

Accessing Institutions: A Step Forward in Women's Empowerment

JYOTI REKHA ROY PRADHAN

Widening their sphere of influence, the women of Karanjia stake their claim to and participate in village institutions thereby throwing open the path to greater access to their rights and entitlements, increased awareness and ownership of the decisions affecting their lives

The SHG members of Rasamtala took charge of monitoring the running of the girls' residential school in their village. They found that neither was food given to children according to protocol nor was the quality of food good. They had complained to the School Management Committee but the matter was pushed under the carpet and no action was taken. The members then collected the data of proof for misconduct and registered an FIR in the police station and also informed the Block Development Officer and the District Collector. The headmaster of the school was replaced within 24 hours. Since then, the members regularly monitor the management of the school.

In Dumbi Sahi village, members of the Sarjamburu, Dinga Marshall and Gaonshree Chandiapat SHGs realized that their children were not getting proper attention because the village did not have any infrastructure for running the *anganwadi* centre, which was located in a verandah. The women discussed this issue in their SHG meetings and came up with the solution that they could approach the Upper Primary School in their village, which had some rooms to spare. They negotiated with the headmaster of the school, who agreed to allot one room for the *anganwadi*. The SHG members are now vigilant about the quality of food provided to the children of the *anganwadi* as well as the school.

When two SHGs in Hatibari village began participating actively in the Gaon Kalyan Samiti (GKS) meetings, they were privy to information about its purpose and budget. GKS is a committee under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM); its brief is to involve the community in planning, implementation and monitoring of health and other allied activities at the village level. This body is also responsible for creating awareness about maternal health, hygiene, environment, sanitation, etc. The villagers were unaware of the purpose of GKS and were thus reluctant to use the funds because they were apprehensive about mis-utilizing the money. Once SHG members understood the broader purpose of GKS, they volunteered to maintain the environmental hygiene of their village.

In Karanjia block, people have been increasingly attending the *gram sabha* and participating in village development initiatives. The Federation members prepared village development plans (VDPs) for 96 villages and submitted it to the *gram sabha* for approval. Almost 70 per cent of the women in the block participated, to get their village plan approved.

Similar reports are pouring in from other villages in Karanjia, where women are taking charge and are determined to make changes in their life, their village and society. Women are not only demanding but also taking action, by negotiating for their rights and entitlements and working out solutions.

BACKGROUND

The Karanjia block lies in the south-western sub-division of Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. PRADAN started operating in Karanjia in 2000 by promoting women SHGs. These SHGs were involved in the savings-and-credit activity, and in promoting farm and non-farm based livelihood activities. The computer munshi system was adopted in 2003, to streamline the SHG accounting system. The computerized accounting systems helped SHGs maintain their accounts, and the women were able to track the status of their funds easily. Around the same time, SHG Clusters also evolved; these were a platform for sharing and learning as well as planning and reviewing the activities of the SHGs.

With time, SHGs became very vibrant and began to monitor their own growth actively. In the Clusters, the women associated with other

Sampurna is a symbol of solidarity and empowerment for the 6,000 women linked with it. Its objectives are to create awareness among the members about their rights and entitlements, and help them access these, increase their linkages with various mainstream agencies, enhance the position of women in the family and society, and to help build the self-confidence of its members.

women and shared their issues and concerns. In these meetings, PRADAN professionals acted only as facilitators while the women tried to solve the issues related to the villages and the *panchayats*. In 2005, discussions in the Clusters resulted in the formation of a block-level Federation—the Sampurna Federation. Today 430 SHGs are members of Sampurna.

Sampurna is a symbol of solidarity and empowerment for the 6,000 women linked with it. Its objectives are to create awareness among the members about their rights

and entitlements, and help them access these, increase their linkages with various mainstream agencies, enhance the position of women in the family and society, and to help build the self-confidence of its members. It also lays emphasis on the participation of women in local self-governance. In the 2012 *Panchayati Raj* elections, Sampurna played an active role in generating awareness among its members about voting and nominating themselves for various posts. Sampurna also aims at enhancing the economic condition and improving the health and education facilities of their villages.

During the 2011–12 annual planning session of Sampurna, its members voiced an interest in working on strategically linking its members with various institutions and preparing an action plan to access resources. The need to have access to institutions was felt because SHG members were dependent on PRADAN professionals or the Federation for various resources or solutions to their problems. Although SHGs carried out their task functions such as conducting regular meetings, keeping

account of savings and credit, and engaging in livelihood activities successfully, they were not very aware of the wider developmental perspective of their village. The issues of non-entitlement in their SHGs or Clusters would be raised; however, they were unable to take action.

