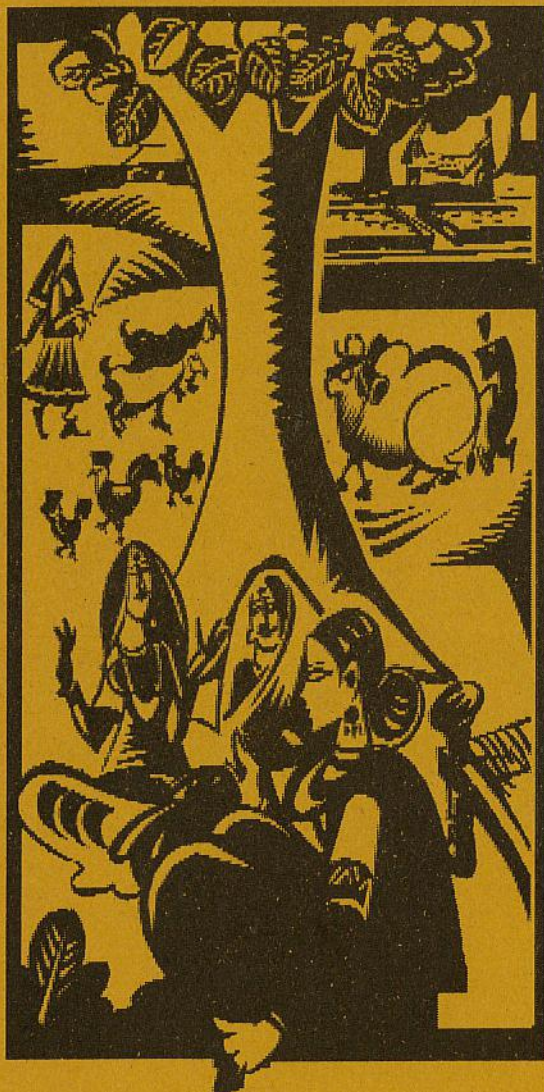


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Competition to Collaboration

Jogen Kalita

Building mutually beneficial collaboration with the PRIs in West Bengal requires maintaining transparency and complementing each other's strengths

Setting Off

The District Magistrate (DM) of Bankura District, West Bengal, invited Pradan in February 2005 to help in implementing watershed projects in the area under the Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojana (RSVY) programme. The DM was eager to seek Pradan's support in initiating development interventions, especially in Khatra sub-division because the region was identified as the most disadvantaged in the district. Pradan soon found that Hirbandh block was among the poorest areas in the region, with 52 per cent families in the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category. Fifty per cent of the population is Scheduled Tribes (STs). There was no presence of any other NGO in this area. The Block Development Officer (BDO) too was eager to involve Pradan in the development of the area. Pradan, therefore, agreed to start intervention in Hirbandh block, Khatra sub-division, Bankura.

My colleagues and I met the BDO, who gave us a warm welcome and suggested that we consult the leaders of the panchayat there before setting out to intervene in the area. He arranged a meeting with a few of the representatives of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). We were to meet them at the panchayat samiti office the following week.

The PRI plays a key role in the implementation of development programmes in West Bengal. The Panchayati Raj system is 30 years old here. The gram samsad is the lowest level at which village-level plans are made. Elected members from the gram sansad constitute the gram panchayat (GP). These elected members,

called GP members, are accountable for the preparation and implementation of the annual plans for the entire GP area, comprising 12 to 15 villages. The panchayat members are elected from the villages and are the grassroots-level leaders of their respective areas. The GP, as an institution, and its members, individually, are responsible for initiating developmental work in their areas. A major portion of the funds for development is spent through the panchayats. We were aware that the PRIs were a strong and influential entity; to initiate any work in the area, it would be essential to get the consent and gain the confidence of the panchayat.

As suggested by the BDO, we met the secretary of the GP-level committee of the state ruling party (Local Committee) and the ex-sabhapati of the panchayat samiti – the block-level tier of the PRI. During the meeting, we introduced ourselves through a brief presentation on Pradan and our work. We expressed our desire to initiate work in the area; this was welcomed by them and they suggested that we start our activities in the Gopalpur panchayat of Hirbandh block. Gopalpur panchayat was a politically less disturbed area because all the members, except one, were from the ruling party. They believed that the level of cooperation from the people of Gopalpur panchayat would be better than that of other GPs. As we were starting our work in the area for the first time, they wanted us to have a positive experience.

Initiating Intercession

We began our initiative with a detailed orientation of the GP-level leaders about

Pradan and its work, vision and objectives. Making the leaders aware of the plans we had was an essential part of our intervention. For this purpose, a two-day orientation programme was organized, and 25 GP members were made aware of the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Kashipur. SHGs are a simple yet effective way of reaching out and connecting with poor women. We also wanted the leaders to realize that an SHG provides a platform for the women, from where they can access banks and other services, which, in turn, can bring positive changes in their lives. On the first day, we organized a visit to a few SHGs in Kashipur; the panchayat members interacted with the SHG members and discussed matters about group functioning. The panchayat members also learnt about the savings and credit procedures of the group, which saw the use of the cash-box, accounting registers, member pass-books and the practice of regular attendance, weekly meetings and so on. On the second day, we conducted the training and explained that Pradan promoted SHGs as saving and credit associations of poor women and helped the SHG members to decide the rules of business, and how to pool their savings for small loans. Linking the workshop with the previous day's visit to the groups, we also facilitated discussions on the processes and functions of SHGs. This helped the panchayat members identify the need and importance of setting systems and structures in SHGs. For instance, the practice of weekly meetings with regularity in attendance and the accounting procedures using the cash-box, accounting registers and passbooks caught the attention of the panchayat members.

Gopalpur panchayat had about 44 SHGs, promoted by the GP, under the District Rural Development Cell (DRDC). The need to

form and manage SHGs was great. The panchayat had to implement the mid-day meal scheme. And as decided by the government, the schools had to be provided with meals cooked by the SHGs. Second, money from the Swarnjayanti Gram Swaroggar Yojna (SGSY) scheme could be availed of only through the SHGs. There were some cooperative societies that were represented by panchayat members, in each block. These registered cooperative societies mostly operated as chit fund groups. The one in Hirbandh block was called Jan Kalyan Cooperative Society. It collected money from the SHGs and deposited it in the society, which, in turn, provided credit facilities to the women. It was a financial system managed by the panchayat members, and to keep this business running, they formed SHGs. The SHGs also served as the vote bank for the panchayat members.

We planned to initiate our work with the existing SHGs along with reaching out to promote a few new ones. Taking the consent of the panchayat members, a strategy decided upon by our team from the beginning, we made a few visits to the SHGs to evaluate their status. We found that there were many irregularities in the functioning of the groups and there also existed a lack of awareness regarding the management. The groups were promoted by a panchayat member, who also acted as the key decision-maker in the SHG. He collected money from the group members and claimed to deposit the cash in the bank, in the group's savings account. The SHG members remained unaware of the amount they had saved and the total cash that was available in the bank. There was no practice of inter-lending because the group members did not keep cash with them. The groups had very irregular meetings, sometimes once a month or even once in

two months. When we asked about the names of their groups and members, most of the women were not able to answer.

After their orientation in Kashipur, the panchayat members were able to clearly differentiate between the SHGs in Kashipur and the groups which existed in their area. In a few meetings with the panchayat members, we were able to convince them that immediate intervention was needed in the existing SHGs in terms of its accounting systems, norms and other functions. We then started working intensively with these SHGs in an attempt to regularize their systems and develop their abilities so that they are able to manage their groups by themselves. We insisted on weekly meetings, meeting steps, in-lending system, credit appraisal practice, repayment systems and the like. We organized training for them on concept seeding, accounting and so on. We attended all the group meetings regularly for the initial three months. The villages that we visited were Chalka, Saluipahari, Guniada, Nanda and a few others. The prominent panchayat members of the GP belonged to these villages. All through this, we made efforts to meet the panchayat members to update them regularly about the work that was being initiated, the trainings conducted, the groups that we were visiting and the SHG systems that we were introducing in their area. At times, they too accompanied us to a few of the SHG meetings in their village. We were aware that to reach sustainability in our activities, the charge of development interventions would have to be eventually shouldered by the GP and its members, along with the community.

