Small Farmers, Prosperous Farmers—Hopes from Central India

ASHOK KUMAR AND OM PRAKASH

Breaking the prevailing cycles of low production, a few small farmers are becoming prosperous by transiting to a state of high returns; they are driven by a passion to grow by working on their existing lands, keeping themselves updated on the latest developments in the agricultural sector and choosing their crops with great farsightedness and perseverance

ABSTRACT

PRADAN, a national-level NGO working for the promotion of livelihoods of rural poor communities in tribal pockets of Central India for the past 30 years, joined a study called 'Small Farmers, Prosperous Farmers (SFPFs)'. The study is focused entirely on the tribal belt of Central India, where the terrain is hilly and undulating and has poor irrigation facilities. Along with under-performing natural resources, these regions also have under-developed markets. Yet, there are examples of enterprising farmers, who have overcome the vicious cycle of poverty of this region, have created wealth for themselves and have helped many other farmers to prosper.

A systematic study of a few selected representatives of this dispersed tribe of individuals has revealed the factors and forces that lead to small farmers (with less than 2 ha of land) doing well in such challenging circumstances. An overarching commonality found in the farmers interviewed was that they were all exceptionally entrepreneurial—being achievement-oriented, ambitious, knowledge seeking, willing to take calculated risks, mobilizing their own financial resources and building effective functional linkages with the relevant stakeholders. Another factor that has contributed enormously to their success is the availability of assured irrigation, which they developed either by investing their personal resources in setting up irrigation facilities or drawing funds from a government scheme. These farmers have also taken calculated risks and invested time and energy in gathering the latest available knowledge and know-how on agricultural practices and markets. The success stories were all of vegetable farmers, probably because of the opportunities accorded by the difficult terrain and the deficit markets. Interestingly, none of the farmers was linked in any large measure with any of the mainstream programmes or services of agriculture extension, bank credit or insurance. Many of them were part of PRADAN's agriculture development programmes and were pioneers in their own right because PRADAN intervened in poverty pockets, where such entrepreneurs did not exist.

There are a number of policy lessons also that can be derived from these stories. First, in order to work with small farmers in rain-fed areas with a view to making them rich, and not just food secure, the intervention has to be comprehensive and holistic. Agriculture extension cannot be a top-down supply of knowledge and technology but needs to be a process of systematic hand-holding. Such extension will need to deal with change in the behaviour of the farmer, to develop entrepreneurial qualities in him, and create enabling conditions and linkages.

All the farmers were exceptionally entrepreneurial—being achievement-oriented, ambitious, knowledge seeking, willing to take calculated risks, mobilizing their own financial resources and building effective functional linkages with the relevant stakeholders

When developing irrigation sources, an approach of creating a large number of small structures offers far more dividends than a small number of large structures. Moreover, using a cluster approach when working with farmers rather than working with individual farmers in a discreet manner proved to be more productive. Government schemes and the financial institutions have to address how they can be more effective in supporting small farmers in their efforts to achieve prosperity and create wealth, rather than being constrained by existing schemes. Given the limitations of the state machinery and the markets, the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) becomes crucial in scaling-up efforts to create wealth and prosperity for a very large number of small and marginal farmers in these endemic poverty regions.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

PRADAN is a public service organization, set up with the belief that in order to bring about change, educated and motivated people need to work directly at the grass-roots with rural communities. PRADAN's agenda is to work on livelihoods promotion, with the objective of agency enhancement of rural communities for larger change. As of today, PRADAN works with around 2.25 lakh families belonging to disadvantaged communities spread across seven states in the country. PRADAN was invited to participate in a study, conceived and coordinated by the IWMI (International Water Management Institute), on small farmers, who have been able to break the prevailing cycles of low production and transit to a state of high returns, to reach prosperity. PRADAN decided to participate in the study because it would build greater internal understanding among colleagues on why some farmers are able to break the cycle of low production and poverty, and achieve prosperity. The study was conducted in PRADAN's field operational areas by those working in the area.

