

Poverty Alleviation in Damray: The impact of Special SGSY

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Emerging as a source of inspiration for neighbouring villages, the farmers of Damray have found success and sustenance, thanks to PRADAN and Special SGSY, by utilizing the natural resources of the land, multi cropping and diversifying from growing paddy once a year to cultivating vegetables and flowers throughout the year, both on the uplands and lowlands

Last Diwali was special for the residents of Damray village. The buyers in the local Khunti market had queued up to buy fresh garlands of marigold from Damray. Within no time, the entire stock of flowers was sold out at a premium rate of Rs 15 per metre. This was unprecedented in a village known for its poverty, debt and distress migration.

Over the last three years, Damray, a tribal village in the interiors of Khunti District in Jharkhand, has emerged as a source of inspiration for the region. It is a small village under the Kewra *panchayat* of Murhu block, with a population of 30 households of the Munda tribe. It is situated 25 km south east of the district headquarters, and the nearby historic and beautiful Sarwada Church. There is no public transport system to the village, and the people usually rely on bicycles to reach the block headquarters at Murhu, around 15 km away.

With the support of Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN), a civil society organization, and because of the opportunities created under the Special Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (Special SGSY), Damray village has not only changed its own fate but is showing the path of socio-economic development to the surrounding villages.

In 2009, when PRADAN intervened in Damray, the households had an average food sufficiency for six or seven months from their own land and relied on supplies from Public Distribution System for the rest of the year or were compelled to migrate to places such as Delhi, Goa, Assam and even to Andaman and Nicobar to earn some money.

Damray was the first village of the Kewra *panchayat* where PRADAN intervened and the women were organized to form two Self Help Groups (SHGs), namely, *Chameli Mahila Mandal* and *Prakash Mahila Mandal*, with a total membership of around 30. In the first year of intervention, the focus remained on the strengthening of the people's institutions, that is, SHGs and *gram sabhas*. The role of the SHGs here was not limited to the weekly savings and credit; the group members were involved in organizing and facilitating such activities among the villagers that helped them identify and recognize the potential of their resources to lead a better life. They helped the villagers change their fate and not to be content with limited agricultural production. The women of these SHGs made ambitious plans and set a landmark target, to secure round-the-year food sufficiency for all households. They also aspired for additional minimum cash income of Rs 3,000 per annum from agriculture.

In order to boost the morale of these SHGs, the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) and the Government of Jharkhand supported the Special SGSY project. Systematic training programmes and exposure visits were organized, to strengthen the traditional *gram sabha* as an institution for the development of the village. These initiatives helped break the hegemony of the men-folk, who traditionally took all the decisions in the *gram sabha*. These decisions often lacked far-sightedness and failed to find any lasting solutions to the perpetual and complex problem of poverty.

The active and effective participation of women in these meetings allowed for more meaningful deliberations on the ways and means to improve the socio-economic life of

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villagers. All these organized efforts started to show results in 2010 when 13 of the 30 families cultivated tomatoes for the first time in the rainy season. Each of the families earned a profit ranging from Rs 5,000 to 9,000, which was unprecedented and beyond their wildest imagination. This first taste of triumph further propelled the confidence and motivation level

of the farmers. Encouraged, in the subsequent winter, the farmers cultivated garden peas, bottle gourd, brinjal, potatoes, tomatoes and cauliflower. Even in the *rabi* season, agriculture was attempted in a small area of four acres with an irrigation facility.

These small successes unleashed the latent potential of agriculture in Damray. It led to a paradigm shift in the way people practised agriculture and perceived the value and utility of their natural resources, especially land. Earlier people considered their uplands as the least worthy and ranked it as No. 3 (grade), and termed their lowlands, where paddy—the staple crop—was grown and considered to be No.1 grade. Concerted efforts and investments in creating awareness, training of people, crop demonstration and the strengthening of the *gram sabha* meetings made people realize that the uplands, which accounted for a significantly larger portion of the land asset, was the most suited for vegetable cultivation and had immense potential to fetch high returns in terms of cash income.

The villagers, until then, had restricted their agriculture to the *kharif* season only because of the depletion of the water resources. A series of orientation meetings and training programmes were held to create awareness that, if scientifically harnessed, Damray had an abundance of water to meet the farming

and other needs of the villagers. If the monsoon rainwater could be preserved for some time, the vast patch of uplands, which invariably remained fallow almost round the year, could be brought under vegetable cultivation.

The annual average rainfall in the state is about 1,400 mm, which occurs mainly during four months (June–September). About 80–85 per cent of the total precipitation is received in three-and-a-half months, from mid-June to end-September, and 10–15 per cent from October to January; very little rainfall is received during the rest of the year.

Of the total rainfall, 60 per cent is wasted due to the surface run-off and leaching. Therefore, only 40 per cent of the rainfall remains for crop use. As per the estimates of the average annual precipitation, about 20 per cent of the water is lost to the atmosphere, 50 per cent flows as surface runoff and the balance 30 per cent soaks into the ground as soil moisture and ground water.