We conducted a series of trainings and exposure visits with the SHGs, and after three months of intensive work, we re-

established 30 SHGs, of which 10 were new groups and 20 were from the older 44 groups. We found that certain pockets within the panchayat were very poor and intervention was required in those areas. Hence, along with facilitating the existing SHGs, we reached out to the poor pockets and promoted new groups. We conducted SHG concept seeding trainings with individual groups. In these trainings, we discussed the need for savings and credit, its various sources and the merits and demerits of all, after which we spoke about SHGs and their functions. We had 10 groups in one cluster and we organized training in accounts and record keeping with each cluster; information was given about cash-book, pass-book and other concepts such as RMTS, trial balance, member balance, etc. We also conducted a few sessions on awareness building on SHGs with the older groups.

Difficult Times

There were noticeable changes among these and we observed a transformation in their practices as compared to what they were following earlier. The groups began to meet once every week and insisted that members attend regularly. Members of these groups began making regular savings and practising inter-lending systems. The groups visited the banks to deposit as well as withdraw money, and used the amount for inter-lending. We noticed that most of these groups conducted their weekly meetings on time and were learning to manage their finances without our assistance. We also observed that most of the members of these groups participated actively in the discussions and showed interest in the functioning of their SHGs.

These changes encouraged us but created discontent among a few of the panchayat members. We were unable to understand

this initially. As mentioned earlier, we had been meeting the panchayat members regularly, that is, every fortnight to discuss the progress of the work and about the future plans for interventions. On 4 May 2007, during one such meeting, some of panchayat members strongly opposed our involvement with the existing SHGs and suggested that we only promote new groups under what they termed the 'Pradan model'. They reasoned that Pradan's way of promoting SHGs was not as per the SGSY guidelines and this would later restrict the SHGs from using the subsidy money, which they planned to use for some profitable activities. We discussed the SGSY guidelines in detail and tried to convince the panchayat members that the 'Pradan model' did not violate any norms of SHG promotion and it would not lead to any problem if the SHGs wanted to apply for the SGSY subsidy. However, they continued to argue and finally said that they would agree only if the DRDC of their area certified that the 'Pradan model' had no flaws. Till then, they suggested that we cease our operations with the older SHGs and promote only new groups.

This came to us as a shock. To get to the root of the issue, we met a few members of the panchayat with whom we shared a better understanding and rapport. These panchayat members were in our favour. There also seemed to be lobbies within the single party to which all the panchayat members belonged. The members who opposed us belonged to one lobby whereas the members who favoured us belonged to another. To our surprise, they had a different explanation about the whole matter. They explained that the panchayat members were feeling threatened by the position and influence Pradan had begun to create among the community and the SHGs. Earlier the panchayat members were the

decision-makers of the SHGs and the group functioned under their command and authority. But after Pradan's intervention, the groups were beginning to become self-dependent and carried out its activities such as depositing money in the bank, keeping records of their savings and the like, all by themselves. Whenever the SHG members faced any difficulty, they now approached Pradan instead of the panchayat members for help and support. Pradan's intervention helped build the capacities of the SHG women, giving them a sense of confidence and the courage to shoulder the responsibilities of their groups by themselves. The panchayat members felt that the community was thus slipping out of their political influence, which they had exerted earlier. Some of the panchayat members found this difficult to accept and hence were trying to prohibit Pradan from intervening any further. We found that the older groups were from the ruling party and the potential to promote new SHGs remained in the opposition party's area. We also discussed the issue with the secretary of the GP-level committee. He suggested that we focus on promoting new SHGs; after seeing the success and development of these groups, the panchayat members would gradually get convinced and then permit Pradan to continue its work with the other existing groups.

Changed Strategies

We took up the challenge. The villagers helped us continue with our work in the area. Moreover, the area fell in the poor pockets that required extensive work, and we were ready to devote ourselves there. We tried to explore possible solutions to resolve the matter because we were aware that without the support of the panchayat members, it would be difficult to sustain our development interventions. We sensed that the panchayat members were perhaps of the

impression that Pradan had begun to occupy their 'space' and hence were threatened by the 'competition'. Another concern among the panchayat members was that they were not sure who was eligible to receive the group promotional cost sanctioned by the DRDC. This was meant for that organization that promoted and managed the SHGs. Initially, this money was received by the GP and they now feared that Pradan would be given this amount instead.

We realized that we needed to make changes in our strategy and approach to work. We could not get much assistance from the DM because there was a new official posted in Bankura, in place of the DM, who initially approached us to work here. We identified some among the panchayat members, who were in favour of Pradan and its work, but were not able to raise their voices and do much over the issue because they lacked clarity about the concepts of SHGs and its benefits. Following our changed strategy, we started meeting these panchayat members and began sharing information about our work and our plans for intervention in their area. Initially, we used to meet all the panchayat members together in the GP meeting and discuss these matters. We realized some members did not share their opinions openly in this forum and were mere listeners whereas the more powerful and dominant members took most of the decisions.

We focused our attention on those members, who understood Pradan, and gradually built a stronger relationship with them. We discussed our work and also asked for their suggestions. Previously, we used to meet the panchayat members every fortnight during the GP meetings. But now we started to meet them more often. We felt that to continue our work in the area, it is essential to work in collaboration with the people

from whom we could expect some support; we believed that eventually after seeing our work, the other members would also begin to trust us and come forward to help.

Understanding all the pros and cons, we proposed to the GP that the Pradan-promoted SHGs could report to the DRDC and likewise the promotional cost sanctioned by the cell could be received by the panchayat. If at any point of time, they felt the need for Pradan to help them in utilizing the money that they received through various government schemes for development interventions in the area for the benefit of the SHGs and the village, we would readily extend our support. We also suggested that a team of Village Resource Persons (VRPs) could be promoted at village levels to provide support and services to the SHGs. These VRPs could be selected by the panchayat members in collaboration with Pradan; they would then be groomed and trained by us. The initial cost of the VRPs could be managed by Pradan but later would be looked after by the GP. After much deliberation, the panchayat members accepted our suggestions and agreed to cooperate with us. We continued our work in the area and after a period of two to three months, the panchayat members noticed our work and saw that our main objective was to make the lives of the villagers better without any intention of stepping into their 'space'. They also observed that the SHGs and the families with whom we continued our work had begun to benefit from our intervention in the sense that the practice of saving and meeting weekly helped the people to meet their credit needs whenever they required. The groups were also in the process of getting some funds sanctioned from the bank for themselves, which they planned to utilize in livelihood activities.

During this time, we gradually introduced SRI paddy cultivation in the area. This made a good impact and helped us gain the confidence of the panchayat members. They asked us to continue our work with the older groups, and plan interventions for development in their areas as well. We explored the other areas for intervention and discussed the possibilities of introducing Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) with panchayat members. Following this, we took the panchayat members for an exposure visit to Purulia to help them understand the INRM activities and also to identify if such interventions were possible in their area. They have now requested us to demonstrate and conduct interventions through INRM in three villages that have been collectively identified by Pradan and the panchayat members. At present, we have 72 SHGs in Gopalpur panchayat, of which 75 per cent of them are old groups that have now accepted the SHG model promoted by Pradan. The panchayat members are now encouraging members of the other GPs to follow the structure of SHG promotion as demonstrated by Pradan. There are 22 VRPs working since 2007 and providing the necessary support to the SHGs. The panchayat members also consult us for micro-level planning in activities related to livelihood and village development. The GP has extended financial assistance to three SHGs for lac cultivation and Pradan has been requested to act as the facilitating agency. In the existing RSVY watershed programme, the panchayat members have requested Pradan to extend techno-managerial support. Hence, work as

been initiated by developing the 30 x 40 model in around 5 ha of land. The block authorities have now approached us to initiate work in two other GPs as well.

