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# NewsReach







## LEAD NEED FOR LEGAL INTERVENTIONS TO EMPOWER WOMEN PART – I

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Antara Lahiri in the first part of her article elaborates the different socio-legal problems that confront the poor adivasi women of Kesla. On the basis of interviews with local authorities and members of the Narmada Mahila Sangh, she offers recommendations to further empower the adivasi women. Antara Lahiri is an independent lawyer based in New Delhi.

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# Need for Legal Interventions to Empower Women

ANTARA LAHIRI

*Seeking to understand the socio-legal problems and identify areas of concern that have legal implications, the study, through interviews of the local authorities and women members of the Narmada Mahila Sangh, highlights their current awareness and offers recommendations to further empower the adivasis of Kesla*

## INTRODUCTION

Interventions by Pradan have focused on building sustainable methods of livelihood generation for the rural poor. The organization, *inter alia*, promotes and fosters development of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), of and for poor women. Pradan targets blocks with high levels of rural poverty and has built a dense network of SHGs in these areas over the past few years.

SHGs enable its members to realize their identity as individuals as well as understand the power of collective strength and mutual aid. In addition, SHGs also furnish a platform for poor women to access public services and undertake movements to bring about change in their lives. Traditionally, SHGs have been able to provide the mechanism wherein concerns on gender, institutional development and provision of financial services have converged. Thus, SHGs may be seen as an instrument to reach out to women in order to organize and empower them, financially and socially.

This study was located in Kesla block, Madhya Pradesh, and the villages situated therein. The community had no previous exposure to commercial farm or non-farm occupations and had been engaged primarily in farming, forest-based livelihoods or migration for sand mining. Pradan has been engaged there, for a number of years, promoting livelihoods such as poultry and mushroom cultivation, by relying on the straw of locally produced cereal crops.

A few years back, the Pradan team in Kesla started to work on issues such as gender equality and social empowerment with the aim of giving poor women a voice within their society. Towards this end, the Narmada Mahila Sangh (NMS) was coalesced from a number of SHGs operating in Kesla block. Federations such as the NMS are primarily formed as solidarity-organizations that bring together thousands of women, comprising different SHGs, to provide them an individual identity and the power to collectively influence their external environment. Currently the NMS has an approximate membership of 8,700 women.

The NMS is a collection of SHGs at the block level, with one or two representatives from each cluster forming the governing body of the Federation. The structure of the NMS is very organized. Two to three women from each SHG come together at the panchayat level to form a cluster. A cluster's main functions are to foster solidarity and mutual learning, resolve conflicts on inter-SHG issues, provide support to resolve an SHG's internal issues, and also create a nodal point for linking with external stakeholders such as banks. The cluster representatives meet on the 10th of every month.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study has been undertaken with the following aims:

- To understand the socio-legal problems affecting *adivasi* women in Kesla block.
- To identify other areas of concern, which have a legal facet, in relation to the *adivasi* women in Kesla.
- To provide suggestions and recommendations on long-term strategy for tackling such areas of concern.

### METHODOLOGY

To understand the problems faced by the poor *adivasi* women in villages in and around Kesla block, village women who faced or took on the administration, police or the judiciary to assert their rights, have been interviewed. These women are involved in some manner or capacity with the NMS and Pradan. Additionally, certain persons from the administration and the lower judiciary have

***SHGs enable its members to realize their identity as individuals as well as understand the power of collective strength and mutual aid. In addition, SHGs also furnish a platform for poor women to access public services and undertake movements to bring about change in their lives***

also been interviewed in order to understand how these women are viewed in the larger context of the area and the society they operate in.

Primary legal texts such as Domestic Violence Act 2005, National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) 2005 and Indian Penal Code (IPC) 1860 have been referred to in order to provide a context to some of the problems identified during the course of

the analysis contained herein.

Secondary sources in the form of reports, books and articles have been referred to and utilized in order to understand the history and context of the socio-legal problems encountered by the *adivasi* women in their day-to-day lives.

### FIELD EXPERIENCES

#### Government officials

*Sanjay Upadhyay, Tehsildar and Executive Magistrate, Shahpur*

Mr. Upadhyay serves as the tehsildar and Executive Magistrate of the Shahpur area. His areas of work include resolution of revenue disputes, identification of illegal mining activities and the misuse of the Public Distribution System.

Mr. Upadhyay stressed on the problems of illiteracy in the area. He stated that even though the tribals get a scholarship of Rs 500 per month to study, there is rampant illiteracy. He further stated that despite there being functioning schools in the area, which are fully staffed, the illiteracy problem was not being resolved. (This however is in

contradiction to Mr. Uikey's statement that for two years, the middle school in the area has had no teachers. On being asked to explain this discrepancy, Mr. Upadhyay stated that there were no unstaffed schools in the area at all.)

On land rights for tribals in the forest area, Mr. Upadhyay explained that the law is very favourable. It permits tribals to claim rights to the land, which they are in possession of and upon which they are economically dependent as on 2005 [as per the dictates of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006]. An interesting fact pointed out by him is that the government has given a remission of 2 per cent of the stamp duty, payable on registration of land, in the event the same is done in favour of a woman. This has led to perceptible improvement in the number of land registrations being done in favour of women. He, however, stated that the number of women fighting for land rights still remains remarkably low.

On his interaction with the women of the area, he stated that these were fairly limited. He is called to take dying declarations from women. However, Mr. Upadhyay stated that 99 per cent of the women in their dying declaration refuse to give evidence against their in-laws even when it is fairly apparent that the in-laws have intentionally tried to burn them. This, in his opinion, is due to the fact that the women believe that they will survive and will again have to live with their in-laws. Hence, they do not want to give

***Mr. Upadhyay stated that 99 per cent of the women in their dying declaration refuse to give evidence against their in-laws even when it is fairly apparent that the in-laws have intentionally tried to burn them***

evidence against them. In many cases, the women die and the in-laws, due to lack of evidence, go unprosecuted.

Further, Mr. Upadhyay said that the requisite officers required to be appointed under the Domestic Violence Act 2005 have not been so appointed for this area. He seemed unaware about the said Act and the requirements there under entirely.

On the easy access to, and prevalence of alcohol in the area, Mr. Upadhyay stated that according to the government's policy, if 50 tribal women petitioned for the closure of an alcohol shop, it would have to be shut down. However, no such petitions for closure as yet have come to his attention.

With respect to women in the local panchayats, he said that women *panchs* in the area do not exercise much power. Additionally, women who become *sarpanches* are so only in name. In reality, their husbands exercise the power, and the term '*sarpanch-pati*' has become a common designation.

*S.C. Agarwal, CEO, Block/Janpad Panchayat, Shahpur*

Mr. Agarwal is the CEO of the Janpad Panchayat of Shahpur, which has 40 gram panchayats (GPs) under it. His responsibilities include administration, growth and development of these panchayats.

In Mr. Aggarwal's view, the primary problem in the region is poverty. He believes that this is being adequately addressed by NREGA because the area has surplus unskilled labour



being provided with employment. He attributes alcohol as the main cause of poverty in the region because the money earned by the tribals is primarily spent on alcohol. Awareness about alcohol and its harmful effects is being generated in schools and GPs. He, however, categorically denied any domestic violence in the area was due to alcohol. (Lalmani later on in this context stated that although government officials do not recognize domestic violence as being caused by alcohol, it is a serious problem in the area and a regular matter being brought to NMS for resolution. NMS, however, cannot ask the government to ban the sale of alcohol as the preparation and sale of alcohol provides livelihood for many members of the NMS. This is borne out by interviews with tribal women across the region.)

