

News Reach

JUNE 2006

Volume 6 Number 6



Lead Article: Amjhari Realises its Potential 1
Tanmaya Mohanty describes how proactive community participation in Pradan's programme of tasar silkworm rearing has spelt success for the people of Amjhari in Jharkhand. Tanmaya is based in Dumka in Jharkhand.

Article: Coping with Water Scarcity II 6
Yatesh Yadav concludes the abstract of a multi-location study of water scarcity in eastern Rajasthan that has severe impacts on all aspects of life including health, agriculture and livestock. Yatesh is based in Dausa in Rajasthan.

Tool Kit: To Sustain the Lustre of Lac 11
Ashish Anand holds that innovative ways are required to promote and sustain lac cultivation in larger numbers in areas around Ranchi in Jharkhand. Ashish is based in Khunti near Ranchi in Jharkhand.

First Person: My Days in Pradan 17
Prashant Mishra narrates how starting work in a grassroots organisation in the remote and impoverished area of Sironj in Madhya Pradesh was a transforming experience. Prashant is a former Pradanite. He is presently working with Orbis India and is based in New Delhi.

9868217600
Sudhir Nath

0120 2513838

binny.kinn - Sawhney
@akdn-org.

Amjhari Realises its Potential

Proactive community participation in Pradan's programme of tasar silkworm rearing has spelt success for the people of Amjhari in Jharkhand

Tanmaya Mohanty

Amjhari is a poor tribal village in Raneshwar block of Dumka district in Jharkhand. This remotely located village is 6 km from the block office and 34 km from the district headquarter.

The terrain around the village is undulating with dense forest cover. All the 41 households in Amjhari are Santhals. The people depend on Kharif cultivation and tasar silkworm rearing in the neighbouring forests for their livelihoods.

Amjhari is poor in many respects. This is reflected in the mud houses, poor communication, poor land quality, lack of irrigation, and even in the lack of awareness on agriculture other than in the Kharif season.

Almost all the houses are *kutchha* (mud and assorted materials) with straw roofs. The undulating village topography leads to little fertile and cultivable land. There is no irrigation and the farmers are completely dependent on the monsoon for the single crop they cultivate. Amjhari is also poorly connected and becomes inaccessible in the rainy season since there is no *pucca* (metalled) road.

Its relative remoteness deprives it of benefits from the outer world such as awareness of government programme as block officials seldom visit the village. There is no primary school or health centre in the village. Health workers rarely visit. Villagers have to go to not-so-near Asanbani village to avail the public distribution system.

Remarkable Achievement

Despite these handicaps Amjhari has emerged as one of the best tasar silkworm rearing villages in the entire State in 2005-06. It was a matter of remarkable achievement for Amjhari and Pradan when Arjun Munda, the Chief Minister of Jharkhand, awarded Charles Marandi, a resident of Amjhari, for being the best rearer of tasar cocoons in Jharkhand at a ceremony at the Central Tasar Research and Training Institute in Ranchi on February 22-24, 2006.

The villagers have made the most of the relatively dense forests with many arjuna and asan trees, ideal host plants for the tasar silkworm. They took the advantage of a development programme to propel them into state prominence.

Pradan identified Amjhari in January 2005 while seeking to expand its tasar programme. In fact we thought that this was an excellent place to rear seed crops. Due to insufficient supply of DFLs (Disease Free Layings) from CSB (Central Silk Board), Pradan also wanted to increase the supply of seed.

Amjhari was suitable in many respects. Almost all households in Amjhari traditionally rear tasar cocoons on the abundant host trees in the surrounding forests. Its very isolation was suited for seed crops, as it would check spread of disease.

The villagers have been rearing tasar cocoons for centuries. It was however extremely unreliable as a source of income because the rearers depended on traditional methods and exposed the silkworms to

nature's vagaries. The traditional method often led to the spread of disease as the seed cocoons were multiplied without examination and washing. The villagers did not use nylon nets while rearing the seed cocoons to save them from predators. There was also a lack of awareness on various diseases and related preventive and curative methods. The yields were low due to a shortage of DFLs.

Initial Hurdles

In the beginning it was difficult for Pradan professionals to convince villagers to participate in the programme. It was primarily because Pradan had never worked in Amjhari. Even today there are no Pradan-promoted self-help groups (SHGs) in the village. In 2004-05, however, Pradan had intervened in tasar cocoon rearing in a few adjacent villages.

The reluctance of the villagers was evident from the poor attendance in the meetings we convened to seed the concept of Pradan's model of tasar silkworm rearing. We were however able to capture their interest by referring to the success of Pradan promoted cocoon rearing in the adjacent villages.

We then convened a daylong meeting with the villagers to discuss the pros and cons of cocoon cultivation. We discussed the drawbacks of the traditional methods that could be overcome by adopting Pradan's model of silkworm rearing. The advantages we delineated included:

- Availability of DFLs in desired quantities;
- Provision of two nylon nets per rearer, which would protect the worms from pest and predators;
- Provision of fertilisers and medicine to

improve leaf quality and health of the worms;

- Detailed training on advanced technology of silkworm rearing, and
- Provision of crop insurance in case of failure.

This induced some people in the village to show willingness to rear silkworm in the new way. The villagers were finally convinced to participate in a two-day commercial training programme conducted jointly by CSB and Pradan on June 27-28, 2005. The participants were selected keeping in mind a few criteria that included:

- They should be traditional rearers residing in Amjhari and have some knowledge of traditional rearing.
- They should have at least 250-300 tasar host plants (arjuna or asan).
- They should have enough manpower in their households.

The major contents of the training were how to select a rearing field based on selection criteria. The participants were also trained on pre-rearing preparation, which includes:

- Cleaning of rearing fields;
- Flame gunning to kill germs in the field;
- Foliar spray of pesticides to minimise pest attacks in the leaves;
- Foliar spray of urea to enhance leaf quality;
- Fertiliser application in the host plants;
- Applying lime and bleach on the rearing floor, and
- Proper set up of nylon nets in the chowki gardens to rear early stage worms.

The training also included proper handling and care of DFLs, maintaining hygienic conditions in the rearing field, harvesting of produce, storage, etc.

Besides training the participants on the techniques of the modern method, we also conducted a visioning exercise where villagers were encouraged to envision their position after 10 years. The vision exercise enabled the participants to project the following:

- Position of the household after 10 years.
- Population increase within the household.
- Division of family within the household.
- Division of land within the household.
- Landholding per divided family.
- Asset holding per divided family.
- Expected output from available resource and assets.

At the end of the exercise the villagers realised that after 10 years the average landholding of each household would decrease but the number of consumers would increase due to the increase in population. They also realised that agriculture alone would not be able to meet their needs.

They therefore decided to protect their rearing fields so that they are able to earn some additional income through rearing tasar silkworms by following modern scientific methods. The training concluded after the participants agreed on a timeline for the various tasks in the coming rearing season.

Tasar Vikas Samiti

We then facilitated the forming of a village-level Tasar Vikas Samiti (TVS) that would co-ordinate the implementation of activities related to tasar. The purpose of forming the institution is to ensure proactive participation and to build a sense of ownership of the people in the programme.

The TVS was formed in a general body meeting in Amjhari where all the residents of the village participated. Those persons directly or indirectly involved in tasar rearing and those who had rearing fields were inducted as members in the TVS. For focussed and efficient functioning, three leaders (President, Secretary and Treasurer) were chosen through voting.