Partners in Change

The PRIs, including the members of the panchayat, are now convinced that Pradan is an agency that works to better the lives of the villagers and has, by no means, any intention to get involved in the political situation in the area. As for us, we knew that we need the support of the entire community, including the people's representatives and leaders, to plan and implement effective development interventions in the area. To reach the stage of making these processes owned by the people, it is essential to ensure the involvement of all stakeholders, from the villagers to the administrative authorities of the area. Pradan is only an external agency extending support and facilitating in the development processes. The basic framework of Pradan's interventions has always been to take its activities to sustainability. We believe that this can only be done when the entire community, along with its representatives, realizes its stake in the interventions initiated by Pradan. It has been thus essential in this context to ensure the collaboration of the administration and authorities of the locality – the PRIs and the panchayat members in our case – by keeping them informed about and involved in all the activities initiated in their area by us and making sure that we do not come across as competitors wanting to step into their 'space'.

An Unplanned Journey

Manas Mandal

Stepping into the sector with a feeling of uncertainty, the author finds a congenial and helpful environment in Pradan that encourages him to continue his pursuit as a development professional

The Beginning

I am from a small town called Bishnupur in Bankura district of West Bengal. I joined the Haldia Institute of Technology to study Biotechnology and graduated with a B. Tech in June 2006. I cherished dreams of taking up a job, which would make my life more comfortable and secure. Initially, I thought of joining some big IT company or the government. However, a financial crisis in my family became the turning point in my life. I could no longer wait to get my dream job and had to grab whatever opportunity came my way. I tried my luck at some job interviews, which didn't materialize. I had sleepless nights, worrying about my family. One day, my Biochemistry teacher told me about an organization called Pradan that worked with the rural poor. He suggested that I should try for a job with Pradan. I agreed because I had nothing to lose. Moreover, the clock was ticking and I desperately needed to get myself a job and a salary.

New Lessons

Bankura district in West Bengal! So familiar to me yet now different altogether. After clearing Pradan's recruitment process in August 2006, I was back in Bankura, posted as a Development Apprentice (DA). When I arrived at the location, the team was promoting Self Help Groups (SHGs) and developing Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) processes at Saltora block of Bankura district. Recollecting the first few days with Pradan always brings a smile on my face. I was relieved that I had finally got a job and was gradually able to shed my worries. I was now able to take

care of myself and my family. I came across a number of new words and concepts such as SHGs, Natural Resource Management (NRM) and livelihood, and I tried hard to understand their meaning. Most of the time, my team-mates used only acronyms such as SHG, INRM, etc., and I struggled hard to remember the full forms of these. Then I heard another term - 'Field Guide'. I liked the word and the person, Raja Chakraborty, who became my field guide. He opened many new windows for me, through which I was able to view myself as a development worker.

As part of the Development Apprenticeship (DA-ship) Programme, I was required to stay in a village (called 'Village Stay' in Pradan parlance) and jot down my observations. I stayed in Amjhore village for 15 days. It is the remotest village in Saltora block and had only 11 families. That was my first engagement with a tribal community. They were familiar with Bengali, my mother tongue, so communication was not a problem. On the first day, I went to see a plot for a mango orchard, being developed near the village. It was pouring heavily that day, but I felt thrilled and excited. I met Bhutel da, a 95-year-old man, who became one of my best companions. We discussed the weather, the crops, family, life and just about anything. He was a man full of life and wisdom drawn from years of experience. I also interacted with the people from the adjacent villages, which belong to Purulia district. I visited these villages often and made many friends. One of them was Sahadeb, who was my constant companion. Exploring the dense forest around the village was

something that both of us enjoyed. I saw that despite their hard lives, the people took time to enjoy good moments together. Football seemed to be the sport that best raised their spirits. I too played in one of the tournaments. I will ever cherish those moments.

I completed the Village Stay with ease but writing the report took me some time. During my days in the village, I saw men and women do their daily chores happily, children play about in high spirits and everybody live each day with a smile. Everything about the village and its people seemed pleasant to me. My field guide urged me to see beyond their smiles and observe how the villagers actually struggled each day to make ends meet. I understood how they worked hard day-and-night to earn some money and feed themselves and their families so that they could hold on to the smiles on their faces.

As days passed, my field guide introduced me to many new ideas and concepts that seemed useful for my career as a development worker. He told me about panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and introduced me to the sabhapati of the block, the Block Development Officer (BDO) and other administrative officers of the district. I accompanied my field guide to meet one of the Gram Panchayat (GP) sabhapatis of our area. We wanted to organize a meeting in one of the villages in which we had started an SHG. The villagers belonged to the Bauri community. Twelve out of the fifteen members were landless. They used to migrate to the nearest towns of Burnpur and Asansol, about 7 km away from the village, in search of a living. I was associated with this group from the initial stages. I conducted concept seeding and awareness trainings with the members of the group. I remember the day when

Bakuldi, one of the members of the group, took a loan to free herself from the clutches of the mahajan. I realized how needy they were when I got to know that the villagers were compelled to take loans of even Rs 100 and Rs 200 from the moneylenders to keep the fires burning in their homes.

After some discussions with my team members, I introduced vegetable cultivation in a 1-bigha plot that belonged to one of the members of the same group. Later, we also introduced SRI paddy cultivation in kharif; these endeavours brought a ray of hope to a few families there. But we realized that we needed to do more in order to bring about changes in the lives of many others, who were in desperate straits. For this purpose, my field guide suggested that we meet the sabhapati of the block. My field guide and I explained to him the need for some intervention in that village. We wanted to discuss the possibilities of constructing irrigation structures under the Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojana (RSVY) scheme in the village. For this we wanted to meet the villagers and identify potential resource persons from among them, who could assist us in the work. The sabhapati made a few phone calls and informed the Local Committee Members (LCMs), who are members of the GP-level committees, to support Pradan and organize this event.

I was surprised to see my field guide approach a third party to help us organize such a meeting. I thought we shared a good rapport with the villagers and calling for a meeting in that village was not a big task for Pradan. Later, during the day, my field guide explained to me why it was necessary to involve the local leaders. I understood that to take the initiatives introduced by us in the area to a level of

sustainability, it was essential to keep the leaders of the community involved and informed. The panchayati raj system in West Bengal is an influential institution. Understanding this aspect, the Pradan team here has adopted the strategy of ensuring the involvement of the people's representatives in all its programmes and activities. This strategy of working in cooperation with the PRIs has also helped to promote a sense of ownership and responsibility, among the people's representatives, of the various activities and programmes initiated by Pradan. It has helped accelerate the pace of development interventions in the area.

Thus, my DA-ship was an enriching experience; I learned many new things and undertook various activities in the field with my team members and field guide. Beginning with concept seeding trainings with SHGs, SRI and its technologies, to the methods and the processes of watershed treatment of an area, and know-how about irrigational structures, etc., my learning and ability to implement most of these has been satisfactory. After more than a year of engagement with the community, I realized that the concept of 'building people' had wide connotations and various dimensions. Learning from the guidance that I received from my field guide and the wisdom that he shared with me, I evolved as a development professional. Over time, I have tried to put into practice the concepts that I have learned from him and my other team mates, and to engage myself with the community to bring about positive changes in the lives of the rural poor.

Getting Involved

In February 2007, I was shifted to Khatra in Hirbandh block of Bankura district. I was still an apprentice then. As of February 2008, in the entire district, we are six

professionals, including me, eight DAs and one team leader. In Hirbandh block, we are two professionals; and three DAs joined us recently. I am engaged in promoting SHGs in Gopalpur panchayat, have also introduced SRI and improved paddy cultivation. I am also involved with the NREGA activities of the area. I believe that the people here are the 'constants' and we, as Pradan, are the 'variables'. They are the ones that will be in the area for a longer time than us and who will benefit from the interventions the most. The people and the PRI generate the funds whereas we present our ideas and technologies to them. This process of acting jointly will help in bringing about positive developmental changes in the area.

