

Agriculture Interventions with Tribals in Bastar Priorities in the wake of the Pandemic



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The surge in COVID-19 cases in India has become the chief reason to worry about. Not just for the imminent risks of losing lives, but equally or perhaps more for losing livelihoods at a massive scale. Some experts are arguing that the likely toll claimed by the latter would surpass the former especially under the probability that the virus could linger on for quite some time in the foreseeable future. The crisis induced by the pandemic has hit hardest on the poor communities, because for many of them, remittances made up a good share of their annual earnings. It is highly unlikely that the unfortunate migrants would prefer to go back to their faraway work destinations again after bearing the unprecedented

brunt of loss of jobs, staying in shelter homes under subhuman conditions, walking long distances to reach homes and so on.

No surprise, the story is no different in Bastar in Chhattisgarh. Early trends indicate that each administrative block (out of 32) would have 1500-2000 migrant workers returning mostly from neighbouring Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra which adds up to at least half a lakh for the entire region. Fuelled by the rising aspirations especially among youths and less local job opportunities, each passing year has seen a gradual rise in the number of villagers migrating to find work seasonally between December and June. Since we can anticipate a post-



COVID new normal with less number of people preferring to migrate long distances for work, the imperative, now, is to provide livelihoods locally. And by far, farm-based livelihoods make the most potential option available in the rural spaces of Bastar. The challenge, however, is to invent or develop farm-based interventions that can effectively contribute in sustainably providing decent and dignified livelihood opportunities for these downtrodden tribal communities.

Rural Bastar and The Current State of Agriculture:

Rural Bastar is a land of tribes like Maria Gonds, Murias, Halbas, Dhurwas etc who make up 25%

of Chhattisgarh’s total tribal population . Mostly living on subsistence, the survival challenges confronting these tribes today are not the same as before. Traditionally and culturally these tribals were not agrarian communities and they still identify themselves more with forests.

Bastar is no exception with more than 50% of its geographies covered by forests, making its rural population highly dependent on forests for survival. However, in today’s macro context of the dominance of the market economy, having all their needs supported by only forest-based activities is far from reality.

In all likelihood, not just one or two amongst forests, farms and markets, but all of these (in varying degrees) do have/would have contributions in a tribal family’s livelihoods and life for them to be able to fulfil the needs and the rising aspirations of its members, especially youths. Amongst the three, the share of agriculture in household income is, currently, the highest. However, the current level of returns from agriculture is precariously low. A survey conducted by PRADAN , a nonprofit working in Bastar district for a decade now, revealed that the annual household income of the tribal households in one of Bastar district’s blocks - Darbha is INR 52,000 (average for 1240 Households) where the share of agriculture was as low as INR 17,700 (34%).

Another data from the state government’s official portal reveals that the average productivity of paddy, the most important cereal crop, in all districts of Bastar taken together, is as low as 1.13 MT/Ha . This rather pitiful state of tribal agriculture is by no means attractive for the farmers, especially youths to have them tied to this occupation. This picture needs to be changed.

Experience from Block Darbha, Bastar: Initial Interventions for Increased Production and Return:

The example of the work of a PRADAN team, in the above context, in one of the tribal dominated blocks - Darbha in district - Bastar, is worth considering. Since last 3 years, the team has initiated an intensive agriculture programme with women SHG members from the tribal communities as the primary clientele. The team was successful in popularizing the livelihood not

only among the SHG women, but many of the youths in that area too started taking serious interest in agriculture.

The team successfully demonstrated the potential of growing vegetables during the Kharif season in many of its operational villages in the first year of the intensification programme. It also demonstrated changed practices in other crops such as paddy and millets. The following years saw a gradual rise in the number of new farmers adopting the new practices and crops, so also the number of farmers securing better profits out of farming.

In the initial phase of the team's intervention, the farmers barely had any market-orientation. As is the case with subsistence farming, the investments in agriculture were minimal, of the order of INR 5-7,000, during the entire farming season including activities such as procuring inputs, hiring labour from outside family, hiring machineries (tractors) and so on. The team carefully designed the interventions that are market-facing, suitable to the agro-climatic conditions and causes minimum disruption of the traditional practices as well.

The plan was underpinned by a vision to address the area's extremely pertinent issues of cash, food and nutrition insufficiency at the household level and getting the youths drawn to agriculture. It underlined high value vegetable farming in homesteads as a core intervention for securing the household cash needs. It further maintained that all other crops such as cereal crops, pulses, oilseeds etc would be promoted with no or little material inputs purchased from the market.

For such crops, use of local seeds, manures etc would be encouraged and few of the conventional farming practices like broadcasting, low use of farm yard manures, quality of manures, pest management measures etc would be changed to the extent possible. Given the demand for investment, rigour and intensity in the case of high value vegetable farming, its area of cultivation was by design, limited between 10-20 decimal of homestead lands. Homestead lands became an important piece of farmland that needs attention and further husbandry. As a result, installing irrigation facilities, and layering orchard

plantations (like Mango, Cashew) along with vegetable cultivation were listed in the menu of interventions as well.

The remaining crops like millet, maize, oilseeds, pulses etc were grown in the rest of the homestead and uplands and paddy was grown in the levelled and bunded medium and low lands. All of these were designed after careful consideration of the existing volume of the family's labour-work and by observing the past trends.