During a Visioning exercise conducted in the Federation, members articulated their vision for their village; it was then that they realized that linkages with various institutions were necessary to actualize those dreams.

In the baseline survey conducted with 187 SHG members in 2011–12, under the UN Women Project on Gender Equality Programme in Karanjia, it was found that 86 per cent of the women did not take any action about their dissatisfaction with the working of government agencies, and 72 per cent of them were not aware of any village committees that they could approach. It was also evident in the SHG meetings and the Cluster meetings that the women had very little awareness about the various committees and institutions in their village and had almost no understanding about their functioning.

During a Visioning exercise conducted in the Federation, members articulated their vision for their village; it was then that they realized that linkages with various institutions were necessary to actualize those dreams. The SHG members wanted to unlock the power of the institutions around them and use them for their well being and development. The Federation, in its action plan, also focused on creating awareness about the various institutions, government schemes and projects existing in the village and the *panchayat*, and helping members understand the roles and functions of these institutions and how they could be accessed.

It was important that all the SHG members became aware of the various institutions and also learned how to exercise their presence and

voice in the system. However, it was a big task. The women were content with maintaining the status quo. They did not think that becoming involved in these matters would be worth their time. Because the focus of PRADAN's engagement with the community had always been in promoting SHGs and livelihoods, the women did not discuss the issues of involvement in

institutions with the team. PRADAN's identity as 'livelihood *wallas*' prevented the women from sharing with it other issues affecting them.

Adding more dimensions to PRADAN's work perspective was difficult to implement and for the community to accept. In some meetings, when the PRADAN team tried to encourage a discussion on the well-being and their rights or entitlements of the members, some of them would react by saying, "Let's discuss our agenda and finish the meeting. Why are we discussing other issues?"

The team then conducted a small exercise on Institution mapping with the SHG members, in order to generate awareness among them about the various institutions and to help them build linkages with the institutions.

THE INSTITUTIONAL MAPPING EXERCISE

The exercise was first piloted with the Maa Tarini SHG in Jhalakiani village of Karanjia block. The assumption behind conducting the exercise was that the SHG members would gain an understanding of the existing institutions in their immediate environment and learn about their functioning. They would be able to identify the important institutions and understand their impact on their lives and on the SHGs. They would then become

empowered to prepare an action plan to influence their immediate environment by using these institutions.

The exercise began with the objective sharing followed by the Marble game (a tool used for analysis of power and resource distribution). This tool helps participants realize that their abject poverty and exclusion are due to their social positioning and exclusion from the institutional processes. This realization arouses the need to pro-actively become linked with the institutions.

In the Marble game, the participants were divided into three groups. The first group had three members, the second group had six members and all the other members were in the third group. A circle was drawn on the floor where a hundred marbles were placed. The smallest group stood closest to the circle and the largest group stood the farthest from the circle. Three square pieces of wood of different sizes were given to the three different groups. The first group was given the largest wooden piece, the second group was given the middle-sized piece and the third group was given the smallest. Each group was given a chance to throw the wooden piece at the marbles in the middle of the circle. The marbles which came out of the circle would belong to the group that threw the wood. It was expected that the first group would earn more marbles because of their proximity to the circle and the fact that the wooden piece they had was larger. The third group would earn the least as they were the farthest from the circle and because they had the smallest wooden piece.

REFLECTIONS ON THE INSTITUTIONAL MAPPING EXERCISE

The exercise captured the women's attention. They shared their feelings and emotions about the game. The members of the first group

were obviously the happiest because they had managed to get more than two-thirds of the marbles. The members of the second group expressed a mixed reaction. It was the third group that expressed intense frustration as they had got only a few marbles. They thought that justice had not been done to them. They were very sad because they were made to stand the farthest and were given a very small piece of wood. They were more in number but received the least.

The members were then asked to share some experiences from their day-to-day events, to help them explore the reasons of this unequal distribution of power and resources. They were able to connect their reality to the game—that some influential people snatch away whatever schemes are available and the poor are left with a small share.

This was followed by a discussion on what institutions are and what they mean to the people; the women began to recognize the various institutions around them. They were asked to list out all the institutions in their villages and the nearby areas. They started with their own SHG, Cluster, Federation, PRADAN, *gram sabha*, School Management Committee, GKS, *anganwadi*, Block, Agriculture Department, *Jungle Suraksha* Committee, Watershed Management Committee, Village Development Committee, *Pala* Committee (a committee which promotes *Pala*, a form of song and play), Sports Committee, Youth Club, *Laxmi Puja* Committee, etc.