The Amjhari TVS discharged its responsibilities remarkably well. It identified people who were interested in rearing, had a sufficient number of host plants and adequate manpower in their households. It ensured that the rearing fields were selected in such a way that they were away from any waterlogged areas and was well aired.

The TVS also collected money to buy DFLs. It handled the indenting of inputs, and their procurement and distribution. It distributed the DFLs systematically, which meant that those who had deposited the money in advance and prepared their fields properly got the seeds first.

The TVS met once a week to review progress and to plan for the future. It deployed a special committee on a rotational basis to monitor the crop. It also deployed a service provider to look after the progress in rearing and provide necessary information to Pradan.

The constant efforts of the TVS and the hard work of all the 41 rearers resulted in an excellent harvest. The Amjhari rearers produced more than 3.5 lakh cocoons from about 4,500 DFLs, with an average of more than 78 cocoons per DFL. This is almost double the standard average of 40 cocoons per DFL. Some rearers were able to produce as many as 120 cocoons per DFL!

Bypassing Moneylenders

After the harvest, the rearers decided to sell the cocoons collectively to avoid exploitation by local moneylenders. Exploitative money lending, particularly in tasar cocoon cultivation, is very prevalent in this area. Pradan is yet to promote SHGs for savings and credit in Amjhari. As a result, the main source of credit resides with local mahajans, who lend at an exorbitant interest rate of 50%, besides asking the households to mortgage their major assets such as cattle and land. The local traders have an informal association through which they divide their area of tasar producing villages.

These traders attempt to associate themselves with rearers from the very beginning of the crop cycle. They provide rearers with cash advances with the proviso that the entire produce is sold to them. Since there are no other sources of credit in the area, people are forced to borrow from the traders and are compelled to sell their produce to them at a disadvantage.

Although the moneylenders offer a high price for the cocoons, they cheat the people in the selection and counting process. They maximise their profits by rejecting a large number of cocoons as defective and paying one-tenth the price to these so-called defective cocoons. They also manipulate the counting process so that a farmer ends up being a loser.

Amjhari attracted many local moneylenders due to the unprecedented harvest. They offered a pretty high price of Rs 1 per cocoon but neglected to fix the price of defective cocoons. The price of defective cocoons was sharply negotiated. As a result they fetched a price of 10 paise per cocoon

and even less. Some of the rearers started negotiating with the traders but the TVS called a meeting and convince everybody not to sell their produce to the traders.

Earlier the villagers did not have much option in selling their produce and therefore, had nobody to turn to besides the local traders. This time, however, Pradan linked them with the reeling centres promoted by it. The villagers were thus able to get a reasonable price for their produce (76 paise per good cocoon and 20 paise per defective cocoon). The fixing of prices and distribution of the money were done in a transparent manner in a meeting attended by CSB officials and Pradan professionals.

The cocoons produced in Amjhari fetched a cumulative price of more than Rs 2.6 lakh. The average income per household was more than Rs 6,000. Almost all rearers performed above par. It also resulted in the State award for Charles Marandi.

Dreams Fulfilled

Most participants of the programme were able to fulfil their dreams by spending the income from tasar cocoons in ways they had long desired. Suniram Murmu was able to tile the straw roof of his house. Madan Kisku sent his two children to a mission school for better education. Samuel Murmu purchased two bullocks and is expecting to reap benefits in agriculture in the coming season. Charles Marandi saved some money in the local bank for his daughter's marriage. Most of the villagers preferred to convert their straw roofs into tiled roofs.

The benefits of scientific methods of rearing tasar silkworms have galvanised the people of Amjhari. They want to repeat their feat and have decided to get involved

in the programme from the very beginning. This year they plan an early cleaning of the rearing fields. The TVS has also decided they it would promote seed crop rearing through four rearers. They have also decided to set up two grainages to ensure guaranteed supply of DFLs to all the rearers for the commercial crop.

This is the story of one village, which achieved its potential through a developmental programme. They have realised that their success depends on proactive participation, timely intervention in all related activities, and collective action through the TVS.

Pradan's role in this transformation has been to build capacity in the community through mobilisation, concept seeding and training. It promoted the village-level institution and strengthened it through regular meetings and monitoring. It also established the linkages that the TVS is now equipped to sustain and take forward. We have learnt anew that implementation of a programme through ensuring community participation and ownership definitely leads to success.

There are many more villages like Amjhari who have not being able to realise their potential. Pradan professionals need to identify the potential through proper assessment and build up the capacities of the communities in a sustainable manner. We need to always keep in mind that community participation and ownership is the key to a successful intervention. If we are able to ensure this, there are many Amjharis waiting to bloom.

NewsReach Livelihoods Compendium

Are you a grassroots professional trying out new and innovative ideas in the field?

Does your organisation work to promote livelihoods for the rural poor?

Are you on the look out for tested and successful interventions for the poorest of the poor?

NewsReach Livelihoods Compendium could deepen and broaden your knowledge about successful programmes implemented amongst the poor in the poorest states of India.

NewsReach Livelihoods Compendium is a collection of cases, narratives and articles about Pradan's livelihood promotion programmes. Most of these have been documented by professionals in the field. For your own copy (Rs 80, postage extra) write to Smita Mohanty at 3, CSC, Niti Bagh, New Delhi - 110 049 or email her at smitamohanty@pradan.net.

Coping with Water Scarcity II

Water scarcity in eastern Rajasthan has severe impacts on all aspects of life including health, agriculture and livestock

Yatesh Yadav

Future of Agriculture

The study also conducted a survey among 120 young persons from farmer families across social classes in 10 villages in Dausa, Alwar and Dholpur districts (see box 6). Out of these four villages are close to an urban centre while the rest are more remotely located. These respondents were between 18 years and 30 years of age and were directly or indirectly related to agriculture.

Seventy-six percent of the respondents said that their family's main livelihood was agriculture. Significantly, 20% of the respondents' families depended primarily on wage labour. Sixty-two percent of the families had earnings from livestock and only 16% had agriculture as their secondary livelihood.

Most of the respondents belonged to small and marginal farmer families. A majority (54%) owned between 0.4 and 1 ha of land and 11% possessed less than 0.4 ha of land. Most of the respondents' families suffered from indebtedness (82%). While 47% had taken loans less than Rs 20,000, about 47% have to repay loans ranging from Rs 20,000 to Rs 40,000 and 9% had taken loans of more than Rs 40,000. Given the economic profile of the respondents, the incidence of indebtedness was quite high.

Loans are generally taken from local moneylenders on high interest rates ranging from 24% to 60% annually. Loans were taken for marriages, death ceremonies, purchasing livestock, deepening wells, installing pumps, buying medicines, etc.

Box 6: Youth Profile

District	Villages	Respondent	SC	ST	Others
Dausa	7	62	21	27	14
Dholpur	2	50	5	42	3
Alwar	1	8	1	0	7
Total	10	120	27	69	24
Education					
Illiterate	Primary	Secondary	College	Professional Education	Possession of non-farm skills
24	39	47	10	0	20
20%	32.5%	39.17%	8.33%	0	17%

Note: Non-farm skills include driving, motor mechanic, mason, bike mechanic, sewing, etc.

It is clear from the survey that farmers are diversifying their livelihoods portfolio because income from agriculture is not able to sustain family needs. Only 4% of the respondents reported more than 70% family income from agriculture. A majority (74%) reported that agriculture contributed less than 50% of their families' incomes.