INTRODUCTION TO THE AREA

The study was conducted across ten districts (two each in Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh and four in Madhya Pradesh) of four States, where PRADAN has a field presence. These districts are in central and eastern India, with tribal communities forming the major population. The area has hilly to undulating terrain and an irrigation percentage ranging from 2–3 to 10%. Many of these districts are in the list of the Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF) and also in the list of districts affected by left-wing extremism. Tribal people in these areas, as is the case elsewhere, are second or, at best, third or fourth generation farmers. Agriculture in the area is marked by the predominant use of own seeds and a negligible fertilizer/

pesticide usage, characterized by a 'low-input, low-output' cycle. A significant chunk of household income comes from collecting forest produce. Despite an average landholding of one hectare or more, food security at the household level is for four to eight months from their own land and the rest of it comes from wage earnings and forest produce collection. The educated younger generation, however, is drawn more to the market-based economy in urban areas, seeking government employment or opportunities in the formal job market.

Agriculture extension cannot be a top-down supply of knowledge and technology but needs to be a process of systematic hand-holding. Such extension will need to deal with change in the behaviour of the farmer, to develop entrepreneurial qualities in him, and create enabling conditions and linkages

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted by PRADAN professionals, who have been working in the area for a long time. Although familiarity with the socio-economic-cultural context is an advantage, it may have led to some assumptions being made and also may have created a bias towards a particular framework or way of thinking. The study focused on pioneer farmers, who are one of a kind in the area, but not so much on their followers, which may have provided more insights and helped create a more complete picture. This was because pioneer farmers were more an exception in these areas; however, even where groups of farmers existed, the focus was on the pioneer, which was realized later at the time of analysis. An aspect that has not been focused upon adequately is the risk mechanisms at the level of the SFPFs.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To understand the conditions under which enterprising small farmers, with a holding of two hectares or less, are able to generate a net income of Rs 2–2.5 lakhs/year (US $ 4,000–5000/year) mostly from farming and make a decent livelihood for their family.
- To understand the demonstration impact of such successful farmers, who on other farmers in the village, area, or community.
- To identify and study examples of several farmers, who have emulated and gained from the entrepreneurial success of a pioneer small-farmer.
- To identify and study examples, in which systematic interventions by NGOs/GOs/co-operatives/businesses have helped entire groups of small farmers to operate at a target level of annual household net income.
- To derive lessons and implications about what NGOs, the government, donors, financial institutions, and research groups can do to grow the tribe of SFPFs.

PROCESS OF CONDUCTING THE STUDY

The study was conducted through the process described below.

The concept and objectives of the study was shared with all the teams, followed by a tele-conference with all interested writers. The concept and objectives, of the study was reiterated. The broad outline for the study and significant themes were discussed in detail. Individual members explained why they selected a particular farmer. Two senior members agreed to follow-up with and guide the writers on developing the cases as per the

outline. A format was prepared, laying out a set of questions and the areas for exploration. The areas selected for exploration included:

- Personal biography and historical background
- Resources available: land, water resources, irrigation infrastructure, cattle and human
- Family members: male/female
- Education level of the participating farmer
- Occupation: primary/secondary
- Cost and return of the occupation
- Achievements and failures
- Linkages

The cases present live examples of people's struggle to move up the economic ladder, overcoming all odds. Sixteen cases have been collected from the remotest areas of ten districts of four states, with varied agro-climatic characteristics, in terms of geography, society and agronomic practices

The writers conducted detailed personal interviews with the selected farmers on the issues listed. The cases were then written out with an objective to highlight the struggle, the strategies adopted and the actions taken by these small but exceptional farmers, living in difficult situations. Detailed feedback on most of the cases was given by senior members. Working on the feedback, repeated interviews were conducted for further clarity, and a second draft of the cases prepared. As per the guidelines, two case writers were selected for working further and presenting the findings at the IWMI partners' meet.