With reference to education in the region, Mr. Agarwal stated that for the last ten to twelve years there has been 100 per cent literacy in the area (by literacy, he meant passing Class 8). Facilities have been provided by the government for the training and education of disabled children in nearby Padar. In his opinion, NREGA is supporting this literacy drive because it does not give employment to people under the age of 18 years. In addition, various incentives have been offered by the government to encourage education. Until Class VIII, free food, education and books are available. Additionally, girls going to school after Class V and Class VIII are given funds by the government to buy cycles, in order to provide transportation and easy accessibility to schools. I saw many girls in school uniforms riding their cycles.

***Regarding the issue of domestic violence in the villages under her panchayat, she and her father squarely placed the blame for the same on the alcohol consumption by the men in the village***

On being asked whether there is lack of teachers in the schools in the region, Mr. Agarwal mentioned that though there were vacancies, these are rapidly being filled. The problem, according to him, is that people who have applied for these teaching jobs apply to schools in multiple Janpads at the same time.

They then shift as and when they get a job, either in or close to their Janpad.

For scheduled caste/scheduled tribe (SC/ST) children, special training programmes have been organized by the government and are being implemented at the block level. For ST women specifically, *hastshilpa* training in terms of handloom weaving centres have been set up by the Hast Shilp Vikas Nigam. In addition, women who come for such training are paid Rs 400 per month as stipend for a period of six months. After completion of the training, women are given raw material, which they can spin at home; facilities for group finance and purchase of looms have been also been made available. Mr. Vinod, the editor of a newspaper in the district, who was also present during part of the interview, said that the problem was that after completion of the training, there was no monitoring done to observe whether the training was being utilized by these women. On visiting one of these centres, it was noticed that only two women were present at the weaving centre and no class was taking place, even though it was during class hours.

The CEO informed me that a new *yojana* (plan) had been initiated by the government for training of women who were below the

poverty line (BPL). The training is being offered in, *inter alia*, *agarbatti* making, sewing, knitting, computers, etc., and can be for a duration extending from three weeks to six months. During this training period, a stipend is also being provided to the women. In order to be eligible for certain types of training under this plan, certain educational qualifications have been specified by the government.

*Champalal Verma, Forestor, Hiranchhapra*

The DFO of the area was unavailable for an interview; therefore, one of the foresters of the area, Mr. Champalal Verma undertook to answer some queries that I had, pursuant to my conversation with Saiwati Bai, a resident of Bhoura and member of the NMS.

Mr. Verma stated that villagers in the area were allowed to harvest forest produce such as *tendu* and *mahua*. In fact, the Forest Department actively supports this by endeavouring to get a good price for the products harvested by the *adivasis*.

Mr. Verma remembered the problem referred to by Saiwati Bai in terms of lack of access of the *adivasis* to trees and forest produce. He stated that the problem stemmed from *adivasis* preventing other *adivasis* from accessing their local forest area. The Forest Department had intervened in this situation and spoken to the *adivasis* creating trouble in the area. In addition, the department conducted a survey and divided the trees among the *adivasis* of the area.

Mr. Verma was informed that the division was not being respected by a section of the *adivasis*. He said that the Ranger would need to speak to the *adivasis* in order to understand the problems that have arisen.

## **Persons in Kesla block**

*Smita Uikey, Sarpanch, Bhoura*

Smita became the sarpanch of Bhoura at the very young age of 22 years, contesting for the seat as an ST. She holds a B.Sc. degree and is a remarkably well-spoken and articulate young woman. She has now been serving as the *sarpanch* for five years; her term expires in December 2009. Her panchayat comprises four villages. Her father joined us in our conversation. He has been a teacher in the local school and gave us his inputs regarding the larger problems being faced in the area.

Smita spoke to me about the problems that she has faced as an educated female in the panchayat. She is the only college graduate in her panchayat and in nearby ones; this is problematic because the villagers prefer uneducated *sarpanches*. This is primarily because an uneducated person may be influenced by the others in the village. This will enable such other persons to exercise control over the monies coming into the panchayat coffers.

Smita's father informed me that although there are schools in the area, there is a severe shortage of teachers. For example, the local middle school in Bhoura has been running for the last two years, but there have not been any teachers assigned to the school. The administration is apparently aware of the situation; however, not much has been done about it.

The panchayat has been allocated approximately Rs 70 lakhs for implementing public works and policies. Smita informed me that these funds have been utilized for the purposes of bridge building, irrigation, forest conservation, etc. Interestingly, gender

equality for women-related programmes were not her priority, in terms of the programmes implemented by her (I have provided an explanatory note for the green highlights further below). She believed that doing infrastructure work for the village as a whole was a higher priority for her.

Panchayat members apparently tried to remove her from her seat because she is an *adivasi* and is unwilling to divert government funds. However, they were unsuccessful in their attempts. She attributes this to the fact that she has maintained transparency in her work and records.

Regarding the issue of domestic violence in the villages under her panchayat, she and her father squarely placed the blame for the same on the alcohol consumption by the men in the village. I was informed that the government has given permission to *adivasis* to prepare and store up to five litres of alcohol in their homes. This has apparently been done to preserve the *adivasi* culture, which uses alcohol in daily life and religious ceremonies. This permission has apparently been severely misused by most *adivasis* because they prepare and store alcohol for sale. They further gave me the example of a village known as Bhouradhara wherein approximately 40 per cent of the women are widows because their husbands have died due to alcohol-related problems.

Mr. Uikey recalled that he had gone to a village where the wives of the *adivasis* were preparing alcohol for a living. He tried to motivate them to give up this business by giving them an example – he asked the villagers whether they were willing to set one of the houses in the village on fire to warm themselves because the night was cold. Extending the analogy, he said that although

the preparation and sale of alcohol was a viable business, it drained the families monetarily and had a huge negative social impact as well. The women agreed with the logic and said that they will stop the preparation and sale of alcohol. However, Smita and Mr. Uikey informed me that the women have now re-started the same business.

Smita was supposed to stand for elections for the office of MLA from the Congress. However, at the last minute, her ticket for elections was withdrawn. She was fairly indignant about this because the person who got the ticket finally had a case lodged against him by the Forest Department, which is currently sub judice. Despite this setback, Smita seemed positive and confident. She said that she has devoted five years of her life to being a *sarpanch*. Instead of getting a good job and making money somewhere, she would like to continue working in the social development field in the future as well.

#### *Sarpanch, Neemkhera*

The *sarpanch* of Neemkhera has been in power for the past five years. He stated at the outset that he did not believe that women were capable of working in the public sphere. Women who were working in the panchayats were basically representing their husbands and did not exercise any power, independent of their husband. He gave the example of his wife who does not, in his opinion, possess the intelligence or the courage to give any inputs/undertake any work with respect in the outside world.

He explained that alcohol was destroying the *adivasi* society. The political scenario becomes heavily influenced by this fact because votes may be bought with a bottle of alcohol. He accepted that alcohol did impact the



incidence of domestic violence; however, he did not categorize domestic violence as an issue. He stated that the panchayat does not intervene in cases of domestic violence because it is seen as a regular and acceptable part of society.

***The formation of NMS has infused her and her fellow women members with the strength and courage to deal with the problems in their lives***

The *sarpanch* questioned the efficacy of the poultry and SHG schemes started by Pradan. He was of the opinion that such schemes were not profitable for villagers. He stated that there were instances where people had taken loans to rear poultry and the chickens had been struck by some disease and had died, leaving the villager to bear the burden of the loan without any means of repaying the same.

The *sarpanch* also seemed averse to the concept of education and questioned the rationale for and efficacy of educating women specifically.

He seemed positive about the possibilities of work for village people offered by NREGA. However, given the fact that most villagers live on a day-to-day income, the time lag that exists between doing the work and the receipt of wages for the same deters many villagers from taking up higher paying work opportunities offered under the NREGA scheme. Consequently, such villagers end up going to *seths* and *sahukars* to seek work and get paid very low wages.