West Bengal follows a 'three-tier system' alongside the administrative departments. This is the zilla parishad at the district level, the panchayat samiti at the block level and the GP at the village level. A PRI is headed by the panchayat pradhan and the panchayat secretary is responsible for monitoring funds. A PRI also has other functionaries such as Assistant Engineers. The panchayat funds are sanctioned through the panchayat samiti that, in turn, are sanctioned by the zilla parishad. A samsad is at the lowest level under the PRI that is responsible for making village level plans. A samsad has an average of three villages with a population of more than 700. The LCMs here belong to the ruling party of the samsad.

In 2006, our team members informed the panchayat members of Gopalpur panchayat of our desire to work in that area. The villages under the panchayat had a number of SHGs that were formed and managed by the members of the GP-level committee, who are, the LCMs. These SHGs came about when the guidelines for mid-day meal were

announced and the ruling party wanted to grab the opportunity. They made use of the existing LCMs in the village, and asked them to form few SHGs in their villages. Thus, a number of women's groups were formed and the women were engaged to supply cooked food to the village schools. In reality, the LCMs did not know about the SHGs and the group functions. Forming women's groups also strengthened their vote bank. There were many irregularities in the functioning of these SHGs. Our team wanted to work towards building the capacities of the existing groups as well as promoting a few new groups. To be better accepted by the community, we also needed to demonstrate how our system could be beneficial to the existing SHGs. Our team hoped that this strategy would not only promote SHGs but also build trust among the PRIs. We worked extensively to revive the SHGs, regularize the group functioning processes and build the capacities of the women. We also explored opportunities for forming new SHGs. At present, we are working with 75 groups, 45 per cent of these being new groups. We conduct trainings on concept seeding, awareness and maintaining accounts. We help them build a vision for themselves, their families and the village.

When I joined Khatra, Pradan professionals had been working there for six months. My senior colleagues introduced me to the panchayat members there and oriented me about the work that was initiated in the area. I too got involved with the team's work of nurturing SHGs and planning livelihood options for them. I was assigned a few new villages, where I formed eight new SHGs and facilitated seven existing groups. I worked intensively on livelihood planning with two of these groups. At present, I am working on linking these two SHGs to lac cultivation and three more

SHGs to goat rearing. None of the members of these groups, to my knowledge, approach moneylenders for credit. The well-developed, inter-lending and accounting systems, norms, the transparent system, and the growing affinity among the group members have been appreciated by the panchayat members. I am happy that together we have been able to reach another milestone of success for my team. These developments have boosted my confidence and encouraged me to work harder.

However, the panchayat members, who were very supportive initially, turned hostile in a few months towards us. They demanded that we stop working with the existing groups and only promote new SHGs. We could not understand the change in attitude. We agreed to promote only new SHGs. We had to reconsider our strategies for working with communities. We gathered that earlier the panchayat members wielded influence over the SHGs; after Pradan's intervention, the SHG members were able to conduct their own group processes very well. They became less dependent on the panchayat members. This was difficult for the panchayat members to accept. We realized that it was essential to keep these influential members of the community involved and informed about our initiatives in the area as we did with our SHG members and their families. For long-term purposes and for sustainability, the support of the people's representatives – in this case, the panchayat members – was vital. We made sure that they were kept in the loop and soon gained the confidence of the panchayat members, who then requested us to work with the older SHGs. We provided the external support system in building capacities and bringing positive changes in people's lives.

Significant Stake

The Gopalpur panchayat accepted us as their 'co-workers'. They extended their support to Pradan, and have helped us to accelerate the development initiatives in the area. Currently, we are working on promoting lac cultivation, SHGs, SRI and improved agricultural practices, horticulture, and developing irrigation structures under INRM (5% model, WHT, 30 x 40 model, etc.). Recently, the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) asked us to initiate a watershed project for almost 560 ha. We discussed this with the Gopalpur panchayat members and took them for an exposure visit to Bandudih in Purulia, where similar work was being conducted. They saw the processes involved in the preparation of a watershed plan and interacted with the people, who confirmed that the initiative was of great benefit to them and helped them earn more money. Motivated with what they saw and learned during the trip, the panchayat members requested us to proceed with the watershed activity in their villages. The amount for the proposed 560 ha watershed area by NABARD took time to be sanctioned. With the assistance of the BDO and the initiative of the panchayat members, we introduced the idea in a 1,600 ha plot; the amount estimated was Rs 1.5 crores under the NREGA plan. It required extensive planning and implementation process for three mouzas (locality) in consultation with the panchayat members. A village consists of 3 to 4 mouzas. Each mouza selected 5 to 6 resource persons who assisted us in the endeavour. We have already completed 20 water harvesting structures and another 180 ha (60 ha each in the three mouzas) will be done within the coming 5 months.

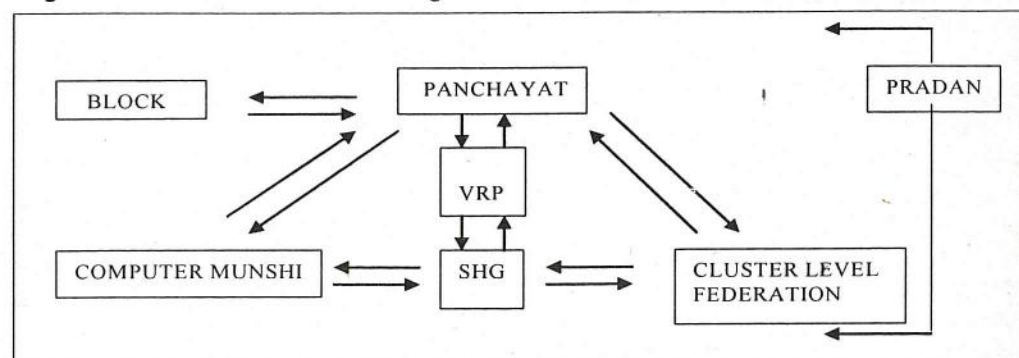
The members asked us to proceed with the processes for implementation of the work.

Work on 5 ha plot has been treated with the 30 x 40 model, and the plot will be developed as a mango orchard. Nearly 30 families will benefit from this. Another 34 ha plot will be treated with 30 x 40, which has been planned for Arjun plantation.

The area, with its natural forests of palash and ber, has huge potential for lac cultivation. The villagers had been doing this on their own for years. We approached the panchayat members for some funds so that this income generating activity could be initiated among the families of the SHGs. They sanctioned Rs 10,000 from their own funds for two SHGs and have agreed to leverage another Rs 50,000 for the coming season. The panchayat sanctioned the amount against a resolution signed by every member of the SHGs that clearly stated all details, including the number of trees and the amount of money that will be used for the activity. It was agreed that the group would refund the principal amount after selling the harvested produce by May 2008. The members decided that the SHGs will keep the funds in a 'Lac Fund', which will be used as a rotating capital to initiate lac activities. These steps taken by the panchayat and assisted by Pradan have helped revive a forgotten activity.

Pradan has recently introduced the Computer Munshi system to bring about systematic and standardized records of their financial health and operations in the SHG accounting process. The panchayat members are very keen that the system be set up. Many of these initiatives that we planned would not have been successful without the cooperation and collaboration of the panchayat members. The panchayat institution is one of the largest 'funding agencies' in West Bengal, and the biggest stakeholders involved in developmental work. For the panchayat members, the community is their vote bank and they

Figure 1: Vision of a Self-sustaining Model



need to maintain their position among the villagers by making them prosperous and content. Often, transferring ideas to the panchayat members has helped Pradan disseminate information to many more villages and panchayats; this has indirectly has facilitated our outreach. When the panchayat members shoulder responsibilities of the development programmes, it helps build momentum in the area and also takes the activities to a sustainable level.