Achieving this however, was quite a challenge. For a typical tribal farmer, especially a woman farmer, learning the necessary skill-set to bring changes in her farming practices, appreciating and finally adopting those was no easy task confronting the intervener. The team employed multi-pronged strategies like preparing video documentation of success stories, disseminating



these videos using pico projectors in the field areas, organizing mass exposures to demonstration sites, arranging credit from banks and NRLM grants as working capitals, promoting agri-entrepreneurs to facilitate backward and forward linkages with the market, strengthening the pool of community service providers and resource persons for extension support to the farmers and so forth.

By the end of three years from initiation, the team outreached close to 5000 women farmers with the above interventions, which includes 2000 farmers under high value vegetable crops across 40 villages in Darbha block. Vegetables grown by tribal farmers unprecedentedly flooded the village weekly Haats and were supplied to neighbouring and distant Sabji Mandis, something the tribal communities never dreamt of. The farmers ramped up their investments and

secured additional cash income in the range of INR 10-30,000 within a span of 3 months and more importantly have had their motivation high. The results extend beyond the direct benefits to the farmers. Many of the village youths who acted as trainers under PRADAN, turned agri-entrepreneurs and marketed the produce in the local and distant Sabji Mandis.

Kharif Agriculture Interventions - Just a Launchpad:

This is an important learning from the above experience. Bastar's tribal farmers need to become 'farmers with some market orientation'. This requires promotion of a farming system that ensures marketable crop yields at levels much higher than the current ones (desirably with no/low chemical inputs) by changing some of the older practices and seed quality and at the



same time, maintaining cropping diversity and not losing those local varieties that yield more or contain nutritional values.

When a family is deprived of assured irrigation facilities, agricultural interventions can be started in the Kharif season as well. In the tribal contexts, generally, Kharif season is a potential entry point for promoting improved Agri interventions and is also a launchpad for further interventions like the creation of irrigation infrastructures and convincing and readying the farmers for winter and summer farming. Besides having some of the conventional practices improved/changed with some better land husbandry, one or two market-oriented high value hybrid or high yielding vegetable crops in homestead lands is critical for boosting their annual income from farming.

One or two experiences of significantly high production and return in Kharif helps the farmer gain confidence in farming as a potentially viable economic activity. She, with the help of her peer group of other farmers, then starts exploring ways to further improve her farming practices and making it more lucrative. She has now embarked on the positive spiral of growth from a regular tribal farmer somehow growing just enough to feed her family, to an entrepreneur farmer with a forward-looking attitude. This is the stage when the farmers are ready to go for the second and the third crops and start aspiring for irrigation facilities, fenced homesteads etc to support these.

Interventions that Followed: (1) Securing Irrigation Facilities, (2) Conservation:

Interventions during the Kharif season, as mentioned above, takes at least a couple of successful cycles to have the tribal farmers gain enough confidence and adopt these. The positive experiences in the PRADAN case motivated the farmers to aspire for double cropping and they started demanding irrigation facilities. The team then worked in coordination with the SHG federations and the block and district administrations in surveying and planning for irrigation facilities across about 20 villages which culminated in the approval of a large number of micro irrigation projects by the government.

Soil and water conservation works too, were implemented under MGNREGA. Now that the community has learnt some new farming practices and has developed a commercial orientation vis-à-vis farming, the interventions around increasing irrigation coverage and conservation are increasingly being appreciated and demanded. Still miles to go, such achievements in a hardcore tribal context holds tremendous significance and generated lots of lessons to learn from the perspective of making farm-based interventions attractive for its farmers. This is particularly important in the current context when COVID-19 induced crisis would deter many of the regular migrant workers from moving out of their villages again.

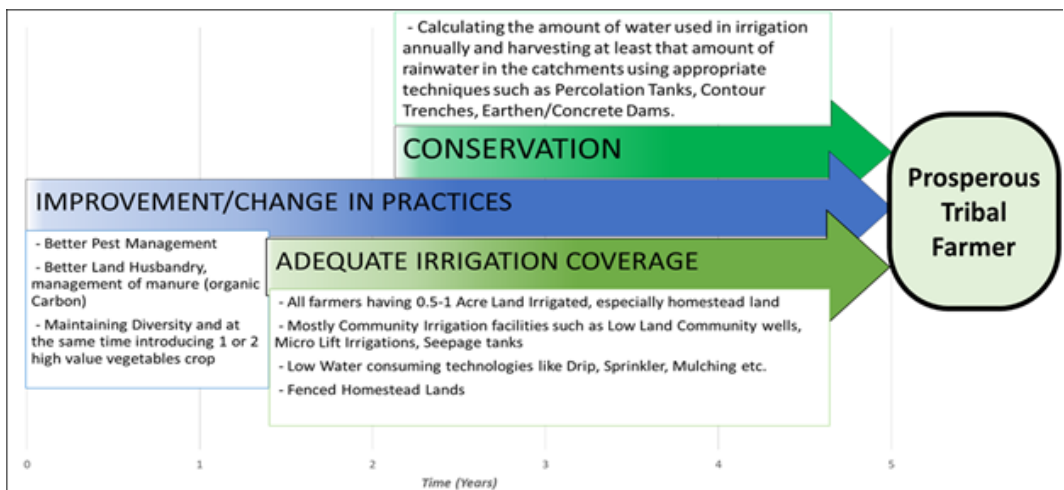


Fig. -2 : Intervention Framework with a Tribal Farmer