

Transforming Lives in Pattaithan

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Moving from a bleak, subsistence-level existence to realizing that their strength lies in unity and in letting go of caste divisions, the villagers of Pattaithan chose to work towards self-sufficiency and dignity, through the SHG and the tola sabha, by utilizing government funds available to them, leading to transformation of the entire village

"Ek din aisan howi jato bhaiya ki jilla se aadami dekhto au sikhto hamar gaon me aake! (One day, the district officials will come to our village to learn how to work)," said Sulochana Devi of Pattaithan village proudly. Her words were immediately endorsed by Shakuntala Devi, who added, "Ab to Bangal jabo na, murgi palwo, chas karwo aur gidada ke padhaabo likhaabo. (I will not migrate to Bengal any more. I will rear poultry, grow crops and educate my child)." These declarations by the women in a tola sabha (hamlet-level committee meeting) acknowledged the significant change that had taken place in their lives and the confidence that they would be able to sustain it in the future.

The time I had invested in all the promotional activities for the SHG and for livelihoods had paid off and the villagers' unity and sustained efforts had definitely changed their lives and the village. I remember the meeting I had attended some three-and-a-half years back in Pattaithan. The village at that time had four SHGs, segregated on the basis of caste.

During an earlier village meeting, members from all the SHGs had gathered at one place. Very soon, the members belonging to the different communities began to argue and the meeting degenerated into mayhem. The people did not trust each other and held many grudges against each other. I listened to them silently and patiently for almost an hour and then tried to calm them. When they stopped to listen, I asked them, "Do you really believe in your heart that what you are saying is right and that this is what you want for your village?"

There was complete silence for a few minutes. About 40–50 village youths and male villagers had gathered at the meeting place and were listening to the discussion. One man from amongst them entered the discussion to justify caste-based inequality by invoking tradition and culture. To my utter surprise, a woman from the Mandal community, who had, a little earlier, been vehemently arguing, stood up and said, “No, we cannot say or do anything in the name of tradition or culture, which may hurt the feeling of others.” She folded her hands and went straight to the *didis* (women) of the Santhal community and apologized for her earlier statements. Many other *didis* followed and suddenly the environment changed.

Some of the *dadas* (men) also did the same and there was loud applause from the whole group. The Santhal *didis* also responded very gracefully. After this outburst of emotions, they sat down to discuss the issues of their village.

BACKGROUND

Pattaithan is situated in Dumka Sadar block of Dumka district. The 70 households of the village are in two hamlets, known as the Santhal tola and the Ghatwal tola. The Santhal tola comprises 36 Santhal households and the Ghatwal tola has 25 Ghatwal households and nine Mandal households. The major source of livelihood in the village is rain-fed agriculture, and the landless families do shared farming and migrate for wage labour in the off-season.

Landholding among the Santhal families is better than among the Ghatwal families. Their average landholding is 7.9 acres whereas the Ghatwal families own an average of 6.5 acres per family. The nine Mandal families are landless and enter into farming lease contracts

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on the land of the Santhal families. All families, thus, are involved in agriculture on a medium scale.

Lack of irrigation facilities hampered people from venturing into irrigation-based cash crops.

Low rainfall in 2009–10 resulted in the villagers failing to cultivate enough food for the year and laid bare the vulnerability of rain-fed agriculture. If the monsoon arrives on time, each family produces just enough paddy to meet food sufficiency for the year.

Usually, marginal or landless farmers migrate to West Bengal during the paddy transplantation and harvesting seasons, where they earn Rs 80 and 2 kg of rice per day. Sometimes, almost all the members of a family migrate to Bengal, leaving behind only pregnant women, nursing mothers and some old people. This made them even more vulnerable and dependent on each other for subsistence.

The villagers needed to have assured irrigation facilities in the village, to allow them to do farming on their lands every year. The landless families wanted livelihood options within their village that would involve little capital. In SHG meetings, they would often discuss these matters and would end up voicing their frustrations and that the government was not taking care of the rural poor.

STARTING AGAIN

In 2005–06, PRADAN introduced Arjuna tree (host plant used for tasar sericulture) plantations but it failed because the plants were all grazed. I was apprehensive about initiating any livelihood intervention and decided to share my anxiety with the villagers. The villagers admitted that they had not taken much care of the plants. They had

not understood the benefits of the Arjuna plantations for their livelihood or that it would improve the soil condition in the village. Only a few members of the SHG had planted Arjuna trees whereas the responsibility of taking care of the plants was with all the members of the SHG. Over time, the families that did not benefit (the families whose land was not under plantation) stopped showing interest in caring for the plantation.