I have visualized a system, which I believe can be a self-sustaining model for the activities that we have introduced here (Fig 1). The block and the panchayat are the leading agencies for development in the area. The SHGs must work in collaboration with these to bring about changes in their lives and the villages at large. Institutions such as the Computer

Munshi system and the clusters can assist in the process, with the guidance and services of a cadre of Village Resource Persons (VRPs), nurtured by the panchayat members. Pradan will be an external source of support providing assistance as and when required by the panchayat and the villagers.

In Conclusion

Joining Pradan was a last resort for me. I had to grab any opportunity that came my way. I had not planned to become a development worker and had entered this sector without much of a vision about the rural poor. Over the years, I have become more attached to the community and have worked to fulfil its aspirations and address its concerns. I have decided to continue my work in these villages and pursue it as a career.

United We Stand

Sanjib Dey

By organizing SHGs around a federation, the women in Kashipur are able to tackle wider developmental issues and build a perspective on long-term gains for their area

Building Solidarity

Pradan started its interventions in Kashipur, Purulia, West Bengal, in 2000, and extended its work to four gram panchayats (GP), namely, Kalidah, Manihara, Barrha and Gourangdih. It began by promoting Self Help Groups (SHGs); at present, eight years since then, there are 155 groups across the four GPs and 16 clusters. Representatives of the clusters formed a forum in 2005, named Panchkutraj Nari Samiti, or Pansi, as it is popularly known among the women. The word, *pansi*, means a small boat in Bengali; true to the word, the women desire to sail this boat together, helping each other to cross the river of hardship. This forum, acting as a federation, was initiated to support SHGs through the various stages of evolution – mutual help, financial intermediation,

livelihood planning and social empowerment.

Over the years, members have been able to manage their SHGs very well through regular savings, credit activities and other functions. They have instituted the Computer Munshi System and pay for its services as well. This was possible through discussions held at various levels by the women – the SHGs, clusters and federation. The members of Pansi act as facilitators in the SHG and cluster meetings; they often use the tools and methods of the Internal Learning System (ILS) to understand the working status of various groups. The SHGs approach Pansi in times of need, and the representatives of the federation extend support to the groups, whenever called for. During this period, Pradan has provided training to build capacities, by equipping Pansi representatives with the skills and knowledge to manage and monitor SHGs, to carry out livelihood planning and enable them to have a clear vision about their lives, their SHGs, clusters, federation and their villages. The essence of all training has been to inculcate a sense of solidarity and promote a 'we' feeling among SHG members by helping them realize that they have immense potential to become 'change agents' and impact the development discourse of their localities. At present, Pradan is engaged with the SHGs in facilitating them to achieve their livelihood goals. The aim is to have Pansi take the lead role in future and support the other SHGs to plan and implement livelihood activities, without Pradan.

Table 1: SHGs in Kashipur

Total Number of SHGs	155
Total Number of SHG Members	2295
ST	929
SC	511
OBC	748
Others	107
Net Owned Fund of SHGs	Rs. 53 Lakh
Net Owned Fund of SHGs Added This Year	Rs. 10 Lakh
Internal Credit Generated This Year	Rs. 32 Lakh
Credit Leveraged from Bank	Rs. 28 Lakh
Loan Repaid	Rs. 18 Lakh
Credit Leveraged from Bank This Year	Rs. 8 Lakh
Number of SHGs with Computerized Accounts	155
Number of Clusters	16

Wider Concerns

Of late, federation representatives have

been encouraging SHG members to initiate discussions on issues not directly related to savings, credit and group processes. Women are now getting involved in other issues that concern them and affect them adversely. Some of the SHGs have also been involved in monitoring the mid-day meal scheme in schools, in applying for old-age pension, in raising their voice against alcoholism and so on for the development of their members and villages. Earlier, they were more focused on the regular activities of their SHGs and remained aloof from other issues. The women thought that there was not much of a role for them to play in the administration and governance of their village. This viewpoint has changed and now SHGs are not only participating in the gram sansad meetings in their villages but also raising their demands before the panchayats. Through various government departments and the panchayat samiti, SHG members are now eager to explore all possible avenues that can give them and their families a better life.

As facilitator, Pradan generates discussions during the SHG, cluster and federation meetings on a number of issues to make members aware of the activities around them. Pradan also ensures that the discussions reach all the SHGs; for this, it provides information to the representatives of Pansi about various concepts, government services and offices, rights and entitlements. They, in turn, spread the word in the SHG and cluster meetings and also encourage the SHG members to take on issues for the benefit of their village, family and self. The encouragement of a bigger entity, that is, Pansi, has given the women a new-found confidence. The feeling of a bigger strength supporting them seems to have given them the courage to stand up and raise their issues out in the open now.

On one occasion, the members of five SHGs from Fusura wanted to take charge of the NREGA work after they learnt that such initiatives were to begin soon in their village. The five SHGs belonged to the same cluster; so they raised the point in their cluster meeting and also discussed it with the representatives of Pansi. Pradan encouraged them to take up the work and conducted training in accounts and other areas for the measurement of earth work and preparation of a muster roll. The members then approached the gram sansad with their proposal to take the contract for NREGA for their village. People laughed at them and remarked that it would be better for them to work as labourers rather than to don the role of 'paymasters'. But the group members of all these five SHGs persisted and even argued with the panchayat members during a gram sabha meeting. The federation supported them wholeheartedly and gave them the confidence to reach their goal. The panchayat finally agreed to give charge to two SHGs on a trial basis and sanctioned an amount of Rs 30,000 and 5.7 quintals of rice, as wages – both in cash and kind – for constructing a village road and a pond. The entire work was carried out in a transparent manner. Everybody knew how much was spent on construction, how much was distributed as labour charges and so on. Ensuring the quality of work and maintaining all the necessary accounts was a challenging task for the SHG members. But they did not feel disheartened with the burden; in fact, they carried out the job with zeal. They maintained a record of transactions in their cash book, made entries in the job cards and muster rolls and also subdemands of their respective panchayats. Witnessing the effectiveness of the SHGs and their efficiency in carrying out the NREGA work, the panchayat has now diverted funds to nine other SHGs for

Some of the GPs are taking the initiative to work in collaboration with the SHGs and are reaching better results through the interventions. In Kalidah and Manihara GP, the members consult SHG leaders and also call them to the GP office regularly to discuss and plan development interventions in the villages. In Manihara, the panchayat has facilitated a process of sanctioning a revolving fund from the District Rural Development Cell (DRDC) for 28 groups. Of the 46 groups that are functioning in Manihara village, 28 of them have got Rs 5,000 each with assistance from the panchayat. The panchayat has also allocated some amount from the SC and ST benefit funds to a few of the SHGs that have members from the tribal and scheduled caste communities. Nine such groups have received an amount of Rs. 6,000 each, which is being used as a revolving fund by the SHGs.

The initiative of the women of Kalidaha is another noteworthy achievement of the SHG members. Where women are considered merely as silent citizens, who can only be homemakers, the group members have proved their capabilities by shouldering the responsibility of the special Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana (SGSY) project in their villages. Through the formation of Village Core Committees (VCC), the SHG members actively take part in the planning of the natural resources, prioritize these plans, maintain accounts and mentor the Natural Resource Management (NRM) activities initiated in the area. A complete process has been designed to manage this project of the central government, starting from the selection of the VCC members to recruiting the Village Resource Persons (VRP), who work as service providers. All of them function as a team in order to achieve better lives and livelihoods for themselves and their families. Besides verifying the

muster rolls, paying cheques to beneficiaries and guiding the VRPs, the SHG members also, at times, need to solve other problems and disputes. In Shambathan village, one of the beneficiaries was not contributing his labour to cut and fence the orchard pit being prepared in their village. Earlier, everyone had agreed that all the beneficiaries would put in part of the expenses, through the payment of some amount of cash or by contributing their labour to make the orchard. Even after a number of reminders by the members of the VCC, the man remained adamant and did not comply with their requests. On the day the VCC was distributing the saplings to the beneficiaries, the members decided that the man would be given his portion only after he paid his due amount. The man refused to make any payment and finally all the 49 saplings that were initially set aside, were planted on a plot that was commonly shared by the SHG members.

