

# Dial C for Change: Alternative Narrative on Transformation

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*Organizing the poor into saving groups, enhancing the productive potential of natural resources and creating a cluster of diverse production centres have been the broad framework for transformation in the lives of the poor in Gumla district*

## FIRST WORD

For many, the poor are considered passive recipients of change—the idea being to pull them out of poverty by creating exogenous opportunities that they can cling on to. Whereas the poor don't resist the plans made for them, they often have very little faith that the plans will work, or work as well as claimed. As a consequence, they not only underestimate the claims that such plans make but also procrastinate before becoming involved with them. Rightly so, as such plans rarely transform their lives. Because context-specific change has not been suitably defined, age-old misfortunes have yet to be transformed. The path to future prosperity has yet to be paved.

For over six decades, the state-driven processes of rural emancipation have attempted to bring about development and, yet, the number of poor has only multiplied and poverty in its diverse manifestations has deepened. The trouble is that the state continues to persist with its distinct ways and the schemes rolled out to transform the lives of poor people, with the intent of development, remain trapped within the convenience of time, scope, space and even policy.

However, there is a difference in Gumla, Jharkhand, a rain-fed district that is predominantly tribal, where non-state actors have partnered with the state, to create 'nudges' tailored to suit local ecological conditions. The undulating terrain, the dusty landscapes and the dilapidated households have, for once, been witness to actual change. The economic success is evident but the crux of the story lies in the manner in which the convergence between the state and the non-state, the formal and informal institutions, and business and civil society has been engineered to script an 'alternative narrative' of social transformation.

The conventional narrative mode is often linear, using a set of cause-effect features to communicate the story. It represents a limited point of view, which is not only obvious but often predictable. The alternative narrative, on the other hand, deviates from the obvious because it locates the story in a broader context, pulls out inferences that go beyond cause-effect linearity and paints a picture that has depth and dimension.

The narrative that follows is an attempt to understand the currents of transformation that have permeated the region and how these have been engineered into society, which has become a proactive partner in it. Consequently, it seems the world of the poor is no longer a land of missed opportunities. The poor now have the power of transforming their own lives and that of others—silently and diligently. The alternative narrative is an attempt at decoding the method in this process—some of it explicit and much of it implicit. The good news is that when something like this happens, it may only need one push, a committed generation, to sustain and facilitate the process of transformation.

## THE STORY

There are many stories that add up to the creation of an alternate narrative. We see the story of transformation when we tread across some of the 216 villages and knock at some of the 18,966 households in as many as six blocks in the district. These numbers constitute 22 per cent of the villages and 12 per cent of the households in a total of 12 blocks in the district, a significant number. The change is being brought about by a small but committed team working under the aegis of PRADAN—which

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has created many innovative avenues of engagement in some of the poorest households in the country.

## Scene 1: Prized Animals

What has hockey got to do with poverty? Seemingly, both have dribbled into the lives of the people in Gumla district. The playing eleven in the national women's hockey team

comprises women from this district. Pratima Kindo's (SHG member) knowledge of the game might be limited but she does know that in local hockey competitions, the winning trophy is most often a 'goat'. For her, rearing goats supplements her family income. Of the 30 households in Sijang-Ambatoli village, as many as 21 households are now rearing goats.

Maintaining a herd of 30 animals costs around Rs 1,500 each year, and the expected return, once the litter cycle is set in motion, is at least ten times the recurring expenditure. A set of animals and a goat-pen have been subsidized under the Tribal Welfare Prototype Scheme, Jharkhand. The challenge before the participating households has been to maintain a healthy progeny and a viable herd for their own benefit under the expert guidance and supervision of a para-vet. Overall, approximately 566 families are engaged in goat-keeping and the number is steadily growing. Not only have the families been gainfully engaged in goat-rearing, they have also become effective managers of a live herd.

