

# People's Participation in Government Programmes

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*Government projects for the welfare of the poor do not reach the targeted beneficiaries because of a failure of the system, and the lack of transparency and integrity in the authorities. The poor are, yet again, the victims of these flawed schemes.*

This article is a recollection of certain experiences I had in Keonjhar district of Orissa. I discovered that where the government is supposed to reach out to its people, the people are themselves making painful sacrifices to keep the government's programmes alive. These sacrifices are not community contribution, *shramadan* or payment for services. The burden borne by the people is such that it almost sums up to a subsidy extended by the people to the government.

The Government of Orissa initiated a project called Mission Shakti in March 2001. The project was launched by none other than the honourable Chief Minister of Orissa, Sri. Naveen Patnaik. It is based on the belief that women's micro and small-scale enterprises can provide an opportunity to accelerate general levels of economic activity and at the same time promote a more equitable distribution of development benefits. Mission shakti is now one of the most prioritized projects being run in the state. Through this project, the government is providing support to women SHGs in order to transform them into self-sustaining institutions. All such efforts are being consolidated at the block and district levels, and federations/clusters are formed for the same purpose. The Mission aspires to achieve the same through the following measures:

- ♦ Strengthening the socio-economic base of SHGs through creation of assets and benefits, both social and economic
- ♦ Increasing awareness for cooperation and aiming for a larger attitudinal change through appropriate sensitization
- ♦ Setting up appropriate monitoring systems for measuring progress

## **MAA BHAGABATI MAHILA SAMITI**

Maa Bhagabati Mahila Samiti is an interesting example from this point of view. This is an SHG in Turumunga village of Keonjhar district. It is a 20-member group. The group has been more successful than the others in the area, having a comparatively larger corpus and lending capacity. Yet, it has a limited understanding of how government programmes function.

The group was reasonably enthusiastic when it got to hear from the *gram sevika* (village development worker) about the government scheme of running a mid-day meal programme. Its members wanted to take part in this programme because they were told by the *gram sevika* that it would provide them a way to get *rojgar* (employment) on profitable terms. They would also, in a way, be able to serve their children. It is important to mention that the state government, by this time, had by and large become more accepting of the participation of the SHGs in the mid-day meal programme on account of the fact that cooking took away valuable teaching time from the teachers.

The members decided to accept this proposal. When I reached Keonjhar and started interacting in the area, the group members of Maa Bhagabati SHG shared their experiences and how they had divided the work among themselves. Every week, two members would go to the school and manage the cooking business. They would take some green vegetables from their homesteads so that they could save money as well as ensure that the children get a balanced diet. There was hope in the eyes of these members that their efforts would serve the children of the village well.

Although the effort appeared impressive in the beginning, a few days later, two members of the group came to meet me for a second opinion. They asked me whether it had been a right decision, after all, to undertake the programme. I was unable to give them a categorical answer. The effort appeared laudable but the women seemed

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apprehensive. Some days later, I attended their SHG meeting. What I heard there that day was totally different from what the members had shared initially.

When the scheme was first introduced in the village, the *gram sevika* had vouched that it was an income-generating opportunity. But no one had made an assessment of the person days of labour that the venture would entail. Nor was it ascertained what materials the government would provide and what the SHG would (if anything). The sharing of roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders was unclear. Without such bare minimum planning or foresight, the eager women had lost more than they had gained. The group had invested around Rs 30,000 in the business expecting that they would get it back sooner or later as payment for their services. After a great deal of haggling with the school teachers and *gram sevika*, they finally received Rs 28,000 of the total amount back. The group had taken a bank loan for its other expenses because it had invested its funds in the 'business' of mid-day meals.

On questioning as to what prevented the departments from paying for the expenses incurred, the group members said that this was primarily because of the poor relationship they shared with the school teachers. For a specific period, both groups (the members of the SHG and the teachers) were in a tussle. The group was expecting money for procuring fuel wood, which was not easily available in the nearby location. The teachers turned down the requests of the SHGs saying that there were no provisions for fuel wood within the scheme. This naturally made the

SHGs wonder as to how the teachers had procured the fuel wood so far (that is, before the SHG took up the activity). When the teachers failed to furnish a suitable reply, the SHG members concluded that they had been either misappropriating funds for fuel wood, or not preparing timely meals.

