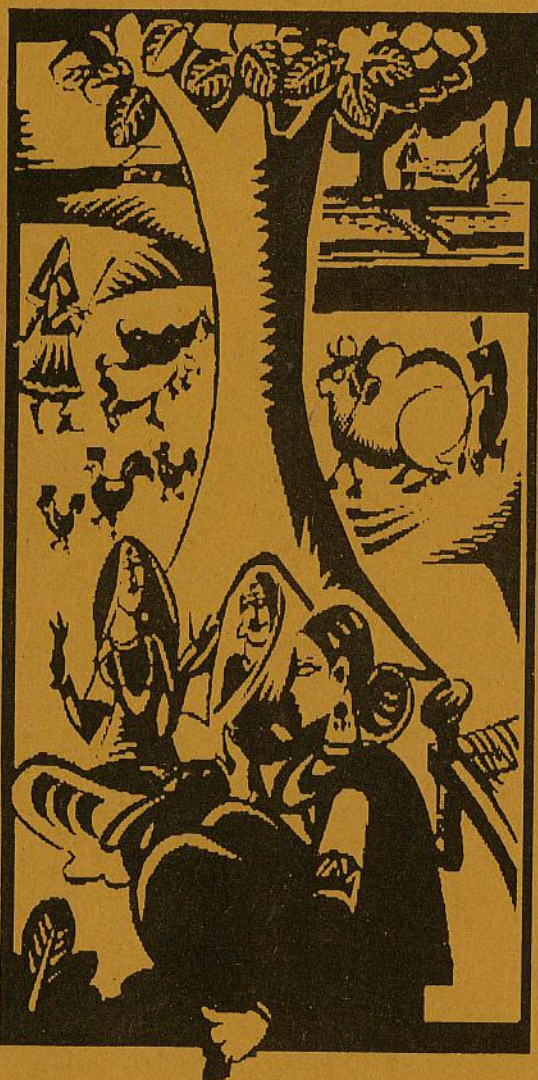


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Lead Article: Striving for Success Part II 1

Lalita Dhal discusses that promoting Clusters for the purpose of helping communities find support and solution to their issues is a learning process for the professionals. Lalita is based in Karanjia.

Tool Kit: Low-cost Poly-house 8

Surjit Behera shares how local innovations in technology, using indigenous resources help make vegetable cultivation a viable and profitable option for poor farmers. Surjit is based in Karanjia.

First Person: Crossing Thresholds 12

Abhishek Kumar Gaurav narrates that a little support, guidance and training sees the empowerment and rise of entire communities. Abhishek is based in Dumka.

Archive: Ihasansare Bahudustare 18

D. Narendranath shares how superstition and ignorance shackle the development and prosperity of the tribal communities. Narendranath is based in Delhi.

Striving for Success - Part II

Lalita Dhal

Promoting SHG Clusters for the purpose of helping communities find support and solutions to their issues is a learning process for the professionals

As the team started focusing more on livelihood activities, team started disengaging from the Clusters for sustaining the SHG movement with the belief that SHGs and Clusters in the project have matured. But very soon the team realised that such a move was a little premature. When faced with challenges of dealing with higher order social issues the Cluster forums fumbled. The Cluster forums in the absence of support lost their own confidence as well the confidence of the members.

The team reviewed its perception of the Cluster forum, the professional's role, the tools used to facilitate learning (Cluster book, etc.). The team realised that it was important to get to a collective understanding of the support structure required to help the SHGs sustain and flourish. The team decided to talk to the community about the issue (disinterest in the Cluster forums). Our discussions with the Cluster Representatives, the individual SHGs and our own understanding of the situation led us to the following conclusions:

- The proceedings at the Cluster meetings had become very monotonous due to the similar nature of discussions in every meeting regarding the financial indicators. Therefore, the members of the Cluster federation lost interest in the meetings, resulting in dwindling attendance. There were some norms (regular attendance, sharing of box, keys and cash book, etc.) that had become very mundane for the older groups; at the same time, the young groups needed to develop these very basic inputs.

- Much of the meeting time was invested in finding out whether basic norms were being adhered to. As a result, other issues of the Cluster could not be deliberated upon. These included uncontrolled grazing (village Bhadubeda) and domestic violence (village Kadadiha), leading to a lot of frustration and angst amongst the representatives as they went back to their SHGs with no concrete suggestions from the Clusters. This led to a loss of confidence in the Cluster as a support forum.

- With time, as the accounts of the older groups grew in volume, it became even more difficult to keep a check at the Cluster level. Whether it was interest payment or principal repayment or loans in arrears, the Clusters found it very difficult to process all the data and generate a focused input for the groups to take back and realistically work on. After all, the ultimate objective of generating the data was to help the 'weak' groups understand the areas they needed to work on.

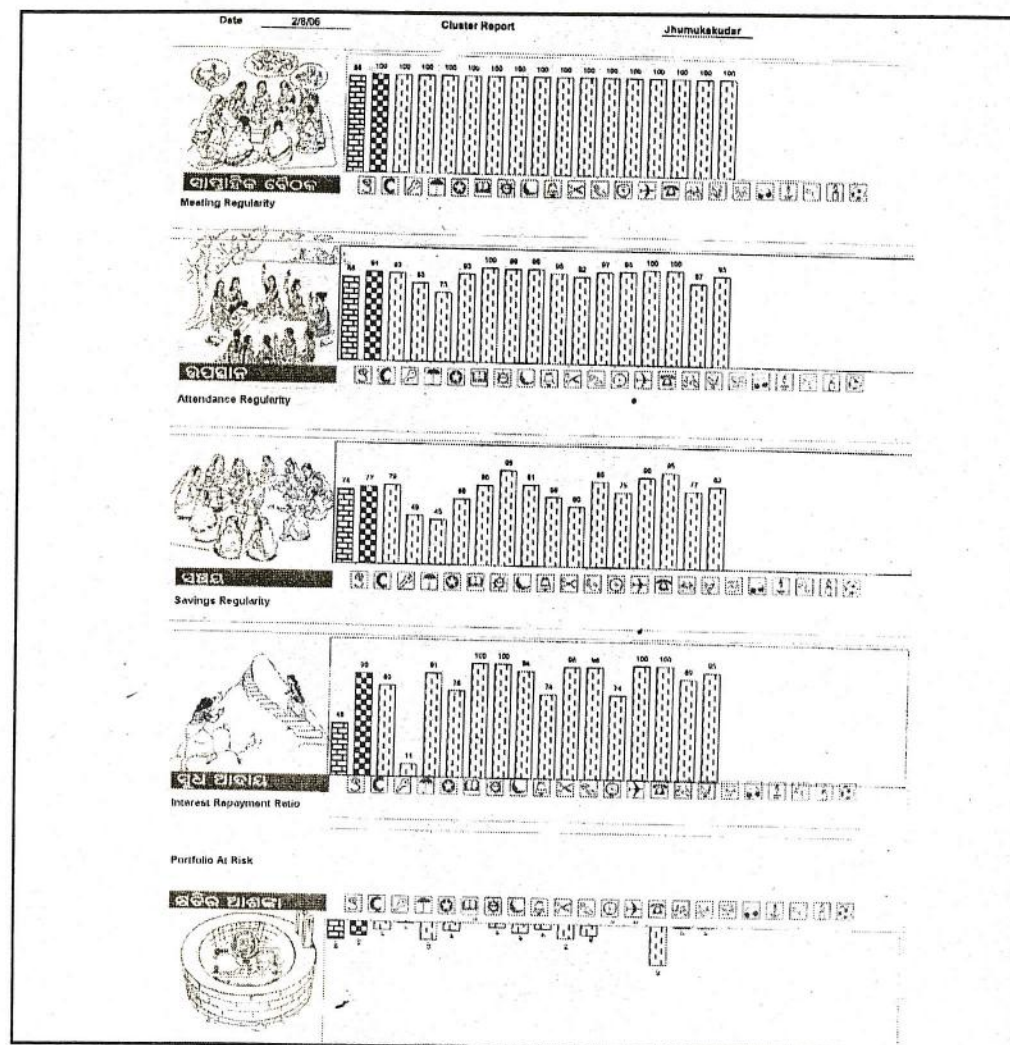
- During the initial period of forming and nurturing Clusters (2003 to 2006) when the professionals were directly involved with the Cluster meeting process, the Clusters did get initial successes in dealing with social problems collectively. This led to higher expectations of the members from the Cluster as a forum and the SHG representatives to the Cluster. But owing to the voluminous data that had to be dealt with in Cluster meetings