A two-day, joint meeting of case writers, senior professionals and a consultant from the IWMI was held at PRADAN's Delhi office to discuss the cases in detail. Three cases of Yadunath Gorai, Saryu Nayak and Subhnath Mahar were discussed in detail. It was found that some aspects required more exploration. Important lessons, commonalities, points of dissimilarities and deviations found in the cases were listed and discussed. This brainstorming and consequent findings served as the layout for preparing a synthesis of the cases. Another meeting of case writers and senior professionals was held to discuss the updates on the cases, based on the first feedback, and to finalize the case synthesis for presentation.

All the farmers studied were well-known to the writers, who have been working in the area for the last 5–15 years. They are familiar with the SFPFs, either by directly working with them or because the farmers reside in the work area. The writers were familiar with the success of these farmers and hence were the first persons selected to conduct the study.

Criteria of Selection

The selection was based on the following criterion.

- Farmers with a land-holding of one to two hectares
- Engaged in agriculture or allied activities
- Successfully conducting the activity for some time (more than three to four years)
- Earning Rs one to two lakhs or more annually from the activity
- Accepted and admired in the village or area for their enterprising activity

About the SFPFs Studied

A total of 22 cases from four states, namely, Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, were presented for deliberations. Post the feedback work and modifications, 16 cases were finalized for synthesis from 12 districts of these four states. The selected farmers

belong to two social classes—Scheduled Tribes (56%) and Other Backward Castes (44%). The age of the chosen farmers was in the range of 25–50 years. The level of education of the farmer, too, varied—from primary to class XII; 37 per cent had attended primary school whereas 63 per cent had studied beyond the primary level. Only two farmers had studied up to class XII. Of these, 63 per cent of the respondents were primarily cultivators whereas 37 per cent were involved in trading, goat rearing or labour for their livelihood.

The SFPF cases reinforce the criticality of access to irrigation to achieve prosperity. All the farmers studied, had access to secure irrigation

FINDINGS

The cases present live examples of people's struggle to move up the economic ladder, overcoming all odds. Sixteen cases have been collected from the remotest areas of ten districts of four states, of varied agro-climatic characteristics, in terms of geography, society and agronomic practices. However, the farmers show very similar attitude and behaviour, characteristics, economic activities and patterns. The commonalities range from basic human traits such as being passionate and hard working to being able to acquire and manage sophisticated skills such as information collection and analysis, to having the ability to manage stakeholders and be open to risks of marketing, experimentation, etc. The study of these cases shows that all the individuals who were successful farmers followed a systematic plan and showed specifically similar behaviour. In the following paragraphs, their specific and significant commonalities are discussed.

ACCESS TO WATER AND IRRIGATION

The SFPF cases reinforce the criticality of access to irrigation to achieve prosperity. All the farmers studied had access to secure irrigation. The arrangement of water for irrigating 0.5 –4.0 acres of their field is the most common measure undertaken by all the farmers.

The creation of a facility to access surface water or ground water, in terms of creating a dug well, farm pond, *nala* bund or check dam along with an arrangement of devices—electric run or diesel-operated or both in many cases—are sourced from government schemes or through an NGO. They did not hesitate to invest their own money for irrigation infrastructure, if needed. Hemlata Lilhare of Takabarra, Balaghat, took help from the Jeevandhara Yojana to dig a well. Own dug well is the most preferred source. Half the farmers managed to create one for themselves, and the rest depended on check dams/passing streams for lifting water.

Farmers devised traditional as well as innovative measures to access and avail of water. Like Yadunath Gorai, farmers who had their own water facility partnered with others for aggregating their vegetables for sale. About five farmers utilized government schemes to create a water facility or used water from a reservoir, created with government aid. These farmers, unlike their village brethren, made efforts to learn about government schemes and to channelize the benefits.

