

SOUBHAGYA R RATHA

CULTIVATING WATERMELONS, IGNITING CHANGE

...

Moving away from the predictable traditional crop, eight Jaheraya SHG women's decision to cultivate watermelons sprung from an attempt to prove their worth as independent farmers, who could take vital decisions regarding farming and marketing produce; it was a subtle defiance of patriarchy, of the annihilation of men farmer's beliefs about a cash crop and of a small example of change that is unstoppable now.

Introduction

DURDURA IS LIKE ANY quintessential Santhal village—on the fringes of a forest, with a small stream flowing through it. A big board saying 'Welcome to the Similipal Tiger Reserve' greets visitors as they enter the village from National Highway 49. As the wheels of my bike move towards the village of Durdura, big hills begin to appear on the slowly and gradually changing landscape. A cool breeze touches my face

as I travel over hectares of land, eyes soaking in the serenity of the view.

Every spring, the smell of mahua flowers reminds the tribals of the impending agriculture season. All the men and women get busy, preparing their agricultural lands to grow paddy. Paddy cultivation is practised across Durdura village during the rainy season. The village has 319 families belonging largely to the Santhal tribe, who reside across six hamlets.

Of the nine Self Help Groups (SHGs) operating in the village, one of them is the Jaheraya SHG which has 10 members. This SHG has taken an exemplary

There are very few moments when a PRADANite is left speechless in front of the community. This was one of them. It was my first experience, and I was just amazed by the conviction of the eight Santhal women, who wanted to experiment with watermelon cultivation

step in agriculture, bringing about a change in their lives that is engraved in the history of Durdura village. The change is a blow to the patriarchal thinking of society that constantly presents men as great farmers and the women as mere labourers.

Brief History

—

November 2016. I invited three committee members from each of the SHGs of Durdura *gram panchayat* (GP) to discuss their upcoming half-year plans around their livelihood and the support they required. Normally, our working methodology with the community is through detailed discussions at the village level or the panchayat level, which generate the future course of action. About 80 women from 30 SHGs participated in the meeting held in Jashipur, one of PRADAN's location offices in Mayurbhanj district.

The main discussion point was the following summer's crops. The crops they were planning to grow, the input linkage, the cost economics calculation, the labour requirement, etc., were some of the points on the agenda. Creepers such as bitter gourd and the cash crop watermelon

were the two focal points of the meeting in the planning for the *rabi* segment. Some of the SHGs preferred to have creepers whereas some shared that they would like to grow vegetables using the kitchen garden model.

The members of Jaheraya SHG remained silent that day and did not discuss their plan of action for the summer crop. A few days later, I got a call from Sudam Charan Marandi, Sakra Marandi's (Jaheraya SHG member) husband, inviting me to hold a meeting at Durdura village. He said, "The Jaheraya SHG members want to cultivate watermelon this year, and they want your support."

Watermelon: Initiation and Process

—

The first question I asked them during the village-level meeting was, "Why do you want to cultivate watermelon? You have never grown this crop before?"

I vividly remember the powerful lines of Sakra Marandi and Sumitra Tudu that day. Sakra Marandi replied, "You only said in that meeting the other day that watermelon is a less labour-intensive crop and gives a good market return. How come you are now asking us why we want to

cultivate watermelon? We have already decided that we want to grow watermelon and we have taken a loan of Rs 15,000 from the bank in the name of our SHG. Now, you have to tell us what we should do next."

There are very few moments when a PRADANite is left speechless in front of the community. This was one of them. It was my first experience, and I was just amazed by the conviction of the eight Santhal women, who wanted to experiment with watermelon cultivation.

It was November-end and the women of Jaheraya SHG decided to start digging a pit with the help of their husbands. By that time, they had also found out about the dimensions of the pit and done the required calculations for it. The pit-digging process started and 1000 pits were ready in five days of hard work.

The villagers were surprised! There was a sense of disbelief that someone would take a risk of growing such an alien crop. And that too on a barren piece of land that had not been cultivated on for the last three years. Apart from paddy cultivation in the rainy season, the villagers had never seen any other crop grown on such a scale and, that

Our villagers told us many things about watermelon. They said that the soil was not right and that it would not be possible to grow watermelon here. They said sarcastically, 'Now, the women will become farmers like us!' We did not pay any heed to their statements.

too, in the winter season. The most shocking part for the men farmers was that the women were preparing the field to grow this watermelon crop, which had never been grown by any farmer in the history of the entire Durdura *panchayat*. This was the first time that an SHG was growing a cash crop in an area where people do not even allow the women to step out of their homes. This move of the SHG members was bound to raise many eyebrows.