(regarding financial and non financial aspects of SHG health) and the fact that suddenly there was minimal 'handholding' by the professionals (2006 onwards), the Cluster could not do justice to the issues that were raised in meetings. This led to a huge breach of confidence in a new forum (Cluster) for the members and, therefore, resulted in low attendance.

A close analysis of the situation revealed that action had to be initiated at more than one levels ;

- We need to look into designing a system so that time is saved in the Cluster meetings. The SHGs should be able to get an understanding of their financial and social health and get time to discuss and act upon other important issues that concern their lives.

Box 2: The Pictorial Format



In 2006, we realised that some norms such as the sharing of responsibilities of the box, the keys and the cash book, and regular Cluster attendance had become very routine for the older groups yet retained their importance for the newer groups in the Cluster. The checking of interest and principal repayments, and attendance regularity took considerable time of the Cluster meeting and, hence, it was very tedious for the members. Cluster Representatives were losing interest in the proceedings of the meeting. At the same time, we knew that these aspects could be well covered by the ratios provided by the McFinancier software. Thus, we started the process of designing a system in which the performance data of the SHG could be shared with the SHG representatives in the Cluster meetings.

A pictorial format was thus designed for the Cluster meetings. It was introduced so that the SHG members, irrespective of their literacy levels, are able to understand the nuances of the five important ratios in the life of their SHG and are able to work on it. These five health indicators are: Meeting regularity, Attendance Regularity, Savings regularity, Interest repayment ratio and Portfolio at Risk. For the first four ratios, the women are able to compare the heights of the bar charts and understand where the group stands vis-à-vis the best SHG in the Cluster. (The taller a group's bar chart, the better it is). For the last indicator (Portfolio at Risk) the depth of the 'hole' (the inverted bar chart) that they had dug for themselves with higher portfolios at risk would tell them how they have been performing. Interestingly, the women referred to the negative histogram as a *kunwa*, or well, and said that the deeper the *kunwa*, the more difficult it is for the group to come out of it.

"*Kuwore bohut tonka padi jayeechhi. Kuworu tonka kaddhibaku podibo*," (A lot of money has gone into the well. It needs to be taken out) is what they said.

The various signs just below the 'X' axis are the symbols of the individual groups in the Cluster so that each is able to recognise its bar chart/histogram.

- We also realised that the McFinancier and all its relevant data would have to be simplified to the level of the groups so that they are able to use it as feedback and improve their performance.
- Professional engagement, which had lessened, needed to be addressed without compromising on the other interventions that the team had initiated.

The pictorial format was introduced in the Cluster meetings to make the meetings more effective time-wise and help the representatives discuss issues other than the financial ones meaningfully. This was the first instance when the McFinancier ratios were used to combine the five important McFinancier ratios with the Cluster meeting process.

Around this time, the team had also designed a new format for the Cluster meeting called the pictorial format.

There were some initial successes too. However, we realised that there were other important aspects not being covered by the

pictorial format. The following aspects needed to be addressed adequately for an SHG to sustain and function efficiently.

- The pictorial format did not indicate the reviewing of the minutes of the previous meeting.

Box 3: Cluster Book II

- It did not record the details of the loans taken by the SHG.
- It did not record the plan of action or map the action taken against the plan.

Therefore, it was very difficult to measure the success of the decisions taken in the meeting.

A new minute book was designed by the team. It attempted a combination of the pictorial format and the Cluster book. Care was taken to design the format such that whatever feedback is generated in the Cluster, it could

be taken back to the group. This format had essentially two parts; the first part was named the Cluster book and the second part was called the group diary. The first part had four sections and was primarily used to record the decisions of the Cluster meeting. The first section dealt with what was decided in the previous meeting and the action taken on the same. The smiling face signified that action had been taken on the decisions in the previous meeting. The second segment was used to record the decisions in the present meeting, the details of the planned action

Box 4: Group Diary

ବ୍ୟବସାୟ ମିଶ୍ରଣ ତାରିଖ :

and the names of the members(s) responsible for its implementation. The third segment kept a record of the petty cash transactions in the Cluster meeting; the fourth was a record of the attendance in the meeting.

The second segment was a very important innovation. Invariably, the information flow had always been from the groups to the Cluster. The group members had no idea of what happened in the Clusters; there was no method to take back feedback or information to the group about what transpired in the Cluster meeting.

A format was designed to have a two-way information flow between the two forums (the group and the Cluster). On the first page, the groups rate themselves on the five Mcfinancier ratios of Meeting regularity, Attendance Regularity, Savings regularity, Interest repayment ratio and Portfolio at Risk. This is done at the Cluster meeting by the Group Representatives and the details of the group funds are brought to the Cluster meeting by the Representatives. After the discussions, the decisions are then written down on the second page, just as was done in the Cluster book. This sheet is then taken back to the group by the Group Representatives so that in the next weekly meeting of the SHG, it can be read out and discussed with the rest of the group members.

The introduction of the formats meant that Clusters had very concrete issues to discuss. Relevant information was conveyed back to the groups as feedback of the Cluster to the group. The groups then could deliberate on the feedback in their group meetings and take steps to improve.

The re-designing of the Cluster meeting system and the MIS system for the group addressed two of the initial problems—that

of designing a system that saves time and also bringing in the McFinancier ratios into play. In fact, it goes a step further and produces data for the representatives to take back as feedback to their groups for further deliberations.

The other issue—the lack of confidence of the groups and the representatives in the Clusters in addressing social issues—had yet to be addressed.

On hindsight, I realised we had withdrawn professionals at a very inopportune time when various social issues had started to crop up in many Cluster meetings. After the initial successes, the groups and the members' expectations from the Cluster had grown and they were looking up to it to play a larger role in dealing collectively with various social issues. We, from our experience with the Clusters, have learnt that support is required, albeit of a different nature, at every stage. It is a challenge to help the groups to express themselves and raise issues and we did a very good job of helping the groups till that stage.

