

Joining Hands for MGNREGA

JYOTIREKHA ROY PRADHAN AND BABURAM PATRA

Realizing the need to have women participate in the governance of their villages so that they can contribute more effectively to their own well-being and the society they live in, Sampurnna and PRADAN take on the responsibility of unleashing the immense power of people at the grass roots for development action

“Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or *panchayat* having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world. It will be trained and prepared to perish in the attempt to defend itself against any onslaught from without. Thus, ultimately, it is the individual who is the unit.” These words of Mahatma Gandhi demonstrate the idea of democracy at the grass roots very well. As development professionals interested in creation of a just and equal society, we have to promote strong decentralization of power and democracy at the grass roots. There lies immense power with the people, and our role is to trigger its unleashing in a desired direction. PRADAN, for very long, has realized the power and importance of women’s collectives in bringing social change. Women have a pivotal role in their own development and that of their village. The time is now ripe for a greater order of solidarity among women’s collectives, in order to harness their citizenship and make *panchayati raj* institutions (PRIs) the governance nodes for accelerated growth and development of villages.

SAMPURNNA—A COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATION

PRADAN started its work in the Karanjia block of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha in 2000. Initially, its focus was on the formation of women's SHGs around savings and credit; these eventually became platforms for promoting livelihoods. Slowly, villages became saturated with SHGs, and Clusters were formed during 2003–04. Although Clusters did discuss SHG issues, they also took up women's issues and, in some instances, confronted PRIs on issues of entitlements such as PDS. There grew a felt need to interconnect these Clusters so that these forums could learn from each other, and address their issues and needs in systematic ways. Thus the concept of Sampurnna (a block-level Federation of women) was seeded in the community. Sampurnna was born in 2005. As more and more SHGs were linked to it, Sampurnna grew as an organization of women; and the needs and aspirations of members connected to it also swelled. During a visioning exercise, it was clear that it did not want itself to be restricted with only the members of Sampurnna (the women who follow the weekly SHG norms) or some limited activities carried out by PRADAN. At first, PRADAN was tentative about including all SHGs under one fold; however, it was evident that a significant number of women were not aware of the issues of poverty and gender discrimination. To counter these issues, there needed to be total solidarity.

Sampurnna and its members realized the need to participate in the governance of the village so that they could contribute more effectively to the well-being of women as well as society. However, they did not have any forum where they could interact at the

As more and more SHGs were linked to it, Sampurnna grew as an organization of women; and the needs and aspirations of members connected to it also swelled

panchayat level. Sampurnna, therefore, underwent a process of restructuring, in order to address the current requirements and carry out its role and responsibilities, to ground its vision. The Federation focused on decentralization of powers by delivering more responsibilities

to village organizations and the newly formed *gram panchayat*-level Federation (GPLF). The basic objective of GPLF is to have a vision around the *gram panchayat* (GP), motivating clusters (village-level forums) for development of their villages, and establishing linkages with relevant stakeholders at the GP level, to be in a GP-level alliance, where women's collectives will influence stakeholders and bring about their own development.

PRADAN'S INTERVENTION

In 2012–13, on the initiative taken by District Collector Rajesh Prabhakar Patil of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha, 10 NGOs of the district, including PRADAN, participated in a workshop for implementation of Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

That year, PRADAN trained the local resource person in the INRM planning exercise, and completed the planning for 20 villages of two GPs with active participation of SHGs at the village level. INRM plans were also implemented with officials of the GP and block administration. PRADAN and the block administration played a major role. The major challenge faced in the process was that the PRI had less ownership and they did not participate in the process and were not in the favour of the process. The following year, in 2013–14, PRADAN signed an MoU for the MGNREGA-NRLM-CFT (Cluster Facilitation

Team) convergence project for three GPs—Kerker, Batpalsa and Patbil of Karanjia block.

CFT focuses on using funds from MGNREGA, to create sustainable livelihood assets for the rural poor so that along with providing direct employment to people, it will also create infrastructure for them, which they can harvest for further enhancing their livelihood. Another highlight of this programme is that it also has the scope for people to participate in the planning process. A CFT was supposed to be a block-level body of administrative officials and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), which would play a pivotal role in the whole programme. PRADAN influenced the government and formed a CFT at the GP level, comprising representatives from CBOs, PRIs and GP officials. PRADAN believed that CFT, at the GP level, will be more instrumental in ensuring participation of people directly. The CFT project was taken up in 3 GPs; the presence of Sampurnna was a boon and it decided to engage six other GPs in the same way, to have a greater impact, and thereby herald change.