The villagers believed that a group of landholding families was required to take care of the plantation which had to be, in turn, monitored by the SHG. This was not true. I realized that there was a lack of clarity about the activity and no proper systems had been developed, thereby leading to its failure.

Once again the SHG members, their husbands and I gathered for the livelihood planning meeting in the village. We discussed the possibilities with each and every family, and walked through the village to understand its topography. We walked through the fields of some families of a different *tola*, to understand the various resources, their quality and their pattern of use. I was completely exhausted but realized how useful the experience had been for me. I now had a better understanding of the village and its resources.

The SHG members were very eager to show me their fields. Of around 300 acres of the village, 65 acres were hilly and under the government's possession. Another 55 acres had large stone boulders and less than a four inch depth of soil which was mostly sand. This land was in the foothills, and also in the government's possession. The villagers call it *khas*, or *parti*, land. Another 90 acres of uplands, locally called *tand*, or *dangal*, were under the villagers' possession but were of no great use other than for cattle grazing. This land was not considered for any cultivation

other than timber or fruit tree plantation.

Around 70 acres of medium uplands and homestead land were considered cultivable only for the rain-fed *kharif* crops because there was no functional water body developed on it and, therefore, no irrigation was available. People were using this land mainly for maize and short duration paddy cultivation. Only 20 acres of lowlands in the village was available for cultivation to the villagers, who used the lands for long-duration paddy, with some wheat production in less than two acres of the area.

This land dries up very rapidly—within one month of the harvest of paddy in January or February. The only consistent source of irrigation is a perennial canal of water in the north-east part of the village. There was no concept of cash crops; vegetable farming was not done on a large scale, and very little of the area was used for oil and pulse crops.

Household-based surveys provided us the details of livestock and work-force available in the village. After these initial visits, we conducted a training programme on improved agriculture, which was appreciated by the community. The training for SRI paddy cultivation and *kharif* vegetable production proved really useful for the villagers. They responded well by participating in these activities on a trial basis in small holdings of land.

GRABBING THE OPPORTUNITY

In the meantime, a project from the National Co-operative Development Corporation (NCDC) began in Dumka, which was basically designed for marginal or landless farmers. The intervention was for developing entrepreneurs in poultry-rearing on a small scale. The landless families of Pattaithan were also informed about

this livelihood option. Eighteen families considered the option through their SHGs and, of these, 15 families finally opted for this livelihood activity. To develop a better understanding, we organized an exposure visit to Petarbar block of Bokaro district, where they discussed the pros and cons of poultry-rearing.

The villagers saw how women in other villages came together as co-operatives and conducted their business efficiently. This made a great impression on the visitors' minds. They realized that there was no unity among themselves in Pattaithan whereas the women of Petarbar conducted their business with the co-operation of each other. They were overwhelmed by the unity and co-operation among the poultry grower *didis*, which they felt was missing in their own village. On their return home, they held a meeting and discussed not only the technology and management they had seen in Petarbar but also the co-operation among the rearers. Inspired by what they had seen, the villagers began to espouse and propagate unity.

The shed construction work began, supported by a series of trainings based on different aspects of the activity. Many difficulties arose along the way such as purchasing construction material and the search for masons; these were solved by the joint effort of the villagers. They decided to purchase material centrally and assigned different roles to the members, distributing the work among themselves so that many activities could be done simultaneously. These matters were discussed in the SHG, which played a supervisory role in the construction of sheds. The villagers chose a supervisor (a community service provider,

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CSP), who assisted them in the construction, in searching for masons and in the purchase of material. It was a great collective effort and 12 poultry sheds were made ready for rearing within two months.

In November 2010, Pattaithan village was selected for the implementation of the Special Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana (SGSY) project. The project included each and every family, regardless of their asset or resource base. PRADAN concentrated on developing

a plan that would provide for or impact the livelihoods of each family positively.

First, the design and layout of the project were discussed with the villagers at a village meeting. The funds were to be routed through the *tola sabhas* and the plan was to be made on the basis of the Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) approach.

An exposure visit was organized—this time to the Salaiya watershed in Katoria block of Banka district, to understand land treatment and water harvesting. Discussions with the watershed committee members were held. These discussions were quite fruitful and the committee members shared with the visiting villagers how their agriculture had changed after the intervention.