A 'Rocky' Encounter

The Buru Jharna Jeon Gaonta, an SHG formed by Pradan at Dhanardi in 2002, was like a door to the outside world for its 16 members. They learned about savings and credit that would benefit their families and them in many ways. For once, they no longer had to go to the moneylenders to ask for money in times of need. They could now rely on their group. They were pleased with this new endeavour but at the same time continued to explore others avenues for a brighter future.

Their first credit linkage with the Barrah co-operative bank brought them Rs 14,500, which the members used to purchase goats and rear them with some support from Pradan. Within a period of two years, the members made reasonable profit and were able to pay back the loan to the bank. This

gave them the confidence to look for options that could enable them earn better livelihoods.

Realizing that credit was an important aspect in this context, they approached the state Bank of India (SBI), Adra, and were sanctioned a loan of Rs 1,24,000 in 2007. At the time of credit appraisal, the SHG members found that a few of them did not have bullocks. Hence, it was decided that the money received from the SBI would be first utilized by these women to buy bullocks for ploughing fields. The credit limit was higher than the immediate requirement of the group so it was decided that the rest of the amount would be kept aside to be invested in a new business.

After a month or so, during one of their weekly meetings, one of the SHG members proposed that their group could invest the money in the stone chip business. This was a job they were familiar with because they used to work as labourers in plots owned by others. But now with the money and the new-found confidence, they had the opportunity to be the owners of such a business. Accordingly, a plot was selected and the group members identified an area. It was government-vested land, had a rocky hill and seemed good for a huge stone reserve.

With the help and support of Pansi, the SHG members decided to apply for the plot so that they could begin their business. They and their men-folk drafted an application asking for permission to take the plot on lease so that they could start their business. Pradan informed them about the various offices in the block and the district that handled such applications. They then submitted the application along with the plot map and other necessary documents to the Block Land Revenue (BLR) and District Land Revenue (DLR) offices in Purulia. The

office authorities informed them that their lease proposal would be sanctioned and within a month's time some officers would visit them to conduct the required verification. However, three months passed and no officers came to visit them nor did they receive any response from the offices. When they went to the BLR office to find out what was taking them so long to process their proposal, they were shocked to know that the plot had been already leased out to the West Bengal Mineral Development Trading Corporation (WBMDTC).

Though disappointed, they did not feel discouraged and within a fortnight they identified another plot (Plot no. 3834) and this time they submitted the application to the Mining Office in Purulia. The representatives of Pansi helped them approach the officers and file their second application. Within a month's time, the SHG got a letter from the BLR office mentioning the date and time for the verification. Accordingly, the SHG members along with some other villagers assembled on the specific date and after the verification, the officers from the BLR office informed them that there were three applications for the same plot and, therefore, the area would be divided among the three applicants. Without giving them a chance to choose, the officer instructed the group members to take that part of the plot where the amount of stone was lower compared to the rest of the areas.

It was frustrating for the members. First, they had to wait for three months only to find out that they were cheated; now, after so much of running around from one office to the other, what they were being given was not what they had expected nor did they feel they deserved it. They collectively decided not to give in to the decisions of the government officers and refused to accept the plot. Pradan professionals told the SHG

members about some clauses under the Mines and Mineral Act of West Bengal. The SHG members then confronted the officers with the fact that, according to the Act, priority should be given to groups rather than individuals. Hence, they stood in an advantageous position compared to the other applicants, who were individuals.

This came as a surprise to the officers, who had not expected these poor, rural women to make references to laws and rights with such courage and confidence. They retracted and allowed the members to choose their own plot. Making an informed choice, the SHG members chose that part of the plot where the amount of stone was high. After the initial investments, the group is able to pay the monthly revenue of Rs 18,000 to the government; with their profits, they are repaying their loan installments to the bank on time. They have till date repaid Rs 59,000 and hope to continue the practice of paying their EMIs on time. The members have decided that after they pay back the entire loan to the bank, they will distribute the profit equally among themselves. At present, they are using the profit of Rs 100,000 as their working capital.

The SHG now receives quarrying orders from the panchayat to whom they also supply the stone chips, crusher, etc. Besides opening up employment opportunities, the determination and hard work of these women have helped better the lives of many families in their villages. Many families from Dhanardi used to migrate in search of living. Now, many families find work here in their own village and this has reduced migration. Saraswati Murmu, Lakhikanta Murmu, Gurupada Murmu and Saheb Murmu are some of the people who have managed to better their lives by investing the wages they earned from this initiative to buy bullocks. Gilapi Murmu, another beneficiary, has repaid

Rs 1,000 to the moneylender and reclaimed her 0.13 bigha land. And throughout this, Pansi has played an important role. Pansi supports the SHG, whenever needed, and stands as a source of strength and courage for its members. It generates confidence among members and enables them to reach their goal.

Strength of a Collective

The SHG members initially had to fight many battles to attend group meetings. When I first began my initiatives with the promotion of women's groups, I had in mind that as a collective, women had the strength to overcome obstacles and articulate demands for themselves. The formation of SHGs helped to create a greater sense of awareness of the development scenario around them, which in turn also helped build momentum among the women. I maintained a strategy of promoting the 'we' feeling among the women, a sense of solidarity and unity. Pansi was set up to create visibility, provide an identity and strength to the many women associated with SHGs here.

Over the years, the initiatives taken by these women demonstrate the immense potential that they possess to bring about change in their lives and also impact the lives of others. As a facilitator, I work towards making them realize this strength that they possess as a collective and Pansi has played an important role in achieving this purpose. The process of working together in a collective through Pansi has enabled them to become community leaders and spearhead changes. By filling in the information gaps and developing their skills and capabilities, I have worked towards assisting them to articulate the vision that they carry within themselves, enabling them to bring about positive changes in their lives and to the community at large.

Making a Difference

Raj Sekhar Bandopadhyay

The author shares his feelings and dilemmas on choosing a career as a development professional in the rural sector

A Different Start

"In this age of ITs and MNCs, what am I doing in an NGO? When my friends are minting money in the big cities, why am I striving in this remote village to help others earn an income?" These questions come to my mind many times as I consider my work in Pradan.

I was born in a middle-class family. My father worked in a colliery in Nimcha, West Bengal. I was a good student in school. I worked hard in college because I knew that to bag a good job in any reputed company, educational qualifications were essential. During my last phase at Asansol Engineering College, West Bengal, where I was studying Electrical Engineering, my friends and I eagerly awaited recruiters to come to the campus and give us jobs. One such day, some people from an organization called Pradan came to our college. Wanting to explore as many options that came my way, I sat down for their presentation. I had briefly learnt that Pradan was an organization working in rural areas and did 'social work'.

As I wondered what an engineer could do in such a profession, I sensed that most of my classmates were also sitting in the room with the same apprehension. During the presentation, we were showed a short film, in which we saw a person on a bike travelling a dusty road to sit among a group of women. We were told that the individual was an engineering graduate, who had joined Pradan some time back and was now working as a development

professional with rural poor in a very remote village. I understood why Pradan was showing the movie and particularly that scene; I tried to visualize myself as the person on the screen. My friends were amused by the scene and giggled and laughed throughout the screening. They believed that only somebody 'mad' would leave the cities to work in the villages with all the dust and dirt. Their attitude disturbed me. I felt it was fine for my friends not to want to work in rural areas, but to mock someone who had the spirit to go for it was uncalled for. I did not comment during the discussion that followed nor raise any questions to the presenters but listened to all of them and browsed through the presentation. At the end, somewhere deep within I felt that this was a job I wanted to do. I was fascinated by the idea that if I joined Pradan I would be working in those villages where even government services have not reached. In the course of helping others and doing valuable work, I would also earn and take care of myself. Moreover, the word 'mad' amuses me now. I prefer to say, "I am MAD, I am Making A Difference."