Shyam Sunder Mallick of Palunkia village, Balliguda, Odisha, constructed a canal of 200 ft from a water source to his field, and lifted the water from it with a diesel pump. He spent Rs 35,000 to buy two sets of diesel pumps without any subsidy, to ensure water supply for his fields.

In not a single case has there been mention of crop failure or loss of production due to lack of water or irrigation. The farmers arranged

assured irrigation for their crop and completely removed the risk of 'drought'. What may be inferred with significant confidence is that this assured irrigation of their fields motivated them to explore agriculture in a big way, without any fear of unavailability of water and the ensuing risk of failure.

Policy Implications: However, the availability of irrigation alone did not propel them to the cycle of prosperity. In most cases, the idea to excel came first, followed by motivation to succeed. The arrangement for irrigation was one of the things that had to be done to pursue the idea. However, if more farmers have to be 'encouraged' on these lines, the creation of irrigation infrastructure would act as a positive, facilitating and enabling condition.

COMMERCIAL VEGETABLE CULTIVATION AS A SECTOR

The next commonality derived from the cases is the gradual shift from the traditional cereal cropping to commercial vegetable cultivation. Over the years, these farmers observed the growth in the demand and sale of vegetables vis-à-vis cereals. They observed the change in the consumption pattern and the food habits of the community, in which vegetables have become an integral part. They have also realized the margin of profit derived from vegetable cultivation vis-à-vis cereal cropping. Ramanuj Singh says, "The return from one acre of vegetable cultivation is more than that of three acres of cereal crops."

Most farmers plant traditional cereal crops in a major section of their land, devoting one-fourth to half of their land for vegetables. None of the farmers have replaced cereal crops completely. Cereal cultivation provides the family with food security whereas vegetables give them cash income. In some of the cases (especially in Dhamtari) when farmers have taken up the cultivation of cereal crops commercially, the reason seems to be an assured buy-back mechanism run by the government, under the Food Corporation of India's procurement system. The cultivation of wheat and paddy in Punjab and Haryana boomed as a result of the Minimum Selling Price (MSP) mechanisms put in place by the government.

The shift to vegetable cultivation is based on past experience of growing vegetables on a smaller scale, which gradually increased to a sizeable area. All the farmers in the study learned the art of growing vegetables

Balram Sikdar resides in Mukdega village of Raigarh district, Chhattisgarh. He has one acre of land. In this one acre of irrigated land, he grows and harvests pointed gourd, cowpea, chili and bitter gourd during the *kharif* season, and onion and leafy vegetables in summer—earning Rs 1.5 lakhs every year.

Dalbir Singh of Tingudi in Singrauli district, Madhya Pradesh, owns 7.5 acres of irrigated and non-irrigated land. In two to three acres, he grows the traditional cereal crops of paddy, wheat, maize and pulses, which fulfills his yearly food requirements and, in 1.5 acres, he grows vegetables in three seasons, fetching him Rs 50,000 annually.

Santu Oraon, a resident of Gumla in Jharkhand, owns 2.9 acres of agriculture land. He takes paddy in *kharif* and tomato and mustard in *rabi*. For two years he has worked on paddy cultivation by introducing new methods in production. The success gave him a boost and, at present, he has diversified his crops to tomato, brinjal, cowpea, ladies finger in 10—20 decimals each, along with the paddy and mustard.

gradually, with initial instances of small successes and failures. Lodhi Singh Parte of Andhiyadhar village, Mandla district, Madhya Pradesh, grows multiple vegetables at present in 0.5 acres of land, earning Rs 0.53 lakhs annually. He started cultivating initially in 10 decimals with a little profit. The success helped him increase his acreage. Giriwar of Dindori, Madhya Pradesh, opted to grow vegetables on one acre of his land. Other farmers too chose to invest in vegetable cultivation, in spite of the increased investment required of cash, labour and technology.

