

# The Women of Chindbahar–Moving Ahead

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*With support from development professionals and information about the various activities under different projects, the women in Chindbahar take up the responsibility of improving their lives, taking charge of projects and interacting with the community and the government officials with ease and confidence*

On the 5 February 2012, I received a call from Laxman Netam, the *sachiv* of *Panchayat Chindbahar Panchayat*, inviting me to attend a *gram sabha* meeting the following day. I went there with Nandini, my colleague in PRADAN, and was happy to see that about 200 villagers had gathered and of these at least 50 per cent of them were women. These women were a part of Self Help Groups (SHGs). The *sarpanch*, the *janpad sadasya* and the *zila sadasya* (the people's representatives at block & district levels respectively) were in the meeting as well. This was a special *gram sabha* called to discuss the problem of land and water work through MGNREGA. I was happy that the villagers were taking the initiative to talk about MGNREGA, without any influence from government officials or NGOs.

Having been to the village today and seen the enthusiasm of the villagers, I began to think of our initial days here. Pradyut formed the first SHG, 'Lal Genda Mahila Swa Sahayata Samooh', in 2009, and I started working here a year later. Chindbahar is a village in Darbha block in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, which is about 22 km from the district headquarters, Jagdalpur. There are seven hamlets in this village with about 350 households. Around 65 per cent of the population belongs to STs, 20 per cent to SCs, 10 per cent to OBCs and 5 per cent to the general category.

In the beginning, when I discussed this with my team leader we decided to keep our focus on the members of the SHGs and their interpersonal relations, ensuring that the groups meet regularly and that we keep a continuous interaction with them. I thus began work in Chindbahar and with it my exploration to understand the village. The *zila sadasya* (Shyamvati Korram) and the *janpad sadasya* (Kamala Kashyap) are from this village, as are many others who are involved in the local political process. These people are very powerful and have a big influence on the villagers. The Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) representatives were either from the BJP or from the Congress and were, therefore, possibly politically influential. I maintained a good rapport with the villagers as well as with the people's representatives and the other powerful people of the village. My primary focus, however, was to enable and empower the members of the SHG. We interacted with the SHG members in group meetings and one-on-one in their homes. I spent time talking to them about their problems, their joys and their sorrows, and shared information about myself with them. I wanted them to understand that I was in the village not only to work but also to become one of them.

I think I was somewhat successful. During Raksha Bandhan in 2010, I was sad because I was unable to go home. The women of Chindbahar understood this. I was invited to the village for the festival and about 30 women tied rakhi on my wrist and told me, "*Hamare karan aap apne bahan ke paas nahhi jaa sake; koi baat nahi, hum sab aapko rakhi baandhege taaki aapko dukh naa rahe ki aap raakhi nahi bandhwa paaye*" (You were unable to go home to your sister because of us. Don't be sad; all

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of us will tie Rakhi on you)." This statement really touched me and I felt that they had accepted me as one of them.

We started a land-and-water activity in the village in April 2010 with a grant from Sir Dorabji Tata Trust (SDTT). The programme was led by a governing body (the *gram sabha*) and a Programme Execution Committee (PEC). The

PEC comprised members of the three SHGs, selected by the group. The responsibilities of the PEC were to monitor the work, withdraw money from the bank and pay the labourers every 15 days. It was a difficult and painstaking task to check who had done how much work. They also encouraged the labour to work well. This helped bring about a change in villagers' perception of the PEC members. The villagers began to respect the PEC members and seek their advice.

