

## The Changing Face of Dhaka and Diggall Pahadi Villages

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*Known for its soil erosion during heavy rainfall, the infertile lands of Dhaka and Diggall Pahadi have been converted into green fields through tasar plantations and other agricultural interventions, ensuring food and financial security for the villagers.*

People invest their time and labour on a resource only if the benefits from it are pre-determined and assured. The villagers of Dhaka and Diggall Pahadi in Jharkhand were no different. They believed that their 62 acres of uplands that stretched across the villages were not even suitable for maize cultivation, let alone yielding an income of a lakh of rupees. However, the introduction of tasar plantation and agriculture through an intervention has transformed the land over the last four years. The area that was not even giving them Rs. 100 now yields an income of Rs 5 to 6 lakhs and has become a symbol of prestige and prosperity for them. This is a vibrant example of the fulfillment of a dream visualized by the farmers. I never thought that my idea of tasar plantation and agriculture would yield such wonderful results so soon.

In 2006, the Department of Social Welfare, Government of Jharkhand, sanctioned a scheme for Arjuna plantation on private land for tasar farming. The programme was meant for tribal families only. PRADAN got an approval for two units of 85 acres each for tasar plantation. Ten to twelve villages in the Kathikund and Shikaripara areas were chosen for the plantation. It was a challenge for me, personally, because I had very little experience with such an intervention. Another challenge was to find land suitable for the Arjuna plantation in nearby villages.

There was a large stretch of unutilized uplands in Dhaka and Diggall Pahadi villages, which I had seen during my field visits. Initially, when I discussed this with the villagers, I found them very apathetic, and this was discouraging. They thought that nothing could be done in these uplands and, therefore, there was no point in having a discussion on the issue. I learned that the land belonged to tribal families, who made their living by working in the lowlands as labourers in other farmers' agricultural plots. When I told them about tasar plantation, the people's first

reaction was to reject the proposal, saying that about 10–15 years ago, *madua* and *gonduli* used to grow in this patch of land but now even those had dried up and the land was uncultivable. It was disheartening to learn that there were even rumours that PRADAN would take away the land. But I decided to give it one last try.

In February 2006, with the support of the local leaders, I organized a meeting in the village. I requested the villagers to come with me to see a tasar plantation before taking a decision. In March 25–30 villagers from Dhaka visited Chandubyan village, to interact with the villagers and to see for themselves the Arjuna plantation and the tasar rearing activities there. This had a very positive impact on the visitors. They had detailed discussions with their hosts and understood many aspects of tasar rearing. On their return to Dhaka, the villagers decided to try out this source of livelihood and formed a village-level committee for the management of the activities. They named their committee 'Aatu Utnav Vikash Samiti', which means to work for the development of the village. We then began our intervention in the village in earnest. In the first year, 40 ha of land were covered with Arjuna plantation and the whole patch of land turned into a green field. When they saw this, the people of Diggall Pahadi called for a meeting in their village and decided to introduce tasar plantation in their patch of 20 ha as well. They sent a letter to PRADAN regarding this. After getting the sanction order, they formed the 'Lahanit tasar Vikash Samiti' in the village and by 2007, the plantation was operational.

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The maintenance of the Arjuna plantation by both the *samitis* became an example of the high quality of management skills amongst the villagers. The maintenance of plants, their timely pruning and their protection from grazing were carried out very

professionally. Strong laws were formed for the protection of the plants and the villagers adhered to them. By 2009, their dream of a tasar plantation on this vast tract of land came true because of the hard work of the villagers. All government officials ranging from the Block Development Officer (BDO), the Deputy Commissioner (DC), the Deputy Development Commissioner (DDC) and the Secretary came to see the plantation. A team of trainee IAS officers also came to understand how the plantation works. The confidence level of the villagers grew because of the appreciation they received from all quarters. Hundreds of villagers from the neighbouring villages came to Dhaka and Diggall Pahadi villages to see the plantations.

Before initiating tasar rearing in this village in 2009, the farmers were trained for two days. This training programme increased their confidence and, for the first time, 20 farmers started tasar rearing on the Arjuna plantation. To begin with, the commercial crop was introduced with 2,000 disease-free layings (DFLs). In this crop, 2,23,360 quality cocoons were raised that could be used for tasar seed production. The total cost of this crop was Rs 3,40,000 and, on an average, a family earned an income of around Rs 17,000 in cash on an investment of Rs 800. These cocoons were bought by 'Abhen tasar Kitpalak Samiti', Saharitola, Kathikund, for the production of high quality seeds. With an increase in income, there was excitement

among the villagers. Once the villagers began earning some money, the migration to West Bengal for earning their livelihood dropped and the villagers became food secure for at least one year. Family members began to stay at home and the children were sent to school instead of to the fields to work.

What was once the most infertile land of Dhaka and what was known for soil erosion during heavy rainfall has now been converted into green fields. The villagers, who are earning large sums of money for the first time, are now beginning to think of how to invest their money to ensure a secure future. Stephen Marandi has invested in life insurance policies; Jetha Murmu has bought agricultural land; and Marhsal Tudu has bought a cycle and a mobile phone. Joel Hasda, Prem Murmu and many others replaced their thatched roofs with tiled ones. Agnesh Marandi, Menesal Tudu, Sushil Soren and Parmeshwar Tudu have invested in light-weight pump sets for irrigation whereas Usha Kiran Murmu and Budhin Hemram have opened bank accounts and are saving their money so that they can spend it on marriages and other family requirements. There was a wave of social and economic change in the village in 2009 and it motivated 50 more farmers to take up tasar rearing in 2010. Other farmers began looking after their

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Arjuna plantations so that they could also be associated with this form of livelihood in the coming years. In 2010, 5,000 DFLs were used for raising the tasar commercial crop. This produced 3,54,000 cocoons of high

quality that could be used for the production of the tasar seeds, and 3,000 tasar reeling cocoons were produced. The total income for the year was Rs 5,88,226. With an average investment of Rs 700, a family was able to earn around Rs 11,000 to 12,000 in a span of 45 days. Within two to three years, earning their livelihood as labourers in agricultural plots became a secondary option, their first became tasar rearing. According to the villagers of Dhaka and Diggall Pahadi village, "The plantation will be a constant source of income for us for the next 50 years. We can now work with respect with this livelihood."

The women of this village are also very happy because they are respected now just like the men are, owing to their involvement in the work. They have greater confidence levels and consider themselves at par with men. They are also happy because people from nearby villages come to them with proposals of marriage for their sons and daughters, in the hope that the youth of Dhaka and Diggall Pahadi will carry their culture of awareness and hard work with them and help transform those villages as well.