A majority of farmers voice the lack of timely credit as a reason for subsistence agriculture. Surprisingly, the SFPFs studied, neither exhibited this concern for capital nor saw it as a bottleneck in their enterprise

Farmers have built networks and have arranged the sources for all the required inputs—good seeds, fertilizers, insecticide and pesticide in advance. They keep themselves updated through various sources of knowledge, to keep their crops safe and to enhance production by incorporating new ideas. Yadunath Gorai and several others are shining examples of farmers, who have managed backward-forward linkages, handled various stakeholders and harvested profit.

The farmers have applied their experiential knowledge to minimize risks by growing more than two or three common vegetable crops instead of one single crop. They have displayed mature analytical skills and understanding of the demand and supply by choosing mainstream common crops such as tomato, brinjal, cauliflower, cabbage, okra, chilli, cucumber and gourd. Instead of growing high-priced niche crops with lesser demand, they have chosen to cultivate vegetables,which have a high demand and moderate but stable rates.

Policy Implications: For small-holder farmers, vegetable cultivation is increasingly becoming an attractive economic activity because they can use their own family labour unlike large farmers, who need to depend on outside labour for growing vegetables—a highly labour-intensive crop. With the increasing labour costs, vegetable cultivation gives small farmers a strong competitive advantage. This sector, therefore, assumes strong importance for small-holder farmers. The government needs to evolve facilitative policies for encouraging many more small-holder farmers to participate in this sector.

LAND-USE INTENSIFICATION

Adequate utilization of resources is another common feature widely displayed by the farmers. Unlike some, who remain limited to 150-200 per cent land-use intensity, the SFPFs have endeavoured to intensify agriculture and increase the cropping intensity to 300–400 per cent. In all the cases under study, the farmers ventured to produce summer crops. Traditionally, agriculture is not practised during the summer season mainly on account of the unavailability of water for irrigation and free grazing. Ramanuj and Dalbir Singh of Singrauli district, however, invested in permanent fencing to keep off the grazing cattle. Large investments have been made to build these permanent fencing structures. They are aware of the high market demand and high prices of fresh vegetables in summer and, hence, these measures paid out adequately. They take adequate measures to learn about and follow practices required and necessary during winter and summer. Yadunath Gorai, Ramanuj Singh, Dalbir Singh, Lodhi Singh and others also have nurseries for their crops, to ensure healthy and proper growth of saplings and the optimum utilization of their land.

ACCESS TO CAPITAL

The non-availability of adequate capital is one of the bottlenecks that hinders good agriculture. A majority of farmers voice the lack of timely credit as a reason for subsistence agriculture. Surprisingly, the SFPFs studied, neither exhibited this concern for capital nor saw it as a bottleneck in their enterprise. The SFPFs work out their cash requirements and devise adequate measures to secure it. Drawing support from input suppliers is one of the means that they use. Loans from the SHGs, the local money lenders and, in some cases, support from banks was found.

Most SFPFs do not rely on mainstream institutions such as banks for short-term credit. Instead they work out various other arrangements to meet their needs

Most of the farmers predominantly depend upon and use their personal money. They have accumulated savings from previous sales proceeds. The use of personal money is one of the ways to minimize risks. Most SFPFs do not rely on mainstream institutions such as banks for short-term credit. Instead they work out various other arrangements to meet their needs. They clearly stated that bank loans create undue stress and fear. Additionally, it is not assured that even after the complicated procedures, the cash would be available on time. Hence, their reliance is never on banks for short-term credit. Only Yadunath Gorai, of the farmers in the study, has managed to build a relationship with the banks and drew credit to the tune of Rs 1 lakh for his requirements.

