

The Community Takes Charge: Green Shoots Emerge

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

"Awaz do hum ek hain!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

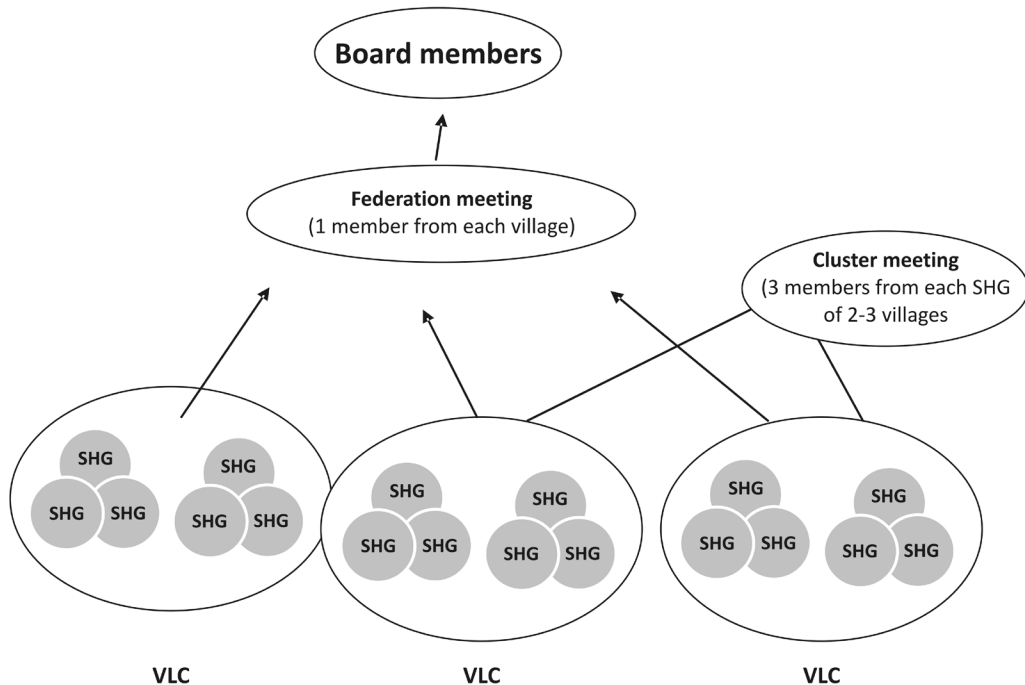
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This article mainly focusses on the Bhoura chapter of NMS, and describes the experiences and efforts of the Bhoura-PRADAN team in making NMS an autonomous body. The team strengthened this volunteer-based organization by bringing about some changes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

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

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

Structure of NMS



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

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

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

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

Issues with NMS

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

has capacitated the group to function and has enhanced their level of knowledge and understanding. CSPs also encourage women to participate in the *gram sabha*. They help women become aware, come out of their homes, go to block- and district-level offices, fill forms and applications and get things done for their community. Such an engagement by CSPs, however, had some limitations as well. It was very common to hear the women of village say: “*Wo sangh sathi (CSP) gram sansad (VLC) me nahi aati to hum nahi baithe meeting ke liye, wo hamari batein likh kar le jati thi upar tak tabhi hamari sunwai hoti thi* (We don't conduct VLC meetings when the CSP doesn't come. She notes down our issues and forwards it to the higher-ups for solutions. Only then are our issues heard).”

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

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

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

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

Reducing Dependency on CSPs

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

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

Some major points of discussion were:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Transferred responsibility and resources:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Present scenario

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

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

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

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

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Challenges in the Journey of being Autonomous

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

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

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

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

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

Fears and Concerns

- ◆ NMS is creating leaders who will lead villagers and Federations. A leader has power and is listened to by all the women and she plays an important role in influencing people. So, would a leader allow for rotation and share her power?
- ◆ Who will facilitate the processes for reflection, to revisit the process of operation and governance of MC members?
- ◆ Knowledge should not be limited to a few hands—how to extend it to others is a concern.
- ◆ The managing of funds in the NMS is, in the long run, also a concern.

Conclusion

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