Through CFTs, PRADAN has engaged in following ways:

1. ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PRI

Sampurnna realized the need to collaborate with the PRI, to create a large-scale impact in the block. The idea that all the women of the block should know about MGNREGA and the need for a *palli sabha* (village-level meeting of all voters) in actualizing their aspirations was the cornerstone of this strategic engagement. Sampurnna and PRADAN came together to prepare the village development plans of almost all the villages of Karanjia block and to design the strategy. The idea of preparing a village development plan was seeded at each tier of the Federation (BLF—block-level

Federation, GPLF, Cluster and SHG). The idea was shared with block-level government officials, who also extended support in grounding this one-of-a-kind initiative. GPLFs took the lead role in influencing members of the PRI by sharing the concept, pursuing it to get involved and preparing a holistic plan. The purpose of influencing the PRI was also a process by which the whole village community comes together to put forward a holistic development plan and the voice of women gets political recognition in the *palli sabha* and *gram sabha*.

2. FORMATION OF AN INFORMAL TEAM AFTER CBO AND PRI CONVERGENCE

The purpose of this convergence is to create a team to review, monitor and execute the plans prepared at each village effectively; to monitor which plans are being executed and how they are executed; to discuss problems the villagers face in MGNREGA and resolve the issues. The weekly meeting of the team was expected to boost MGNREGA work by tracking which work is being carried out by a particular Mate and by checking with a stakeholder whether his/her assigned role is being carried out. This team, comprising CBO, PRI and executives, is in the full charge of the development of its *gram panchayat* and is called the Cluster Facilitating Team (CFT). The CFT comprised the *sarpanch*, two ward members, *panchayat* executive officer, *gram rozgar sahayak* (GRS), two leaders from GPLF, two *gram sathis* (mates), one technical staff such as the *gram panchayat* technical assistants and a local resource person from Sampurnna. The team meets on a fixed day of the week. It formulates some norms for itself for smooth conduct and functioning. With the encouragement and help of Sampurnna, such CFTs were formed in 9 *gram panchayats* of Karanjia block.

CFT was a new initiative for PRADAN as well as other stakeholders. After various rounds of discussions with stakeholders, all agreed to support the formation of a CFT. A formal meeting was organised at each *gram panchayat* and the purpose of a CFT was shared with all the villagers. The responsibility of GP staff, PRIs, CBOs and CSOs was discussed at large and was agreed upon.

3. THE PLANNING PROCESS

A systematic plan prepared by the villagers is essential for development. The plan prepared in 2012–13, with support from district administration, Sampurnna and PRADAN, was to engage in Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) in around 90 villages. However, its shortcoming was that it was not a holistic plan because it focused only on the natural resources of the village and not on the other needs of households. In 2013–14, Sampurnna's objective was help formulate a holistic plan for the villages. This took place in the same year as the Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise I (IPPE I) by the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD).

The women leaders of each village mobilized the villagers for the planning process. Some local resource persons (from the villages) were trained at the block level to assist the women leaders in the planning process (3 to 4 resource persons per *gram panchayat*). The dates for planning at each level was decided at the block level, and circulated through letters to each SHG by Sampurnna. PRI members such as the *sarpanch* and ward members also motivated the villagers to join in the planning process. The trained women leaders and resource persons in different groups took on different responsibilities to execute the planning process smoothly. The training event for the planning exercise was conducted in such a way that the planning pool could collate and consolidate

almost every detail without much transactional loss.

The planning process was a four-day event. The process of analyzing the existing situation (including livelihoods, health, and educational status of the village etc) was by social mapping, resource mapping and wealth ranking. The real issues are then identified and plans are prepared accordingly. The plans have two components—individual plans and the community plan. There is also space for planning for utilization of assets that will be created or have been created. The plans are then prioritized at the *palli sabha* and approved. The plans also focus on including all the families of the village from all sections. Of the 150 villages in the Karanjia block, the plans for 100 villages of 9 *gram panchayats* were prepared. The planning exercise was completed in two months and the plan was consolidated by the trainers in 15 days. The consolidated plans, in booklet and file format, were kept in the village organization (VO) for approval in the *palli sabha*.

Uniqueness of the Plan

Recognizing women as beneficiaries: The planning process is itself unique in nature. It started with the work division of men and women in the village. During whole planning process and in the *palli sabha*, the names of the beneficiary women were read out loud, and villagers asked each other who each woman was. It was a step in recognizing that women too are beneficiaries, and the *palli sabha* approved the shelf of project along with name of women beneficiaries.