A large number of the youth (52%) is migrating in search of jobs to the district headquarter or Jaipur, Delhi and Ahmedabad. Most engage in unskilled wage labour (54%). Very few get service jobs.

Most of the youth were uncertain about their future. Most (68%) wanted to shift to non-farm activities. Although the most popular choice was to start an urban non-farm activity (58%), a significant number (25%) were willing to go for rural non-farm alternatives.

The respondents cited lack of capital to start new non-farm activity as the major hindrance in shifting to non-farm activities from agriculture, along with other constraints like lack of technical education. Low income was reported as the main reason (64%) for shifting from agriculture.

Sixty-two percent of the respondents were willing to continue farming along with their non-farm activities. But a significant percentage (37%) would lease out their

land if they could sustain a non-farm activity. Almost none of them wanted to sell off their land once they shifted from agriculture since it is only fixed asset they have. It is clear that the people needed to diversify their livelihood portfolio to sustain diversified family needs.

Most of the youth (77.5%) did not want their children to opt for agriculture as a livelihood. Most of them wanted that their children should engage in non-farm or service activities where the income flow is certain.

Water Scarcity and Livestock

The study component on water scarcity and livestock was conducted in 5 villages of Dausa and Dholpur districts. We interacted with 63 livestock rearers (see box 7). Most of the rearers were illiterate (almost 62%). Only nine respondents had matriculated, including one graduate.

Most of the rearers were small and marginal landholders. There were 6 landless families. For the rest average landholding was a meagre 1.09 ha, out of which 0.59 ha was under supplemental irrigation and the remaining depended on the rains.

Among the respondents, goat (37%) and sheep (23%) were the dominant livestock along with buffalo (20%), local cows (13%) and crossbred cows (7%). Significantly,

Box 7: Profile of Livestock Rearers

District	Villages	Respondents	SC	ST	Others
Dausa	4	44	14	21	9
Dholpur	1	19	11	0	8
Total	5	63	25	21	17

Box 8: Milk Yields

(Litres/lactation)			
	Existing	Expected	Assumption
Cattle	672	1,080	4 litre/day for 270 lactation days
Crossbred Cow	1,135	1,890	7 litre/day for 270 lactation days
Buffalo	1,268	1,440	6 litre/day for 240 lactation days

more than 63% of the respondents reared buffaloes, 35% reared goats and 33% owned crossbred cows. Only 10% reared sheep and 24% owned local cows.

The study showed that most of the rearing practices were traditional. Goat and sheep were mainly reared through grazing. People hardly fed them at home. However, buffaloes were mainly stall-fed. A family member grazed the animals for about 6–9 hours. During rainy season almost all animals (except milking buffaloes and cows) were sent out for grazing.

The fodder for stall-fed animals is mainly met by crop residues. During the rainy season, cut grasses are the main fodder. Especially grown fodder contributed little to the total fodder demand (2.1% in Kharif and 12.7% in Rabi). Stall-fed animals were mainly fed crop residue in summer.

Most of the rearers fed the animals in small and low feeders. Almost all rearers did not have a waterer. In all cases, higher than recommended dry fodder was given. The animals were hardly given any concentrates and green fodder. Green fodder cultivation is directly related to water availability. Since water is scarce in the area, very little green fodder is given to animals. Nutritional deficiency caused due to repeated breeding, late conception and low milk yields was reported from almost respondents.

Grazing animals largely drank from common sources like ponds and rivers and stall-fed animals were given water at home after fetching it from wells or hand pumps. In summer, the animals were watered twice a day (morning and evening) and once at noon in winters. The rearers provided an average of 9.02 litres per day per animal throughout the year. The distance to fetch water varied from near home to 1 km.

The dry summer and winter months lead to water crises for animals. Rearers in the Daang region of Dholpur migrate from the last week of January or from February till the rains arrive. The Daang is severely water scarce where animals drink only rain-harvested water, which gives out in January.

The study found a gap between water provided to animals and their actual requirements. The gap is wider in the case of crossbred cows, whose water requirement is about 50–60 litres per day but only around 30–40 litres per day was provided. It was similar in all other cases.

Low water consumption led to low milk production. Unhealthy water (such as with high fluorides, TDS, etc.) affected livestock performance. There were cases of repeated breeding and late conception in animals due to these problems. Scarce water greatly affects the bathing of animals. Lactating animals may get a bath but not others.

Grazing animals may get a bath if common ponds have sufficient depth of water, which is rare.

The deficient feeding and watering practices have led to low milk production. Average milk production from all milk animals was much lower than expected, if proper feed and watering was available (see box 8). Livestock rearers are therefore getting very low returns due to water scarcity.

Water Scarcity and Dalits

Water scarcity has negative implications for the weaker sections of society like Dalits. The study looked at water scarcity and how it affects the Dalits in four villages in Dausa and one village in Dholpur. There were 57 respondents from the community. A majority of the Dalit households were marginal cultivators. The total landholding of 57 respondents amounted to a meagre 17 ha (average .3 ha), out of which more than 13 ha did not have any kind of irrigation, indicating low water accessibility for agriculture for Dalits.

A majority of the respondents (59%) depended mainly on wage labour for their livelihood. Only 32% of the respondents cited agriculture as their main livelihood and 9% as non-farm activities. Most of the respondents were chronically poor. Seventy-three percent of the respondents had family incomes less than Rs 2,000 per month. Only 2% of the families earned more than Rs 4,000 a month and 25% earned between Rs 2,000 and Rs 4,000. None of the respondents earned more than Rs 10,000 a month.

Most of the respondent households (53) had to fetch domestic water from a common

source in their village or hamlet. About 30 respondents reported that upper caste people avoided water from these common sources. A huge amount of time and energy went into collecting water for domestic purposes. Since it is the women who collect water, they spent a lot of time and energy to meet their families' water needs.

Summers are well known for water crises in Rajasthan. The problem becomes more acute in the case of Dalits. Significantly, 12 respondents reported water scarcity even in other seasons, indicating water is scarcer for a Dalit. Very few families responded positively on water supply from the government. Generally families took help of neighbours to fetch water from the latter's water sources. These families largely have their irrigation wells, which act as a secondary water source for the Dalits. Dalit families had nothing to pay back to these families for the support they get in fetching water. It was perhaps the only positive aspect revealed by the study.

Most of families reported that decisions about common water sources were mainly taken by the dominant caste in the village. In very few cases the entire village took decisions regarding rules and regulations of water distribution.

Most respondents were unhappy about the quality of water. Only 20 families reported satisfactory water quality in the rainy season. More than 40 families reported frequent cases of dysentery, typhoid and stomach upset, which is prevalent among the Dalits.

Ways Ahead

India has had a longstanding tradition of water management built on rainwater har-

vesting. It still survives in some parts of Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and the Northeast. Farmers of the eastern Rajasthan traditionally have experience of water harvesting. The traditional water harvesting systems are paals, taals, bawdis, pokhars, johads, etc. Paals are largely built on cultivated land to harvest water to add to good crop yields. Taals and Johads are common water-harvesting structures largely used to water animals, and for other common use. Bawdi are stepped wells and are used mainly for domestic purposes. Pokhars are prevalent in the Daang area of Aravali hills. The water harvested in pokhars is used for domestic, animal and agriculture purposes.

The green revolution and increased population along with other factors increased land prices and large areas, which was earlier paals, taals and johads have been converted into agriculture fields. The remaining structures remain unattended due to ownership transfer or family division and are often non-functional.