*Saiwati Bai, member of Narmada Mahila Sangh, Kesla*

Saiwati Bai has had a life fraught with many troubles and obstacles. She has faced disease and domestic violence, and has managed to survive it all. She said that many of us (women in the area) have gone through the

same problems but have managed to preserve the strength to fight government officials and the system, in order to gain and preserve their rights. Unfortunately, the problem of economic poverty is dealt with by many women in the village by selling/being sold into slavery for nominal

sums of money to *seths* and *sahukars*.

The formation of NMS has infused her and her fellow women members with the strength and courage to deal with the problems in their lives. The women in NMS discuss the problems in an organized fashion. There is first an attempt to solve these problems at the SHG level. In the event a solution cannot be found, the problems are then taken to the cluster-level meeting and, if required, to the NMS.

Although NREGA seemed to appeal to her, she informed me that the working of NREGA has been problematic. The *sarpanch* of her panchayat, despite the written diktats of NREGA, only offers work to the villagers he is close to; in addition, he states that the wages given shall be as per the *theka* rates instead of as per the calculation specified under the NREGA. In fact, when Saiwati Bai protested at the rates offered and pointed out its discrepancy with NREGA, the *munshi* (accountant) threatened to chase her out of the village. Apparently, now work under NREGA has stopped coming completely even though the women of the village had recently raised a petition to ask for the same.

Saiwati Bai also elaborated on the major deprivations being faced by tribals, with respect to forest land rights. According to her, the richer people deprive the poorer villagers

and demarcate trees for themselves on government-owned forest land to harvest forest produce and for felling. She fought for the conservation of these trees as well as the right of the villagers to harvest forest produce. She approached the authorities to ask for a division of the forest land, in order to ensure access of all to the trees and forest produce. The authorities had commissioned a survey of the land and had calculated that each villager in that village was entitled to 30 trees. This division, however, has not been carried out and the right of the villagers to access the forest and the forest produce continues to be restricted.

The impact of alcohol on tribal society is also an issue that she feels very strongly about. She has been trying to educate the women preparing or selling alcohol about the harmful effects it has on their society. The rationale used by her to convince the local women is that by selling alcohol to a *bai's* husband, the children of the *bai* are being deprived of food because the money to be utilized to buy food is being spent by the husband on alcohol instead.

*Saraswati Bai, Kesla*

Saraswati Bai is a victim of domestic violence, having been physically abused and burnt by her in-laws. She was persuaded by her husband (who works in the CRPF) to not lodge a criminal complaint because he feared the loss of his job. She has a daughter studying in class X. Currently, her husband is not paying her any maintenance.

Pradan assisted Saraswati Bai in getting legal counsel in Bhopal in order to seek justice. The case is currently sub judice in the trial court at Bhopal.

*Ram Bai, member of Narmada Mahila Sangh, Kesla*

Ram Bai had a 15-year-old daughter, who was raped and killed in December 2007. Due

to inefficient investigation by the police, no culprits had been brought to book for a number of months.

When the Collector had come for a visit to a nearby village, Ram Bai brought up the inefficiency of the police in not having brought to book any persons for this heinous crime. Shortly after that, the police identified and arrested three boys as the culprits.

Ram Bai's husband had been called to testify in the Betul court where this case is being heard. The court has released the accused persons on bail. Ram Bai and her husband, however, have not spoken to the government prosecutor about the case and are unaware about its status/next date of hearing.

Ram Bai has one other daughter, who is 18 years old. She has failed class X twice. However, on further questioning, it was revealed that though Ram Bai and her husband are illiterate, they have actively encouraged their children to continue their education. They been encouraging their daughter to take the Class X exam in private and finish her education.

*Bela Bai, Sukhtawa*

Bela Bai has been involved with various cases on behalf of the NMS. She recounted an instance where she along with the NMS had intervened in a situation in which a son was beating his parents regularly. They went and initiated action against him in the police station. Consequently, the son stopped beating his parents and now only beats his wife.

She also recounted to me the 'witch-hunting' case which had occurred in the nearby village. A member of the Janpad Panchayat accused his sister of being a witch. He asked his sister

to prove her innocence by digging up a buried idol while she was naked. The sister complied with the same in the presence of the entire village. Following this, she came to NMS for succour. The women of NMS, in a cluster meeting, decided to take up her cause and went to the Collector to initiate action and imprison the brother. The police took action and imprisoned the entire family. However, they got bail when the witness for the prosecution turned hostile.

Despite being illiterate, Bela Bai is very much in favour of education. She has been a strong proponent of the cause and has petitioned and ensured the building of schools in her village in order to be able to ensure that her children are able to go to school. She, however, said that it was unfortunate that the only colleges in the area were in Itarsi and Hoshangabad. Consequently, the children of the village were not able to easily access the same.

She also explained her idea and need for the institution of a Mahila Gram Sabha. According to her, in the state-established Gram Sabha, women are either not allowed to speak or are not in a position to speak freely. Women *sarpanches* tend to echo their husband's wishes only and do not have a voice of their own. Therefore, women's concerns at the local government level go unheeded. In order to obviate their plight, a panchayat of women, that is, a Mahila Gram Sabha needs to be set up in which only women will be present and only women will be allowed to raise issues.

***Despite being illiterate, Bela Bai is very much in favour of education. She has been a strong proponent of the cause and has petitioned and ensured the building of schools in her village in order to be able to ensure that her children are able to go to school***

Bela Bai did not seem to have seen much implementation of NREGA in her area. She informed me that although job cards have been issued under NREGA, women are not being given access to work. All the work goes on a preferential basis to the men.

Sarada Bai, a fellow village woman who was also present during the conversation, gave an instance of how the NMS helped her. Her husband used to regularly beat her. She went

to the NMS for help. Her husband was then called to a meeting and reprimanded and told that he would be required to pay a fine in the event of beating Sarada Bai again. Following that, her husband has stopped beating her.

*Sukhiya Bai, Community Resource Person, Pradan*

Sukhiya Bai has been retained as a community resource person by Pradan. She is a very articulate woman, who has been involved in various cases on behalf of the NMS for the assertion of the village women's rights.

She recalled an incident in which during the construction of a road near her father's field, the machine dug up portions of the field, leaving gaping holes. When she physically tried to stop the persons, they threatened to levy costs on her for the time the machine was not utilized. However, when she threatened to physically damage the machine, the persons manning the machine and the person directing the same left. She went to protest and seek compensation from the Tehsildar and other authorities for the damage done to the field, and ultimately received a sum of Rs 10,000.

She organized the village women to take action against the teacher of the local school because he was late to school every day and did not teach properly. When the protest was lodged, the teacher threw the keys of the school at the assembled women in anger and left. The school was closed for eight days after that incident and the keys remained with the village women. The master subsequently tried to get all the village women to sign a false document. Most of the village women were illiterate; they affixed their thumb prints to the document without understanding the contents of the same. When asked to sign, Sukhiya Bai told one of her family members to read the document. The document stated that the keys had been snatched from the master by the village women and was being illegally being retained by them. Sukhiya Bai consequently refused to sign the document. The master was then told by the village women to reform and start taking classes well and on time. He agreed and the problem was resolved.

The women who had gathered with Sukhiya Bai to discuss their problems with me said that one of the major problems that they faced was the severe lack of water because there is only one water pump in their village. This hampers their livelihood because during the summer months, the poultry tend to die from lack of water.

The women agreed that various incidents of domestic violence did occur in the village. However, when the husbands 'randomly' hit them, the women stated they threatened the erring husband that they would lodge a FIR

***Most husbands do not seem to appreciate the idea of their wives getting organized and attending meetings in the public sphere***

against him. The women would meet and talk to the husband and dissuade him from continuing to physically abuse his wife.

*Radha Bai, Community Resource Person, Pradan*

Radha Bai is a community resource person for Pradan. She has been involved with raising

petitions before government authorities to resolve the villagers' problems. For instance, she was involved in the aforementioned petition raised to the Collector for the indictment of the brother of a woman who was accused of being a witch. She was also involved in actively petitioning the Collector for adequate compensation when the roofs of many houses in the village got blown off during a storm. Radha Bai also protests against domestic violence in the village and at the cluster level.