Some of the measures adopted by the farmers for arranging and use of capital are:

- Planning their purchasing so that the cost is spread out over time. Initially, the cost of seeds and fertilizers needs to be incurred. The other inputs are bought as per need and the stage of the crop.
- Purchasing all the required inputs in bulk for the whole season is also practised. Ramanuj Singh says that he plans for, purchases and stores all the inputs in March–April.
- Devising a combination of crops in such a way that the first crop starts giving early returns and takes care of the cash required for the coming expenses.
- Using personal money and some credit from the input suppliers.
- Establishing a system under which the cost of inputs supplied on credit is deducted from the sale of the harvest (as in Yadunath Gorai's case)

A point of concern here is whether people, in such a situation, who operate at such a low economic scale and have to divert their money for capital-intensive activities, are compromising on essential family investments or larger consumption expenses. What happens to family expenses when farmers divert personal resources for commercial farming? This subject needs deeper study.

Policy Implications: Clearly, small farmers hailing from the rain-fed areas, in spite of a proven track record of earning assured large incomes, do not find mainstream banking a reliable support. This is an important area for awareness and response from the banking system. What are the demand and supply characteristics of credit here? Do these farmers have to either draw on their own meagre resources or resort to moneylenders?

ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE

The findings revealed another area of commonality among SFPFs. The quest for

acquiring new information and technology concerned with their work is significant among these farmers. They are the first ones to attend any meetings, demonstrations or training conducted by government authorities, seed companies or NGOs. They meet seed sellers, agriculture officials, scientists and seed company officials; and visit shops, Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), etc., frequently enquiring about new information, problems that may arise and issues that others may have faced. They have established a working relationship by constantly being in touch with these persons and institutions for information. Their fields have the finest crops, where new technology has been used, best available hybrid seeds and fertilizers procured, the latest and most effective insecticides and pesticides utilized. The study shows that input suppliers are the most important actors in disbursing knowledge and information. These input suppliers may be used as sources of extension of knowledge on the ground, of course, with adequate checks and balances.

These farmers are extremely resourceful with amazing farming skills and can be seen as pioneers. They do not have any bias toward the government and private players and do not hesitate to use either of these for their own benefit

Another significant finding from the study was that the massive agriculture extension system does not factor in support for these SFPFs. The government machinery in these remote areas is either non-existent or dormant. It acts only as distribution points for some inputs, especially seeds. The role of the government for disbursing technical know-how needs to be devised afresh.

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The SFPFs conduct frequent experiments based on popular intuitive agronomy. The objectives of such experiments are:

- To test some specific seeds
- To adopt a new crop in the area
- To introduce a new technology in farming practice
- To increase yield
- To learn to test systems and practices in order to lower risks

The costs of all such experiments are borne by the individuals themselves. The risk too is borne by farmers. Such experiments, evidently, help in boosting the confidence of these farmers.

LINKAGE WITH MARKETS

The places where these small and prosperous farmers are located are quite remote and not usually connected with the markets where they need to sell their crops and produce. Yet, all of them have developed functional linkages with the inputs and output markets. Initially, they began by selling the produce themselves in the local market; slowly, as the volume increased, they were able to attract traders and, through them, sold their produce to distant markets. Although they did not have any prior exposure to the markets, they soon identified suitable people and connected with them; they first established linkages with the local market players and soon connected with distant markets. They quickly sensed the limitation of the local markets, and to overcome the chances of glut, they keep searching for new markets.

All SFPFs have a very good relationship with the input and output traders, who help them with information about prices, trends, new products and credit. Sometimes, they also collaborate for mutual benefit, using each other's strengths. Whether they are the farmers in Odisha or Jharkhand, they have all appreciated the role of markets for earning money and have actively linked with them. Evident also is the fact that unless there is a volume attractive enough for the market, it is not possible to build an effective relationship there. To achieve this, they are increasing the area under vegetables (personal or leased) or collaborating with other farmers (in all cases, the scale of production in 2 to 5 acres, grossed crop area or more, is critical for prosperity).

These farmers appreciate that the markets are real. They have understood the nature of markets and do not complain of price fluctuations; they have, instead, learned how to make use of them and use their superior knowledge of markets to make modifications in crop choices and timings

All the farmers have experienced price fluctuations (Rs 2—25 per kg) and learned from these. They are more alert to price trends and respond to them by producing more when the prices are high and by avoiding crops that are consistently getting lower prices.