Several NGOs have taken initiatives to revive the traditional water harvesting systems. These include Seva Mandir, Sadguru Foundation and Grameen Vikas Trust initiatives in southern Rajasthan, Tarun Bharat Sangh and Pradan initiatives in eastern Rajasthan. For instance, communities have revived paals with support of Pradan, which has had a remarkable impact on groundwater, agriculture and people's life. There are still a large number of these traditional structures that can be revived.

The government has also initiated a number of schemes for water harvesting like IWDP (Integrated Waste Land development Project), DPAP (Drought Prone Area

Project), watersheds under EAS (Employment Assurance Scheme), Hariyali, NWDP (National Wasteland Development Project), etc. Drought relief programmes also focus on digging of ponds, construction of new ponds, etc. The government also constructs big irrigation structures. These big water bodies have been rather successful. Recently, the Rajasthan government has launched a Jal Sanrakshan Abhiyan (water conservation campaign) on a large scale.

Despite all these the people continue to face acute water scarcity. The study has found that there is a huge gap between harvested and extracted water. It is therefore imperative that more intense efforts are made to harvest rainwater, a huge potential that is presently untapped. There is urgent need to harvest each and every raindrop.

It is clear from the study that water scarcity is affecting the lives of people in eastern Rajasthan. There are no many options left to deal with situation except 'valuing' each drop of rain, harvesting it, preserving it and using optimally.

Concluded

9234300569
Tata
09431370532
9934170814
To Sustain the Lustre of Lac

Innovative ways are required to promote and sustain lac cultivation in larger numbers in areas around Ranchi in Jharkhand

Ashish Anand

{ 15th Oct.
Khunti
Based
Narendra Nath
SHG }

Tripura
Chaibasa
(CKP)
2 hrs

The ways to promote livelihoods are many. There are many factors at play: existing capabilities of the targeted people, resources available locally, different methodologies, capabilities of the change agent and others. I have professionally come across a few ways in my three years in Pradan.

Promoting lac cultivation has been one of them. I still remember my rookie days in August-September 2003 when Pradan was seeding the concept of lac cultivation in Jharkhand. I still remember that my senior colleague Binju and I went to Churgi village in Khunti block in Ranchi to share the concept of cultivating lac using modern techniques with the community. Bhagirath Dabul, an old friend of the team, had gone to ask the people to gather while we waited in his house.

Eye Opener

At the meeting I found that the package of practices of lac cultivation was not too complicated, did not require too much input, and wanted but a negligible number of labour days in a year compared with other agricultural activities. The returns it fetches compared with labour and input costs were quite handsome. Despite these advantages, number of lac farmers was decreasing every year.

On the way back from the village I was grappling with many questions about the viability and prospect of lac cultivation in the tribal areas of Jharkhand. When I shared my concerns with Binju, he gave me few documents and notes on the lac experience of Pradan's Khunti team. These gave me the first ideas of lac (see box 1).

Box 1: Lac Basics

India and Thailand are the main areas where lac is cultivated. Over 90% of Indian lac is produced in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Orissa. Jharkhand is one of the major producers of lac in the country. The principal lac producing areas in Jharkhand are Ranchi, West Singhbhum, Saraikela, Gumla and Simdega districts.

Lac is a natural substance secreted from the female lac insect. The male insect dies soon after mating. These parasitic insects can survive only on fresh twigs of some selected host plants such as Palas (*Butea monosperma*), Ber (*Zizyphus mauritiana*), Kusum (*Schleichera oleosa*), Semialata, Peepal, and few others. In order to protect themselves, these insects secrete a kind of fluid that solidifies to form a crust around them so that they can grow safely inside. The covering is considered valuable.

Lac insects in India are of two types: Rangeeni and Kusumi. There are differences in the quality of secretion, choice of host plants, cultivation period, market value, etc. between Rangeeni and Kusumi. Both strains have two lifecycles in a year.

The lac insect supplies resins, dyes and waxes used commercially to manufacture a wide range of products that include adhesives, paints, varnishes, pills and capsule coats, coatings for confectioneries, coatings for fruits and vegetables, insulators, edible colours, dye agents, cosmetic products, controlled release medicines, fertilisers, etc.

Rearing lac insects is a traditional activity for tribal families in this part of the state. Lac holds a special place in their livelihood cycle. India produces 65% of total production of lac and in that Jharkhand amounts to about 60%. Ranchi district alone contributes to 68% of the state's production. A study by ILRI shows that the income from lac is next to the income from the Kharif paddy (28% of the total).

However, lac rearing is termed as highly unpredictable as scientific methods are still evolving. Adoption of modern techniques is very low. There might be a bumper crop in a year and a dismal showing in the next.

The year 1999 proved to be a near fatal year for the sector. Temperatures rose alarmingly. Loss of crop was widespread and almost total. As a result, the brood was also lost, posing serious problems of availability in the next year. Shortage of brood also resulted from excessive profiteering by middlemen and factory owners. To cater to foreign demand they raised the price of crude lac substantially (to as much as Rs

150 a kg), compelling farmers to cut even brood lac, thus worsening the situation. A lot of farmers stopped rearing lac.

Brief Background

Pradan's Khunti team started promoting lac cultivation in 2001 in two villages of Torpa block. Progress in the first year was insignificant because the number of participants were too low to ascertain the impact of a scientific intervention, since a good harvest depends many factors.

In the second year the team collaborated with the government of Jharkhand and ILRI (Indian Lac Research institute). We continued with our efforts in the third and fourth years, learning new things and overcoming various obstacles on our way.

We realised that the sector was dying due to lack of awareness of modern techniques and government apathy. Migration from the sector was the order of the day. Most traditional lac growing villages were leaving the occupation. But our consistent efforts starting paying off in the fourth year, when

Box 2: Stabilising Production

One of the major problems of this sector in the recent past has been the instability of prices and frequent price crash in the local markets. This has led to lack of interest among farmers and production has come down drastically in the recent past. Experts in the field say that the Indian lac industry is totally dependent on the export market and the uncertainty of production leading to the uncertainty of prices make foreign buyers wary of entering it. This scenario is coupled with low level of penetration of proper training, capacity building and extension efforts on improved technology for lac production by NGOs, resource institutions and the state government agencies.

It is important to understand that without interventions to stabilise the production, prices cannot be stabilised. Simply intervening in the market through procurement and other methods of price administration are not sufficient. To bring stability to the sector, stabilisation of production through intervention in technology coupled with backward (brood lac producers) and forward linkages (community based lac procurement agents) are absolutely critical.

Box 3: Scientific Package of Practices of Lac

Pradan's package of practices covers three major intervention points on which production is dependent. Number one is scientific pruning. Lac insects require soft and tiny twigs to survive and pruning plays an important role. It is not a new activity we are proposing; people already know its importance. The second intervention point is brood estimation and inoculation in net bags. Over and under inoculation is always suicidal. Scientific estimation gives the amount of insects a tree can bear. With the brood come predators. Inoculation in net bags prevents predators to damage the lac insects. Our third intervention point is spraying of insecticides and pesticides. This is again important as like other crop, insects and fungi can damage lac. Apart from spraying of insecticides and pesticides, all the steps were also followed in the traditional method. The only thing is that the new package of practices has added cause and effect to each and every step of the intervention.

we were able to favourably change the perspective of the outer world and the government regarding the sector.