Village development plan: This included a holistic plan of all resources of the village, and included plans for health, education, housing, sanitation, social security, fuelwood plantation near the household, making cement concrete

platforms for cleaning utensils to avoid water logging near the wells and handpumps, etc. It also included the agriculture plans of the villagers.

Consolidation of village plans into *gram panchayat* development plans under MGNREGA: The plans were prepared under MGNREGA at the village level in such a way that around 100 per cent works are related to agriculture or allied activities, maintaining a 60:40 labour-material ratio at the *gram panchayat* level, and the *gram panchayat* will be the implementing agency.

4. THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

Project approval: After the plan is prepared at the village level, it is approved by the *palli sabha* and then by the *gram sabha*. The shelf of projects is prepared at the block level and technical and financial approval is sought at the respective levels. Initially 50 per cent of the projects were issued by the *gram panchayat*; however, this year (2015), due to the intervention of the district administration all the projects were issued by the *gram panchayat*. This is again another move for decentralisation and enhancing better participation.

5. THE GROOMING OF WOMEN MATES

Mates play a major role in implementation of the programme because they organize labour groups and maintain records. The work of Mates includes helping in the the layouts, inspecting the measurements and maintaining the muster roll at the work site. This is usually considered to be technical and masculine work. PRADAN's approach to development is not only creation of infrastructure but also equal involvement and opportunities for all. It was, thus, necessary to break stereotypes prevalent in society. PRADAN trained 36

women as Mates directly, and trained and provided handholding support to many more at the ground level. This has not only equipped women to work as Mates but has also enhanced their confidence and helped them to create an identity of their own. Due to the selection and working of women Mates in nine *gram panchayats* such as Kerkeri and Kuliposi, the percentage of women who worked under MGNREGA has also increased.

6. OBSERVING ROZGAR DIWAS

The essence of MGNREGA is the demand-driven process for wage employment and sustainable assets creation. To foster that spirit, SHG members observe Rozgar Diwas. On the day of Rozgar Diwas, SHG members of the *gram panchayat* go to the *panchayat* office seeking employment as per the Performa. On some occasions, the *panchayat* office was closed. The women would then go directly to the BDO to complain about the closed *panchayat* office on Rozgar Diwas. Initially, it was a tussle between the women members of Sampurnna and the *panchayat* officials. The latter would not give the women an acknowledgement slip on the pretext that they are very busy, they do not have the stamp, etc. The women have understood the importance of the acknowledgement slip for the work demanded and now refuse to leave the office without it. And nothing could make them budge from that stand. Finally, the officials would give them the acknowledgement slip. Once they had the acknowledgement slip, the women had the confidence to carry on the fight for justice. They knew they can now access their rights as citizens. Observing Rozgar Diwas brought with it the ability to demand what is their right. It also signaled to the *panchayat* officials that they need to respond to the demands of the women.

7. GRIEVANCE REDRESSAL SYSTEM

The major objective to set up a grievance redressal system at Sampurnna was to provide a support mechanism so that people could voice their complaints easily to the duty bearers.

Grievance redressal within a specified time is an important aspect of any good programme. MGNREGA has provisions to redress the grievances of its citizens. PRADAN, along with the Federation and Sampurnna, took over the responsibility of creating awareness on the process of registering grievances. To help women in the process, Sampurnna has set a system whereby they can easily send their grievances to the Sampurnna office; the grievances are then submitted to the concerned programme officer. If the programme officer does not resolve the grievance within 15 days, the grievances are uploaded on the Internet to be addressed by the higher authorities.

OUTPUTS

The participation of people, especially women, has led to intensive plans being prepared in each village; we, thus, see a rise in the labour budget in the three direct CFT groups, in comparison to the others. We also see that the labour budget is higher than the national

and state average, indicating that the quality of plans has increased over the years in CFT GPs (Figure 2). There has been a rise in the level of awareness among people and they have demanded employment. Earlier, rural connectivity was the focus under MGNREGS; this has shifted to land development and drought proofing measures, which will secure the livelihood options of small and marginal farmers as well as positively impact natural resources. We can analyse some of the quantitative data, to assess the impact of programme.

This shows that there has been increased focus on land development, and water conservation and water harvesting measures in the CFT *gram panchayats*, in comparison to other *gram panchayats*.