However, when the time came for groups to move into action after the initial successes, we did not provide them with the required support. This was a critical juncture in the life of the Clusters, and with lack of an enabling environment from us, the Clusters met with failure and slowly lost the confidence of the groups and SHG members.

We had a very interesting situation at hand; on the one hand, we had to move ahead with large-scale livelihood programmes, and on the other hand, we had the situation where one of our vital cogs in the supporting environment for the SHGs, that is the Cluster, was slowly losing its vitality, energy and the confidence of the SHG members. We thought that a federate body of SHGs, or Federation,

would be a very effective forum for dealing with social issues. Since the Federation would be a forum that would have linkages with the external world and it would have representations from every Cluster, it would stand a better chance of dealing with social problems in a collective manner; if the need arises, it would even take it to higher authorities. Additionally, a professional from the team would be directly responsible for supporting the Federation in its functioning and in collective decision-making. This would also take care of the 'handholding' issues of the groups and Clusters.

Our efforts so far have yielded many positive outcomes.

- The attendance of the Cluster Representatives in the Cluster meetings has been regularised in all the Clusters. Additionally, only the designated Cluster Representatives attend the meeting, thereby ensuring the continuity.
- The SHG health indicators have shown remarkable positive movement after the changes.
- Many social problems have been reported and dealt with in the Clusters.
 - A case of wife-beating in Pahaspal village of Kadadiha Cluster was taken up by the Cluster Representatives, who met with the family. Not getting a positive response from the family, the Cluster representatives took it up in the Federation. The Federation

representatives visited the sub collector who has assured action on the issue.

- In Deuli Cluster, alcoholism was a major problem. This was aggravated by the fact that a lot of the local liquor was brewed in Deuli village itself. The Cluster, as mark of protest and to send a warning to all the brewers, organised a peaceful rally in the villages, affected by this evil. The immediate result was that the breweries closed shop.

- The payments for maintaining the running costs of the Computer Munshi, and the whole system of RMTS inflow and outflow through the McFinancier system has been regularised and all the Clusters deposit the amount, on a regular basis, in each of its monthly meetings. This is also the result of the energy generated in the Clusters because of the new systems and processes adopted by the team.

All these developments have taken place in eight years—2000 to 2008. There have been many issues and obstacles which the team has struggled with. However, our understanding of the situation and SHGs Clusters and federation as a forum has grown and today we are looking at newer horizons to stabilise the SHG movement in Karanjia. We are looking at developing the Community Resource Persons (CRP) cadre. This is the next big step of providing support services to ensure the sustainability of the SHGs. Our next strategy is to develop this aspect in the SHG-Cluster-Federation support structure.

Low-cost Poly-house

Surjit Behera

Local innovations in technology and using indigenous resources help make vegetable cultivation a viable and profitable option for poor farmers

Introduction

The idea of a low-cost poly-house came to our mind in 2004 when Pradan initiated the implementation of land- and water-based livelihood activities in the Mayurbhanj Team, with support from India Canada Environment Facility (ICEF). One of our major focusses, in this project, was to increase family incomes by providing individual irrigation infrastructure to each family through the construction of small farm ponds (average size 40 x 50 ft) and dug wells. Our most successful intervention, in terms of addressing land-

based livelihoods, was pond-based agriculture. Within three years of the project, 570 families in 11 villages benefitted from the construction of 500 ponds and 25 dug wells. This intervention really changed the cropping pattern of the area from mono-crop paddy to vegetable cultivation on a large scale. An awareness of the change that had taken place was best expressed by a man in a local market, "Aji kali Karanjia re panipariba Pradan pain sabudine milu paruchhi" (Now-a-days vegetables are always available in Karanjia because of Pradan).

Seedlings of Success

Umakanta Khandei, a graduate of Patbil village, who lives with his six-member family, was trained by the Mayurbhanj team to function as a Village Level Expert (VLE) for the Land and Water Development Samiti in the Hindusahi hamlet of Patbil. The close exposure to the activities being carried out by the hamlet-level association, under our project with ICEF, kindled his entrepreneurial spark. He decided to take up intensive vegetable nursery farming, using improved practices.

With our guidance, he built a 600-sq-ft poly-house, investing about Rs 11,000, to provide greenhouse cover for vegetable seedlings. He grew 40,000 quality vegetable seedlings in one batch, free of infestation by insects and pests. The production of seedlings in the poly-house took lesser time, that is, 15-20 days, than the usual 20-30 days. The produce was assured, even if there were adverse weather conditions such as rain and very low temperatures.

Farmers from Patbil and the nearby villages now purchase seedlings from him. He earns about Rs 1,500 per month from this. He has also started raising cashew seedlings. In the second year of the project, he earned about Rs 15,000 from selling cashew seedlings. He now plans to branch out into producing various horticulture saplings such as mango, drumsticks and so on.

Constraints in vegetable cultivation

The climate of Karanjia is best suited for vegetable cultivation. The temperature starts falling from July onwards. People prefer to grow cole crops such as cabbage and cauliflower in early kharif, which starts from end of July.

Karanjia has good market linkages with Jamshedpur in Jharkhand and the coastal areas of Orissa. Middlemen from Jamshedpur and Anandpur in Keonjhar district and other coastal areas come directly to Karanjia to buy vegetables such as cabbages, cauliflowers, pumpkins, etc. In a season, farmers earn Rs 8,000 to Rs 10,000 through the sale of these cole crops. However, the nurseries for these cole crops often suffer due to heavy rains and to insect and pest infestations. This leads to losses and disappointment among the farmers.

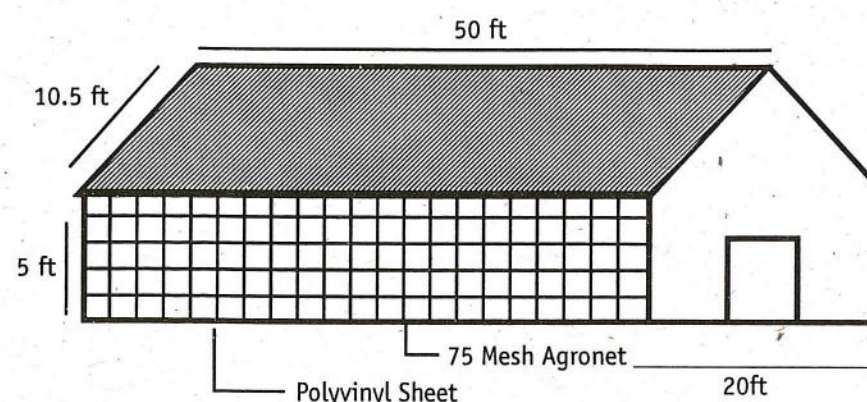
To surmount these problems, our team initially thought of building portable poly-houses for individual families. We had been taught the concept of poly-house in the agriculture colleges that some of us had attended. A poly-house is a structure made of polyvinyl sheet. It is low-cost because the wood and bamboo and other materials used, barring the polyvinyl sheet, can be found locally.