Initial Experiences

I joined the Pradan's Bankura Team as a Development Apprentice (DA) in August 2007. On reaching the office, my team leader, Dibyendu Chaudhuri welcomed me. Introducing me to the other team members, he briefed me about the organization. I met Arijit the other DA, a fresh recruit, who seemed to look as

perplexed as I was. I found a companion in him. The team leader announced that we would have to visit some villages the following day to get an orientation about the organization's work. That night Arijit, my new companion, and I discussed our future in that place. We had no idea how we would go to the village the next morning. Would we have to walk miles to reach the place? Would we be given motor-bikes? Would there be anyone accompanying us to the villages or would we have to manage things all by ourselves? We did not know but we felt excited. Both of us went to bed wondering what the next day would be like.

To our joy, we saw a car parked outside our office in the morning. We were told that the car would take us to the villages and that our team leader, Dibyendu would accompany us. We proceeded to a village called Handudih where we were to attend a meeting. The village was about 26 km from our office. The initial journey till Gadapathar seemed very comfortable till I saw the car take a turn into a *kaccha rasta*. The driver saved the car from falling into the numerous potholes on the road. I was glad when we came to the end of that ride only to find that we were in the midst of a forest. This time there was no road at all, only traces of some tracks in the sand that the driver was following! I felt scared but in a few minutes I saw a few houses in the distance – Handudih at last! When we reached the village, a group of children rushed towards us. They looked at the car, stared at me and then spoke to each other in Santhali. Now there was another problem for me. I did not know Santhali and I felt totally lost, hearing the chatter of the children. Suddenly I heard the words, - "*Aikhane ashun* (Come here)". Later, I learnt that the words were spoken

by Mantulal Hembram, a resident of the village. I was greatly relieved. Those two words took away part of my worries and I was happy to know that some of the villagers knew Bengali, the language I am familiar with.

We sat for a meeting with some women from the village. I recollected the scene from the film we were shown in college at the time of recruitment. The group of women in the film was similar to the group here. I learnt that such groups of women are called Self Help Groups, or SHGs. The women belonged to the Santhal community. I had seen people from the same community earlier but had never bothered to meet them. I interacted with them and was amazed to see how well informed these women were about their group functions and accounting procedures. I noticed how meticulously they had kept records of their transactions.

We then proceeded to see the fields in which they were cultivating brinjals. When we reached the field, my friend, Arijit became excited. He interacted with the farmers and discussed about the vegetable, the diseases that were damaging the plants and also recommended some medicines. He had studied at the Bidhan Chandra Krishi Vishwavidyalay (BCKV) from where he had done his MSc in Horticulture. I, the Electrical Engineer, stood looking at the brinjals and listening to the conversation around me. I wondered how I would ever manage to work for the development of 'rural India' or for that matter, even be able to guide at least one family in that village with the minimal information that I had about agriculture and SHGs. My team leader, Dibyendu saw my troubled expression and comforted me by saying, "In time, you will learn

everything." This gave me some breathing space; I also realised that my journey in Pradan would be filled with challenges, in terms of learning new things, working with poor families and adjusting myself to a rural setting.

Learning the Hard Way

In Hirbandh, the team comprises five of us - two executives and three DAs, including me. The team implements activities related to Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) and Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojana (RSVY). We are also promoting improved agricultural practices with our most recent intervention in lac cultivation. At present, I am helping 101 families with agricultural interventions for the rabi crop, and 27 other families with lac cultivation. We are in the midst of planning for the kharif crop as well as for fishery.

Over time, I engaged myself with the community, trying to learn all that my senior colleagues tried to teach me. I spent all my days in the villages, wandering about the agricultural fields, talking to people, attending various meetings and playing with the children. My first few days in the villages made me reflect upon a lot of things which I had initially taken for granted. Earlier, I was content with the idea that life meant acquiring a professional degree and joining the fast lane of the corporate world. Life was all about racing bikes, movies in multiplexes, hi-tech gadgets and money to serve all purposes. At least, I believed that this was what everybody in the world was doing, and I did not want to be the odd-one-out. But when I came here, I found that there are people, in the same world, for whom earning a meal a day, having a

piece of clothing and building a roof for shelter was a daily and ongoing struggle.

During my village stay in Guniyada, I visited Malindra Sardar and his family. As part of my training under the DA-ship programme, I was asked to study the income and expenditure patterns of a few families from this village. That was when I came across Malindra da, a 75-year-old man. His wife had passed away a few years ago and they had no children. He stayed with his brother's daughter whom he had adopted. His annual earning was about Rs 8,000 but he spent Rs 12,000. He managed his finances with the old age pension that he received monthly and with the wages from the 100 days of work under NREGA. He was unwell most of the time and had to spend a lot of money in his treatment. Malindra da had recently sold off his land because he was in dire straits. Often, he used to get some money by selling some of his household goods in the local market or to moneylenders. His adopted daughter, now 19 years old, had to stop going to school because she had no proper sari to wear to school. She seemed anaemic and Malindra da told me that her ill-health was mostly because she had to go to bed on an empty stomach almost every second night. I was taken aback by what Malindra da was sharing with me. It occurred to me that there was more to life and survival than what we youngsters could ever imagine.

We carry many prejudices about the rural poor, their lives and lifestyles. We are always up-to-date with the businesses of the Ambanis and the Mittals. But we are not willing to appreciate the initiatives of the farmers and the entrepreneurs, who struggle to earn a living in our villages. Take the case of Ananda Bauri. I met Ananda Bauri, a farmer, during my village stay at his house in Guniyada. I was

amazed to see how meticulously Ananda Bauri calculated his expenses on his agricultural field and planned his investments. He told me how important it was to know about the weather conditions in his profession. He also had to keep himself informed about the various medicines, required to protect his produce, and their dosages available in the market. His wisdom never failed to surprise me as I had grown to believe that it was us, the literates, who knew about science and commerce. During my stay with the Bauris, I basked in the love and care that I received from them. Ananda Bauri's wife, whom I fondly called *didi*, introduced me as her brother from a far-off village. Never once did they mention that I was a stranger, who had sought shelter at their place on Pradan's request so that I could complete part of my training as a DA. After a long day's work, I would enter their house only to find *didi* waiting for me with a warm smile, ready to serve food, prepared especially for me. Her care and concern helped me release all the tensions and worries of the day and gave me the strength to look forward to a brighter tomorrow, the same way my mother made me feel.

Certain incidents occurred a few months after I joined Pradan that disturbed me. A friend of mine had joined Pradan with me and was posted at Khunti. We got busy with our work and were not in regular contact with each other. One day, suddenly I got to hear from a common friend that he was not well and had gone back home. During his stay in the village he had fallen ill and was detected with malaria along with jaundice. Immediately, his team members took him to a doctor in the nearby town. Later, his parents came and shifted him to a hospital in Burnpur, his hometown, in West Bengal. However,

within two days of his hospitalization, he expired. This was a shock to me and I felt concerned by my own decision to live in places with so little medical help another friend of mine, who had joined the Bankura team with me, left Pradan simply because he felt he could not adjust to the rural setting. He was also an engineer and felt that if he explored options of a career in the cities he could earn a better bargain.