We started in 2001 with a clear vision to establish and stabilise production (see box 2). We took the help of ILRI to discover the reasons that were damaging the crop and making the occupation more vulnerable. We also devised a package of practices (PoP) that does not vary too much from the traditional method but makes it more logical and less risky a livelihood (see box 3).

A Long Journey

When I look back to the days in 2003, a line of a great Urdu poet comes to my mind: Mai akela hi chala tha janwe manjil ki or, log aate gaye karwa barta gaya (I started for the destination alone, people started coming and the march proceeded).

After completing my village stay and attending the orientation programme, I was rearing to go to the field. The month was October, a crucial time for the Rangeeni variety of lac. Our main focus was on stabilisation of production without intervention in the brood. Our assumption was that there are some brood surplus areas and

some brood deficit areas. So, even without intervening in the brood sector, bridging the gap between the areas can stabilise production. Once the production was stabilised, the people will automatically go for the second cycle of the crop.

In 2003 more than 450 farmers registered with us for the scientific cultivation of lac. The major challenge was to procure brood and supply it to the farmers. The total brood requirement was 54 quintals. I jumped into the fray when full-fledged procurement of brood was going on.

Tamar, Bandgaon, Gulu, Maranghata, Hembrom, Syeko – all the names of the local markets was on my lips. The entire season (October- November) the team was busy in procurement and deployment of brood lac in the villages. So much so that I initially thought that people are joining our programme because they do not have their own brood and therefore, brood is the most important point of intervention in the entire programme.

It was true to an extent. Most people did join the programme because of the brood and spraying machine. But we found it was

harder to convince the people that inoculation in net bags and spraying was as important as getting the brood.

The result in 2003 was not too encouraging for the team. The average conversion rate (from stick lac to scraped lac) was 2.73 times. But the farmers did not lose. But the major gain that year was that the views of mainstream institutions like banks and insurance companies changed favourably. They were earlier reluctant to enter the sector due to the various uncertainties. BASIX also facilitated insurance. As a result, the farmer did get something even in the face of failure.

Convincing the farmers on our various intervention points were still a challenge. But that did affect the increasing number of farmers joining in the effort. In 2004 we touched a mark of 850 participants and the total brood requirement shot up to 87 quintals.

This made us think how long could this continue. Each year the number of participants was increasing and so is the demand of brood. We had to devise ways to make the programme sustainable. We needed to answer some hard questions. Was our objective just procurement and deployment of brood or mitigating the risks of production? How long can we rely on a single area for the supply of brood?

In 2005 we somehow managed to meet the demand for brood along with BASIX. But it turned out to be a bad year. Temperature in March (the main growth period of lac) went up to an unprecedented 38°C. The heat caused widespread death and the whole area received a jolt. The prices of lac rose to Rs 150 per kg and even the brood lac

were cut and sold as scraped lac to meet the demand of factory owners.

2005: A Turning Point

Based on my experience in promoting lac cultivation, I think two things are important to successfully promote lac cultivation. Currently lac cultivation takes place only once a year. Unless it is converted into a round the year activity, the progress we have made in the past years would be difficult to sustain.

Secondly, brood lac is a critical input in the programme. However, we do not presently have much control over it. The success or failure of our programme depends on this external factor, that too on a particular patch in the forest. We need to address this.

My fears came true in 2005. A record 970 farmers registered themselves to cultivate lac. We went to the same patch for the brood. Meanwhile, preparations were in full swing in the villages: readying the net bags, training the service providers, establishing brood cutting and packing centres, etc.

The brood never arrived. So in the middle of October (an absolutely critical period), our supplier from the same patch informed that two other buyers had offered him much higher rates. We frantically started looking for brood elsewhere. We went to Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. By then it was end of November and end of the inoculation period.

Only 330 families (out of 970) inoculated their trees, that too from their own brood. The programme received a major jolt, forcing us to reconsider our strategy.

This has been on my mind for some time and I thought of cultivating lac also on palas and kusum trees (also excellent hosts for lac), apart from the ber trees that our families favoured for the Rangeeni variety. I chose four villages as my starting points. It was difficult to convince the people but they came around when they realised how important it was for them to have their own brood.

People in these areas do not cultivate lac on palas and kusum although one single kusum tree can fetch almost Rs 20,000 in a year. Ber grows close to their homes. Palas and kusum trees are mostly in the jungle and people fear their harvest being stolen. Since the trees are not used and cared for, their canopies are poorly developed.

I suggested self-help groups (SHG) members help each other in this regard. They finally pruned the palas trees and inoculated their kusum trees in February (for the Kusumi variety). More than 50 farmers registered to participate.

Thanks are also due to ILRI, which helped in arranging brood lac at a subsidised rate. We procured more than two quintals and deployed it in the villages. To our surprise, the farmers paid the entire amount for the brood the very next day.

The next day I along with the extension cadres arranged for a village camp. To insure inoculation in net bags and at proper pruning points, we formed a lac dasta (lac task force), to monitor the progress in the four Kusumi villages. The insects emerged and started feeding on kusum leaves, to everybody's delight.

The crop is mature today and the harvest

looks to be very good. The conversion rate from brood to harvest is expected to be six times. From just the phunki (lac by product) farmers have recovered 70% of their costs.

Multi-Layered Cultivation

Kusum requires 18 months after the pruning to be inoculated. This is a rather long period. So the trees are divided into three parts. We suggest that the farmers prune the first part in February, the next after six months and the third, six months after that.

By doing so, when the third part is pruned, the first part is ready for inoculation. After six months the second part is ready and the first ready to harvest. At this point we suggest that the brood be cut from the first part and inoculated in the second part. Input costs are done away with, except labour. The same tree is used as a mother unit as well as for commercial production of Kusumi lac.

Brood Matters

We have also taken the issue of cultivating brood lac seriously. Brood is usually grown on palas, which are in abundance in the forest in our operational area. We managed to prune palas trees by the end of February after a great deal of difficulty.

Here I deviated a bit from the social work ethic that stresses on people's participation for the success of a programme. I spoke with several farmers but none were enthusiastic about pruning the palas trees. Even after several meetings there were very few takers.

It was February and time was running out. I with the extension cadre took a hard

decision. We took permission from tree owners and started pruning the trees ourselves. After a couple of days the people started participating. So much so that 200 farmers in seven villages registered to grow brood lac on palas. Arranging for Rangeeni brood posed no problems.

The results are for all to see. Today the white brood is hanging in profusion from the twigs of the palas as if it is flowering white after blooming red in March. We keep our fingers crossed as inoculation arrives. Perhaps in October we would get brood marked 'cultivated in our own villages'.

Coupe on Ber

We have not restricted the brood intervention to only palas. At the suggestion of ILRI we are also testing a new way, coupes on ber trees. It is not a totally new technique. People in our area preserve their brood in ber trees also.

A ber tree can have multiple of pruning points and canopy. It is seen that lac incrustation is low in the upper part of the canopy. The Rangeeni crop matures in May and the hatching of eggs takes place in June-July. If the crop can be left for another two months, it converts into brood.

We have now suggested that while pruning, leave out some of the branches (30-35%), which bear low incrustation of lac and prune the rest. The tiny insect will emerge in June-July from the left out branches, which can be used as brood.

This can now be either used in palas or even in the same tree in newly emerging shoots (since most of the stick is uncovered of lac). In October the canopy will

again be developed. By that time the brood is ready in the upper part of the tree, which has been self-inoculated. The tree would produce its own requirement of brood without depending upon foreign inoculation.