Social aspects

Sakra Marandi says, "Our villagers told us many things about watermelon. They said that the soil was not right and that it would not be possible to grow watermelon here. They said sarcastically, 'Now, the women will become farmers like us!' We did not pay any heed to their statements. We went on with our plan and started cultivating watermelon."

Singa Marandi added, "We used to get frustrated by these statements. We started becoming afraid. We began to doubt ourselves. We wondered if we could do it."

Through many such crests and troughs, the SHG persisted with its plans to cultivate watermelon. Each woman was assigned to look after 125 pits. Altogether there were 1000 pits across one acre of land and each 125-foot pit had a different owner. The nurturing and caring of the respective pits was carried out by the respective owners and the inputs required would be purchased centrally by the SHG.

I clearly remember it was already the end of January when they started venturing into the 'doubtful' job of watermelon cultivation. According to a market study, January-end was too late to start this cultivation and could have hazardous results in terms of pricing of the produce at the time of harvest. My heart beat faster whenever I thought of the consequences if the activity were to fail. The entire loss would have to be borne by the farmers.

Keeping this high risk in mind and with renewed energy, I continued to work with the women. I had taken up the challenge and did not want to keep the possibility of loss in my mind; I was expecting the growing of this crop to impact farmers of other villages too. They would want to upscale to this cash crop as well. But at that point of

time, this was a distant prospect because the activity was already in the risk zone due to a delayed beginning.

We followed the processes as per the Package of Practices (PoP) although there was lack of clarity because different experts were giving different opinions. We explored several permutations and combinations for maximum efficacy, starting from maintaining a five-foot distance between pits to keeping a one-and-a-half foot depth of pit. We were trying to follow all advice.

Here, the important thing to share is that the nearly one acre of land which was being converted into a watermelon patch was not land that belonged to these women. The SHG members had requested the landowner of another village to lend it to them for one season to grow watermelon. This land was barren upland and had not been used for three years for any cultivation. Probably, that was why the owner had agreed to give it to them.

The SHG members developed a system to look after the patch. Each woman of the SHG would give one day in order to watch

For the first time, men were not in charge of the cultivation with women playing a supporting role; instead women were the drivers of this enterprise, with their men supporting them

the plants and protect them from animals. If anyone fell sick or was otherwise not able to visit the patch, she would assign another person to take her place.

PRADAN supported them by providing a pump-set and pipe to irrigate the patch, from the nearby stream. The women gave the responsibility to irrigate the patch at regular intervals to their husbands. Introducing an expert, Jairaam Mahanta from Syngenta (a seed company), was another calculated measure we took. The expert's job was to visit the patch every Sunday, identify the deficiencies and suggest measures so that the fruit gains a marketable size.

For the first time, men were not in charge of the cultivation with women playing a supporting role; instead women were the drivers of this enterprise, with their men supporting them. This was the satisfaction I experienced when I sat with the members of the Jaheraya SHG and their husbands and mapped the progress of the watermelon cultivation.

BDO's Visit

Time flew. The plants grew and the watermelon fruit became

visible in every pit. The people of the village and the nearby villages started coming to see the patch. It was a treat to see the watermelons spread across the one-acre patch from afar.

Everyone who saw the patch said, "I will also cultivate watermelon next year." In March, the Jashipur Block BDO, Mr Dharmendra Mallik, visited the patch when he came to know about the efforts and the diligence of the Jaheraya SHG. He was so happy to see the patch that he committed to fence the entire acre of land. The SHG women told him that it was not their land and that they had taken it on lease. The BDO then appreciated the intervention even more and recognized the hard work that the women had put in and the support that they had received from PRADAN. He congratulated them on creating a breakthrough in cash crop cultivation in that GP.