The advantages of a poly-house are several. Plants can be grown as per the requirement, irrespective of the weather conditions, because it is a closed structure. The covering of polyvinyl sheets protects seedlings from insect and pest attack to a great extent, ensuring the production of healthy seedlings. Plants grow faster inside the structure because the temperature remains a little higher inside the poly-

house, even when it is cooler outside.

Our team first made an arch-shaped bamboo frame covered with polyvinyl sheets. The frame was used to cover the bed and could be lifted for irrigation. One poly-house covered one bed with a capacity of a 1,000 seedlings. Initially, the farmers were excited about this structure. However, they faced some problems with this design. Strong winds blew away or damaged the portable polyvinyl cover because it was so light. Second, owing to the small enclosed space and height of the poly-house, there was an increase in the humidity and temperature inside resulting in the damping off of young seedlings. Damping off is a common fungal disease, which attacks seedlings, weakening the stems at the soil level. Infected seedlings usually die. Third, the frequent lifting of the frame for irrigation, and its being blown away occasionally by wind, resulted in the seedlings being highly vulnerable to infestation by pests.

Our team then designed a structure, 5 ft high, that covered two nursery beds, so that during irrigation there would be no need to lift the frame. The attempt was to ensure that it would not be easily blown away by the wind; the humidity would be less and, therefore, there would be lesser chances of the damping off of young seedlings; and the beds could be irrigated without lifting the structure, thereby limiting the entry of insects and pests. However, this structure too got damaged in very windy conditions and the humidity could not be controlled much due to poor ventilation. These experiences lead the team making further changes in the design of the low cost poly-house. The new design was as shown in Figure 1.



Mosquito nets are used up to a height of 5 ft along the sides of the poly-house for proper ventilation. This reduces the humidity and the temperature inside the structure during April and May, which increases beyond 40 degrees Celsius and causes the damping off of the seedlings.

A poly-house of these dimensions requires minor repairs every year and major repair in every three years. Moreover, the seedlings grow faster inside this structure. Any delay in selling of seedlings leads to the growth of the plants beyond its optimum saleable size and, in turn, reduces its marketable quality. These need to be kept in mind.

The minimum, economical size of such a poly-house is 55 x 20 ft, encompassing 28 beds of 3 ft x 8 ft bed-size each, with a spacing of 6" between the beds. The beds are also 6" away from the wall. There is 2 ft wide passage in the middle. A poly-house of these dimensions can produce around 35,000 to 40,000 seedlings in one batch. The standard width of polyvinyl sheets available in the market is 7 m therefore the width of the poly-house is restricted to 20 ft. The length takes into account the capacity of one person and the economics.

Figure 2: The inside view of a Bed Structure

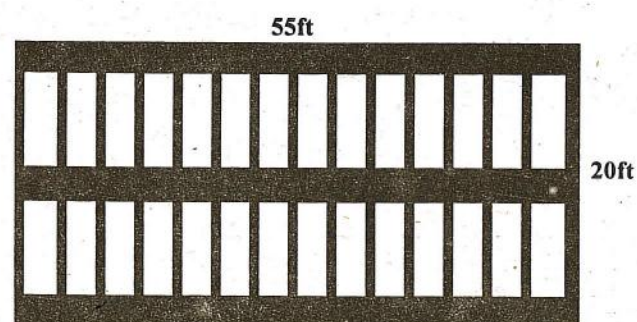


Table 1: Cost Estimate of Poly-house

S.No.	Item	Quantity	Size	Rate (Rs)	Total Amount (Rs)
1	Polyvinyl sheet	1	22' x 65'	5,500	5,500
2	Middle pillar	9	3" x 2.5" x 9'	50	450
3	Side pillar	18	3" x 2.5" x 6'	25	450
3	Wood for roof	18	2" x 2.5" x 12'	50	900
4	Wood beading	35	1" x 2.5" x 6'	6	210
5	Bamboo	10	pieces	25	250
6	Nut bolts	30	6"	5.5	165
7	Nail	1	kg	40	40
8	Nail with cap	2	packets	30	60
9	Lace	0.5	kg	120	60
10	Bricks	1,000	No.	1	1,000
11	Transportation of bricks				200
12	Sandy loam soil	1	tractor load	200	200
13	Compost	0.5	tractor load	700	350
14	Labour charge	20	labour days	50	1,000
15	Mosquito net	15		45	675
Total					11,510

Table 2: Cost Economics Assuming Own Labour

Recurring Expenditure Per Cycle for 28 Beds					
Total Cycles Per Year 4 (June-July; August-September; October-November; December-January)					
Item	Rate per bed (gm)	Rate (Rs/gm)	Quantity (gm)	Total Amount (Rs)	
Seeds (Improved)	10	45	14	630	
Seeds(Hybrid)	5	90	14	1260	
Pesticide				100	
Vermicompost	2 basket per bed	Rs 2 per basket	56 baskets	112	
Total				2102	
Income					
Quality seedlings from each bed	1200	Rate	Total bed	No.	Total Amount (Rs)
Seeds (Improved)	Per seedling	0.1	14	16,800	1,680
Seeds(Hybrid)	Per seedling	0.25	14	16,800	4,200
Total					5,880
Net income per cycle					3,778
Total profit per annum					15,112
Annual loan repayment assuming an entrepreneur takes the Rs 11,000 required for the poly-house loan to be repaid in three years at 18% interest per annum					4,987
Net profit per annum					10,125

The Outcome

At present, there are six entrepreneurs engaged in seedling-raising in low-cost poly-houses. Farmers procure their seeds for vegetable cultivation from these entrepreneurs. Within two years, the number of farmers engaging in vegetable cultivation has increased from 500 to 1,500 families.

Low-cost poly-houses assure the production of healthy seedlings and are unhampered by the irregular rainfall. More farmers are engaging in vegetable cultivation. The activity is also seen as viable to farmers who have less land holding.

Entrepreneurs have added other seedlings such as cashew, papaya and teak seedlings in the outer circle of poly-houses and selling these too. One entrepreneur harvests the rain water from the roof of the polyvinyl sheet and uses it for irrigating the seedlings in the poly house.

The demand for seedlings from poly-houses has been increasing day by day. Farmers are booking beds in advance.

There is need, however, to increase the technical knowledge of the entrepreneurs from time to time to produce quality seedlings. Business plans need to be made with the poly-house entrepreneurs to help them increase the uses of poly-houses in order to maximize benefits.

Future Plans

The business is economically viable and an individual entrepreneur can earn an additional Rs 1,500 or Rs 5,000 by expanding to other areas of agro-business such as the sale of fertilizers, seeds, pesticides and agricultural implements. Entrepreneurs like Umakanta can convert this area into a prosperous vegetable belt that will benefit many poor farmers.

Crossing Thresholds

Abhishek Kumar Gaurav

A little support, guidance and training sees the empowerment and rise of entire communities

I joined Pradan on 15 May 2006 after completing my B.Sc. in Agriculture from Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi. I wanted to use my knowledge and skills to engage with people who were in need of my services rather than being involved with a big corporate house and striving only to make profits for the company. When Pradan came to the campus, I learnt that the NGO worked with rural poor people in remote areas of the country. I thought that this could be an opportunity for me. I was selected by Pradan from the campus and posted to Dumka, Jharkhand. When I joined the Pradan Dumka team, I was happy to learn that Pradan was the right platform for me—it allowed me to get closer to the rural poor and contribute productively for their betterment.