The Case of Jhalkiani Village

Jhalkaini is a tribal-dominated village in Karanjia block of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha. It comprises of 150 households. The population of the village is 858.

The village was like any other village three years ago, but things started to change with Sampurnna's and PRADAN's initiative. The women of the village came forward to bring the change in their village.

Figure 1: Different Types of Grievances Lodged under MGNREGA

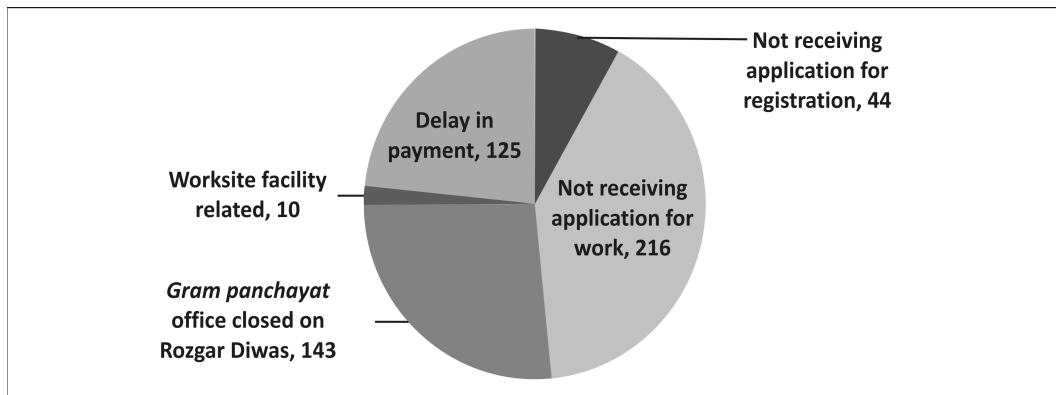
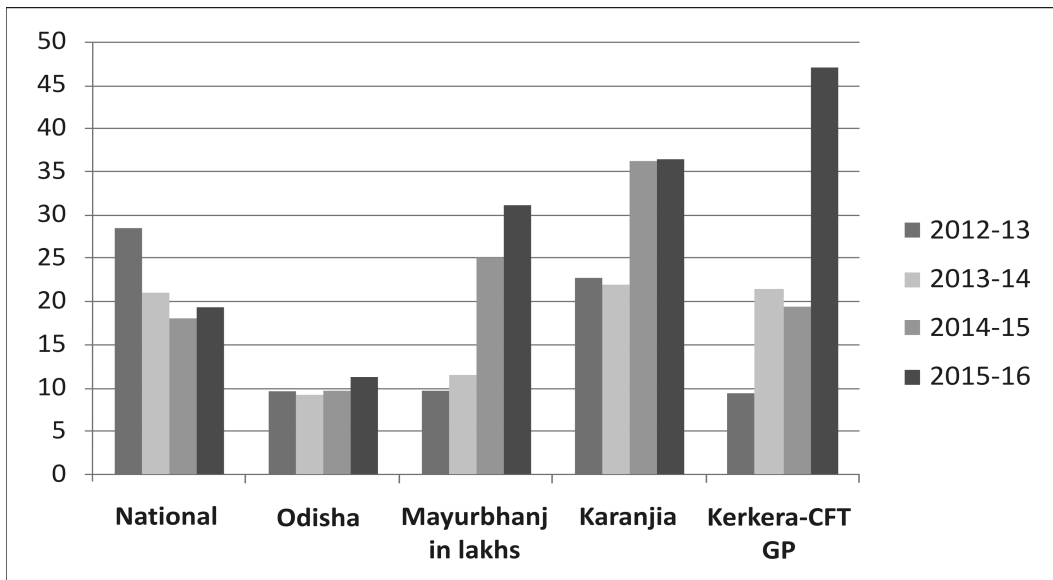
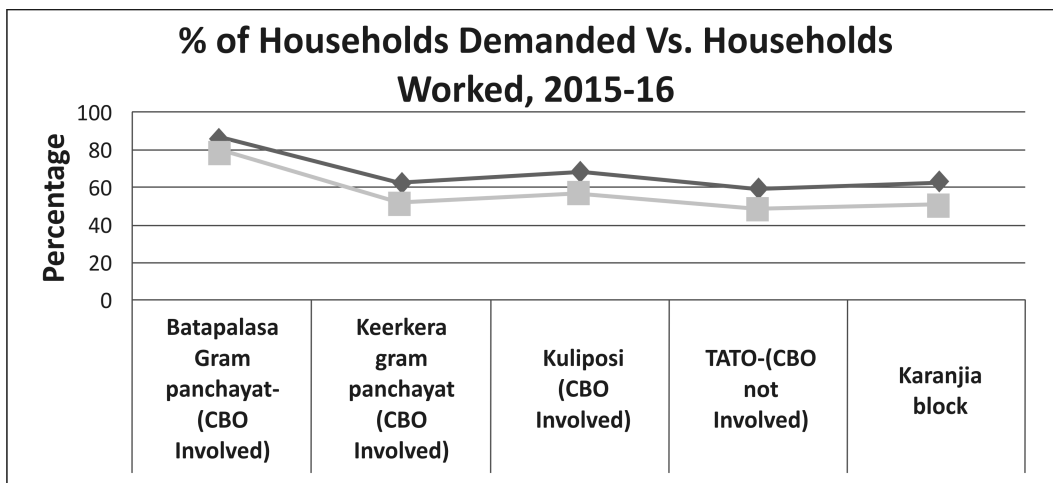