Ironically, Radha Bai needs to lie to her husband in order to attend meetings and to go to the aid of the women in the village. This is apparently a common problem because most husbands do not seem to appreciate the idea of their wives getting organized and attending meetings in the public sphere.

In the case of any dispute arising, Radha Bai stated that the idea of spending money and going to court is not appealing. She believes that it is a better idea to resolve the same between the villagers only. This ties in with the idea of the *Nari Adalat* – Women's Court.

Radha Bai is an active supporter of the concept of *Nari Adalats*. Apparently, the basic training of the judges for the *Nari Adalat* took place some time back. Radha Bai, however,



said that due to the time lag between the training and the implementation, the judges had forgotten the concepts they had been trained in. She stated that although many village women had raised and supported the idea, the concept had not taken off due to lack of funds.

Radha Bai also mooted the idea of a formal office for the Nari Adalat so that women in

trouble could take refuge in the office and seek justice from a secure turf. This is because, apparently, the women of the area perceive the police as threatening and cannot freely communicate the problems they face to them. She suggested that the office be located in the Pradan campus, which is perceived as neutral territory. She wanted the concept to be started in Kesla and then be duplicated across the region.

*To be continued...*

# Effective Water Management through SHGs: A Case from West Bengal

MADHUMITA NATH, BANKURA

*The active participation of the villagers in the functioning of their hitherto defunct and listless SHGs helped bring purpose and vibrancy to the groups*

In 2007, when I was in the final year of my post graduation in Social Work at Jamia Millia Islamia University, Delhi, I heard that Pradan would be coming for campus recruitment. Rural development was part of the curriculum of my social work studies and much emphasis was given to it. I decided to try for placement in Pradan because it worked in the area of rural development. Fortunately, I got selected and was asked to join the Bankura team in West Bengal. I was posted to Saltora block, a sub location of the Bankura project.

The Pradan team had started operations there in 2005 through Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) activities, watershed work, mango orchards and the promotion of Self Help Groups (SHGs).

During my Development Apprenticeship (DAship) period, I visited Mahishradihi village. Initially, I found it extremely difficult even to pronounce the name of the village. What was even more difficult was to reach it during the rainy season. The village, with around 58 households, is located right at the foot of the majestic hills of Biharinath. Predominantly a Santhal village, it also had 10 SC households. Invariably, every year, the bridge linking the village gets flooded. The path to the village is a rollercoaster ride; but what kept me going there again and again was the breathtaking beauty of Mahishradihi. I vividly recall the day I visited Mahishradihi with a colleague, who then told me to explore the hamlet further. This was in 2007.

As I explored the village, I noticed that there were no proper roads and the condition of the *kacha* roads was pathetic. Electricity was a new phenomenon, which only three or four families could afford. There was one primary school but no health centres. In fact, during the monsoons, it was extremely difficult for the villagers to access any kind of health services. The place was so cut off during the rains in July and August and sometimes even in September that nobody voluntarily visited the village for fear of being stuck there for hours.

Pradan promoted a SHG called the Jugidanga Nibedita Mahila Samiti in 2007, with 18 members. When I visited the SHG, it was just a year old. The members had been meeting regularly for their weekly transactions but were not engaged in any livelihood activity. Three other SHGs — Bina Pani Mahila Samiti, Durga Mahila Samiti and Sri Sri Urochiri Mahila Samiti — with 16 members each had been formed in 2006 by the village panchayat. However, these SHGs were almost non-functional. None of these groups was engaged in any livelihood activity. They had never had a weekly SHG meeting, and as I probed further, I found that they were clueless about the purpose of a group.

As a professional, I saw that I needed to make the members aware of the benefits of an SHG, its norms and procedures and eventually help the group to establish linkages with institutions in order to work towards attaining sustainable livelihood options. A number of group meetings were conducted and the groups underwent training to orient each to the basic concepts of group formation and functioning.

As I gathered more information, I found that every household was engaged in some agricultural practice because the land was very fertile. The primary source of income came from agriculture. Seventy per cent of the households had landholdings in the village, where, in kharif, besides paddy, they cultivated vegetables such as brinjals, bitter gourd, ladies finger, cabbage, cauliflower, pumpkin and bottle gourd. The total area for vegetable cultivation per family was about 20

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decimals. Their source of irrigation was a stream and the water that came down the mountains during the rainy season. There were no water bodies and no water harvesting structures.

Some kind of development intervention was required in the village. However, initially the women were reluctant to go out for exposure visits to other villages; their

interactions were limited to members of their own groups. In the course of time, the members underwent membership training and were willing to go to other villages for group exposure visits. The weekly meetings became mandatory and these infused a sense of solidarity among the members. The group selected a young boy from their village to work as a village resource person. Pradan trained him to look after the SHGs' accounts and record keeping tasks. The idea was that, eventually, the resource person would also assist the members in livelihood planning.

All this took concrete shape when we received funding support from Sir Dorabji Tata Trust (SDTT) for a flow irrigation project in Saltora. Owing to runoff or improper channels being formed, the available water was not being utilized fully, leading to water wastage. If the water that usually went waste could be minimized and directed from the source to the lower areas, two crops, including wheat in winters, would be possible. For this, the water had to flow through pipes. To install these pipes, Rs 3,00,000 was allotted, of which Rs 76,000 was earmarked for field development. The total area for cultivation of kharif, rabi and vegetables would be 20 hectares.

Mahishradihi was one of the three villages selected for this venture because of its high altitude and thereby prospects of better cultivation of crops. The villagers readily agreed to go ahead with the project. In a few days, the villagers along with the SHG members selected a site ideal for the installation of pipes. The next step was to organize a village-level meeting to present the concept of flow irrigation and its benefits. The landowners needed to agree to the pipes being laid across their fields. The owners of the ponds also needed to agree to excavation work being carried out to increase the depth of the pond. The villagers had never heard anything similar to these plans earlier. So we explained the water cycle, the utilization of untapped water and the technicalities of the work involved to them, with help of some charts with diagrams. After much discussion, the villagers understood the concept and they all realized that sufficient supply of water would mean year-round production of crops. We had to assure them that the technical part would be taken care of by us though.

We taught the villagers to mark the names of the beneficiaries on a village map and the direction of the pipes that were to be laid. In the subsequent meetings, the process of implementation, the purpose, the budget and the benefits of the project were discussed and it was decided that the SHGs would be responsible for executing the work. The women initially refused to take on the responsibility for implementing the work because they thought that that was a man's job. The question in their minds was, 'How can we, who spend most of our time doing

***The initiative was new for these women and challenging. However, they agreed to go ahead because it meant learning new things and moving into those areas traditionally handled by the men***

household chores, possibly shoulder the responsibility for such crucial work?' I realized that some degree of hand-holding was required here to equip the women with the necessary skills and confidence. I discussed certain aspects of the work such as chalking out the layout, preparing the muster roll, designing the entire excavation site and the filtration trap, monitoring

the work, sharing responsibilities, etc., with the members. The initiative was new for these women and challenging. However, they agreed to go ahead because it meant learning new things and moving into those areas traditionally handled by the men. They realized that only if the construction work got done before the rainy season would the farmers be able to utilize the water for the rabi crops and cultivate the 20 ha of land.

The members decided to form a committee to monitor and evaluate the work. They selected three members from each group to represent a 12-member committee. They named it the 'Mahishradihi Mahila Karjya Kari Committee'. The roles and responsibilities of this committee involved record-keeping and maintenance of documents, visiting the bank for monetary transactions, making payments to the labourers, arranging the material needed for construction and preparing the muster rolls. The members, who were not in the committee, were to monitor the overall implementation of the work. Accountability and transparency had to be maintained from the very beginning by the 12-member committee.



