

# The Power of Collectivism: A Showcase

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

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

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

## BACKGROUND

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## OUR EARLY INTERVENTIONS

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

## NEED IDENTIFICATION AND PRIORITIZATION

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

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

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

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

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

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### FIGHTING BACK

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

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

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

- ♦ Money charged for rice in both the cards is one rupee extra.
- ♦ Money charged for sugar is Rs 20 per kg (mandate is Rs 18.35).
- ♦ Money charged for oil is Rs 19 per kg (mandate is Rs 15.05).
- ♦ Every month there were irregularities in the ration distributed, especially, salt, sugar and oil, which are distributed only occasionally.
- ♦ The behaviour of the dealers with the consumers is objectionable. They use foul language and threaten people that they will transfer their card to some other dealer if they ask any questions.
- ♦ In one instance, the dealer claimed that the people need to pay for the transportation and, therefore, he deducted a kilogramme of rice per card.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### IMPLICATIONS OF THE TRAINING

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

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

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

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

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

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

### PUBLIC HEARING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### CHALLENGES FACED

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

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

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

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



## LEARNINGS

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

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

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

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

programmes on PRI and the *gram sabha* helped develop the confidence of the people of their influence in governance.

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

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

## THE WAY FORWARD

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

Seeing the changes in this village, neighbouring villages have also started to raise their voice against the irregularities in the PDS system. Having seen many such struggles spread out in

this block, we are now thinking of collectivizing SHGs at the VO level to help villagers claim their rights.

## CONCLUSION

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

terms, the local administration such as the *panchayat*, block and district) seems to have an unwelcoming attitude to such initiatives.

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

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