There was need for substantial groundwork before the people accepted goat-keeping as a livelihood option. It has been dealt with in great detail, and its social relevance and economic viability have been mapped as well. The tribal ecosystem is conducive for rearing goats; the

settlements in the backdrop of the forested areas provide the necessary feed for the herd. Most of the households clearly see their herd through the economic lens but there is more to it which they find hard to articulate. Does it offer insurance against medical emergencies? Pratima Kindo does consider animals as a kind of insurance cover against economic exigencies for the entire family, without having to pay a premium, however. No wonder then that the goat-pen has not only become an integral part of the household but is also looked after closely by all the members of a family.

Although difficult to establish, could it be possible that villagers drew their 'skills' and 'endurance' to survive against odds in goat-rearing from the traditional game of hockey?

However, the conventional narrative emerging from Scene 1 (on goats) is undoubtedly of economic security, achieved through the adoption of an activity that was made risk-free by the programme team that had carefully re-introduced livestock into the tribal landscape. Because the households have been trained in goat-keeping with the assurance of para-vet services at hand, the risk-free venture, suited to their socio-cultural ecosystem, has found favour with the poor.

Formal insurance of any kind is a rarity among the poor although health insurance and insurance against bad weather have been their standard concerns. Insurance is unlike most transactions that the poor are used to. They find it hard to comprehend that they have to pay for something they may never make use of. However, goat-keeping provides them an indirect insurance cover, for which they need not pay a premium but they do become eligible for monthly rewards.

A livelihood opportunity that cross-subsidizes an insurance cover is the take-home from this

venture. Given the economic uncertainties that the poor are consistently exposed to and the impending climate change, there seems to be a case for using public funds to create livelihood opportunities because that may act as hedge funds to cover risks and exigencies. Federating goat-keepers could further strengthen collective insurance for them.

## **Scene 2: Back to One's Land**

Budesar Singh seems to have lost track of the number of years he has been a migrant labour, travelling to far-off places in search of work to ensure the survival of his family. The memories of insalubrious living conditions haunt him as much as do the daily risk of losing his belongings. Bringing home savings from work was at an enormous risk of leading an insecure life in the hustle-bustle of crowded cities, considering there was always the danger that the money that he saved from his work could be stolen at any point.

All that has changed because Singh is now one among several farmers in Baranda Toli (a village with 150 households), who cultivate vegetables for commercial purposes. They have managed to ensure, with support, a secure and permanent water source, and his small patch of 15 decimals blooms at least twice a year, yielding more than what he would have saved from the construction and wage work he was engaged in. Cultivating vegetables for the market, however, is not enough unless a forward linkage is set up for bargaining a suitable price.

Supply-chain linkages depend on the volume of material that can be made available to the market upon demand. Without doubt, the process of developing such a chain has looked at the supply-demand conundrum to the advantage of the local people. Not only has the system been well laid out, the capacity of the

local youth to act as a link to the market has been orchestrated. Leveraging resources from the local administration to back up the support by developing a 'sorting centre' has contributed to setting up a sustainable supply chain.

Government resources are rarely used to create small land-based businesses; therefore, it is much easier for the poor to move out to the city. However, if a market could be brought to their doorstep, land-based enterprises could use the opportunity and continue to work in their traditional vocation (farming). Although it is common knowledge that farmers are giving up farming to seek more sustainable means of livelihood, it is indeed heartening to note that now migrants are returning home because they see an opportunity for a better future in Gumla.

Two points are clear. First, the vicious cycle of poverty can be broken by engaging with the market for economic optimization of local natural resources. New lucrative opportunities such as vegetable cultivation can be created. Second, the development of a value chain binds people to a new set of ground rules, which provide individual gains and, at the same time, create a community of practitioners working towards the greater common good.

There are, of course, questions that arise. Is this a temporary transition or is there more to the story that is currently being scripted? There are two perspectives from which this transition can be viewed. The first is techno-economic in nature, wherein the local capacity has been raised to leverage the market for establishing a land-based enterprise. This is the conventional narrative, which is linear and wherein the indicators of success lie in the 'numbers'—of

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people engaged, of material marketed and of profit made. The narrative assumes that the economic incentive will propel the cause-effect relationship to persist over time.