Spraying of insecticide and pesticide is a crucial part in this intervention. Till date inoculation is complete in palas and the self-inoculated bers have seen the emergence of insects. We are hoping for the best.

Present a New Idea for Peer Review

Pradan has always been in the forefront in innovating on new ideas that could be implemented at the grassroots. **Concept Papers** in NewsReach are a way to share and air new untested ideas to solicit peer feedback. If you have a new idea you would like to test before implementing, send us a 2,000 word **Concept Paper**. If you have experience or views on any **Concept Paper** that would help the author, email us at newsreach@pradan.net.

My Days in Pradan

Starting work in a grassroots organisation in the remote and impoverished area of Sironj in Madhya Pradesh was a transforming experience

Prashant Mishra

It was a dusty day of April 2002 when I started off from Bhopal for Sironj in Vidisha district of Madhya Pradesh, where I had been recruited by Pradan to work as a Development apprentice. I had just passed out from Indian Institute of Forest Management (IIFM), Bhopal after completing my PGDFM in March. It was on day minus one of the placements in IIFM that I got through for Pradan. Pradan came for recruitment a day earlier than scheduled.

I was keen on joining a grassroots NGO because firstly I wanted some good firsthand experience of working with the community directly and secondly, I used to feel indebted due to the money that the government spent over me while in IIFM.

I had imagined that Sironj would be a well-connected place. After all, it was only 120 km from Bhopal, the capital of Madhya Pradesh. Vidisha is also connected by train but I had seen in the map that Sironj is somewhat away from the railway line.

"So what?" I had thought, "40 km is nothing. I can cover that much within 45 minutes and get aboard a train for home." But that was not to be, as I later found out.

We started off from Berasia bus stand in Bhopal on a bus labelled non-stop. I was full of excitement. After all, it was my first job! I had imagined so much about the place. I used to imagine a one storied building on the side of a highway (like the Pradan office in Kesla is situated) and I used to think that it would be like a flat (like the office of Amhi Amachya Arogyasathi, an NGO in Garhchirolli, Maharashtra where I had visited before). I kept

thinking about the work that I would do and how I would use the learning from IIFM.

While I was thinking the bus had covered the good patch of road of about 40 km from Bhopal. We crossed Berasia and voila! The bus became a roller coaster ride, jumping and jerking over a road so full of potholes that I was reminded of the surface of the moon full of craters that I had seen in the National Geographic! I could not believe that roads just 40 km out of the state capital and that too in the constituency of the brother of the Chief Minister can be that bad.

The Tire goes Boom!

I was soon to realise that it was just a beginning. Soon the passengers and the luggage were falling on each other. The bus was already overloaded but I had a window seat and got enough oxygen along with the dust to remain conscious to register the unprecedented travel in my life. There came a bridge on a river (Sagad, I later came to know) and right in the middle of that bridge, the rear tire of the bus went flat. I thanked my stars, not for the flat tire, but for the opportunity to get down from the bus that seemed like a cattle truck and be a human being for a few minutes again.

I looked around and found what government records and IIFM books called forest - a thoroughly exploited scrubland in which only the stumps of once densely found teak trees were found. It looked apologetic to me for not looking as a forest at all.

I was looking at the vegetables sown in the riverbed under the bridge when the conductor of the bus started calling everybody aboard. I

was surprised at the speed at which they had replaced the flat tire with the spare. Later a co-passenger told me that it is so common that the conductor and the cleaner have become experts in that particular activity.

Over Forest and Field

We moved a little ahead and I realised that suddenly the bus has left the road and is traversing through someone's field, which, it being post harvest, was devoid of any vegetation. The bus was going away from the road, deeper and deeper in the fields and I was trying to understand what the poor devil was up to. A point came when the road could not be seen anymore and this guy is driving the bus right to the fringes of the forest and on the fields.

I thought that some one has hijacked the bus, and all the passengers including yours truly have been taken hostage. I knew that I was going to join a grassroots organisation and that it will definitely not pay a single penny in ransom for me, because at that point of time, they did not even know how I looked like.

I looked around to see the reaction of co-passengers. Most had an exasperated look on their faces – faces smeared with sweat, dust and the smoke – but none had the bewildered look that I carried.

They were looking sympathetically at me and I was not able to understand how these guys can keep their cool. By that time the bus had left the fields and was deep inside the scrubland. We were going through the forest tracks used by the head loaders and illegal woodcutters and the forest staff. This was a bit too much for me.

I poked my elbow in the ribs to the co-passenger sleeping (miraculously!) beside me.

"Yes?" he enquired, angrily on being woken up from his bumpy siesta, "What is it?" "Bhai Saab," I said, trying to placate his discomfort of being woken up in a middle of a beautiful dream maybe, "*Aap ko kuch gad bad nahin lag raha hai?*" (Don't you find something amiss?)"

He looks up and down, right and left, and then says, "What?" "Look around," I said "We are in the middle of nowhere and I think there is something terribly wrong." "Yes, it is," he says, "Even the forest tracks and wheat fields of Madhya Pradesh are better than the roads!"

Saved!

True to his words, I saw the bus again changing its course, this time away from the forest and the fields and after another 15 minutes, we were back on the road, but in order to avoid the small stretch of 15 km of absolutely terrible road (other patches are plainly horrible. There are degrees of horror in the roads of MP), we had spent close to one hour going through the forests and the fields. It was my first experience of the vehicles leaving the highway and braving the forest and the fields.

Finally, spending each second in the fond remembrance of the roads of Char Imli, the abode of the bureaucrats in Bhopal, where even the side lanes (meant for the mighty pets of the burra sahebs to relieve themselves) are comparable with the Western Express Highway between Mumbai and Poona, I approached Sironj town. Surprisingly, the bus was still in one piece (congratulations TELCO!).

I saw a nice building, which heightened my spirits of finding more such buildings in my abode for next few years. It was a hospital, perched on the plateau that overlooks Sironj town. The next moment our bus was going down the plateau to reach the bus stand of Sironj.

I got down and many auto rickshaw drivers surrounded me at the very instant. "Kahan jaana hai, Sir?" asked one. "Pradan Office," I said. "Where?" "Above Khargosh Bidi factory," I explained. "Accha accha. Pradhan walon ke yahan jaana hai? Chaliye!" he said, to my relief.

"Pradhan? As in headman of the village? Interesting," I could not hide my grin. The autowallah shrugged. I got into the auto, put my luggage (an airbag and a sleeping bag) in the back and we drove off.

We drove on roads covered with the flagstones - something I had not seen for a long time since I went in some very interior, old streets of my hometown, Rewa. Between the flagstones, there were the drains, open ones, about 3 inches wide and 5 inches deep from individual houses to the main drain that ran parallel to the road. These smaller drains had flagstone sidings and so one can actually drive a vehicle over it, without damaging either the vehicle or the drain. Also, it is very convenient for the sweepers to clean the open drains. I looked around - old, decrepit buildings, crumbling havelis, small fortresses. It was clear that I have arrived into a part of history studied with remains of the past.

First Impressions

I was looking around when the auto rickshaw stopped. "Aa gaya, sir," announced the autowallah. "Kitna," I asked, getting out of the auto with my luggage. "Beis," said he.

Pocketing it, he drove off without saying a word. I sighed in relief of having reached there, finally. I looked around. I was in the middle of a street, between a one storied building and a small shack, in front of which a white male goat was tied, chomping grass. It was a flourmill.