On returning from the exposure visit, a meeting was held in the village to discuss the learning from it. The dates to make a plan and form a *tola sabha* were then decided. On the given day, the entire village met to do the resource mapping, and again we walked through the village to each and every patch of land and made a plan for every area. The *didis*

moved from one plot to another, discussing the merit of the land and its limitations for the purpose of agriculture. The plan for building the seepage tanks, narrow wells, broad wells, water storage structures (30x40 model and 5 % model), land-levelling, farm bunding and

gully plugs emerged from visiting different plots.

TAKING CHARGE

Two separate *tola sabhas*—Rengech Hod *tola*

Plan for Pattaitan Village

| No. | Main/Sub-Activity Heads | Unit | Plan | Type of land | Families Benefitted |
|-----|---|-------------|------|--|---------------------|
| 1 | Land and Water Conservation and Tree-based Activities | | | | |
| a | 30x40 land husbandry | Acre | 20.6 | Upland with 2 to 5% of slope | 27 |
| b | Fruit tree plantation | Acre | 23.5 | Upland with 2 to 5% of slope | 27 |
| c | Staggered trench | Acre | 32.1 | Upland with more than 5% slope | 34 |
| d | Land husbandry | Acre | 13.0 | Gentle slope and un-bunded lands | 51 |
| e | 5% model of land treatment | Acre | 29.8 | Medium upland and flat upland | 42 |
| 2 | Micro-Irrigation Systems | | | | |
| a | Irrigation systems based on narrow wells | Number | 8 | Medium upland and homestead land | 46 |
| b | Irrigation systems based on broad wells | Number | 4 | Medium low-land and low-land | 41 |
| c | Irrigation systems based on earthen dam | Number | 1 | In seepage line with firm sides | 16 |
| d | Micro lift-irrigation system | Number | 1 | From perennial source of water to homestead land | 8 |
| e | Seepage tank | Number | 26 | Medium low-land and low-land | 26 |
| 3 | Agriculture Sector Development | | | | |
| a | Vermicompost | No. of pits | 34 | Homestead land | 34 |
| b | Improved Agri-horti cropping practices | Acre | 45.7 | Medium upland, medium low-land and homestead | 69 |
| c | Sorting-grading centre | Number | 1 | In residential area near tamarind tree | 70 |
| 4 | Livestock-based Enterprises | | | | |
| a | Small-holder poultry unit | Number | 18 | Backyard homestead land | 18 |
| b | Goat-rearing unit | Number | 10 | Homestead land | 10 |

sabha in Santhal *tola* and Garib *tola sabha* in Ghatwal *tola*—were formed, to supervise the work. A Project Execution Committee (PEC), comprising three SHG members and two male members from the SHG members' families, was formed to help with the technical measurements and the preparation of bills. All these meetings witnessed 100 per cent attendance of the families in the village.

This unity, however, did not find favour with some local contractors and middle-men of the village. They began to instigate some families to take undue advantage from the programme. The local contractors spread canards that the PEC members would get a percentage of the funds. One family was told that once the structure was made on their land, it would be declared government land and the villagers would lose possession of it. Furious, this family brought up the matter in the *tola sabha*, declaring that the funds were being mis-utilized and that nothing would come of the plans. The villagers sorted out the matter in the *tola sabha* and convinced the family, explaining the process of the works and the fund flow mechanism. The use of the funds and the billing-voucher systems were displayed in a transparent manner. The family was reassured and their confidence in the process was restored.

In the early meetings of the *tola sabha*, work was prioritized taking into consideration the ridge-to-valley treatment as seen during the exposure visit. The villagers decided to work on the structures of 30x40, 5%, and land-levelling and bunding first and then construct irrigation structures such as seepage tanks and wells. They also considered seasonal variances during the planning of fruit tree plantation. The construction of land and water measures

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began with great enthusiasm, and the women and men of both the hamlets came together to dig the soil for the 5% models.

The PEC members got fully engaged in laying out the structure for the works for which they had been trained earlier. The villagers felt the need to have an educated person write their

books of accounts such as the cash book and the bank books for their payment transactions. In the meantime, PEC members underwent training for measuring the structures and, accordingly, prepared their recommendations for the payment to labourers.

During the work on the programme, the barriers of caste and class were broken. Usually, the Ghatwals (Other Backward Community) considered themselves superior to the Santhals (Scheduled Tribes), and their women usually would not work with the Santhal women; in this instance, however, they came together. Their deep faith in the *tola sabha*, possibly, helped them overcome the gap of caste and class between them. In the *tola sabha* and the SHG meeting, it was decided that all the capable labourers of the village would work in two or three schemes at a time so that the structures could be completed before the monsoon.