Struggles and Hurdles

Some conditions were a given and could not be altered. The land was not very nutrient-rich because it had never been ploughed. The patch was far from the village and took the women around 10–12 minutes to reach. The water

depleting in the nearby stream for around 15 days became a major cause for concern. The women did not have the knowledge about the technical dimensions such as boron deficiency, so immediate measures could not be taken. The marriage season and some death rituals kept women farmers from attending to the patch because they had to be present at the ceremonies. The melon patch got neglected for some time during the fruiting period; heavy boron deficiency resulted in the breaking of some of the fruit. This was the lowest phase of the entire initiative. Things were not okay, technically.

I suggested to the SHG members that we should meet in the evenings, if it was difficult to find time during the day. They readily agreed and we held meetings regarding the issues they were facing. This motivated them to continue with renewed energy. We discussed what sort of technical knowledge was needed and arranged for an expert to guide the women. These meetings would mostly end late at night. I will never forget those nights. One such night could have been my last night on earth but probably I had to work to complete, so I survived the road accident that took place.

With expert advice, technical problems were controlled and, fortunately, it rained heavily resulting in the stream getting full again. The smiles returned to the faces of the women farmers

Bouncing Back

“When you give your heart and soul to a work, it automatically manifests in the result.”

“Wish I could be the Midas touch,
Wish I could be the rain,
Wish I could fill all the colors...
In their hopes again and again.
Wish they could frolic
Wish they could fly high...
Wish their vicious cycle would die
And
They emerge as butterflies from
their chrysalis

Irrespective of every odd setback explained earlier, the second phase of the activity began full of divine energy. With expert advice, technical problems were controlled and, fortunately, it rained heavily resulting in the stream getting full again. The smiles returned to the faces of the women farmers. To aid the growth of the plants, fertilizers were applied. Things were back on track. The patch filled with new, healthy watermelons. Soon it was time to sell the fruit.

The SHG’s focus shifted to finding a market for selling watermelons despite there being 25 per cent fruit damage. Here, both PRADAN and the Jaheraya SHG women faced a big challenge.

Market...The real game-changer

By the time their crop was ready to be sold, other market players and businessmen had captured the market with the cheapest prices. The coastal belts of Odisha produce huge quantities of watermelon and the fruit reaches the market by February and March and fetches the maximum price. The price automatically falls as more vendors bring fruits. The fruit from Jaheraya reached the market in April, by which time the price was at its lowest—Rs 4 per kg. The Jaheraya SHG’s production was not so much that it could supply big vegetable vendors. And Rs 4 per kg was very minimal. The women were disappointed because they had expected much higher returns. They were expecting a minimum of Rs 6 per kg.

Here, the knowledge of the market and the pricing of bulk-selling was a great learning, for me as well as for the SHG. One member of the SHG shared, “If we sell in bulk, we get around 50-60 per cent of the market price, next time we will keep this in mind before selling our produce.” After selling one pick-up of watermelon (which came to around 3 tonnes) at Rs 4 per kg, they decided to sell

their produce in the open market on a per kilogramme system. They started selling watermelons directly to consumers in the local haats and at road-side gatherings. It took them some time to sell all their produce. They did not accept the bulk-sale system and I wondered why not.” Probably, because they were first-time growers, and had already experienced the market price, but did not have any idea about the bulk-selling price of watermelon. They wanted to sell it by the per piece system. Even though their produce was ripening, they did not want to sell it at a lower price. They also preferred to distribute the left-over fruit among their relatives, which was the social dimension of the activity. I saw sacks of watermelon being taken to relatives.

What the Analysis Says

After selling the produce, the SHG members met during the day to analyze their investment versus returns (Table 1 and 2). They mentioned that they were happy to earn goodwill by distributing watermelons to their relatives and neighbours. Damayati Marandi, Manaka Majhi, Sumitra Tudu and Salma Majhi distributed watermelons to their relatives

This was the first time the women had got involved in selling the produce; they found that grading of the fruit is very important in a competitive market. Good size and fair price are the two mantras of this kind of cash crop

and neighbours rather than selling all their produce.

However, they had not kept a record of the produce sold. Six of them did not know how to read and write and their family members did not help them maintain records. The amount of profit was very tentative, and was based on the per-fruit selling price and the number of sacks they had sold. After calculating the profits earned by each woman, they realized that those who had given more time to their crop and had taken proper care of their respective pits had earned the maximum income. Those who did not or could not give enough time and energy to care for their plants did not make much profit.