If economics had been the only incentive, migration could have been as lucrative as farming, if not more! This leads us to the second perspective that relates

to the cultural underpinning of the economic transformation. Whereas it is often considered that development is essentially an economic idea, in reality cultural undercurrents play a critical role in social acceptance of change. This is more evident in a tribal region than elsewhere. It is the cultural belongingness to land that plays a crucial role.

Stretching the argument further, it is also a fact that the social strength of the tribals rests on a loosely organized egalitarian existence with a strong belief in ecological principles. This is seemingly more evident in Gumla than elsewhere, where a sense of collective survival has percolated horizontally across the society. The realization that culture has a strong bearing on 'development' has only begun to unfold and is still not totally understood. The work by the programme team has inadvertently leveraged the cultural context to its advantage. This is indeed a subject for detailed study, beyond the purview of this article.

### Scene 3: Sustaining change

"We celebrate as we deliberate," said a woman in the monthly meeting of the Federation. Each woman represents her respective Cluster. The women are dressed for the occasion, in off-white saris with maroon borders. The mood is upbeat and the environment vibrant; they discuss issues related to maintaining accounts

and developing viable plans for their Clusters. In a democratic set-up, the Federation exudes the power of numbers and the strength for change.

There are 1,063 functional Self-Help Groups (SHGs) promoted by PRADAN in the district; these have been grouped into 61 Clusters. Ten such Clusters constitute a Federation. In each of the Federations, the accounting system is perfected to the last digit by computer *munshis*, who have been appointed to manage the accounts, which provide a real picture of the financial health of the groups. This financial clarity has empowered women's groups to negotiate with the government for mobilizing public funds.

Clusters and Federations are sustained on the funds collected through a membership fee by the groups, which provides services in return. From addressing social issues such as the curse of liquor consumption to the administrative streamlining of the Public Distribution System, the Federations continue to reinvent themselves to stay relevant. Acting as pressure groups, the Federations have become the front-office for the social transformation sweeping the district.

How far the SHG-Federation inter-dependence will last is a million dollar question. Much will depend on how these women-led institutions position themselves between state and non-state institutions and how involved they become in the on-going economic activities in the region. Without a doubt, leadership is as critical as the drive to reinvent the Federations as an 'agency' for change.

Over the years, for many 'development agencies', organizing women into SHGs has

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become a convenient entry point for initiating development activities in rural areas. Whereas it has worked in a majority of the places, at several locations this neo-institutional mechanism is literally on the verge of collapse. Leadership has undoubtedly been one factor; the absence of an enterprise model of sustaining such groups is another.

As one delves further into the socio-psychology of these Federations, it becomes apparent that a bit of hope and some reassurance have been powerful incentives for groups to stay together. The sense of security that these Federations provide acts as a glue for two reasons: one, it creates a sense that the future holds promise and, two, it lowers the stress level of the community because it provides an umbrella of protection over their heads. The connectedness of the collective to such Federations is determined by the kind of goals that have been set and how far the goalposts are from its members. It helps if every member is motivated and is inspired to aspire for change.

#### **Scene 4: Sweet Taste of Success**

A sage was once challenged by a king, "Tell me, how do you describe 'truth'?" The story goes that the sage handed a mango to the king and said, "Only by eating it, will you know the truth of its taste." Unlike the sage who could not describe its taste, Shivshankar Oraon knows the flavour of his mangoes. For Shivshankar, however, the truth is that his life has been distinctly flavoured, ever since he harvested his first crop of mangoes three years ago.

Shivshankar has been joined by 900 other households in four of the 12 blocks in the

district, in harvesting the fruits of their labour and patience. Shifting from cultivating coarse grain to planting fruit trees in his erstwhile barren plot has dramatically transformed his life—and he has moved on from being a menial daily wager to a proud orchard owner.