The committee negotiated with the JCB machine operators for earth excavation. The members bargained with the contractor regarding the layout of the earth excavation site and the rates for doing it. The first contractor that the members met asked for Rs 75 per cft (cubic feet) of earth digging. The rate seemed affordable and both parties agreed to it. However, the contractor suddenly refused to take up the work and left without offering any reason. Heavy rains at that time were disheartening because we thought the project would not take off till the next year. The search for a new contractor then commenced. After a month's time, by the end of June, someone agreed to take up the work at Rs 130 per cft. This was a challenging task because the monsoons were fast approaching.

The villagers were dejected because they wanted this work to take place before the monsoons and time was running short. I did not want to give up on the activity because the women were looking forward to working together for their development and that of the village. The results of these efforts would be evident by the next year when people would produce ample vegetables and other crops. The work thus began and every member took her/his role and responsibility seriously so that the project could be implemented successfully. The entire process was an enriching experience. The members took turns each day to cook food for the people who were operating the machines. The headmaster of the village school managed to get an electricity connection and made arrangements for the workers to stay in the classrooms of the school.

We organized a one-day training for the committee members on preparing the layout and measurement of the site. This was a

novel experience for the women, in which they learned to hold the measurement tape and record the readings on paper. The women who did not know to read or write observed the process closely and participated in it. Initially, the women were scared to hold the tape and take measurements. They could not imagine that they, as women, would be able to do this task successfully. The men offered to help. However, with a little encouragement and persuasion from us, the women gradually took control and after a few trials, they succeeded in giving the outline. I was overjoyed to see the energy and enthusiasm of the women to learn new things, and the support that the men showed. Within a month's time, the machine work was complete. We visited the site regularly, interacted with the members regarding the progress of the work, the problems, the future plans and the recording of payments in the muster roll. It was interesting to see the members take turns to follow up the progress of the work twice a day. They also took care that the earth excavation work was completed within the specified amount or else there could be shortage of money. With the increasing work and transactions, they decided to keep a person, who would be paid a nominal amount, to help them with the accounts. By this time, the members learned how to prepare the muster roll and to issue cheques.

The women completed the entire earth excavation work in Rs 2 lakhs. In terms of envisioning the results of the entire work with a long-term perspective, the women came up with a plan. With a little facilitation from our side, the women made plans that went beyond the construction work and the utilization of water for long-term benefits. The 90 decimals of land, adjacent to the school, was wasteland; the newly excavated soil was dumped there. The SHG members

had a discussion with the headmaster of the school, who agreed to give them the land for three years to cultivate vegetables. Since the land was close to the source of water, they could easily pump water from the pond. With a little guidance from us, the women chalked out plans for preparing the land such as levelling, building barriers, sowing seeds, guarding saplings, etc., as well as maintaining the books of accounts.

That year, the sowing had been delayed because the rains came late. The women, therefore, were in a hurry to sow the seeds. This made most women devote more time to their own fields than contribute to the community work. The work had to be finished quickly or else rains would spoil everything. The members, therefore, called a meeting to discuss how responsibilities could be shared by all so that the work could be managed smoothly. There was a long discussion, and the women collectively resolved to share the responsibilities of the cultivation of vegetables in the land that they wanted to develop. The next day, when I visited the village, I was happy to see 15 women working in the community land. They were levelling the land, carrying manure, digging pits and sowing seeds. The material required for the masonry work arrived on the same day. The vehicle carrying the bricks could not reach the site due to poor road conditions. But without much difficulty, the women transported the bricks for the construction of a filtration tank in the newly excavated pond.

Once the pond was done, designing the layout of the pipes was taken into account. The members were shown how to calculate the depth of the water table. A few labourers were hired from another village to work on digging the earth to lay the pipes. The technical details of designing the water filtration trap were explained to the mason. Eighteen members took three consecutive days on the site to do earth filling work. While the filtration tank was being completed, the women took care of the vegetable plot too. The members were trained to apply medicine to the plants. They built a sturdy fence around the plot to protect the saplings.

With unity of purpose and the belief that together they can achieve more through the SHGs, the women of Mahishradihi are well on the way to empowerment and development. The real test, however, is to sustain these activities. The women must be able to vision a scenario of development for themselves and the village. Though I no longer work in the same area, I am happy to have engaged with this community and contributed my bit to their well being. Having had the experience of working with the people of Mahishradihi, I realize that a little bit of encouragement and facilitation is all that they require to initiate and strengthen the processes of change for the betterment of their families and their village.

# Raising of Tasar Host Plants in Private Degraded Wastelands

K. SATHYANARAYANA, S. AMARNATH AND MD. SHAMSHAD ALAM

*Introducing the concept of utilizing privately owned wastelands to raise tasar host plants proves successful, both in terms of providing a sustainable livelihood for the tribals and keeping alive their traditional occupation*

## INTRODUCTION

About .25 lakh tribal families in tasar producing states depend mostly on naturally grown forest plantations of tasar food plants. Whereas farmers prefer arjun and asan trees for tasar rearing, a major area out of an estimated 111.68 lakh ha of tasar food plants in the country is dominated by sal. Of late, the indiscriminate felling of tasar food plants from village forests for fuel, besides the prohibitory provisions of the local forest department, is a great obstacle to the extension of tasar cocoon production. Under the Inter State Tasar Project (ISTP), over 7,500 ha of land was planted with arjun/asan varieties. However, much of it could not be maintained properly after the project due to the tasar rearers' lack of accountability. In view of the practical difficulties in accessing tasar food plants in deep forests and the economic viability of tasar culture over other agriculture crops and forest produce, the augmentation of tasar food plants in privately owned wastelands attains significance because land resources are better managed and utilized under private ownership. Since tasar silkworm rearing is a family avocation of tribals, they consider the plantations raised in their private lands as an asset that will receive their attention, effort and resources. Moreover, they will be able to retain the income they earn from this activity. In common forest lands, however, the major challenge for the intervention was to create a vision of long-term livelihood opportunity for the tribals through the utilization of these forests.

A collaborative initiative was taken up under the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana (SGSY) Special Projects in Bihar and Jharkhand to promote economic plantations of tasar host plants in the tribals' private wastelands. The beneficiaries were from the below poverty line (BPL) families, mostly belonging to Scheduled Tribes (STs), Schedule Castes (SCs) and other weaker sections of the society, who are traditionally involved in tasar culture. The idea of utilizing the wastelands had relevance because the average landholding of even poor households is 1.7 ha.

Initially, it was difficult to get a positive response from the people because most of them did not believe that the activity would be viable. A cluster-based approach

was followed in plantation activities to attain the scale of economy in a compact area (comprising 1–2 panchayats). In most clusters, the overall area of plantation was around 100-150 ha, involving 100-200 families, ensuring equitable sharing of benefits and participation of the majority.

#### **MOTIVATING TRIBAL GROUPS**

The concept was shared with small groups of poor tribals, who owned contiguous patches of land (at least 5 ha) suitable for tasar host plant cultivation. Exposure visits were organized to economic plantations promoted under other schemes, in which rearers had already started commercial cocoon production. Interaction between the tasar rearers and the group was facilitated to help them understand the economic returns and various factors such as managing and protecting plantations at least for four years of gestation, and the contribution of labour.

#### **OPPORTUNITY COST ANALYSIS**

A hamlet-based meeting was organized to assess the economic benefits from other activities such as cattle grazing, collection of fuel wood and other competitive agriculture crops, namely, pulses or millets, on idle lands.

#### **SELECTION OF PLANTATION SITE**

A compact geographical area, covering 1–2 panchayats, with a minimum of 35 per cent of the private landholdings that were fallow/wastelands was identified. Wastelands without continuous stone layers within 3 ft depth and soil interspersed with loose boulders or soil with loose morrum layers up to 4 ft depth were selected. Special land husbandry measures were taken up to check run-off of water and soil erosion, where the slope was more than 25 per cent.