Pradan has been working in Dumka since 1995 to promote livelihoods among the rural poor. The formation of women's SHGs lies at the core of its approach. The linking of mature SHGs to banks for credit, designing systems for income generating activities and the implementation of these are part of the livelihoods promotion strategy. There are over 350 SHGs in 36 Clusters across 4 blocks. The team is engaged with more than 5000 families in over 250 villages through activities such as tasar sericulture, horticulture, agriculture and land and water activities. At present, I work with my team in promoting SHGs, supporting farmers in implementing improved agricultural practices and in the production of vermicompost, in tasar reeling and related activities, in land and water management and in a proposed project on poultry.

Initial Work

Village Bagnal is 24 km far away from the

Dumka district headquarters. It is one of the poor pockets of Santhal community of Dumka, comprising 55 households. When my senior team members visited Bagnal for the first time in 2003, the villagers were facing problems in irrigation, there was a lack of awareness about their rights and entitlements, there was limited opportunity for livelihoods and they could not access cheap credit facilities to improve their lives. The families were trying to make ends meet by engaging in various activities such as agriculture, leaf-plate making, and collecting and gathering forest produce for domestic consumption and for selling as well. In order to take care of their needs, some migrated to Bengal for 3 to 4 months in a year. From all these sources, a family was able to earn at an average about Rs 12,000 only per annum. Migration happened mostly during kharif paddy transplanting, kharif paddy harvesting, potato harvesting and the summer paddy transplanting and harvesting. They were also dependent on the moneylenders at an interest of 60-120 per cent per annum! The Pradan team felt the need to take some initiatives to help the community resolve these problems.

Pradan had already started interventions in the nearby villages of Damri, Nerwapahari, Basmata Jagudih and Parshimla. The SHGs in these villages together formed a Cluster, which they called the Bagnal Cluster. The Cluster was named so even before any intervention started in Bagnal village because the village was situated in the centre. The villages were situated in 5 km radius within the Cluster. Pradan was initially engaged in SHG promotion and improved agricultural practices. Pradan started work in Bagnal village by forming SHGs and through the capacity

building of the community, particularly women. The first group was formed in January 2003. Gradually eight groups with 115 members were formed in three villages, that is, Bagnal, Rampur and Karmatad, close to each other. We, the professionals in Pradan, talked to the villagers about the functions of banks, the government, the block headquarters and the services that they can avail from these institutions. We also conducted various workshops to enhance awareness, on membership training and motivational training to help the women understand their roles, responsibilities and functions as SHG members better. All through, we emphasized on their strength as a collective in playing a role in the development of themselves, their families and their village.

The forums to discuss on these issues were the SHG and Cluster meetings. Often, I attended and facilitated these meetings. Creating a friendly and supportive environment for the members to communicate their problems more openly among themselves always remained my area of concern. I listened to their concerns and encouraged members to help their fellow-women in a supportive and objective manner. With Pradan's help and support, the SHG members also succeeded in strengthening their livelihoods through agriculture, SRI and vegetable cultivation, and vermicompost production. The eight SHGs have been linked to banks for their credit requirements and, collectively, they have now availed a loan of Rs 1,35,600 this year.

The people in the villages around the Bagnal Cluster are appreciating the efforts of the women to bring about changes in the lives of their families and village. The SHG and Cluster meetings are being used by the villagers as forums to find the answers to their problems. Conflicts that occurred in the village are being brought to the women in the SHG

meetings. When the SHGs were unable to resolve the issue despite a thorough attempt, it is taken up at the Cluster level. For instance, some time back there was a conflict between two families in Bagnal because their children wanted to get married. The parents did not approve this marriage because the boy belonged to a well-off family and the girl to a poor family. The girl was pregnant and she appealed to the family to accept her as their daughter-in-law. When the young couple failed to convince the boy's family, they called for a village meeting. Even the village leaders and villagers could not make the families accept the marriage.

The couple then approached the three SHGs, namely, Manopkar, Jyoti Kiran and Marshal Bambir Mahila Mandals, in the village, to resolve the issue. The members of the three SHGs explained to the parents that it was better to accept the decision of their children and let them be happy. The children in their own way had already made their decisions and as mature adults it would be better for every villager and family member to support them. The women also told the boy's family that it would be better to resolve the matter on a happy note, failing which they would otherwise have to approach the police for a legal settlement. And after long hours of discussion with both the families, the SHG women succeeded in convincing the families to accept their children's marriage. At present, the two are proud parents of a baby girl and the grandparents are also very fond of their granddaughter.

The women SHG members are actively involved in spreading awareness in the village about issues such as vaccination of children and pregnant women, domestic violence and so on. Discussions on these issues are more often initiated in the Cluster meetings facilitated by Pradan professionals.

Emerging Issues

On 20 February 2008, during one of their Cluster meetings, the discussion focussed on the problem of alcoholism in their villages. Both men and women, including some of the SHG members, were addicted to liquor. The younger generation too was getting addicted. They mainly consumed the locally prepared liquor made from fermented Mahua flowers. In the Cluster meeting, some of the members shared stories of being victims of domestic violence because of their spouses' drunkenness. They realized that a major portion of their household income was being spent on liquor. On an average, Rs10 per day was spent by a person in buying liquor. Over time, there were other costs that the family had to incur on health care. The women observed that a family with an alcoholic member spent around Rs 1,000 to Rs 1,200 more on health care compared to a family with no alcoholic members.

The deteriorating health of the alcoholic affected his/her day-to-day work, especially in the fields. The SHG members and many others in their village were struggling with these problems. To top it all, the women in the village sold liquor and most of their customers were men. To attract these customers, the women sellers dressed in a way that raised eyebrows among the villagers. The job of selling liquor was not considered to be one of dignity among the women. However, it was the only source of income, even for a number of the SHG members. On two hatiya (market) days in a week, they made around Rs 50 to Rs 70 per hatiya.

We had had no direct involvement in the way the women were handling the issue of liquor selling in the area. But we had made efforts to organize the women as a collective so that they can together raise and resolve broader

issues. With Pradan's silent and some fellow SHG members' active support, a few women stopped selling liquor. They started activities such as commercial vegetable farming and vermicompost production. Cluster representatives pondered over the possible ways to tackle the issue, but were not able to arrive at a solution.

As part of our livelihood promotion, we worked on creating awareness among the villagers about the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and on helping them use the opportunity to create livelihoods assets for themselves. The objective was to help people make their own plans about the villages for integrated natural resource management. We helped the villagers submit plans to the block offices. We planned a rally in March to disseminate information regarding the Act and the provisions it gave to people to earn a livelihood to as many villagers we could. The women decided to prepare a few slogans through which they could spread the word across about NREGA.

The SHG members met to discuss the programme in their Cluster meeting. They thought that the rally would be a good forum to also raise their voice against liquor selling. I was astounded to see their commitment to resolve the matter that affected their lives.

As they prepared slogans for awareness about NREGA, I helped them to develop a couple of slogans on alcoholism and link both the concerns. They raised the point that instead of drinking and sitting idle, it was better for all villagers to get engaged in the work generated through the NREGA programme. Moreover, drinking meant spending money whereas working in the programme meant earning money for the family.