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PRADAN spoke to the villagers about the possibilities of introducing the Special SGSY programme, which was being implemented in 95 villages of Khunti district. The villagers were excited by the prospect of creating assured irrigation, learning improved farming and earning wage income—all based on

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interventions in their own land and village. They planned to create a series of seepage tanks (small farm ponds 30 x 30 x 10 ft) along with other activities such as land development (which mainly includes land levelling and farm bunding) and irrigation wells. The prime focus was to create in situ water conservation that would provide life saving irrigation during dry spells in the *kharif* season and would recharge precious underground

aquifers so that water use would become sustainable and remain available all round the year. A total of 12 seepage tanks were dug, costing Rs 5,000–8,000 each, depending on their size.

The immediate effect was wage generation and asset creation for the families; in the long run, these measures converted the village into a vegetable bed and changed the land-use pattern from mono-cropping to multi-cropping. Vegetable cultivation has now become a round-the-year activity. People begin vegetable cultivation in the uplands in the rainy season and gradually go down to the lowlands in the summer season where there is assured irrigation from seepage tanks. There is manifold increase in the range of crops and the area under cultivation. Farmers now confidently cultivate vegetables such as cabbage, cauliflower, chilli, tomato, potato, okra, brinjal and garden peas in large quantities.

Agriculture is no longer just a means of sustenance but has grown into an enterprise. Farmers are beginning to cultivate and sell high-value products such as broccoli and capsicum. Looking into the supply deficit market of the state capital, Ranchi, and the district headquarters, the audacious farmers of

Damray have even successfully ventured into floriculture. Scores of farmers have taken up marigold cultivation as a cash crop for the first time in their lives.

In just four years of project interventions, from 2009 to 2013, the number of families engaged in intense vegetable cultivation has multiplied from 13 to 27 (of a total of 30) and the total area under vegetable cultivation has increased to more than 31 acres. Some farmers also grow summer paddy, using the SRI method. Rajen Hassa Purty, a resident of Damray, earned more than Rs 40,000 last year by selling vegetables and flowers from his piece of land of one-and-a-half acres. He was awarded the best farmer of the *panchayat* in a *Kisan Mela* organized by the Murhu block.

It is hard to believe that before the project inception, the same land use was covered with *putus* (a locally available grass) bushes and remained fallow. Encouraged by the output, Rajen cleared and brought another acre of land under cultivation. With the surplus income earned, he has installed a sprinkler set so that water can be more judiciously used. Along with crop diversification, he has also started mixed cropping. For example, okra and bottle gourd have been transplanted in the garden pea field so that more income can be generated from the same piece of land. This year, he is hoping to earn more than Rs 60,000 from vegetable cultivation alone.

Along with Rajen, Elisaba Purty, Prisca Purty and Martin Purty have also cultivated a variety of vegetables in more than two acres of land each. To support the efforts of the villagers and to encourage scientific cultivation, a green net house has been installed through the Special SGSY, to ensure healthy seedlings.

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interventions in their villages. Like true champions of development, the SHG members of Damray have organized themselves and taken up the task of mobilizing the remaining villages of the *panchayat* around the Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM)-based livelihood interventions.

Till date, they have formed 19 additional SHGs in nine neighbouring hamlets and villages and created two Clusters (representative body of SHGs to discuss and resolve the issues of the member SHGs and to promote cross learning). The members are also an integral part of the Jharia Mahila Sangh, the first-ever block-level SHG Federation in Khunti district, an output of the Special SGSY Project. Capitalizing on these social mobilization initiatives, the nearby villages have gradually moved to follow the trajectory set by Damray. Farmers from adjoining villages such as Chendagutu, Simbua, Iti, Murud and Dekela have already been exposed to the social mobilization around the INRM process, as demonstrated in Damray. Farmers like Rajen Hassa Purty of Damray, along with the others, constantly extend support to these villagers, who are striving to come out of abject poverty.

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Thirty-nine families of this village demonstrated the production of vegetable soya bean (a new variety of soya bean, which is consumed as a green vegetable as well as a pulse and contains a high amount of protein). They also organized field days and market days, to promote the crop and its taste in the nearby villages, hoping to share the benefits of development witnessed by the residents of Damray. Mutual support and cross-learning are helping the entire area move towards socio-economic prosperity.

The project received immense support from PRADAN's two partner organizations, namely, Asia Vegetable Research and Development Centre (AVRDC) and Digital Green. Experts from AVRDC helped in the selection of various lines of seeds and crops, and the adoption of the best practices in vegetable cultivation. On the other hand, Digital Green helped in creating awareness of the practices through the very simple technique of shooting videos of the best fields and their Package of Practices (PoP) in the local language and disseminating them in other villages with the help of a DVD set or a pocket projector.

The Special SGSY programme has not only created avenues of livelihood in the area but

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has also impacted social aspects of life. In March 2013, around 300 village women organized themselves and campaigned against social evils such as violence against women, liquor consumption, superstition and corruption. They also celebrated their first Cluster *Adhiveshan*

(the annual General Meeting of the group of SHGs), where they took an oath to work for the overall socio-economic development of the area. The SHG Federation has constantly extended its support for such social activities.

The overall impact of these efforts and women's empowerment is evident in the local governance. Mrs. Lucia Jojo, an SHG member of the Prakash Mahila Mandal of Chendagutu village, won the post of *mukhiya* in the very first *Panchayati Raj* elections held in Jharkhand.

The experiences of the Special SGSY programme in Damray have further strengthened the belief that poverty can be alleviated through collective efforts. Synchronizing the government's programme with the people's aspirations and dedicated professionals engaging with the community are bound to bring lasting change in the lives of the poor.