#### **FORMATION OF TASAR VIKAS SAMITI (TVS)**

The TVS is an informal village-level group, responsible for raising and maintenance of plantations. It meets once in 15 days to plan and budget for various activities. It maintains accounts and stock for material transactions. The TVS ensures increased tribal participation at every stage of plantation activities, starting from site selection, planning, budgeting, nursery raising and transplantation to regular intercultural operations and protection of plantations from grazing. If the owners of the land form a majority of the SHG members, the village SHG played the role of the TVS.

At the outset, the TVSs prepare a detailed work plan and budget, based on their abilities to contribute labour and material. This is assessed by the Pradan functionary operating in the area. She/He assesses the progress of the work and monitors expenditure and recommends the timely release of amounts to them.

#### **LAND HUSBANDRY AND PLANTATION MAINTENANCE**

Considering the water run off due to the undulating topographical terrain and land husbandry measures, namely, the staggered trench, 30' x 40' model and field bunding, water harvesting structures, etc., were planned to prevent soil erosion and enhance the moisture retention capacity of the land. The uniform and vigorous growth of the plants in the subsequent years was ensured through intercultural operations such as hoeing, fertilizer application and pruning for three years subsequent to the year of transplanting.

#### **INTERCROPPING**

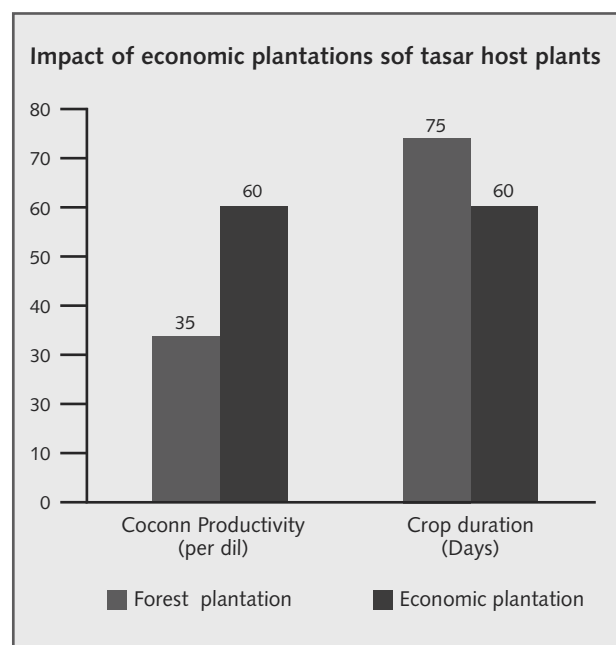
To sustain the interest of the tribal rearers during the gestation period, they were



encouraged to take up intercropping with leguminous crops such as *moong* (*Vigna Mungo*) and *urad* (*Vigna radiata*) that fix nitrogen in the roots and add the same to the soil. Because the farmers start getting short-term returns from intercropping, they began to take interest in protecting plantations. The TVS engaged cattle guards to prevent grazing and damage of the plantations in the initial stages. Ploughing across the slope at the time of intercropping turns the soil of the entire field and checks water run-off, and promotes vigorous plant growth, triggered also by increased soil loosening, higher percolation of rainwater and biologically added nitrogen.

### SALIENT ACHIEVEMENTS

Under the project, a total of 1569.8 ha of plantation of tasar host plants were raised



**TABLE 1: TASAR HOST PLANTS RAISED UNDER SGSY SPECIAL PROJECTS**

State	District	Blocks	Plantations (ha) raised
Bihar	Banka	Bounsi, Chandan, Katoria	511.8
Jharkhand	Godda	Godda, Sunderpahari & Poraiyahat	360.0
	Dumka	Jarmundi, Saraiyahaat, Shikaripara, Kathikund & Dumka Sadar	527.0
	West Singhbhum	Jagannathapur, Kumardungi, Manjgaon & Jhinkpani	171.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>4 districts</b>	<b>15 blocks</b>	<b>1569.8</b>

**TABLE 2: PERFORMANCE INDICATORS**

Parameter	Norm
<b><u>Survival percentage</u></b>	
After one year	95%
After two years	90%
Avg. height of plants by 3rd year	8 ft
Maturity for tasar rearing	4th yr

(Table 1).

All the technological inputs from the Central Tasar Research & Training Institute (CTR&TI),

Ranchi, were adopted in raising the *kisan* nursery and establishing block plantations and their maintenance. Besides, SHGs were

**TABLE 3: FEATURES OF ECONOMIC PLANTATIONS RAISED AND MAINTAINED**

Particulars	Block plantation	Chawki plantation
Minimum plot size	5 ha	0.1 ha
Optimum scale per family	1 ha	0.1 ha
Location	Private wastelands in non-traditional areas	Private lands adjacent to traditional tasar rearing forests
Owners	People willing to take up tasar rearing as a new occupation	Traditional and active rearers
Plant combination	Arjun and asan in 70:30 ratio (quick growing arjuna will help to start commercial rearing in 3 years)	Arjun and asan in 50:50 ratio (plant stock is very robust and will take 4-5 years to mature)
Plant spacing	6 ft x 6 ft	4 ft x 4 ft
Plant population per ha	3,000	6,700
Desired plant height	12 ft to 20 ft with wide and thin canopy	Within 10 ft with small and dense canopy
Usage	Rearing of worms of all ages	Customized to accommodate nylon nets over plants to rear chawki worms only

**TABLE 4: ADVANTAGES OF BLOCK AND CHAWKI PLANTATIONS****Block plantations**

Converts unproductive lands into a long-term production base.

Because the plants are regularly spaced, management of cocoon crops is easier with less manpower.

Low cost of maintenance, intercropping and low economic gestations are attractive to poor people.

Recommended package of practices can be adopted, which is not feasible in protected forestlands.

**Chawki plantations**

Requires small piece of land, yet critical for seed crop cycle.

Easier to raise nylon nets over small plants to ensure complete protection of tiny worms.

Easier to maintain hygiene during silkworm rearing as the plants have small canopy.

Practices of pruning, lopping and fertilizer application essential for chawki rearing can be adopted, which are not allowed in forest lands.

encouraged to produce vermi-compost, which was utilized in maintaining the plantations. Inorganic fertilizers were also used. All the major performance indicators, with regard to survival, average height and maturity, listed in Table 2, were achieved. Features of block and *chawki* plantations raised under the SGSY Special Projects are in Table 3. Besides raising plantations of arjun

and asan, the Projects helped in rejuvenating over 10,000 ha of natural forests with tasar host plants.

**IMPACT**

All the block plantations and *chawki* gardens raised under the Projects were ready for rearing tasar silkworms by the fourth year, with more than 90 per cent survival and

better quality foliage. The suitability of the leaf quality and increased uptake of disease free layings (dfis) per unit area was evident with the increase in cocoon productivity of 60 per dfl from 35 per dfl in the natural forest plantation. In some of the clusters, cocoon yields were as high as 100–110 cocoons/dfl. The increase in cocoon yield was due to better management practices of tasar silkworm rearing on plantations raised in private lands, in the vicinity of villages. Further, crop duration was considerably reduced from 75 days in forest plantation to 60 days in these economic plantations due to quality foliage, resulting in better growth of tasar silkworms. Advantages of these plantations raised under the Projects are indicated in Table 4 and the figure.

#### LESSONS LEARNT

The spacing being used of 6' x 6' and 4' x 4' that was adopted for raising block and *chawki* plantations, respectively, was found to be very close with canopies of adjacent rows overlapping. A spacing of at least 8' x 8' for block plantations and 6' x 6' for *chawki* plantations are required. There is also a need

for a common platform at the state level to share experiences, which will help in the preparation of a comprehensive action plan for the state besides reducing duplication of efforts and ensuring smooth collaboration among various agencies.