On 17 March 2008, around 100 women joined the rally and walked for hours in the hot summer sun through the villages of Bagnal, Rampur and Karmatad. I was witness to this event and I saw the vigour and excitement in the eyes of all the women as they shouted their slogans. The spectators seemed astounded by such an initiative by their women-folk. One, it was the women who were spreading news about a new happening in the village, that is, the NREGA. And two, they were mentioning things about liquor that was quite surprising for the people because for ages the villagers were used to taking liquor on a regular basis and saw no harm in doing so. The onlookers listened to the women with attention; however, they did not seem concerned that the women were raising their voices against some very pertinent issues regarding alcohol consumption. The villagers had become familiar with the women being involved in activities related to savings, credit and income generation. This time they were raising the issue of liquor selling and consumption.

The villagers did not think that the women had enough strength to stop a habit that was so old and so prevalent among the men. To them, it was a one-day event, the substance of which would soon fade away. The villagers were selective in the absorbing the information; they were glad that Pradan and their SHG members were involved in the NREGA process, which meant that work would be completed with greater efficiency and no corruption. They had witnessed over the years that the women SHGs and Pradan had been successful in bettering their lives through various savings, credit and livelihood activities and that all the processes were transparent and clean. Contrary to this, when the government started some work under NREGA in their village, the villagers did not

even receive their regular weekly payment according to the specified minimum wage rate and never got any detailed information about the work in their village.

There were some individuals in the villages, who worked as contractors in constructing infrastructure, however, who were disturbed by this affair. The business of these contractors was to get their hands into the various government projects, also NREGA, meant for village development through corrupt means. They used to utilize only half the amount sanctioned for the activity and keep the other half as their own income which was illegal. However, they were able to make a lot of money through such unscrupulous means. But when they saw the women getting involved in NREGA, they felt threatened. They knew that from now on they would get lesser chances of exploiting the poor and earn through such unscrupulous means.

Standing United

Next, the SHG members decided to hold a special meeting to deliberate on future proceedings. On 22 March 2008, one of my senior colleagues and I attended this meeting organized by the Cluster representatives. The women suggested that they hold another gathering on the coming hatiya (market) day. The women decided to write a formal letter to the authorities about the gathering on 24 March 2008, to protest against the selling of liquor because most of the supply of liquor happened from these places. The Cluster representatives drafted the letter and more than 100 SHG members signed it. They sent copies of the letter to the authorities such as the District Commissioner (DC), Superintendent of Police (SP), Block Development Officer (BDO), Gram Sabha Members, Hatiya Samiti, Gram Shiksha Samiti, Gram Pradhan, the Gurit (villager messenger)

and the Naiki (Gram Pradhan's assistant). It was the first time the SHG women were taking such an initiative in their area.

I told the members of Pradan's support for their initiative. However, I made it clear to them that this initiative was their responsibility, and Pradan would only support them by giving them the information they needed from time to time. It was their fight and once they started it, they would have to face every eventuality that came their way.

On 24 March 2008 about 60 SHG members walked to their village hatiya and issued a one-week ultimatum to all liquor sellers. They told them that from the next hatiya liquor selling should be stopped. They went to each seller and discussed with them the reasons for stopping the sale of liquor in the village, mentioning all the ill-effects of liquor consumption such as deteriorating health, violence at home, increase in family expenses and less engagement in productive work. Already, there was a visible decline in the number of liquor sellers in the market. Before the start of the initiative, there were a total of 25 liquor sellers in the market, which had declined to around 10. One reason for this was that some of the liquor sellers were also SHG members. Being a part of the whole drive against the sale of alcohol, they had already stopped sitting in the market to sell liquor.

The women again showed up in the next weekly hatiya, that is, on 7 April 2008 and went around checking if the sellers were still selling liquor. They found that their ultimatum had worked! Except for 2 or 3 sellers, who had not been present in previous hatiya, no one was selling liquor. On talking to these few sellers, they found out that because they had been absent the previous week, they had not understood the intensity of the issue. They

had not expected the women to come again to the hatiya.

I too was present on that day as an onlooker. I heard several comments from the villagers about the initiative taken by the SHG members. Some said, "The liquor sellers have not sold liquor worth even Rs 10 in a day. These ladies have tremendous courage and energy."

Two days prior to this, the SHG members got information that a few villagers were conspiring to disrupt their planning for the 7 April 2008. The women had heard that these men were planning to raise their protest in the weekly hatiya and could even create a ruckus. But the women did not feel discouraged by such news. They informed the SP. The SP, who was familiar with the initiative the women had started in the area, ordered the police station in Masanjor to see that law and order was maintained in the hatiya. The SP also appreciated the women for their efforts and encouraged them to take on more such initiatives. As a result, there was the police force at the premises and the women did their usual round in the village.

From its advent, the Cluster used to hold an annual event, or Shivar, at which all the SHG members gathered to celebrate their unity and solidarity. The last Cluster Shivar was held in 2005. In the gap of three years, the energy and enthusiasm of the women seemed to decline. With the start of this movement against the sale of liquor, however, there was a revival in the zeal and there was a stronger bonding among the women. The SHG women of the Bagnal Cluster once again planned to organize a Cluster Shivar and renew their bonding. On 11 April 2008, 500 members from three Clusters, namely, Bagnal, Damri and Parsimla, gathered for their annual fest. The

women discussed issues such as the sale of liquor, NREGA, vaccination of children and pregnant women, children's education and so on.

The women had earlier got the news that a few men from their villages were planning to disrupt their Shivar. They had informed the police authorities about their event and had also requested for security. The police force was on duty at the premises from 7 a.m. Seeing the support from the authorities, the women felt even more confident about their initiative. During the event, two villagers came to the Shivar and demanded that the event be stopped. They also threatened to break the pandal if the women did not listen to them. Even before the police could come and stop the two men, all the women stood up and challenged the men saying, "Let us see how you can dare to do anything." Seeing the collective strength and unity of the women, the men stepped back, and the police took them away from the premises.

In Retrospect

The women are now planning to spread their movement to the nearby weekly markets of

Basmata and Pahrudih villages. They have started meeting with their Cluster representatives and SHG members, promoted by Pradan and other NGOs in the area. I feel proud to be engaged with a group of women, who think about all aspects of development, be it livelihood, children's education or fighting other societal evils such as domestic violence and alcoholism, of their village. These women have always been labelled as the disadvantaged and weaker section of our community and are considered as unable to think or even take action on any developmental issue. They have proved many wrong. As a development professional, I think it is important to support and encourage their efforts as well as value their ideas and thoughts. There are numerous such women living in villages similar to Bagnal in our country, waiting for help and support. As seen in Bagnal, such initiatives by women, with some 'hand-holding' from external agencies, definitely contribute to the betterment of their family, village and society.

Ihasansare Bahudustare...

D. Narendranath

Superstition and ignorance shackle the development and prosperity of tribal communities.

Ihasansare Bahudustare...

(Oh Lord! Please liberate me from this world so full of sorrows, and from this endless circle of birth and death.)