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No sooner did the SHG members voice their concerns, the teachers took it upon themselves to defame the SHG. They began to accuse the SHG of not being able to cook proper meals for the children. They even brainwashed a number of parents. The parents were also convinced by the reports of the teachers because the SHG was struggling to generate the required resources on its part. Choked on account of both delay and improper payments, the SHG fell into a debt trap. To make things worse, the SHG was not even sure if it would receive anything for its efforts. The eventual result was that the effort was an utter failure. The SHG was demoralized, people lost faith in institutions such as SHGs, and the mid-day meal scheme has returned to the callous hands of school teachers.

### **VILLAGE POND AT TURUMUNGA**

The example of the excavation of a village pond in Turumunga village, Keonjhar district, is equally interesting. There were five SHGs in one hamlet of Turumunga. There was a huge hue and cry for getting work orders under the food-for-work scheme. There was cut-throat competition among the local people and the SHGs to get work orders. In this instance, the government was generous and willing to provide work orders to women-managed SHGs. Some of the SHGs comprising the village poor pointed out that

the government's generosity had prompted the rural elite to organize (or perhaps disguise!) themselves as namesake SHGs and corner work orders. The elite had even attempted to buy out work orders from the local SHGs and promised them a pay-back cut in return. In other nearby villages, an informal selection process had

been set up to select the SHGs that would assist in the implementation of programmes. The villagers claimed that most of the selection processes were rigged and the pseudo SHGs were accorded supervisory status for implementation.

Despite all such competition, the women members of the five SHGs in Turumunga succeeded in getting the work order for pond excavation in the village. They felt that the project would increase water storage, create small-scale opportunities by way of fisheries and, most importantly, save them from migration by providing wage relief. The group was assisted by a ward member in securing the order. The SHGs were able to secure this work under the programme because they were united in their demand for work, and the block-level officers were equally keen to sanction it.

The group diligently allocated responsibilities amongst themselves for managing the bank account, calling for meetings and mobilizing labour for work. On the technical front, the junior engineer from the block headquarters guided the members in getting the actual work done. The junior engineer's recommendation was required for releasing money to the members. The women members also played safe and tried to take him along with them so that

they would not face difficulty in getting the money.

The initial instalments were released without a delay. However, when the members went to the block office for the final payment, problems began to surface. The final payment was supposed to be released with the work completion report from the junior engineer. The sub engineer then informed them that the work had not been completed properly so they would be paid less than what they were demanding. The women had to persuade the engineer for many weeks. The women members went to the block office on several occasions. This entailed heavy expenditure. When the group sat down to ascertain its expenses on travel and lodging, it was astounding. The loss of person days in persuading the sub engineer was substantial. The group had expended no less than Rs 7,000.

Though the SHGs had participated in the programme proactively hoping to gain from it, and the government had readily sanctioned the work, it eventually resulted in much dismay. The group also spoke of the bribes they had to pay to ensure that they receive payments in time. Till date, the group is yet to receive Rs 70,000 for their work and yet to make payments of Rs 44,000 for cement, stone and their own labour. On account of this, the group is not being able to wash its hands of the programme just like the Maa Bhagabati group. The villagers share that whereas they are in deep trouble, the government has achieved its own targets. The targets set by the administration have been achieved at the expense of the people.

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In both cases, there was a degree of confusion even when people's institutions had willingly tried to participate in government programmes. Besides altruism, a safe exercise of caution where collaborations are concerned is necessary for

forging sustainable village institutions. In the case of Maa Bhagabati Mahila Samiti, there was utter confusion regarding the sharing of roles and responsibilities. There were no Terms of Reference in the work the SHG undertook. In addition, the school teachers were disinclined to be transparent in their dealings. In Turumunga, there were all kinds of procedural delays and lapses. Here too, the villagers lacked clarity about the rate at which they would be paid. Being unaware of how measurements were being carried out by the engineers, they initially chose to believe that the check measurements made by the engineers were correct. Despite having completed the work and having paid bribes, they are yet to receive Rs 70,000 from the department.

Undoubtedly, government schemes and programmes provide a great means to centre-stage village-level institutions. These also provide local institutions a great opportunity to contribute to village development. But when collaborative efforts between the government and people's institutions fail, it damages the faith people espouse in both—village-level institutions and government programmes. It takes a long time for people to put the past behind them and engage meaningfully with the state machinery once again.

NGOs such as Pradan have a significant role to play in this regard. Efforts to institute

mechanisms that will ensure transparency and accountability right from the beginning are necessary. Unfortunately, most village communities feel too subservient to the government, to press for the same. Facilitation by NGOs must also ensure clarity on how roles and responsibilities, and

benefits will be shared. By capacitating the SHGs to carry out a feasibility analysis of opportunities presented before them, one gives the members information about what an opportunity has to offer, the risks it will entail and the actual profits they will reap.