#### OPPORTUNITIES

These plantations also have the unexplored potential to generate carbon credits, based on the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). This attains importance as developed countries and economies in transition can acquire carbon credits generated through such projects to abate part of their greenhouse gas emission-reduction commitments. The highest carbon sequestration rates (0.1-0.25 MT/ha) are associated with the trees and, consequently, these can cause marked increases in the level of soil carbon. The present initiative, through active tribal participation, of raising and maintaining tasar host plants in a systematic way and following recommended technologies will help in popularizing tasar culture as a micro-enterprise besides ensuring environmental protection.

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# Aamar Bazaar: Generating Income for Flood-affected Women

RAVINDRANATH

*The community-based concept of Aamar Bazaar has proved to be a good practice with potential for replication. It has helped women in the flood-prone districts of the upper Brahmaputra river basin in Assam to identify income-generating activities that make up for the losses that traditional livelihoods suffer on account of frequent floods*

Aamar Bazaar, meaning our market, is an idea floated by the Rural Volunteers Centre (RVC) that works in the upper reaches of Brahmaputra in Assam. The main purpose of Aamar Bazaar is to ensure community-based disaster risk reduction (CBDRR) of vulnerable communities, particularly women, living in flood-prone areas.

## THE REGION

The geographic area of operation of RVC covers the flood plains of Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts, and the Majuli sub-division of Assam in particular, and the eight northeastern states of India in general. The district of Dhemaji emerges from the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh and stretches to the Brahmaputra river with Subansiri river on one side and Siang river on the other. The district covers an area of 3,237 sq km and is a plain area lying at an altitude of 104 m above mean sea level.

Lakhimpur district lies on the north bank of Brahmaputra river. It is bound on the north by Siang River and Papumpare district of Arunachal Pradesh, and on the east by Dhemaji district. The largest river-island in India, Majuli, in Jorhat district, is to the south and the Gahpur sub-division of Sonitpur district is on the west. Being located where the steep slopes of eastern Himalaya abruptly drop, thus forming a narrow valley, the region of the upper Brahmaputra river basin is very vulnerable to flooding. The estimate is that about 50–70 per cent of the population in the area has been adversely affected by floods in the last three decades.

The Brahmaputra river, the Subansiri river and a number of their tributaries originating from the hilly terrain of Arunachal Pradesh account for the perennial floods in the region. In addition, extensive human interventions including deforestation, river stripping and construction of mega dams on the Brahmaputra river have further compounded the impact of climate change, rendering the area vulnerable to a multiplicity of hazards.

## THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts are largely rural districts. The economy is mainly agro-based. After agriculture, livestock rearing is an important livelihood of the community, but this sector is yet to be commercially organized. Sericulture, fishing and driftwood business are practised in smaller measure. The adverse effects of chronic floods on fertile agricultural land have rendered even the affluent farmers landless. The depletion of agro-based traditional livelihood practices has resulted in inter-district and inter-state seasonal and permanent migration. Moreover, the farmers' understanding of the markets, accessibility to the market and control over prices, demand-supply and related market forces at the hands of the primary producers is very poor.

## RATIONALE FOR AAMAR BAJAAR

Aamar Bazaar makes for a good practice, and has great potential for replication because it is community-based; it enables women living in flood plains to learn about and select a set of income-generation activities from a wide range of choices. This makes up in a big way for the losses that traditional livelihoods suffer on account of the flood situation.

What makes Aamar Bazaar unique is that it is based on the belief that if the women have access and control over resources, that is, produce, markets, prices and ultimately money, they can plan and implement disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities better both at the household and the community levels. Women in the region have a keen understanding of the natural resources because they are involved in the collection of fuel wood and potable water. They have the required knowledge and skills for the livelihood practices; it is they who give time and labour for agriculture and animal

husbandry. All these ensure a life of dignity for the women, both within the family and the community. Our experience reveals that their knowledge and understanding can be more easily leveraged for DRR activities, once the women are economically empowered through activities such as the Aamar Bazaar.

## LOCAL CONDITIONS PRIOR TO PROJECT INITIATION

Since the mid-80s, the deposition of sand, the erosion of the river banks, the shifting of the course of the river and other adverse effects of chronic floods have corroded agro-based traditional livelihood practices. The breakdown of surface communication systems has not only affected animal husbandry but even traditional handloom and handicrafts sector by hindering access to markets, resulting in the producers becoming dependent on exploitative middlemen. All this led to the crippling of the village economy, displacement, seasonal and permanent rural-urban migration. The women were the worst affected.

The alienation from traditional practices further removed women's control over household and community resources. Since the mid-90s, in almost all riverine villages in the upper Brahmaputra river basin, the women, who once used to derive respect and take pride in their contribution to the village economy, have become cheap agricultural labour, if not contract workers at construction sites in nearby towns and cities. The conditions not only have economic implications but have also impacted the care and education of the girl-child, health and protection of women from domestic violence and trafficking.

In the mid-90s, 'women's empowerment' became the new buzzword for the UN bodies, national policy makers as well as



non-governmental development agencies. In order to make women self-reliant, the formation of women SHGs and the subsequent extension of support to the groups for income-generation activities has been a core-strategy for development agencies ever since. This understanding led every investor to target women as primary beneficiaries in various socio-economic development schemes. Though this was expected to undo several of the ills faced by women, critical observation reflects that little or no practical knowledge and understanding of the market-dynamics, more specifically the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the demand-supply ratio, has either left women debt-ridden or victimized at the hand of corrupt-nexus.

#### **PROJECT/INTERVENTION FORMULATION**

In the given situation, RVC thought of a mechanism that involves the following stages:

1. To organize and educate women on market mechanisms, such as demand and supply, quality of products and market linkages.
2. To provide a range of choices to women for the selection of income-generation activities, on their own.
3. To ensure skill and quality upgradation opportunities.
4. To create facilities and opportunities for production, vendoring and selling.

The mission of the Aamar Bazaar project was specified as follows:

“To ensure that women in the flood affected and hostile areas of upper Brahmaputra river basin have access and control over safe and reliable income generation practices in a sustainable way. To thereby ensure that

women are empowered and rendered capable to plan and implement Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) activities, of their own account, for the primary benefit of women and children, and the community as a whole.”

#### **KEY ELEMENTS OF THE PROJECT**

Intervention started in 2004 in Dhemaji district, with the setting up of Aamar Bazaars by SHGs comprising rural women, either by using the platform provided by the existing village weekly markets or opening new markets for a cluster of villages.

The weekly markets, which serve as sole market avenues, were previously run by influential individuals with the authority to collect revenue. RVC facilitated the process of establishing Aamar Bazaars by mobilizing support from the community and the government in favour of this SHGs. Tireless engagement, in the form of meetings, discussions and exposure trips, with the SHGs in the riverine villages of Sissiborgaon block, Dhemaji district, and negotiations at the government level resulted in the formation of 21 Aamar Bazaars. Revenue was collected from the vendors by the members of the SHGs. Necessary permissions were obtained from the government for this. Women would be the primary stakeholders in the Bazaars, and all decision-making were to be routed through them.

In the process, the physical infrastructure of the market and primary source of revenue through rentals, that is, the shed, was constructed by the women's groups out of their own savings. Engagement with the markets helped the women's groups understand the market mechanism. Aspects such as demand and supply, price

determination, quality control and gradation of products became clear to the women. The possibility of collectively fixing and controlling price was also revealed to them.

Understanding the basic nature of market processes encouraged the women to go in for selective production and set up their own vending shops. They were thus able to create a market for their own farm and non-farm produce in self-created market spaces. The whole process enabled the women of this hostile and flood-prone region to rebuild their lives to a sustainable level.