The PEC members also invited some of the powerful people of the village to the meetings; by having those people appreciate their work, they were able to strengthen themselves, creating an overall positive energy and impression. We also encouraged them to participate in meetings with external resources, in order to give them an exposure to the outside world. Initially, we invited the CEO of the *zila panchayat* (Mr. R. Prasanna) to the village. The women seemed a little nervous to begin with. However, when the CEO reached, Dinmani, Ahalya, Manjula and Kalwati (all PEC members) began a discussion with him, and the other six PEC members stood behind them to give them support. They were able to explain the planning process, how they were working, what the output was, what the response of the villagers was and their overall experience. The CEO seemed very impressed by them. Another positive was that the people's representatives,

that is, the *sarpanch* present on the occasion, saw the confidence of the women and how they spoke with the officials. The major gain from this event was the confidence of the women. We, therefore, decided to call government officials, people from outside Bastar, professionals from PRADAN posted in nearby places and villagers from other villages to Chindbahar.

We realized that should women become the people's representatives, they would contribute to the upliftment of the village. We began to strategize accordingly. The first step towards this goal would be help the women understand the PRI system, their rights and entitlements and the meaning of a *gram sabha*.

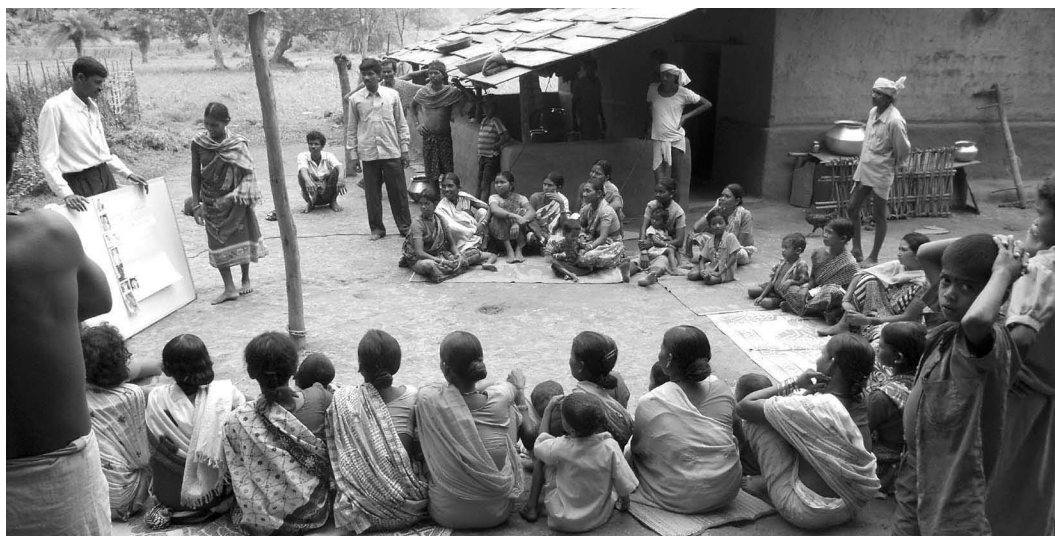
We organized exposure visits to Narharpur for the women of the SHGs, to meet the people's representatives of Kanker block where PRADAN had been working for the last seven years and where many works of MGNREGA are in progress. The women interacted with

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the SHG members and the PRI representatives, and learned about how MGNREGA schemes have helped the village. They also learned how the work was delegated and how everyone

contributed to the smooth running of the work in the village. On their return, we found that the women were more confident and they had a greater understanding of and belief in the work being done by PRADAN. They became more serious about the meetings, started talking about various issues in the village such as the MGNREGA work and its status, the behaviour of the PRI people with them and how they can help the people of the *panchayat*.

At the same time, there was a shift in the people's representative's perception about PRADAN and its work. Kamala Kashyap, the *janpad sadasya*, encouraged the women of her neighbourhood to form an SHG and asked PRADAN to support and to strengthen it. Her husband visited some of the neighbouring villages with me and told the villagers about



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the land-and-water activity at Chindbahar and the working of the SHG there. He encouraged and motivated the villagers of all the other nearby villages to do the same. This helped in forming SHGs in other villages and hamlets.