For the sale of their produce, they rely on market players such as traders, except Ramanuj Singh from Singrauli, who prefers to sell his produce himself because he gets a good price, and Yadunath Gorai from Jharkhand, who functions in a group and takes the responsibility of marketing and inputs.

Entry into larger markets/Agriculture Produce Market Committee (APMCs)/Barriers on Borders, surprisingly, was not mentioned as a hindering factor by these farmers.

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For information related to new products, practices and troubleshooting, the market plays a crucial role (the input suppliers are important sources of information on inputs and troubleshooting; the output traders are sources of information regarding the quality of produce required in the market, the prices and trends). The farmers acquire information from the product literature provided by input companies, discussions with the traders participating in training programmes, and exposure visits organized by the input companies, etc. A good relationship with the market players also helps them to source quality products, though sometimes at higher prices, if taken on credit.

Policy Implications: How do we bring the market to the producer? Or do we rely on his/her enterprise to work around various constraints and risks and develop these linkages?

Relationship with the Government

The role of the government is not evident although, in some cases (Odisha and Madhya Pradesh), the irrigation infrastructure (wells, check dams, lift irrigation points, pump-sets) that have been set up by the government have helped farmers. Similarly, programmes such as MGNREGS, WADI and Watershed development have helped farmers develop their land resources (bunding, levelling, fencing, orchard development, etc., in Madhya

Pradesh and Chhattisgarh). Also evident is the fact that when these farmers are successful, access to government schemes such as the Kishan Credit Card (KCC), irrigation infrastructure, subsidies, etc., becomes easy. Either government officials come searching for them or they become confident in approaching and dealing with the government. Access to government schemes also becomes easier if an NGO (like PRADAN) is working in the area; PRADAN has helped them access the benefits of schemes such as MGNREGS, WADI, and Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IWMP), and lift irrigation, bank linkages, etc. In the supply of agricultural inputs by the government, issues such as timeliness and quality come into play.

The infrastructure created by the government has provided support conditions for some of these prosperous farmers but there was no software support such as effective training or capacity building, which may have helped them to adopt high value agriculture such as vegetable cultivation

The infrastructure created by the government has provided support conditions for some of these prosperous farmers but there was no software support such as effective training or capacity building, which may have enabled them to adopt high value agriculture such as vegetable cultivation. Skills and knowledge, therefore, are very important, in order to become prosperous. Some of the farmers (Sukhdeo) learned this by working in fields of other farmers whereas some of them (Jaleswar, Shankarlal, Jayanti bai, Budhram Munda, etc.) were trained by NGOs; some (Yadunath, Jairam Singh) learned by observation and reflection, and some (Robin Hansda, Yadunath, Subodh Patra, Shyam Sundar Mallick, etc.) learned by studying the product literature, interactions with salespersons, traders, watching agricultural programmes such as *Annadata.*

Policy Implications: Investments in creating irrigation sources and also building their land resources are very much in the purview of government programmes. We need to ensure that these programmes reach the deserving communities in a beneficial manner. In addition, there is also a strong case emerging for convergence of programmes and departments.

Risks and Failures

Not surprisingly, none of the SFPFs studied had access to institutional risk coverage mechanisms. Most of them seemed to be completely self-insured—no institutional or community insurance. A factor that seems to have worked in their favour was that all of them were primarily self-financed, which meant that, in case of failure, there was at least no prospect of a creditor looming large on the horizon. The SFPFs seemed to be following a strategy of starting small, building personal savings for capital formation for financing growth, following a multi-crop strategy to diversify risk, and ensuring food security through their land. However, in a risk-prone activity such as vegetable cultivation, farmers would have suffered fluctuations in production and encountered market-related risks. However, post-facto realization was also that this study did not spend enough time on this aspect with the respondents and, therefore, suffers from this limitation.