I was confused and wondered if I should be doing the same thing as well. I believed that I was equally qualified and suitable to get jobs in corporate houses. I could also earn a comfortable salary compared to the one I had now. I was caught in a whirlpool of worries and desires. But each time I visualised myself in the cities with tall buildings and air-conditioned offices, I felt suffocated. I found it difficult to imagine myself inside closed doors, surrounded by machines, trying to keep pace with the fast changing trends. I felt content in the villages under the open skies, and feeling the warmth in the smiles of the people. Each day in the village brought new challenges and opportunities for me like a blend of different colours. If I had joined my 'core sector', electrical engineering, I would only be engaged with machines. Being in this field allowed me to look at a whole new arena of issues related to women, agriculture, natural resource management and many others. In electrical engineering, if any mistake occurs while instructing someone in making a transformer, it can be rectified very easily later. But when working with poor farmers, a few minor flaws can also cost them a fortune. I would feel responsible for the loss they would incur due to my carelessness. Moreover, to me, working with machines seems like a heartless job, but seeing a smile on the face of a farmer when she makes a profit of even Rs. 10 fills

my heart with joy and a sense of achievement.

My Point of View

Different people have different aspirations and desires. Different people can see the same thing differently. And I see my life in the villages from an angle, different from hundreds of my fellow-mates. I think about the lives of these friends of mine, working in big business houses and imagine their lifestyles. They will be travelling the same road from their house to office, sitting on the same chair, interacting with the same bunch of people at office and returning home by evening just to prepare for the same routine the next day. I, on the other hand, roam around exploring one village after the other, from one forest to another, interacting with hundreds of vibrant faces and returning to my modest shelter, wondering what new challenges and opportunities the morrow would bring me. Each warm greeting that I receive from the villagers whenever I visit them reinforces my conviction to be here and continue with my endeavour in 'making a difference'.

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Bankura: A Profile

All the articles in this issue are from the Pradan Bankura Team, the result of a NewsReach write-shop organized by the Team members. We give here a brief profile of the location and the work done by Pradan there.

Bankura is located in the western part of the state of West Bengal. It is a part of Bardhaman Division of the state and falls in 'Rarh' region of West Bengal. River Damodar flows along the northern boundary of the district. The adjacent districts are Bardhaman in the north, Purulia in the west and West Midnapur in the south. It ranks 4th in literacy rate in the state according to 2001 Census.

Bankura district has an area of 6882 sq km, and according to the census of 2001, it has a population of around 32 lakhs. This district has a moderate deposit of coal and a substantial deposits of china clay. Bankura is subdivided into two distinct parts as far as terrain and economic condition are concerned. Six blocks in the eastern side come under alluvial soil zone and are economically better off. Sixteen blocks at the western side are undulating and sometimes hilly.

Table 1: Bankura - Demographic Details

Population	32 Lakh
SC and ST	41%
Total Literacy Rate	64%
Female Literacy	49%
Rural Population	93%
Sex Ratio (Female per 1000 males)	953
BPL Families	43%

Pradan in Bankura

Pradan started its work in Bankura in early 2005 from Saltora block on the western side. Gradually, the work expanded to Hirbandh. The work was primarily around integrated natural resource management, which also quickly came to the notice of the local panchayat. Over a period of time quite a strong relationship has evolved with the panchayat. Pradan and the panchayat started working together closely in implementing INRM activities, with the panchayat being the implementer and Pradan playing a facilitating and training role. Saltora and Hirbandh have been a learning ground for Pradan on how to scale up its

activities in collaboration with the panchayat. Currently we work in Saltora, Hirbandh and Bankura I.

Outreach as on January 31, 2008	Achievement	Target
Number of Villages	126	110
Number of SC Families	2620	2649
ST	1335	950
OBC	1350	1103
Others	589	389
Total	5894	5091

Approach and Strategy

Based on this experience, we have decided to adopt the following programme strategies:

- Integrated Natural Resources Management for enhancing production, reducing risk of the production system and increasing income level
- Non-farm activities such as poultry, goat rearing, tasar spinning/reeling and lac cultivation for the landless
- Promoting and nurturing women-managed SHGs as a platform for enabling the women so that they can help themselves and each other and act as financial intermediaries to mobilize credit from banks for livelihoods.

All these activities are to build capacities of the panchayat in planning and implementation which can be stated in brief as follows:

- Sensitizing the functionaries of the panchayat on pro-poor approaches through workshops and exposure visits.
- Identification, training and grooming a pool of resource persons in every block. These Resource Persons are to be selected from the local villages themselves. They will be paid from the panchayat and will report to the panchayat. Pradan's role will be to handhold these resource persons at the community level and provide ongoing training.
- Identifying, training and grooming other

community resource persons for other services such as Self Help Group accounts keeping, auditing, etc. These resource persons are to be paid by the community on user-fee basis.

Progress in the Past Year

In the past year, we focused on family-based livelihood planning. Reducing risks in the crop production system and enhancing returns by crop diversification and a better package of practices were the strategies adopted in improving agriculture-based livelihoods. We adopted an approach of training the local resource persons regularly, who in turn worked with the communities in helping them enhance farm-based incomes. With the assistance of 120 of these resource persons we were able to reach over 2000 families in our farm-based interventions, as detailed below:

Crop	No. of Families Involved Last Year
Kharif Paddy	1937
SRI Paddy	1010
Kharif Vegetables	1229
Arhar	224
Maize	463
Fisheries	418
Lac Cultivation	28

We maintained a family income enhancement focus. As the table above depicts, one family took more than one crop in order to earn a total income of about Rs 4000 on an average, with about 30% farmers earning more than Rs 6000, in one season.

In addition to the above crops, 450 families also established vermicompost units for manure, which they used in their own fields especially for vegetable cultivation.

This year, due to adequate rains, there was no major crop loss in paddy. The average yield of SRI and improved paddy were 5.1 ton per hectare and 4.3 ton per hectare, respectively. But due to heavy rain in some places kharif vegetables and maize did face losses. But in the rabi season, farmers are expecting more return from

vegetables, wheat and mustard. The rabi income data has not yet come. We are expecting at least Rs 5000 per family income enhancement from Rabi crops.

Crop	No. of Families involved last year
Rabi Vegetables	1086
Wheat	364
Mustard	298

Opportunities

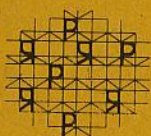
The team maintains its continuous engagement with the panchayati raj system at the state, district and local levels in order to reinforce the pro-poor and participatory approach that is gradually gaining ground. The effort is to ensure that the benefits from the panchayats actually flow to the poor and very poor families, rather than being cornered by the better-off families.

As a result, in Bankura-I and Hirbandh blocks, the Gram Panchayats (GPs) are favouring small water harvesting structures instead of re-excavating the existing big ponds. The GPs are asking the SHGs to implement the INRM plan in order to avoid intervention by contractors. The Gopalpur GP in Hirbandh block has released fund for lac cultivation to the SHGs. The Bankura-I block level panchayat samiti has planned to focus only on small water harvesting structures, soil and moisture conservation structures and plantation on uplands to benefit the poorer families.

Pradan is also gaining widespread acceptance in the area as a major developmental agency. The District Rural Development Cell (DRDC) has appointed PRADAN as SHG implementing agency under SGSY. The Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC), Mejia, has shortlisted Pradan as a partner in its Social Integration Programme to implement a large scale watershed development project.. Pradan has also been selected by the Bankura District Planning Committee for preparation of Comprehensive District Agriculture Plan based on INRM principles.



PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) is a voluntary organization registered under the Societies' Registration Act in Delhi. We work in selected villages in 7 states through small teams based in the field. The focus of our work is to promote and strengthen livelihoods for the rural poor. It involves organizing them, enhancing their capabilities, introducing ways to improve their incomes and linking them to banks, markets and other economic services. PRADAN comprises professionally trained people motivated to use their knowledge and skills to remove poverty by working directly with the poor. Engrossed in action, we often feel the need to reach out to each other in PRADAN as well as those in the wider development fraternity. NewsReach is one of the ways we seek to address this need. It is our forum for sharing thoughts and a platform to build solidarity and unity of purpose.



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