During the month of April–May 2011, the release of funds was delayed by the District Rural Development Authority (DRDA), Dumka, the fund-routing agency. “How will we work on empty stomachs?” was the question on the minds of the villagers and they often discussed this in the *tola sabha* meetings.

They decided to borrow some money from their savings in their SHG. Taking into consideration the situation of those poor workers who would

need the funds the most, they judiciously used the borrowed amount. This inclusive approach, however, benefitted only a few families. Some of the families only had upland plots, on which the planning of horticulture and 30x40 model was done.

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In the *tola sabha* meeting, therefore, the villagers discussed initiating horticulture work in the northern uplands of the village (about 8.33 ha of fallow land belonging to about 20 families). It was decided that work should be initiated on everyone's land because that would enhance their interest in carrying out the operations.

The work for the mango tree plantation started with pit digging, followed by the standard practices of plantation. At the end of August 2011, mango plantations on fallow lands were a physical reality, with less than three per cent mortality of plants. The success was celebrated by the whole village at a common feast, increasing the sense of belongingness amongst the villagers. They continued to work with motivation till March 2012 when it was decided that due to the delay in the release of funds by the DRDA, the routing of funds would be done by Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS) directly to the *tola sabha* accounts.

REVISITING PLANS

This gave the villagers an opportunity to review their planning and implementation, to include all the families. They also realized that the decision to form two *tola sabhas* in two hamlets for ease in operations was not working because it did little but increase the paper work. They decided to merge the two *tola sabhas*, naming it the Rengech Hod *tola sabha*.

During the review of their plans, the villagers realized that the Mandal families could get a good harvest from their marginal landholdings by making just one earthen dam in the north-eastern part of

the village. A problem they faced was that, with the increasing intensity of agriculture, the procuring of chemical fertilizers such as urea was proving to be very costly; in addition was the irregular availability of urea in the market. To address this, vermicompost production was included in the plan. They prepared the Detailed Progress Report (DPR) of the *tola sabha* anew and submitted it to the JSLPS in June 2012. The plan was sanctioned immediately and the implementation began with the same design and was supervised by the Village Level Committee (VLC), formed by merging both the *tola sabhas*.

The *gram sabha* was involved in the process because the convergence plans were submitted to it. The work of land and water was completed by March 2014 and the villagers are now engaged with greater intensity in agriculture, broiler farming and vermi production.

CHANGED SCENARIO

The impact evaluation report of the *tola sabha*, conducted by PRADAN for Pattaithan in 2013, reported: The village with no livelihood options is now attracting people from all over to give them mantras for successful horticulture practices. A region where the only source of irrigation was rain, now witnesses prepared fields of *rabi* and *kharif* crops all around, irrigated with wells and seepage tanks. The land and water treatment allows acres of uncultivated land to produce tonnes of rice, wheat and vegetables such as potato, tomato and chilli. The mango plantation, prepared over an area of 8.33 ha, was possible because

of the three wells which irrigated the area.

Harichand Rai from Ghatwal *tola* says, "My land was totally barren and cultivation was not possible due to the undulating terrain. After levelling and bunding, I can now use 1.8 acres of my land to cultivate rice and vegetables. Before this, I had to do labour work, migrate to Bengal, cut wood from the forest and sell it. I have now cleared my debt of Rs 10,000 to the *mahajan* (moneylender) and will never borrow money from him. I can earn as much as Rs 8,000 to 15,000 from the vegetables and be occupied full time. I spend most of my time in the field. Earlier, it was very difficult to eat even a single meal per day and now we can afford to buy clothes and go for better health services."

Another villager, Mandal Murmu, shares with tears in his eyes, "I had to mortgage some asset every year for food and my wife died because of a lack of medical attention. I was buried deep in debt to the lenders. Even though I had enough land, the lack of irrigation facilities and the undulating terrain made it impossible to cultivate it. But now I have enough cultivable land because it has been levelled and the irrigation sources provided from the 5% and the seepage tanks in my field. There is now enough water to irrigate crops in *rabi* and *kharif* seasons. I have now cleared all my debts and have come out of the trap of the *mahajan*. My daughter is married and I have distributed the land among my children."