Importance of Clusters

Most of the SFPFs studied are in the nature of pioneers, the first people in the area to embark on this route. Gradually, seeing their success, others are making an effort to imitate them. These clusters make further expansion easier and allow more sophisticated institutions to emerge, for example, farmers'

groups, commission agents, institutional buyers, etc. Another point that needs to be noted is that what works for one need not work for another. While studying Nityanand and Cohort in Keonjhar district, Odisha, clearly, Nityanand, an OBC, made the transition; however, the other two Munda farmers from a similar milieu dropped out and are working as wage labourers in an urban market. Probably, more hand-holding is required or some more research is required on people within a community, to understand the phenomenon of dropouts better—and what makes for success and failure.

None of the SFPFs studied had access to institutional risk coverage mechanisms. Most of them seemed to be completely self-insured—no institutional or community insurance.

Role of NGOs

The case studies cover both the NGO-supported and the self-driven farmers. Some exceptional farmers have just taken off and gone on a growth spiral and have reached great heights. Could these exceptions become the rule? In many of the cases, the motivational as well as knowledge and skill building support was provided by NGOs, particularly in isolated areas. NGOs also played a crucial role in helping small farmers access different government schemes to create infrastructure such as irrigation, WADI, watershed development projects, etc. They have also helped small farmers meet food sufficiency through increased food-grain production programmes and have developed the skills of the farmers for high value agriculture such as vegetable cultivation.

The quest for knowledge, a keen observation and reflection are common characteristics exhibited by all the small prosperous farmers. PRADAN believes that these skills can be developed and nurtured through well-designed observation and reflection processes. Because NGOs have a long-term presence and a working relationship with the small and marginal farmers, they can help small farmers acquire these skills in two to three years' time and become prosperous.

NGOs can also play a role in establishing production clusters. They can help organize clusters of vegetable/high value crop production, which will help in the development of a high level of entrepreneurship in the area.

Policy Implications: There is an important lesson for agriculture extension departments here. Extension in agriculture is not just about transfer of technology or knowledge in a top-down manner. It is about understanding the situation of the farmers and responding to the special needs they may have. It is about building their confidence and helping them to take risks. It is also about converging resources from many departments and institutions so that a wholesome response can be provided. Till such a thing happens, agriculture will remain captive to the vagaries of nature and the markets.

Some of the special qualities of agri-entrepreneurs are:

- Passion for agriculture
- High aspiration, ambition for high incomes
- Keen observation and reflection
- Constantly scanning for new ways to increase profits—new markets, new crops, new practices, field experiments
- Common sense and street smartness
- Exceptional capability to be good at managing a number of things (farm management, market, inputs, labour management, market orientation, quality consciousness)
- Exceedingly hardworking

Conclusion

All traits of a successful SFPF are very similar to that of a successful entrepreneur in any field. Because the study focused on SFPFs, the focus of the study was not on what kind of replication these farmers would be able to stimulate or inspire in the area. That might have also thrown more light from an interventionist perspective. The people who are to follow may not be required to possess the same levels of enterprise or need to invest the same effort in the initial cost of research, experimentation and market search and development. The threshold barriers may be lower for those who follow. This is an extant gap in the study, on hindsight.

Lessons for PRADAN and other stakeholders

An appreciation for the prosperous farmers in the project villages needs to be developed and interactions with them from a learning point of view be enhanced because there are many lessons on entrepreneurship that these can provide. Several questions arise: How can we leverage exceptional qualities and success of these SFPFs for gains for the larger community? How do we facilitate social learning, replication and emulation? Sometimes it may happen spontaneously as with Yadunath. What can we learn from these examples? In the poorer areas, the adoption of the SFPF practices will not happen by default. It will require designed interventions, eco-system approach, and linkages with appropriate institutions and markets. Alternative implementation models for diffusion of new practices—the cluster approach—needs to be studied. Is it possible to look at a collaborative enterprise between the better-off farmers and the budding new farmers and evolve a win-win arrangement?

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