Bhaja Govindam by Sankaracharya

The rains had ceased. Dada, that is, my colleague Satyaranjan, quarrelled with his clothes at the well. Clouds navigated lazily in the evening sky, often forming weird shapes, then diffusing, merging with each other. My mind must have been playing tricks with me-whose mind doesn't occasionally? But I cannot deny the fact that I saw the clouds take the shape of an old woman holding out a child in her extended hands, as if she were playing with him, tossing him in the air. Little by little, the 'child' disintegrated...

Despair overwhelmed me. Isn't that what had just happened here, in my village Baradih? Sitaram had just died. Yes, the chubby seven-month-old ruffian, who used to turn the world upside down when he did not see his grandmother. It was a brief illness of a week. Gut cramps? Dysentery? Who knows? Whoever went to the doctor? Not Dukhni, the child's mother; not Budhi, the grandmother, and not Ramlal, the father. Since they wouldn't go, we went to a nearby medical shop and bought some paediatric syrup, which we administered to Sitaram religiously. And the child did seem to get better.

Ramlal, however, did not believe in the effectiveness of modern medicines. He-rather, all of them-were convinced that it was the evil spirit of Dukhni's ex-husband that was

causing all this trouble. That spirit needed to be pacified, cajoled. A puja needed to be done. Couple of chicken needed to be sacrificed. The magic-man, the Ojha, Mihilal of Chamudohar village, needed to be plied with some liquor. All this meant money. Ramlal was scouring the countryside for money. Superstition-a lasting curse on the Santhals.

I had to go out of Baradih for a week. Dada was left behind with the parents to look after the child. Every morning, noon and evening, he would personally give the syrup to Sitaram. The child had weakened considerably in seven days of the illness; yet, he cheered up slightly and started kicking around a little. Dada would tell Ramlal and Dukhni every time he met them to take the child to the hospital at Bartkatha. Initially, they said they didn't know where the hospital was; then they said they would take him on Monday, the market day.

On Sunday, the puja was performed by Mihilal-a man with steely eyes and shoulder-length hair. He was the local witchcrafter, who could invoke or exorcise spirits in return for a few bottles of liquor. Development, progress down the ages, has done little to release these simple people from the stranglehold of the Ojha. The Santhals have kept many of their traditional institutions such as that of the Manjhi-Haram (the headman), the Ojha, the Pargana Manjhi (the Cluster headman), the marriage customs, death rituals, etc., free from rampant 'Diku-i-sation' unlike many other tribals in South Bihar. Preferring to settle in the remotest areas, development has always reached them last.

Mihilal came promptly on Sunday. Through his puja, he 'liberated' Sitaram from the clutches of the evil spirit that had come from Barkitarn, Dukhni's sasural (husband's home). In the process, he also gluttonously 'liberated' enormous quantities of chicken and mahua (the local liquor). Everybody was happy. Sitaram was now free. If only they could foresee just how 'free' he would be in the next few hours!

Monday, Dada reminded Dukhni to go to the hospital and went to the weekly market. He returned at five in the evening and went to look up Sitaram. They had not taken him to the hospital. "Why wastes one's time in hospital now when the puja has been successfully conducted? See, how well Sitaram smiles?" Dada saw red. He stomped back to the centre and didn't go back that evening.

It must have been about one o'clock in the night when a fearsome shriek split the dreadful silence. Dada bolted out of the centre and reached Dukhni's house in one leap. Ramlal, Budhi, Dukhni, Talo, Muniya—all sat huddled around the child, dumbfounded. A dhibri (a crude kerosene lamp) flickered violently in the corner, as if wanting to express its anguish. There lay Sitaram, his little hands and legs stretched, unnaturally. His breath came in painful spasms and his eyeballs rolled over, backwards. The imminent was obvious. Unable to stand the sight any longer, Dada returned to the centre. He lit a lamp and just sat there. Time moved at a snail's pace. The deafening silence rammed into his ears. He didn't have to bear it for long. A few minutes later, a long-drawn-out wail signaled that the inevitable had happened....

Sitaram is gone. Back to his land, said Budhi. "God gave him to me for a few days and now

he has taken him back. God must have his own reasons for what he did. But who has seen His ways? Why, God? Why did you choose me to be your plaything? Why did you give Sitaram to me at all, if you did not plan to keep him here? Earlier my husband died, I accepted it. Then my two sons died. I managed to live with that sorrow too. Then came Sitaram, I was happy. I gave him all I had. He too loved me. When he was here, we had someone at home to come back for, to buy little things for. You also loved him, didn't you Master Babu? How he liked to receive those biscuits from you! How he enjoyed playing on your motorcycle! Everybody loved him so. Now God has snatched him from us. Oh! It is so painful, it is so frustrating. There is a total emptiness. Dukhni does not want to stay in that house any more. She wants to go to her husband's place in Barkitarn.

She's young. She has a future. Maybe she's right in going. But where should I go? I'm not going anywhere. I grew up in this place. I plan to die too in this place, even if I have to live alone."

Budhi was right. Dukhni was actually thinking of leaving Baradih with Ramlal. Uncertainties everywhere were the only thing holding them back. Dukhni did not take too well to Sitaram's death. The despair, the frustration, the feeling of emptiness—it was not only ours, not only Budhi's, but Dukhni's too. She was the mother and Sitaram was her only son. She was absolutely stupefied and moved, when she did, like a somnambulist. The first three days were like a nightmare, recounted Dada. Dukhni and Budhi just cried and cried. They did not eat a thing. Swollen eyes, which had no more tears to shed. Stony, empty stares. Occasional bouts of whimpering, which would burst into long-drawn wails. God! Was it painful listening to

them! Who could console them? Dukhni would, occasionally, in half sleep, absent-mindedly grope around to embrace the child, who used to be there. Her hands would feel the empty bed sheet. The excruciating truth would strike her for the umpteenth time. A heart-rending wail! It seemed as though Dukhni would go mad! She looked mad!

Budhi was the first to come to terms with reality, the mind-boggling reality that the poor cannot afford to mourn their dead! "Such luxuries are only for the privileged! Not for us! We don't earn one day, we don't eat. Punishment for the unpardonable crime of being poor!" Budhi went out the next day, brought sal leaves from the forest, made leaf plates, sold them in the market and bought ration for the house. Dukhni took two more days to recover.

The day I returned to Baradih, Dukhni and Budhi had gone to transplant paddy in the fields. The previous day, they had had the shradh ceremony for Sitaram. All the villagers were treated to mutton and alcohol. Much money was spent. Ramlal had to pledge the standing crops in one of his fields to the mahajan, to borrow Rs 1,000 from him.

I will never forget the look on Dukhni's face when I saw her first on my return. She was standing at her door, having just returned from the field. When she turned and saw me, it was a strange stare. Her eyes had lost their spark. As if someone had pulled a shutter down her eyes. She seemed to look at me and at the same time not look at me. Her eyes seemed riveted at something behind me, beyond me in the horizon. Was she searching for someone - something there? A pair of little hands to reach up and caress her face? She

pulled her much-worn saree around her aching breasts. The ache only a mother understands when a suckling infant stops feeding suddenly. Gradually, she got used to the fact of not having her son around. Surely, she had got used to thinking of her son as dead. She had adapted rather quickly. Like every Santhal, she has taken that death in her stride. "If you want to live, you have to die every moment of life," said Swami Vivekananda, and he is dead. His words live on. But for the Santhal, life is about avoiding death. The trapeze artist plays with his life, the crowd claps and he gets paid. The santhal pays with his life. A life in which death stalks every moment, one cannot but get used to it as a constant companion. Wild animals, snakes, diseases, rivalries and to top it all...poverty! It is a complicated life. One which you and I cannot comprehend easily. "Tadwat jeevitam atishaya chapalam!" (Strange are the ways of life.)