I looked at the one storied building for any signs of Pradan or 'Pradhan' as they called it. On the balcony I noticed a small board with the logo of Pradan. "There you are," I told myself. Holding my bags, one on my shoulder, and the other in my hands, I looked for a staircase. Having found one on the left, I decided to climb. It was a fight of about 15 stairs and I found myself in front of the office, which was going to be my karma bhoomi (the theatre of action) for next few years.

I treaded cautiously. I peeped in the office. There was a big hall and a wall after two thirds of the length of the hall. Built only up to 6 feet, it was more of a partition than a permanent structure. The hall was empty, but I could hear voices of some people talking. I looked around and found a shelf in the wall, just after the entrance. There was a packing box for a computer.

"Wonderful," I thought "At least one can watch movies by getting some CDs here." Later, my expectations proved to be misplaced because this was an old 486 kind of computer, slightly more modern - on which even MS Word would not run properly, forget about a video CD. Anyways, there was no CD drive in that box of a computer!

I looked at the charts put on the wall. These were all in Hindi about the various activities like SHGs, agriculture, etc. I could hear a female voice, as I closed in to the partitioned part of the office. I decided to surprise the people at the other end. I entered the room with my bags on my shoulders and came face to face with a bespectacled girl of about my age.

"Hi!" I said, "I am Prashant and I have come here to join you guys!" She looked at me with a bewildered look and then said, "Hi! Have you

come here on a two-month summer training programme?" looking at the little luggage I was carrying. "No," I said, "I am here to join Pradan as an employee." "Really? But looking at your luggage, I thought you are here for a short period of time," She said. "I don't need much luggage to sustain myself," I told her, "And in any case, I would be going back to Bhopal to get my books and all!"

"Ok" she said, "Let me introduce you to the others." She took me to the other corner of the office. "Here," she told a middle-aged person on a chair, "He is Ashokji, our team leader, and Ashokji, this is Prashant. He has come to join Pradan." "Welcome!" said Ashok.

Village Stay

Staying in a village immediately after joining Pradan is a litmus test as well as an acclimatisation drill for newcomers. I was taken to a village called Chaapu, which was a predominantly Gond tribal village about 15 km from Sironj. Not long ago (about 15 years ago) this village was totally encircled by a dense forest and people made it a point to get inside their homes by 4-5 o'clock every evening because tigers roamed about in the area.

The main occupation of these landless tribal people was woodcutting and they were allotted this land by the Nawab of Sironj to exploit the khair (acacia) trees of this area. Since they used to cut the khair trees, this community itself got a new name - Khairua.

After years of reckless felling of trees and converting land for agricultural purposes, the majestic forests today exists only in the maps of the forest department like so many other forest areas in Madhya Pradesh.

Every morning the women from this village take head loads of the wood collected from the

nearby scrubland and walk 15 km to Sironj, where they earn about Rs 30-40 for each head load that is sold as the fuel. They have this hand to mouth existence in which when a woman cannot go to the market for some reason, she has to look for food from her neighbours or the moneylender.

Two Tribal SHGs

Sulakshana, my colleague in Pradan, had helped these women to get organised into two self-help groups (SHGs) associated for saving small amounts of money, Rs 5-10 a week and lending amongst themselves once the amount became significant. It was for getting easy credit within the village during the time of distress.

She used to hold meetings for these villages every Tuesday night, when the women would be through with their household chores and would take out some time. It was one such meeting to which I was taken the second day after I joined Pradan.

We reached the Khairua hamlet at about 8 pm in the night and waited for the women to come. It took a long time till they all arrived, and this time I utilised for observing the landscape. We were in a hamlet that was on top of a hillock not very high, may be 15 metres from the fields below, on which there were a number of huts located.

We sat in the balcony of one of the huts. Although it was mid April already and daytime temperature was considerably high, it was very pleasant in the evening - typical of the Malwa weather.

The women were talking to Sulakshana and asking questions in hushed voices, pointing to me. I knew they were asking about me and I was not surprised. The biggest surprise for

these women was that Pradan people were unmarried even at the age of 24 that I was, because in their village, guys usually got married at a very young age, the latest being 18.

The Best Song in My Life

As we sat there, myself, Sulakshana and some women SHG members, waiting for the rest to come, they started singing some songs in the way that I will not forget till the last day of my life. They made two small groups of 5 women each. One group would sing a line in chorus and the other would repeat in chorus just as the first group completes a song.

It was so sweet, so natural that I was feeling that the summer breeze itself is singing the song in tune with the valley that lay in front of the hillock that we were sitting upon. The starlit sky above our heads seemed to be dancing softly in the tune of the song- "Tune kaali gai ka doodh piya, tone kali gai ka doodh piya, tu isiliye kaala hai, tumhara rang kaala hai (Mother of Lord Krishna consoling the young lad when Radha, his childhood sweetheart would tease him by telling him that he was of dark complexion: "You drank the milk from a black cow, that is why you are dark, your complexion is dark"). The song reverberates in my mind as I type these lines.

These women, with no material valuable in their lives, just a few old shanties and small patches of unproductive lands without any irrigation facility, live their lives in here and now situation, singing songs, dancing and living each day of their life as if it were the last one of their life, their life full of laughter and enjoyment despite the sorry state that they live in, the exploitation that they face on a daily basis.

Those poor people who don't even earn enough to cover their bodies and fill their

stomachs, whose women travel everyday to the nearest market 15 km away with a head load of wood weighing not less than 35 kg and come back the same day covering the same distance on feet, live life king size, and we, despite having so much in our lives still carve for more and crib about how bad our lives are, looking for happiness in material assets, discotheques and pubs. What a contrast!

Moharbai and Her Clan

Next day, I was dropped into a village called Tarwariya, which was the star village of Pradan's Sironj project area. I was putting up with a harijan family headed by Moharbai, an elderly widow, who was a member of one of the SHGs in that village. She owns a few goats, who share the courtyard with her family members in night to sleep in.

I was staying with them, taking baths at the hand pump on their side of the village, predominantly inhabited by Harijans and Mehtars, both among the most exploited and downtrodden lot of the Indian Society through the ages - sharing food and sleeping in a group in the shared courtyard being a part of their life - and I never felt discriminated against.

In fact, they would take pride in a 17th pass (what villagers called a person who has completed his post graduation) urban youth staying with them. I accompanied them to the fields, where wells were being dug and kids would take the goats out for grazing. In May, where the Sun would bake the animals and plants alike in a parched central Indian village, where the heat wave would howl like a banshee in the deserted streets, when nothing, man or animal can be seen, as everybody takes refuge inside the shanties and mud structures and sleep, to wait till the heat reduces a bit and people go out to work at about 4.30 in the

evening and work till darkness falls. Yet, I never heard anybody complain.

Living in the village, I made a point to give only my first name while introducing myself. The villagers would try to probe deeper to find my surname to ascertain which caste I belonged to and I would deflect all such questions. They did not give up and found out from my colleagues in Pradan. Some of them would call me maharaj, which I did not like due to the caste angle attached with it.

I left my home in 1997 just after school and have been living in hostels and shared accommodation since then. The kind of camaraderie that we shared in hostels negated any chances of having caste-based biases or pride in most of us. Therefore, caste was the last thing in my mind while enjoying my days in Pradan. However, some villagers, particularly those of the so-called higher strata, would take me aside and ask me not to stay with harijans lest I lose my dharma, which I outright rubbished, telling them that I am myself a harijan, which they would obviously not believe.

