

The Visible Changes in Women's Lives: PRADAN's Efforts in Khunti

SHAHNAWAZ ALAM

Empowering the tribal women by organizing them into collectives in which they support each others' savings and credit activities, and providing them with the information, skills, financial support and linkages for implementing different livelihood options has changed the character of rural society

PRADAN's efforts to empower women have brought about visible changes in rural society. Tribal women are orienting themselves to the multi-level changes in themselves as well as in their villages. They have become more confident, have an effective say in their family and village, have become more aware of their rights and entitlements, have greater access to mainstream institutions and have a better self image. 'Development communication played a vital role in this process'. This article will discuss how PRADAN's efforts are contributing to the empowerment of women in the tribal villages of Khunti district of Jharkhand, and the use of development communication towards this.

Khunti district is just 40 km away from Ranchi, the state capital of Jharkhand. Khunti has a tribal-dominated society (more than 80 per cent of the population belongs to the Munda tribe) and there is widespread poverty (62 per cent are below the poverty line—BPL). The literacy rate, however, is higher than the national average (69 per cent). Women are respected and have a say in society. In all important decisions of the family, their opinion is sought; they go to markets, work in fields and the male members of the family help them in the kitchen. However, some traditions and laws deprive them of their rights and make their position in society weak. For example, only a male can be the Munda (the traditional administrative head of the village) and land can belong to the male heir only. Similarly, women alone cannot take any decision independently, whereas the men can do so. PRADAN has been working here to enhance livelihoods and empower women for many years.

The term 'Development Communication' was first coined in 1972 by Nora C. Quebral, who defines it as "the art and science of human communication linked to a society's planned transformation from a state of poverty to one of dynamic socio-economic growth that makes for greater equity and the larger unfolding of individual potential."

PRADAN uses a family based approach. This approach implies that each and every family has its own set of problems, and the resources and means to cope with these. However, due to lack of knowledge, information and opportunity, the family is unable to visualize and reach the desired state. PRADAN professionals help organize the community and facilitate them to reach there. Women's Self Help Groups (SHGs) are the primary body through which PRADAN intervenes in a village.

Between 10 and 20 women from the same socio-economic background are organized in a group; they meet to make small savings and take credit as well as to discuss and resolve their socio-economic issues. The philosophy behind organizing women-only SHGs is so that their families and society realize their importance, and the information/knowledge they gain reaches every person in the family. In the initial days of PRADAN's intervention in the area, there was opposition from the families. *Dadas* (husbands) were hesitant to allow *didis* (wives) to step outside their homes and organize themselves. Even if they were permitted to do so, many a time *didis* were beaten back home for the same. There was doubt and fear about why these strange people had come to the village, why the women were being organized and why money was being saved in a box. The communication skills and transparency of PRADAN professionals played an important role here. PRADAN professionals shared in the *gram sabha* (the weekly meeting of villagers, which is usually attended only by men) how small savings can contribute by helping the family cope with poverty and how the combined efforts of the men and the women would improve their condition. Initially,

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the men expressed their fear of losing control and their position, and the changes in the social fabric; gradually, however, they realized that the empowerment of women did not necessarily mean the 'disempowering' of men. At present, around 12,000 women are members of SHGs.

SHGs have brought about multi-level changes in a woman. First, she now steps out of her home and engages in economic activities. Her confidence and self esteem have increased because

she contributes to the family's economic needs at crucial times such as during the agricultural season, marriage, children's education and health services. She has become more aware of her rights, having discussed issues and concerns with fellow women and understood them. Gradually, a transformation in thinking has occurred. Women now know that they are not born for just following their husband's orders and doing household work but to build the family. In the process, the leadership qualities of many women have come to the forefront. They confidently negotiate with banks, Block authorities and other mainstream institutions, and if their rights are infringed upon or their dignity is hurt, they fight to restore these. Susari Muchu's story exemplifies the empowerment process of a tribal rural woman.

Susari Muchu is a tribal woman who lives in a remote village. She has studied up to the 10th standard. Her husband, Sanjay Topno, controlled all her activities. He opposed her association with the SHG, saying she should not waste her time in such a worthless activity. However, PRADAN professionals and other villagers continued to engage him in dialogue

and persuaded him to permit Susari *didi* to join the SHG. One year later, armed with the scientific knowledge that she gained from agriculture training programmes, she started tomato cultivation in the rainy season, with the concurrence of her husband. This went against the people's belief that tomato cannot be produced in *kharif*. However, even though the growth of the plants was very good, a drunken Sanjay one day went to the field and destroyed the crop, saying that his wife was challenging his knowledge and making a fool of him. He did not believe that the plants would bear fruit and it was better to grow other traditional crops.