While analyzing the data with the SHG members, a few learnings emerged. It was realized that the best time to initiate the activity is November-end and it should be completed by January or February because the chance of getting a fair price decreases when more produce comes into the market. This was the first time the women had got involved in selling the produce; they found that grading of the fruit is very important in a competitive market. Good size and fair price are the two mantras of this kind

of cash crop. It needs to look good and round, to catch the vendor's eye. They also figured out that the size of the fruit should not exceed 5 kg. If it is between 3 and 5 kg, the vendors are interested in purchasing it because Rs 15 to 20

per fruit is the ideal price in the watermelon market.

The members said that earlier they had thought that they could sell the watermelons at the available market rates, that is, the rates at which they buy; in bulk

Table 1: Expenditure Incurred by the Women (Excluding Labour Costs)

Ingredients	Cost (Rs)
Watermelon seed (4 packets) @Rs 800	3200
Fertilizers (Urea, DAP, Potash)	3040
Boron (2 packets) @Rs 350	700
Isabion (natural biological activator, activates plant potency, vegetable growth and induces flowering)	1200
Insecticide	1000
Fungicide	390
Total cost	9530

*SHG members prepared organic manure (Pranamrit, Agneyastra, Mahulastra) and applied as per the need.

Table 2: Member-wise Cost Economics

Name of the SHG Member	Total Investment	Total Selling Amount	Total Profit
Sumitra Tudu	1191.25	1700	508.75
Sakra Marandi	1191.25	12000	10808.75
Damayati Marandi	1191.25	2000	808.75
Malati Marandi	1191.25	8500	7308.75
Manaka Majhi	1191.25	3500	2308.75
Jhanmani Hembrum	1191.25	4000	2808.75
Salma Majhi	1191.25	3000	1808.75
Singa Marandi	1191.25	9000	7808.25
TOTAL	Rs. 9530/-	Rs. 43700/-	Rs. 34170/-

Irrespective of the negative statements of the villagers, the Jaheraya SHG forged ahead to cultivate such a rare cash crop and successfully established that women have the potential to be farmers if they are given the chance to prove themselves

selling, however, the prices are much less. For them, it was 60 per cent of the market price. An important factor was that they needed to maintain a log book, to record their investment and the revenue generated, for better analysis.

The After-effects

Irrespective of the negative statements of the villagers, the Jaheraya SHG forged ahead to cultivate such a rare cash crop and successfully established that women have the potential to be farmers if they are given the chance to prove themselves. These eight women of Jaheraya SHG are planning to cultivate watermelon in a bigger area this year, and this time they are very confident of getting a good price. They want to ensure that they apply everything that they have learned from this intervention. Regarding the marketing of the bulk production, they have established contact with three vendors and November will be the month of initiation of the activity—a learning from

the previous year. About 20 to 30 women farmers in the *panchayat* are now planning to grow watermelons this year, which in itself is a small ignition of change, inspired by the challenge that the Jaheraya SHG took on for itself.

Conclusion

There is always a story behind every successful venture. What makes a story interesting and worth narrating are the pushes and pulls experienced by the people, the challenges posed to them by circumstances and society, and their dedicated and diligent efforts at overcoming these hurdles and emerging victorious.

This case study does not highlight a great movement of cultivation of watermelon on a large scale, nor does it tell the story of any great economic benefits reaped by the women, who cultivated the fruit. It is a tale of the several small success stories of the women of Jaheraya SHG. There are stories of subtle defiance of patriarchy, of the annihilation

of men farmers' belief system about a cash crop and of a small example of change that is unstoppable now.

I believe this is just the beginning of change, in which the so-called illiterate tribal women clearly took a stance and proved they could carry it out. Watermelon cultivation was just a means to depict and convey the fact that

“Change begins from self...”

Few moons ago...

They ignited the change!

Today, there is a vibration.

In the entire habitation of that geographic periphery.

From 8 Santhal women,

To about 50 SHG women,
Will defy patriarchy and take on
the challenge

Of cultivating watermelon, this
year.

Few more moons to come...,

This will certainly happen

Change is the only constant,
Now that the mind is without
fear.

Soubhagya R Ratha is based in Jashipur, Odisha