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Raising a mango orchard is not very complex but nurturing saplings for first three years during the non-fruiting period can be very frustrating, especially when the farmer is extremely poor. The solution to this was to introduce inter-cropping with vegetables while waiting for the mango trees to bloom. Vegetable production yielded Rs 25,000 each calendar year. The number of mango growers has now gone up to 50 households in Kuraag village because of the cushion provided by vegetable cultivation.

Overall, some 557 ha of land are under mango cultivation in Gumla district, producing no less than 500 tonnes of mangoes worth over Rs 1.2 crores during one season. What went into the making of this mango district? Funds were not raised from traditional donors but resources were mobilized from various schemes of the government, to spur the sweet revolution. Under the Integrated Tribal Development Programme, the Micro Economic Social Organization (MESO) offered Rs 29,500 per acre on an experimental basis, which was used for creating irrigation infrastructure such as wells. With the vegetables and mango farming combination becoming economically viable, tribal farmers as well as government officials are upbeat about the success of the initiative.

The experiment with mango orchards points to the ingeniousness of the programme team to create location-specific options for people to choose from. Selecting *Amrapali*

as the mango variety for the area may have been a technical choice but dovetailing it with a cropping package was a conscious decision. This was a carefully thought-out strategy to engage marginal land-holders in agronomic practices that would offer a win-win scenario for the smooth adoption of mango as a valuable crop. Mangoes have

not let the poor down; instead, these have helped usher in economic prosperity, resulting in many families moving to the town to avail of better education facilities for their children.

This raises a compelling question: where does this newfound (relative) prosperity lead to? Some econometric studies do suggest that as the poor move to another level of economic engagement, they usually exit the previous vocation after they find a firm footing through it. In addition to this being an obvious implication of any developmental intervention, it nevertheless demonstrates the effectiveness of the programme and its rightful ownership by the target population. Such change has a progressive fallout because it creates space for the next batch of the impoverished community to move up the ladder. An econometric analysis can help determine the true impact of this development intervention.

## THE MESSAGE

The menu of interventions may have been conventional but the scenarios it generates stretch beyond the cause-effect paradigm. Organizing the poor into saving groups, enhancing the productive potential of natural resources and creating a cluster of diverse production centres have been the broad framework of change in the district. However, it could not be anticipated that the menu of interventions would lead to a sub-menu,



wherein a social safety net, sustained income and food security emerge as unintended outcomes. Put them all together and it paints a comprehensive picture of change.

The fact that the approach has worked and worked effectively, leads to an obvious query: what have been the driving principles of change that development practitioners can take home from Gumla? Even if all the ingredients are available, making a perfect dish needs more than the right mix of all that has been on offer! Similarly, putting the menu of interventions on the ground may not necessarily yield the desired outcome. The following factors seem to have worked, in isolation as well as in combination, to trigger change.

### Menu of Choices

In offering a diverse but locally relevant menu of interventions for the poor, the programme has not scaled down expectations but has instead focused on the core competencies of people and backed it with technical support. Given that growth requires both manpower as well as brainpower, the menu of choices has made the best use of both in creating a spark. Unlike other impoverished groups, tribals embody a culture of collective survival, which helped spread the spark across society.

The diversity of options has also increased the probability of acceptance. Because the poor often lack critical pieces of information and have rarely been given the power to make decisions, the choice of options empowers them to view themselves in a 'game-changer' role. Often, poverty manifestation does not allow the poor to perceive 'change' even if it exists all around unless they are themselves

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made to believe, through hands-on experience, that change is indeed possible. This not only leads to increased ownership of development interventions but also an innate desire to make these work as well.

### Institutional Synergy

Rather than raise projects to make investments in development options, PRADAN has partnered with the district administration in leveraging resources from various anti-poverty schemes of the state. Unlike time-bound projects, such an approach helps continue strengthening, consolidating and expanding the outreach on a programme-to-programme basis. Notable in this approach has been the fact that rather than engaging the tribals into alternative livelihoods programmes such as food for work, the focus of engagement has been land-based.