Does the story end here? Sadly, no! Budhi blamed her fate and God, and continued to stitch sal leaf plates. Dukhni reconciled herself to Sitaram's death. But Ramlal was not the one to give up easily. Sitaram could not have gone just like that. If it was not the evil spirit from Barsot, it had to be from somewhere else. He had to find out. He set out, with five others from the village to Parasnath, near Giridih, to a village called Kubri, to meet a man they call the Sokha Baba. A man with divine powers, who when offered a couple of hundred rupees, some rice and jaggery, will bare open before you all the notorious deeds of evil spirits.

Sokha Baba lived in Devas. There are two such Devas around Barkatha, one at Parasnath and the second near Bishungarh in a village called Hotoi. Bad patches in life, death, and rivalries-

all these ensure a constant stream of believers round the year to the Devas. The Sokhas fleece them. Yet they keep coming back. Any problem in life, the Sokha has to be visited. The Santhals, when faced with seemingly unsurmountable circumstances-not very rare-and when at their wits' end, turn to Ojhas and Sokhas. However, there are some shrewd members in the community, who are conditional believers. One of them is none other than Ramlal.

The Sokha Baba at Kubri told Ramlal that the child was killed by the evil spirit residing at Chhotu, Ramlal's cousin's house. It was quite shocking to think that the child's own uncle would try to kill it. Yet that was what the Sokha Baba revealed.

To go back in time a little: Budhi's father-in-law's father, Jhalo Manjhi, came to Baradih with his son over 50 years ago. At that time, there were only one or two families there. Jhalo came to look after the property of a very rich Pandey of Belkapi village. When Pandey died, he bequeathed a lot of land to Jhalo. On Jhalo's death, those lands got transferred to his son's name. Now a rich landlord, this son became the Manjhi-Haram of Baradih. He had three children, two sons and one daughter. The eldest son, who subsequently became the Manjhi-Haram, married Budhi. They had three daughters and two sons. The second was the daughter who had three sons and two daughters. Her youngest son had two sons. The key characters in this story are the 2 sons of Budhi, 2 sons, Talo and Khadia of the second daughter and 2 sons-Chhotu and Jeevlal-of the youngest son.

After Budhi's husband died, his two sons inherited his share of the land and the elder son became the Manjhi-Haram. By this time, due to division over the generations, individual holdings had become meagre and were barely sufficient for a decent survival. Occasional scuffles among cousins over boundaries were not uncommon. At this juncture, the two sons of Budhi died in quick succession due to some illness.

There was a galore of allegations and counter allegations. Talo and Khadia accused Chhotu and Jeevlal of deploying evil spirits to kill Budhi's sons, so that they could usurp their lands. Chhotu and Jeevlal were sure that Talo and Khadia had taken help of evil spirits. They had the other families staying in the village to support them. Thus the families in the village split into two factions - Talo, Khadia in one faction and the remaining eight families in the other. Budhi remained neutral.

The Devas was the next resort. Representatives from both factions went to the Sokha Baba at Kubri. The verdict of the Sokha went against Chhotu and Jeevlal. But instead of taking any compensatory measures such as a puja or a sacrifice, they accused Talo of foul play. Thus the rift widened and the quarrel continued. It continues to date.

While the quarrel went on, Budhi's youngest daughter, Dukhni, brought a ghar-jamai. Since women do not have any right to property, the land in the name of Budhi's husband came to Ramlal, since he was the ghar-jamai. Chhotu and Jeevlal, who had an eye on this land, which they could have inherited, did not like this but they kept mum.

Pristine and serene, Baradih had difficult times because of the feud in the village. Instead of trying to co-exist in this tough world, they quarrelled. Festivals, the mainstay of Santhal life, passed off without any celebrations. Any ceremonies-marriage, birth, death-in any family found the members of the other faction boycotting. Any group-based development endeavour got ruled out. For the people of Baradih, this division had become part of their nature. There was no question of a compromise. Appalling it is to see people, who have no worthwhile tomorrow to look forward to, cling on desperately to their meaningless yesterdays.

Coming back to the events at hand, as the people of Baradih quarrelled through thick and thin, Dukhni conceived and gave birth to a chubby young boy, Sitaram. Sitaram grew to be the apple of everyone's eye in the village. His sudden death was a terrible shock to the family and to all of us. The verdict by the Sokha Baba that Chhotu and Jeevlal had conspired to kill him was a further jolt. But again, instead of conceding the verdict, Chhotu and Jeevlal said that they want to go to another Sokha to confirm the verdict.

What followed was an ugly form of motivated conspiracy and design. The design of Chhotu and Jeevlal was to harass Ramlal so much so that he would be compelled to leave Baradih. Budhi and Dukhni also would be compelled to leave with him. Then all the land would be theirs. They were not exactly happy at the prospect of the ghar-jamai enjoying the property that could have theirs if they had the support of other families, who gleefully watched when cousins fought. They conjured up a case that Ramlal was seen talking to and taking advice of Talo, who was their rival.

This was not called for. Therefore, if they had to remain in the village, they (Ramlal and family) would have to conduct a big feast for all the villagers (except Talo and Khadia) or else they would be excommunicated and their lands confiscated. Ramlal was baffled out of his wits. His child had just died and he had not yet regained his bearings. And here he was being asked to do penance for a non-issue. But what could he do? Jeevlal was now the Manjhi-Haram according to law, and a majority of the village was with him. Ramlal did not want to be excommunicated. More than himself, he was afraid of his younger brother, who he said would not get a bride if they were excommunicated. So, much against his and our wishes, he pledged the rest of his standing crops and conducted the feast. Everyone in the village, except Talo and Khadia and us, was treated to lot of meat and liquor. Ramlal was exonerated of the crime of talking to Talo.

Poor Ramlal! His woes were yet not over. The controversy over Sitaram's death remained. Chhotu and Jeevlal wanted to consult another Sokha Baba for a second opinion. Since Ramlal was the appellant, again they went, at his expense, to the Sokha Baba at Hotoi, near Bishungarh. And here is the piece de resistance. This Sokha said that the evil spirit had come from Budhi's father's house and it was Budhi herself who had kept this evil spirit in her house to kill Sitaram! Naturally, this verdict was acceptable to Chhotu and Jeevlal, and Ramlal did not know to do.

Yes, Ramlal did not know what to do. He still doesn't. He has a wife who is half dead, a mother-in-law who still has some life left, a brother who is unemployed and himself, along with two pint-sized bullocks and a leaking

dilapidated house. All his standing crops have been pledged to the local moneylender. He doesn't know where to go from here. The world had not been kind on him. He lives now in

Baradih, a totally shattered man. "Ihasansare Bahudustare....."

This article was published earlier in October 1991.



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.



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