#### **A SUCCESS STORY: THE MATRI AAMAR BAJAAR KENDRIYA SAMITI**

The Matri Aamar Bazaar Kendriya Samiti (MABKS) is an apex body, formed in 2006, of the Aamar Bazaars, for the coordination and management of the Aamar Bazaar process. The MABKS is being empowered to play a lead role in negotiating with the government on behalf of the Aamar Bazaars and overcome the constraints hindering the growth of such markets. The formation of the MABKS has also opened up a new chapter to address the gender-imbalanced practices and conventions obstructing the socio-economic growth of women. In the course of two years, besides influencing traditional structures, the MABKS has succeeded in influencing and easing government rules to establish community-based rural markets. During 2006–07 and 2007–08, the MABKS has been able to influence open tender processes successfully and introduce direct settlement in favour of the SHGs for 15 village markets, owned by People's Rural Institutions (PRIs). Previously, the SHGs formed by women members of

***The formation of the MABKS has also opened up a new chapter to address the gender-imbalanced practices and conventions obstructing the socio-economic growth of women***

marginalized families used to fail in the bidding, and they were thus excluded from the process. The women did not understand market dynamics nor could they influence the price of the produce in their own favour.

In 2008, the MABKS, with the vision to work as an independent organization for the flood-affected women in

distress across the Brahmaputra River Basin, registered itself under the 1860 Society Registration Act.

#### **UPGRADATION EFFORTS**

At the macro level, RVC imparts skill upgradation training for quality production in two identified sectors — handloom and handicrafts, and animal husbandry. So far, a training-cum-production centre of traditional handloom and handicrafts, owned and managed by the Aamar Bazaar network, to create macro linkage in favour of the rural women has been set up. A similar facility has been set up for pig rearing. To ensure a major stake for the primary producers (women) and establish macro linkages in the animal husbandry sector, the MABKS has established a 'Rural Animal Market'. The market is designed to eliminate exploitative middlemen and ensure the primary producer's control over prices.

The initiative is mainly self-financed, that is, out of the savings of the SHG groups, for the construction of market sheds and Water and Sanitation (WatSan) facilities. The Aamar Bazaar undertakes a number of measures to strengthen its processes. This includes:

1. Training on market mechanisms and entrepreneurship development

*Since the initiation of the Aamar Bazaar project, public sector bodies such as PRIs, Autonomous Council and the local MLA have come forward to support, strengthen and make the process more sustainable*

2. Study and documentation of local resources and skills
3. Skill development and product diversification training
4. Part support for setting up a training-cum-production centre of traditional handloom and handicrafts

RVC is actively mobilizing resources for all of the above purposes from development organizations and NGOs, with whom RVC has developed a credible partnership along its 15-year journey. Since the initiation of the Aamar Bazaar project, public sector bodies such as PRIs, Autonomous Council and the local MLA have come forward to support, strengthen and make the process more sustainable. Confidence in the Aamar Bazaar has grown manifold ever since the local MLA attended the annual meeting of the MABKS in 2008 and the zilla parishad member inaugurated the Rural Animal Market.

### **MONITORING MECHANISMS**

Monitoring mechanisms include:

1. Visiting to the market site on market-days
2. Attending the bi-monthly meeting of Aamar Bazaars
3. Involving the members of Aamar Bazaars in different meetings, trainings and workshops

4. Going through the ledger, cash-book, bank pass book of the bazaars at periodic intervals

### **FOOTPRINTS**

- So far, 50 Aamar Bazaars have been established by the SHGs of the riverine villages in the Brahmaputra river basin.
- The number of SHGs directly engaged in the process is 200.
- Fifty Aamar Bazaars engage around 1,000 vendors.
- At present, in 35 of the 50 Aamar Bazaars, there are 135 women vendors; till 2006, there were only 11.
- The cumulative revenue earned by the Aamar Bazaars from the vendors is approximately Rs 10,000 per market day, that is, approximately Rs 40,000 per month.
- This earning largely encourages the flood-affected women to plan for less vulnerable livelihood measures and, in turn, live a life of dignity.
- The MABKS has registered itself under the Society Registration Act 1860 with the vision of working independently in the near future.
- A training-cum-production centre, which is owned and managed by the MABKS, of traditional handloom and handicrafts has been set up, to create macro linkages in favour of the rural women. The centre has so far provided training to 60 rural women.
- The market has increased the income of pig-rearers (traditionally women) from Rs 300 to Rs 500 per piglet.
- The Aamar Bazaar project has the support of local politicians such as the MLA and the zilla parishad member, and other key decision makers.

## CHALLENGES

Some of the challenges faced are:

1. Mobilizing SHGs to adopt market-oriented mechanisms
2. Engaging collectively with the community, PRIs and the government departments
3. Negotiating with the vested interests of certain stakeholders and resisting the conspiracies of middlemen
4. Mobilizing resources for Aamar Bazaars
5. Ensuring that the markets remain functional during floods
6. Integrating DRR in the Aamar Bazaar mechanism

## LESSONS LEARNT

The positive lessons that have been learnt are:

- Women should take vital decisions on sustainable livelihoods, rather than restricting themselves to relief measures.
- Direct engagement/involvement with the market is the most convenient way to understand market mechanisms just like the rural folk learn by doing.
- An understanding of markets, when followed by skill upgradation inputs, greatly increases the opportunities at hand.
- Access and control over resources by women allows them to plan and implement DRR activities conveniently, with a focus on women- and child-related issues.
- The Aamar Bazaar mechanism bears the potentiality to eliminate the miseries of the women, arising out of the alienation from traditional livelihood practices because of floods, sand deposition, bank erosion, breach of surface communication, etc.
- The Aamar Bazaar model is easily

replicable and can bring about a social revolution in the region, in favour of women.

- People living in remote villages get the opportunity to procure household items within the village or in the adjacent village through the Aamar Bazaars. This reduces the travelling and transportation costs and, in turn, increases the purchasing power of the flood-affected marginalized communities.

The negatives are:

- If not dealt sensitively and strategically, the mechanism may lead to social conflict between the dominant male groups and the SHGs.
- In case a village has too many women SHGs, inter-SHG conflicts may arise, regarding the establishment of the market, collection of revenue from the markets, decision-making, etc.
- Markets, once established, may be taken over by the PRIs or autonomous councils for revenue earning purposes. This may deprive the founder's from their right to earn the fixed revenues.
- If a balance is not maintained, the practice may lead to permanent alienation from the traditional livelihood practices and a total dependency on market economy.
- Intrusions of market products may influence the traditional practices (food habits, garments, etc.) and thereby lead to the extinction of small village-based, income-generation activities.

## CONCLUSION

The efforts, initiated by RVC in 2004, stress on a reverse mechanism, that is, 'market-to-production' instead of the usual 'production-to-market' mode. This has

***The efforts, initiated by RVC in 2004, stress on a reverse mechanism, that is, 'market-to-production' instead of the usual 'production-to-market' mode***

achieved the expected level of success. The objective of rebuilding the lives of the flood-affected, rural women has been fulfilled; additionally, they are able to plan and implement DRR livelihood initiatives.

The process has to be carried forward in a phased manner. We are aspiring for a gradual increase in coverage, with intensive R&D work. During the first five years of launching the innovation, 400 women SHGs, comprising about 6,000 rural primary producers from the riverine villages of Dhemaji district will be linked to the process. During the sixth and seventh years, another 6,000 primary producers from Lakhimpur district will be linked. From 2011 onwards, the process will be expanded to the rest of Assam.





In view of the practical difficulties in accessing tasar food plants in deep forests and the economic viability of tasar culture over other agriculture crops and forest produce, the augmentation of tasar food plants in privately owned wastelands attains significance because land resources are better managed and utilized under private ownership. Since tasar silkworm rearing is a family avocation of tribals, they consider the plantations raised in their private lands as an asset that will receive their attention, effort and resources. Moreover, they will be able to retain the income they earn from this activity. In common forest lands, however, the major challenge for the intervention was to create a vision of long-term livelihood opportunity for the tribals through the utilization of these forests ...

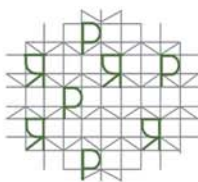
**[read more on page 17](#)**



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

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