The success of the initiative has significant lessons for future planners. If a one-time investment of around Rs 2 crores can generate Rs 20 crores on an annual basis, there is enormous potential of turning things around in rural areas. However, it must not be construed that the same approach can be replicated easily in every area. It would need an intermediary organization, whose members can touch the ground running, to convert the undercurrents into signals of activities for engagement with the poor. It would warrant a suitable mix of techno-managerial skills, along with an appreciation of local traditions and cultures, for designing programmes that pull the poor out of poverty. Else, food and employment insecurity will continue to cripple the economy for all times to come.

Through initiatives such as those introduced by PRADAN, there emerges a scope for

improving the functioning of formal and informal institutions. The PRADAN team created conditions for synergy between disparate institutions which, coupled with technological innovation, allowed a supply chain with forward-backward linkage to develop where it was non-existent.

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### Capability Push

Poverty, in its diverse manifestations, leads to an intolerable waste of talent. It is now being widely accepted that poverty is not just a lack of money, it is not having the capability to realize one's full potential as a human being.

Capability as a means of progress has been central to all cultures. Economic growth as a normative concept, on the other hand, undermines capabilities and, hence, human dignity. In Gumla, it is the people who matter ultimately; profits are only a means to improving human lives. Through various interventions, communities have been encouraged to live full and creative lives because the focus has been on improving their lives. In an era of perpetual inequity, it has been demonstrated that the idea of development works well when it is focused on the lives of the individuals and the way they actually live because in the final analysis that alone has to change.

Capabilities of the community across villages have been given a push; from amongst the poor have emerged para-vets, orchard owners, innovative farmers, willing entrepreneurs, market mediators and leaders. Those who were earlier bunched together as 'poor' have now been ascribed distinct capabilities! This is indeed the crux of the alternative narrative where economic transformation has been used as a means to enhance human capabilities

and, indeed, human dignity and pride. Wherever economic transformation is assumed as the final goal, change can only be temporary.

In the final analysis, the project team created a 'menu of choices' through which it leveraged 'institutional synergy' to build the 'capacity' of the local people.

It created congenial conditions

for change through:

- ♦ a multi-talented team, driven by distributive leadership
- ♦ a sense of 'agency' for transforming the community
- ♦ an approach, based on the principle of trusteeship

Social transformation, thus, has been an inter-play between several factors, some known and many unknown, in building an 'alternative narrative'.

### LAST WORD

We are largely incapable of predicting where growth will happen, and we don't understand very well why things suddenly ignite. Neither can we guarantee that our actions will lead to the reduction or eradication of poverty. Because poverty has been with us for many thousands of years, it is unlikely that it will be removed easily. In no way, should it mean that efforts to address the causes of poverty be slowed down. On the contrary, each step needs to lead to another, and we need to move forward with optimism, assimilating the learning from our experiences.

It may not be easy to escape from poverty, but some well-targeted guidance can sometimes lead to dramatic outcomes. Many studies



have shown the growth linkages between agriculture and the wider economy. It has been estimated that on average, in Asia, every \$1 increase in agriculture income adds \$0.80 in additional farm income. This theoretical possibility has indeed been turned into a reality in Gumla although there is need to capture the finer details.

The 'alternate narrative' is based on evidence of change, apparent and perceived as well as physical and economic. There is more to it than what we see. The stories do add up but getting a coherent and logical script from these stories remains difficult. Each of the stories provides compelling evidence that communities have rallied around to convert their misfortunes into prosperity. It may still be early days, yet the

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trends clearly show what people have been able to achieve, dispelling the entrenched notion that the poor are doomed to failure because of their poverty.

Although we may not have the magic wand to eradicate poverty, it could, however, be safely said that there are context-specific realistic solutions at hand. The experiments in Gumla have demonstrated possibilities, small as well as big. Since the situation has started to change, the improvement itself is influencing the beliefs and behaviour of the people. This is reason enough for this cycle to be set in motion and, for as long as the external factors remain favourable, the cycle must remain in motion.