After identifying these institutions, the women were helped to map the institutions, based on the accessibility and their importance in their lives. The women drew a circle with their SHG in the centre and the different institutions around it. The institutions with which the women had greater access or a better relationship were placed near the SHG and those with which the

women had lesser linkages were placed farther away from the centre and the SHG.

Similarly, the size of an institution represented its importance—the more important the institution in their lives, the bigger it was drawn. In this way the importance and the linkage of the SHG with the various institutions were mapped. After this exercise was completed, the members were asked to analyze the present situation. The picture

revealed, in most cases, that the institutions that delivered entitlements to the citizens were actually far from the SHG. The gram sabha was one such institution. The women had the least interaction with it, and yet most of the entitlements had to be accessed through it.

The women realized that they were also unaware of the GKS and the School Management Committee; their interaction with these could give them an opportunity for a cleaner environment and better educational facilities for their children. The members found that they were closer to religious committees and sports committees because they donated money for these; yet they did not get any direct benefit from these.

In Jhalkiani, the SHG members resonated with this realization and said, “The same thing happens with us. When any government scheme or programme is introduced, we are not informed about it and the benefit is accessed by a few well-off people.” The exercise was helpful and the women realized that because they do not demand their rights, they are left out. Now that they have become aware, hopefully, they will be able to change the situation and will no longer be mute spectators; they will perhaps be able to work together, united.

The women said that because they had a very limited understanding of the process and the functioning of the gram sabha, they remained absent from it. They were, therefore, not familiar with the village plan and, by and large, remained excluded from the decision-making process.

After the exercise, the women were asked to choose two or three institutions on which they would like to focus and then to identify strategies to become involved in it and establish a linkage. Some of the action plans included gathering knowledge of the *gram sabha* from the ward *panch* or *sarpanch*, attending the gram sabha, checking the services provided in *anganwadis*, monitoring the functioning of the school, etc.

Women marked the *gram sabha* as the most important institution because it was the forum in which the development plans of the whole village was made and the beneficiaries for the various schemes were prioritized. The women said that because they had a very limited understanding of the process and the functioning of the *gram sabha*, they remained absent from it. They were, therefore, not familiar with the village plan and, by and large, remained excluded from the decision-making process.

The women made a decision to attend and participate in the *gram sabha* of their village. As per the baseline survey conducted under the UN Women’s Project by PRADAN, 68 per cent of the women did not attend the *gram sabha* earlier; after the members took a conscious decision to participate, the situation has improved. In the recent *gram sabha*, 83 per cent of the participants that attended were women. It also had a positive impact on the VDP. The women played a crucial role in developing the village plan, based on the Integrated Natural Management (INRM) approach, and also in prioritizing the Shelf of Project (SOP) in the *gram sabha*.

INCREASING ENGAGEMENT

Seeing the positive impact of the exercise on women's engagement with the institutions, the process was conducted in all 430 SHGs in the Karanja block. A pool of resource persons were trained to conduct the institutional mapping exercise, initially with the support of the PRADAN professionals.

After the primary exercises at the SHG level, the learning and action plan of the SHGs were consolidated at the Cluster level. The basic objective was that the Clusters, being active and vibrant collectives, would regularly review the action plan of the SHGs and extend their support to them. Also, the Clusters could generate momentum within the member base on a greater scale and quantum.

During 2011, the Cluster review process was also modified, in view of the women's engagement with institutions. Apart from financial parameters and livelihoods, the focus now was also on what the SHGs had planned to work on vis-à-vis the institutions. The SHGs shared their experience of the institutional mapping exercise and how they wanted to take it forward and increase their understanding on how to engage with the various institutions.

Another small exercise was conducted at the Cluster level to prioritize their engagement with the institutions, depending upon the role and functions that each institution played in their life. All the Clusters drew up a priority list, which included institutions/programmes such as *gram panchayat*, MGNREGS, GKS, *anganwadi*, the school and the Watershed Management Committees.

The Cluster decided that because the gram panchayat was the power hub, the women needed to enter its purview and access their rights and entitlements. They would become a part of the system, in which they would not only be demanding from the system but also would engage actively in creating a space for themselves while being able to influence the system.