Susari *didi* was very upset but waited to show him that she was not wrong. When Vishwasi Guria, another woman from the same SHG, harvested her crop and made a profit of Rs 8,000, Susari *didi* reasserted her position before her husband. The following year, Sanjay not only engaged in improved agriculture activities but also supported Susari *didi* in her development and empowerment endeavours.

Today, Susari *didi* is seen as a role model; she leads the village in organized development. She maintains the books and accounts of her SHG and of the Special SGSY programme in her village; represents the SHG in the cluster and shoulders the responsibility of dealing with the bank. Last year, one day she went to the bank to withdraw money. The clerk asked her to get her signature verified by the Field Officer. When she approached the latter, he threw the passbook back at her with anger and said, "*Kahan kahan se log aa jate hain dimag khane ke liye* (Wonder where these people come from to chew my brains)." She was very

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upset with his behaviour and decided to teach him a lesson. She wrote an application to the Branch Manager and met him. She warned the Manager that she would bring the matter to the notice of the BDO and DC if he failed to take action. The Manager took immediate action and the Field Officer apologized for his behaviour. She did not stop there however. The Manager had to assure her that such behaviour would not

be repeated with any woman from any village.

The journey of organizing and empowering did not stop here. The women of 8–10 SHGs have formed a higher level collective called cluster. A cluster has two elected representatives from each SHG, who meet once a month for cross-learning, and for understanding and resolving the issues and concerns of each other. The experiences gained through these clusters led the women to organize into federations at the block level. These federations deal with larger and complex issues affecting society in general and women in particular. For example, in October 2011, a schoolgirl was raped by three people; the police did not arrest the culprits because they were powerful men. The Torpa Mahila Sangh (the women's federation in Torpa Block) organized around 500 women, including schoolchildren, and pressurized the police to arrest the rapists. Within two days, the culprits were behind bars. Similarly, in Goa village of Murhu Block, a bribe was demanded from each family for electrification of the village. The Jharia Mahila Sangh (the women's federation in Murhu Block) organized a meeting with the officials concerned; the MLA of the area was also invited. Following this, the village was electrified without a single rupee being given as bribe.

All these have brought about a change in the mindsets of the men. From a position of hesitation and opposition initially, they now fully support the women. Women also participate in the *gram sabha*, and their views are taken seriously. In Khunti district, the hamlet-level Program Execution Committee (PEC), comprising exclusively of women, successfully implements, monitors and maintains the books of accounts of the Special SGSY project, a time-bound project with more than Rs 8 billion programme fund in more than 100 hamlets/villages.

Even in the field of agriculture, which is the main source of livelihood of the area, the stake of women has increased. The talks and planning for adopting a new technique or even a new crop are initiated by women. PRADAN professionals remain in constant and close touch with women through SHGs and clusters, and share ideas/information with them. Women discuss the same with their family members and then take the final decision. The adoption of the new/scientific techniques such as SRI and vegetable cultivation during *kharif* has brought economic prosperity to the family. This has increased the self confidence of women and changed the way the male members of their families perceive them. Today, when a man is asked what his plans for agriculture are for the year, often the reply is, "*Didi log batayengi; hum logon ka kaam to khet taiyar karna hai* (Our wives will tell us; our job is to prepare the fields)." This is certainly a significant and positive change in the importance of the woman and her views in the family.

These changes did not come easily. PRADAN practised well-thought-out strategies and processes of communication. It firmly believes in human abilities, and 'trust' is at the core of all its actions. PRADAN professionals sit

in a circle on *jattis* (mats) with the villagers. These have greater implications for change. Sitting on a mat instead of a chair, or a high place, increases the community's trust in the professional and implies that the person is not a 'sahib' but someone who empathises with them, really values equity and understands their life. Sitting in a circle also does away with hierarchy and fosters better understanding of each other.

All the efforts of PRADAN to enhance livelihoods and take steps towards empowering women are based on participation. Knowledge and skills are improved through various training programmes and exposure visits. PRADAN uses the print medium (for example, brochures and PoPs of various crops) and audio visuals (such as shooting short movies on the best practice/success stories), to bring about changes in the thought processes and perceptions.

However, it is not easy to change perceptions. There are a few pockets, especially the remote villages, where *gram sabhas* do not allow *dikus* (outsiders) to enter. Sometimes, language also becomes a hurdle in conveying ideas and information. Moreover, the younger generation is being lured to urban life; only a few well-educated people enjoy working in a rural village. Similarly, different religions see and interpret these changes in their own way.

In the tribal villages of Khunti district, through the efforts of PRADAN, changes in perception are visible. Today, women enjoy more dignity and space, have a greater say in the economic decisions in their families and are actively engaged in tackling the larger issues that affect their lives. There is strength in unity, and SHGs, clusters and federations provide them with the platform to voice their views and demand their rights. They are now more confident, knowledgeable, skilled and forthright.