Another *didi*, Sangita Devi said, "My field was barren and we had very little options for livelihood. We used to grow vegetables but it was not profitable due to the lack of irrigation. The crop was often damaged by pests. I had

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to get my daughter married but the burden of debt from the *mahajan* made it impossible to even think about it. After becoming a part of the SHG, attending various agri-horti training programmes, and with the construction of two seepage tanks and a well on my field, I have now cleared all my debts

and got my daughter married. My boys work in the field and cultivate enough vegetables to have a profit of around Rs 10,000 per season. I have grown rice with the SRI technique and have greatly benefitted from our efforts in the *tola sabha*. I do not have to be at the mercy of the *mahajan* because I can now borrow money from the SHG to buy manure and seeds and, of course, in any emergency."

These are only a few of the many stories emerging from the changing face of the village in the last one year. The stretches of green fields with vegetables, rice and wheat, cultivated with modern techniques, the seepage tanks, the mango plantations, the wells and dams have become evidence of success. The cohesiveness among the *didis* from both the hamlets has increased and they have now formed a new SHG, which includes the women of all three communities. Their response, when asked about this is, "If we can work together, enjoy together, why not form an SHG together?"

The previously active contractors acknowledge that women are better implementers of the development of resources of the village. The *didis*, who earlier quarrelled on small issues, are now going through proper processes of resolving issues. They are also proud that they have had an expenditure of nearly Rs 42 lakh but not a single rupee has been unaccounted for.

The construction of the 5% model and the seepage tanks, coupled with the adoption of the SRI technique, has almost doubled production. Families that had only six to nine months of food sufficiency now have food sufficiency round the year.

This has had a major impact on families that had to migrate earlier to West Bengal, to supplement the deficit of their food. Their stability has increased and now they are trying to enhance their income locally. Poultry-rearing has also provided productive, year-round work for these families. This has positively affected the morale of the villagers.

People are now becoming more confident in their work and have many plans for use of their constructed assets such as seepage tanks and horticulture. When some SHG members were asked about their vision for the future, they replied that they would send their children for higher education to towns. Some of *didis* have invested in life insurance and they plan to insure other members of the family as well. Around 40 to 45 families have repaid their debts to moneylenders and have got their mortgaged land back. Their new aspirations are a life with good drinking water facility, electricity, mobile phones, colour TVs, motor bikes and contesting the *panchayat* elections.

The SHG has not yet implemented any scheme under MGNREGA; it has, however, helped the *tola sabha* to make and submit some of their schemes for wells and a large-sized pond to be constructed under MGNREGA. They have submitted their plans to the block office, to access MGNREGA funds.

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MY TAKEAWAYS

Many land and water works are in progress, and today I feel proud to say that my role and engagement in the processes have reduced; I am hopeful that soon the day will come when I will no more be needed to

influence their planning, proposal making and implementation. What I have personally got out of the whole journey are some invaluable experiences that will help me throughout my life in the development sector.

I have realized that the collectives have tremendous strength, to carry out the operations of any project for their members. The determination shown by the SHG members in the functioning of the *tola sabha*, in planning and in the implementation of the schemes is commendable. SHGs, initially, played a crucial role in launching the *tola sabha* as a platform for the villagers, and later the *tola sabha* made itself relevant in the village.

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The patch-wise treatment of plots in contiguity has changed the ecology of the area. After the rainy season, many new water springs are arising at different places in the lower lands. The water level in the wells has risen significantly and the fields that were drying as early as in the month of October now retain moisture even after January. So, my faith in the success of INRM techniques has been reinforced.

However, the question of investment per family or per hectare is still a dilemma to my mind. An expenditure of around Rs 60,000 per family was required to bring about this level of change in the village whereas the project guidelines of the SGSY restrict the amount to only Rs 21,000 per family. Fortunately, this *tola sabha* was selected for intensive implementation of the project and, therefore, received so much investment, but there are many other villages like Pattaithan that have no government support. Projects such as the Special SGSY can only be used to create examples for other villages but for actual and uniform investment, we need to focus on the programmes under MGNREGA and generate awareness amongst the community to access these.

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What inspires me the most is how the villagers rose above personal differences and worked together to develop better prospects for themselves. Every time they were in trouble or were stuck, they sat and talked with each other, approached other stakeholders, built upon their learnings and came up with better alternatives. Every year, the plan was revised and updated, with the changed requirements of the field, and it became better every time. The rotation of the signatories and the PEC members at regular intervals helped disseminate knowledge among more villagers. Now, they support other villages to develop their livelihood plans. They feel proud when they talk about their struggles and how they overcame them.