The Cluster decided that because the *gram panchayat* was the power hub, the women needed to enter its purview and access their rights and entitlements. They would become a part of the system, in which they would not only be demanding from the system but also would engage actively in creating a space for themselves while being able to influence the system.

The *anganwadi* was the obvious choice of the women because the scheme focused on the development of women and children. During the discussions, the women were able to relate

with the *anganwadis* to a great extent because these centres catered to the needs of the pre-schoolers and the pregnant and lactating women, and were easy to access. The women wanted to work on the functioning of the *anganwadi* because they were dissatisfied with the quality and the amount of the take-home rations provided to them.

They also wanted to work with the MGNREGS because it is a central government scheme and very much a part of their livelihoods generation.

THE EXPERIENCE OF ACCESSING INSTITUTIONS

Although the women began to enter and, to some extent, participate in the functioning of institutions, they were not able to negotiate strongly. They would return having been shouted at by the concerned authority. Gradually, there were a few positive experiences and the women drew inspiration from them. They found it difficult to confront the *anganwadi* worker because

often she would be a member of their own SHG. There were also instances where the *gram panchayat* office bearers such as the *Panchayat Extension Officer* and the *Gram Rojgar Sahahyak* expressed discomfort over the women's changed attitude. For example, when the women began accessing institutions and complaining about the discrepancies, the office-bearers attributed this to the leaders and the PRADAN professionals. Many leaders and trainers received threats from the *gram panchayat* office bearers and the *Sarpanch*. In one instance, a trainer from the Kendumundi Cluster was threatened by the *Sarpanch* after she started making the SHG members aware about the MGNREGA. The SHG members began demanding work at the *gram panchayat*, according to procedure. The *gram panchayat* office bearers were caught because they had wanted to avoid the work load. They approached the *Sarpanch* and he went to the trainer completely drunk and began threatening her of dire consequences. The SHG members came together in her support and he walked out.

MILES TO GO

The SHG members have been thoroughly trained and regular discussions have taken place in the SHG, Cluster and Federation meetings. The women are now very aware about the various schemes being generated. They extend support to each other because they see it not as an issue of a single SHG or Cluster, but of all the members in the Federation.

The women are now more confident of approaching the *gram panchayat* and the block and the district officials. They may still

The women are now very aware about the various schemes being generated. They extend support to each other because they see it not as an issue of a single SHG or Cluster, but of all the members in the Federation.

not be able to negotiate alone; however, as a group, they certainly can demand their rights and entitlements. The women are also supported by the trained community resource persons (CRPs), who help them in writing applications and quoting laws. Various workshops have been conducted to sensitize the duty bearers and the PRIs.

The process of institutional mapping has been pivotal because it has stimulated SHG members to think beyond their horizon of savings and credit, and become aware of the various other institutions around them. This shift in focus has helped them look at these institutions in a different perspective; a shift from being just receivers to demanders, a shift from exclusion to inclusion. The exercise has helped women understand the various institutions and their importance in their lives as well as realize how little they knew about the work and the functioning of these institutions.

In most places, there is now large-scale participation of women in the local governance institutions. New PRI representatives have been elected; and SHG members too have been elected as representatives in many of these bodies. Women feel empowered by their new practice of attending a forum wherein, traditionally, women did not participate or were very few in number. The women are curious and eager to know what transpires in this space, hitherto occupied mostly by men. However, this energy and enthusiasm has to be simultaneously supported by perspective, knowledge and information, which is the next level of challenge.

Realizing their strength, many collectives are making choices about whom to elect to these spaces. Many women leaders are getting

elected to these institutions as people's representatives. In Karanjia alone, 105 women leaders were elected to the PRIs. During the UN-women mid-term review in 2013, it was found that there was considerable enhancement in the mobility of women and increased linkage between women and various institutions.

The women have now started accessing institutions, questioning and demanding their rights and entitlements. They have also now started making complaints in case there is any discrepancy. To support the women, the

Realizing their strength, many collectives are making choices about whom to elect to these spaces. Many women leaders are getting elected into these institutions as people's representatives. In Karanjia alone, 105 women leaders were elected to the PRIs.

Federation has started a grievance redressal system, which they can file any complaints regarding the operations of the MGNREGA in their village. The complaints are then registered by the accountant of the Federation and forwarded to the concerned authority. If issues are not resolved within seven days, the complaints are sent to the next higher appellate authority.

All these steps together have brought about a positive shift in the women who now have greater confidence and greater self-esteem.