I was so immersed in sweet and sour experience of a village stay that I forgot that I was supposed to come back to Pradan on the 4th day. On the evening of 5th day, a villager who had visited Pradan office for some work informed me that I am supposed to come back the following evening to attend some important meeting. The next day I took lift from a youth of the village on his bicycle and we came peddling all the way to Pradan office some 10 km away.

The Action Begins

Soon after my village stay, I went for real action at the grassroots. Pradan in Sironj is working for implementation of World Bank aided Madhya Pradesh District Poverty

Initiatives Project (MP-DPIP). In Sironj block, this project is to be implemented in 46 villages and the total outlay is about Rs 12 crore for 5 years (starting 2000).

Social Paralysis

Before I joined Pradan I always used to read in the newspapers and magazines that the money for development could not be utilised in the project duration for some project or the other. I always used to think that the agency that is working to implement is not functioning properly. It is true to a certain extent, as in most of the Indian development projects are like a paralysed body - your head works and you come up with some really wonderful ideas. Based on those ideas, you gather resources also, but when it comes to executing those wonderful ideas, your limbs either do not work; or if they do, they work in an absolutely undesired way, spilling your resources here, there, everywhere, except the place they were meant for.

All ambitious ideas in past decades have died in this fashion and I do not see a ray of hope as at the grassroots, things have hardly changed, or if at all they changed, they have gone for the worse. The worst part is that we have, as individuals, accepted this chaos and most of us are either part of this orgy of corruption and mismanagement or we are ready to compromise at any point of time.

I used to think that there is no way a person can survive in the rotten system that we see around ourselves. More so, I thought that never in life could a multi-crore project be run without any corruption. I was so disgusted with the system that soon after my graduation, I chose to join IIFM to get placement in an NGO because in my opinion both the Government and the corporate sector have failed to safeguard the interests of the people.

In such a state of mind, I had gone to my home after my graduation when my father, who is a government doctor, advised me to drop my radical views about corruption and nepotism in the system. "Or else," he said, "You won't be able to survive in this system." After joining Pradan I had an entirely different experience.

Ashok, our team leader, entrusted me a cluster to 5 villages on the fringes of Sironj block towards the south. Two of them bordered with Nateran and three with Lateri Blocks of Vidisha, so soon I was labelled as a person on a border posting. These villages were between 15km to 25 km from Sironj.

The day I went to the first village named Kankerkhedi I traveled with Ashok on my bike (A Hero Honda Splendor) for 15 odd km on the state highway joining Sironj with Bhopal. It is such a pathetic road that the whole way I kept cursing the authorities. This place is hardly 100 km from Bhopal and you would have to travel on it on a bike to find out in the hellish condition of the roads in Madhya Pradesh.

Plight of Kankerkhedi

Kankerkhedi is a small village of about 35 households settled on the foothills of a plateau on the fringes of a forest. It is not a very well to do village as the average landholding is close to half a hectare and the topography is undulating.

We entered the village through a *naala* which was used by the villagers as a connecting road, since there was no road constructed to connect this village about 250 metres from the main road. Although it was only about 250 metres, which may sound very little to many, but during the rains, it is a horrific experience to cross it. So the villagers prefer to walk on the muddy fields to reach the main road rather

than walking through this *naala* in the rains.

Unfortunately, since both Ashok and I were visiting this village for the first time during rains, none of us knew this. I decided to reach the village on the bike itself. But the *naala* was so full of filth that I had to literally wade through the mud with my bike. When somehow I was able to reach its end, where there was the well of the village, its only source of drinking water, I faced many villagers who were there to witness this courageous exploit of crossing the *naala* on a bike to reach the village, which was probably not achieved in past so many years.

There was a narrow alley from the end of the *naala* to enter the village and it was lined by mud houses on both the sides, most of them in a bad shape. This alley was very undulating and with an upward slope of about 20 degrees. This alley bifurcates into two parts further, the left one going towards the temple and the houses of the better off families of the village, the Mina Patels, and the right fork goes towards the houses of Harijan Families.

The alley was full of mud as well, as there is no drainage system in the village and wastewater from all the houses is dumped directly in the street, and it flows down it to accumulate near the well. There are no toilets in this village and everybody, regardless of his social or financial status, has to go to the nearby forest or fields to attend the calls of the nature.

Occasionally, the kids defecate in the *naala* and during the times of the rains, all this waste get accumulated near the well, and gets a chance to percolate down in this shallow well of about 20-25 metres depth. To my horror, this was their only source of water for drinking, bathing, cooking food and washing. No wonder when we settled down in the bal-

cony of one of the huts and started conversing with the villagers, they told us that almost all of them were suffering with diarrhoea at that point of time.

As I watched the kids who had gathered there due to curiosity, I could see rashes in their skin and abscesses in the heads of toddlers, protruding bellies of the small kids of 3-5 years, indicating severe malnutrition and contaminated water.

At the end of my first year working in Kankerkhedi, 14 out of 150 odd villagers were dead due to mainly waterborne diseases; the majority of them children less than 5 years of age.

Nightmarish Situation

I was appalled at the nightmarish situation in which people were living in that village. I recalled the clean super highways of Bhopal and Delhi, the parks for wealthy joggers and their dogs, all amenities that we, the urban people, take for granted, most of the time. And here was another India, where there is no drinking water, no health support, no education, no roads, and no electricity as if they do not exist for the state.

That day the ground realities of our country hit in the face of the India Shining and the brouhaha about economic liberalisation. Where is the development for these people? Are they any lesser Indians than those living in Lutyen's Delhi or Nawab's Bhopal? What shall they do? To whom shall they approach to look into these problems that challenge their basic survival?

All the actors of the rural life - PRIs, government personnel, doctors, lawyers, moneylenders, traders, banks - everybody is standing there with a knife of exploitation in their

hands to claim the proverbial pound of flesh. What would have I done had my family lived in such circumstances? What would have you done? Under these circumstances is it a sin to revolt? I don't think so.

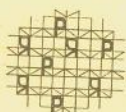
I did not hate them when they did not trust me. I did not hate them when they tried to gobble the money provided by the government for their own welfare scheme. I did not hate them when they offered me a bribe, which I didn't accept. I did not hate them when they took kickbacks for purchasing their own goods from the traders.

Why? Because that is what we, as a society, as a nation, have taught them. For last so many decades, that is their learning. You bribe the revenue official; you get the copy of your own land records. You want money to purchase seed and fertilisers, to do farming for feeding your kids, you get a loan from the moneylender at a criminal rate of interest of 36% to 60% a year (which none of us would ever dream to touch even).

You bribe the surveyor; you get the money of insurance from the insurance company. You bribe the teacher to get admission of your child in the school. You bribe the minister to get your son in school as a teacher. You bribe the panchayat to get a hand pump dug at your doorstep. If you can't pay the bribe, you don't have a right to survive. That's the bottom-line for the poorest of the poor. Our system does not consider them to be human beings; for it they are some advanced form of humanoid apes, whose birth or death does not affect anybody.



PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) is a voluntary organisation 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 organising 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.



Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN)

3 CSC, Niti Bagh, New Delhi 110 049, India

Tel/fax: 011 2651 8619/2651 4682. Website: www.pradan.net

E-mail: newsreach@pradan.net