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and spoke fluently before an audience of 1,500 women and government officials. Some of the other members of the PEC from Chindbahar made a presentation on the land-and-water activity. I was in the audience then and overheard a person from another village say

Of course, not all the people's representatives were happy with this arrangement. Some thought they would lose their hold on the villages or that funds may be blocked if the villagers tried to get the money themselves. Problems did arise because of these fears.

that these were the same problems that they faced as well and admired how the people from Chindbahar had been able to solve theirs. I felt happy to hear this and was reassured that I was moving in the right direction with the women of Chindbahar.

For example, one day I had gone to the village for an SHG meeting. In that meeting, one completely drunk man came very close to me. He said, "Aap yahan aake logo ko bewakuf bana rahe ho aur hamaare ghar ki auratein kaam dhaam chodke aapke saath samay barbaad kar rahe hai (You are making a fool of people and our women instead of doing the housework are wasting their time with you)." Though I was very pained by his words, I did not reply and listened to him with patience. On my way back, my thoughts were centred on the incident and I was determined to change the perception of that man. I continued my work in the village but this time with a new strategy. I invited the men of the village to the SHG meeting so that they could understand what was happening in the SHG meetings. The strategy was helpful and I was able to establish a rapport with the men of the village.

After the Mahadhivesan, I noticed a renewed energy in the women. They began to speak up and even, on occasion, confronted the PRI representatives and the *sachiv* for their rights.

During the social audit of the *gram sabha* in January 2011, the women raised a common voice in front of the PRI representatives, the *sachiv* and the government officials. They asked for the detailed expenditure of the MGNREGA work and the future plans. The *sachiv* was unable to answer and the women became very angry and even seemed to forget who they were talking to. They spoke sternly to the *sachiv* and gave him a warning to correct the mistakes. Later, when they found that the *sachiv* had not made the corrections, they made a written complaint to the CEO of the Darbha block.

On 25 October 2010, the women of the Darbha block celebrated their first Mahadhivesan. They set up a core committee to organize the function and four of the members were from Chindbahar. They were very enthusiastic and worked very hard. Dinmani, one of the SHG members from the Chindbahar, was the anchor for the programme. She was very confident

As time passed, the PEC members strengthened their technical skills about the measurement of work, giving layouts, negotiating with the labourers, making their payment, etc. By the end of 2011, we helped the *panchayat* and the villagers to submit the plan of work under MGNREGA. They did so and work of about Rs 13 lakhs has been sanctioned.

When the MGNREGA projects were sanctioned and work began, we decided to end the SDTT project. The villagers were not very happy but over many meetings with the SHGs, the PRI representatives and the villagers, we were able to disengage, and the women decided to work on the MGNREGA projects.

I am happy and satisfied with the way things are moving in the village. It is now time to think about a strategy to help the villagers keep this energy up so that the work in the village moves as fast as possible. I believe that if the work under MGNREGA goes smoothly in the first year, it will continue for a long time. It is important to create awareness, unity and a feeling of ownership among the villagers, to be able to implement any kind of scheme or plan in the village successfully.

I would also like to share what I have learnt from this experience. Being development professionals, we think we have to generate ideas and options for villages and communities. We assume that the villagers will not be able to work on their own. They have not worked on these developmental issues before, so how will

they be able to handle it. But working in the field, I found that the tribal people also have a mind and they are thinking people and we should not judge them just because they have not been exposed to the working of projects. If they are shown what needs to be done, they will do it in their own way and style. They may make mistakes in the beginning but they will learn from their mistakes. I learnt that as a professional, I have to have patience and keep an open mind.

The villagers of Chindbahar are on the road to development and they will move ahead and achieve many things on their own. They just have to keep the spirit of unity and have the belief that they can change their status by working together. My work now is to invest time in the village to increase the energy and the feeling of ownership of the group and help them visualize the development of their life and the village.

As I conclude, I remind myself that I should always look at the positives, no matter what the situation or condition, so that I can help the villagers to move ahead in a positive way.