Figure 2: Approved Labor Budget (2015-16) under MGNREGA



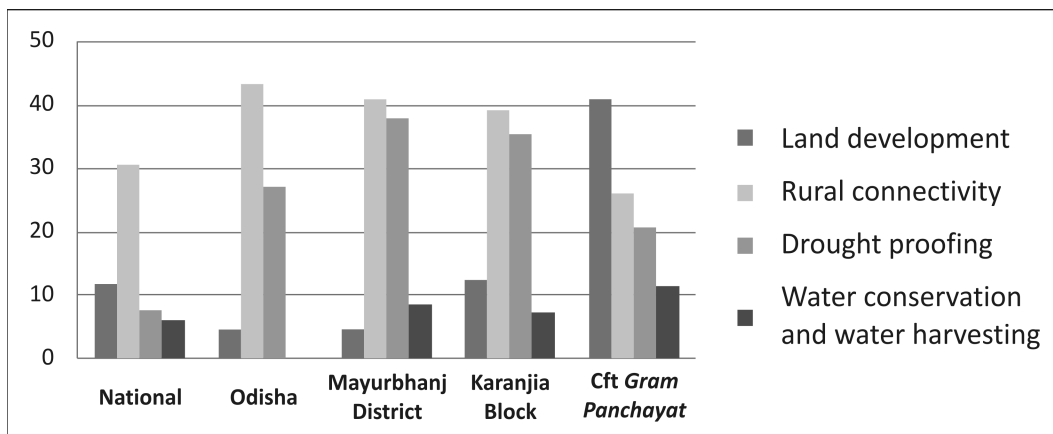
Source: www.nrega.nic.in

Figure 3: Demand vs. Work participation in CFT and Non-CFT Area



Source: www.nrega.nic.in

Figure 4: Work Category-wise Expenditure in 2015–16 (%)



Source: www.nrega.nic.in

Sampurnna took an active role in creating the village-level plans for assets creation under MGNREGS in 2013–14. The members of Sampurnna moved from village to village to mobilize SHG members and other villagers to participate in the process, and get the plans approved at the *palli sabha* and *gram sabha*. The village has planned assets, with a special focus on assets for women. Of the 478 assets planned, 310 are in the names of women. The *palli sabha*, in which the plans were approved in 2014, had 107 participants, of which 86 were women.

SHG members interested in working as Mates under MGNREGA were trained on the technicalities of work execution. Malati is one such SHG leader. She was the first woman to start INRM work in the village, after which others followed.

Women leaders have also been able to influence the ward member of their village. Initially, he was very indifferent to developmental issues. But the members called him to all meetings and demanded that he carry out his duties. There is now a perceptible shift in the behaviour of ward member. During the planning for INRM in the village, he supported the women in the

planning. In addition, during implementation, he convinced those people who were hesitating to implement INRM plans. In two years, 28 lakhs has been spent in this village on various infrastructure related to land development and water conservation.

The villagers are more aware of their rights now under MGNREGA. Jhalkiani village has registered around 60 complaints in two years. Registering complaints has not only solved their problems but also activated the government machinery to stay alert to the demands of the people.

At present, the village is busy preparing the village development plan for IPPE 2. The joint endeavours of Sampurnna and the SHG members of the village are propelling it forward and the hope is that in the coming days, the village will continue to tread the path of success.

