

Youth Interventions in Mohgaon: Expanding Options

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

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

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

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

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

INITIATION OF THE PROGRAMME

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

STEPS IN THE PROGRAMME

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The role of SHGs in the programme:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the world by learning skills and negotiating their own terms.

EXPERIENCES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IMPACT

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

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

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

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

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

consulted for opinions and can make choices for themselves.

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

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

Breaking the barriers of

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

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

limit them to domestic games and activities.

Skill-building and income-generation:

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

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

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LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WAY AHEAD: FUTURE PLANS AND IDEAS

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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