The Case of Sunamani Tudu, a Woman Mate

Gopalpur is a tribal village under Mayurbhanj block in Odisha. The village is small, comprising of only 25 Santhal families. Gopalpur is not an

extraordinary village but is now well-known because of Sunamani Tudu.

Sunamani Tudu is a resident of Gopalpur village. She has a small family—her husband and two daughters. The family owns a small piece of land, cultivated by her husband. Their house is made of mud and has a thatched roof. She used to brew *hadia* (liquor prepared locally by rice) and sell it in the weekly markets. She was just like any other tribal women doing all the household chores, selling *hadia* and managing her family expenses.

Life took a turn for her when she was selected as a Mate under MGNREGA in the October 2012 *palli sabha*. She was one of the choices of villagers because she had studied up to and passed the tenth standard. Her husband and villagers, however, were doubtful about her competence in being able to do technical work as well as measure the work done under MGNREGA and make the calculations.

PRADAN organized a three-day residential training for Mates. She attended the first day of the training but could not attend the last two days because her husband opposed it. Her husband was of the view that the work of Mate is a difficult task, the labour does not get timely payment, and Sunamani would not be able to manage it and, therefore, she should not venture into becoming a mate.

The PRADAN professional and INRM expert, Laxman Soy, had a challenging time in supporting her during the initial days of work for generating demands, filling up the muster roll, etc. Sunamani too had a difficult time but she was deeply interested in the work. Hence, she persisted and acquired the knowledge and

skills to carry out such work, slowly gaining more and more confidence.

Initially, only 10 villagers came forward to work with her; with time, when they observed that they were getting their payment on time, other villagers also came forward to work with her. Currently, 30 villagers are working with her. She gets Rs 170 per day remuneration and earning about Rs 5,100 per month. She plays a pivotal role in INRM planning in her village. Prior to her involvement in MGNREGS, the village did not have any plan or work around its natural resources. But with Sunamani's efforts, the village has its own plans; already—20 ha of cashew plantation is being done in her village.

She had earlier saved Rs 15,000 from *hadia* business; after becoming a Mate she has saved Rs 60,000 in her own bank account. She has also built a *pucca* house made of brick walls and asbestos. Earlier, she did not have any say in her family. But now her family is being recognized because of her. One day her husband went to the nearby village to purchase bamboo but the villagers said they will not give him bamboo until his wife comes and asks for it!

Sunamani is the symbol of change. She is a living example of how women can achieve whatever they want once they are convinced. This simple yet inspiring story shows us many facets of life: that women do not want to prepare *hadia* and sell it, but are doing so because they do not have any other lucrative alternative; that women are capable of doing paper work and management if provided support; that women are self-sufficient and can sustain themselves and others through life.

CHALLENGES FACED

Two decades have elapsed since the enactment of 73rd amendment of the Constitution and the enactment of provisions of (Panchayat Extensions to Scheduled Areas Act , 1996) the state Govt. were supposed to provide functions, finances, functionaries pertaining to 29 subject listed in the eleventh schedule of the constitutions to the *gram panchayat*. But the real situation in ground in a state like Odisha, subjects like agriculture, horticulture, fishery, livestock, etc., are with the line dept. of the state government, wherein the *gram panchayats* have no role to play. Those working in the above subject areas are not accountable to the *gram panchayats*. There is, therefore, deficiency of skilled staff in the *gram panchayats*.

Even the staff such as the GRS, the *panchayat* executive officer and the GPTA (*gram panchayat* technical assistants), who work for *gram panchayats*, are not accountable to them. They are accountable to the block administration.

Lack of funds: During implementation of the project, the flow of funds for MGNREGA from the centre to the state was stopped or

got delayed, causing the community to stop working and making it frustrating for the PRI, CBO members and the community.

Due to lack of funds at the *gram panchayat* level, it could not fulfill some of the local needs such as supplying pipe-water to each household.

CONCLUSION

The beauty and strength of democracy at the grass roots is evident in the intensive planing around land and livelihoods, which cannot be thought of without the participation of people. The proactiveness of the administration and the involvement of CBOs like Sampurnna helped the *gram panchayats* and the block to make plans of such a magnitude. Besides, the support system for CBOs and the community to claim its entitlement and lodge grievances allowed the community to experience the power of the citizen. This is just the beginning and is a bright example to follow. India is a country of villages, and we need to experiment and innovate ways to involve the rural community in planning and implementation. Only then can India be a self-sufficient republic in a true sense.