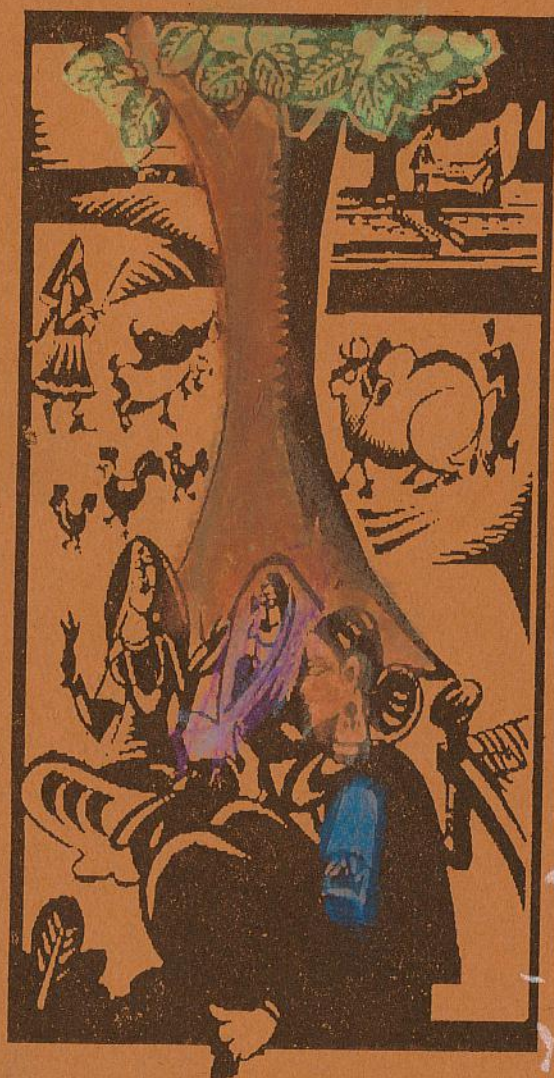


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# News Reach

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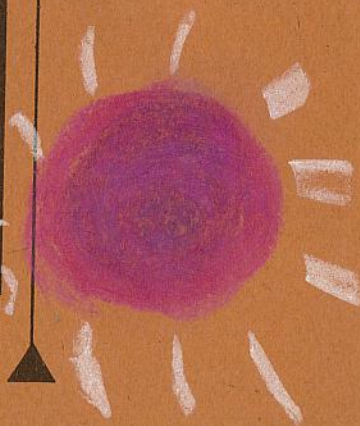
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## SHG Federations

Federations do create favourable conditions for the growth and development of the poor people, but there are a set of precautions that one needs to consider while promoting such a collective

D. Narendranath and Ajaya K. Samal

### Promotion of SHG Federations

SHG Federations, a not-so-recent phenomenon, has witnessed large-scale spread in the country in the wake of the SHG microfinance movement. Federations have been popular in the country for more than 10 years now, and yet there is no standard purpose for promoting federations. A study by Sa-Dhan in 2003 classified federations into four types based on their main function – Financial or Non-Financial and, based on the locus of control, Internal or External. Of a total sample of 28, there were 18 federations involved in financial functions, and 14 of these had external locus of control, meaning that the important decisions in the federations were being taken by the NGO promoter.

The trend is not radically different now. As per a count by APMAS (Andhra Pradesh Mahila Abhivruddhi Society) in 2007, the total number of small and large federations stood at about 69,000, of which more than half were involved in financial functions. Perhaps, the practice of the NGOs promoting federations for a particular agenda, such as microfinance, which they think are important, and the tight control the organization exerts has led to the Federation movement not having a life of its own but rather living a life that is closely monitored from outside. This is quite unlike the way the SHGs evolved, wherein the essentials of group promotion and nurturing were clear in the first few years on which refinements continue to happen even today.

Pradan has still not taken a call on the issue of whether or not federations need to be set up; but if Pradan were to promote federations,

it would not be involved in financial functions in the way many are. Insurance is one important financial service that the poor people need which requires the formation of a federation, but Pradan has not fully explored this. Besides this, Pradan does not envisage using federations for savings and credit functions. The federations set up by Pradan will play non-financial functions predominantly which would keep Pradan's involvement to the minimum.

These are early days yet, and it will take a little more time for the agenda of the federation to evolve and for Pradan to understand how to promote truly women-managed and governed SHG federations. Below is an attempt to lay down the broad contour of what Pradan understands by federations today. This is necessarily to be subjected to close critique and refinement. These are drawn from the experiences that Pradan has had in promoting SHG Federations in many locations.

### Need for Federations

In some of our recent deliberations, we realized that the formation of SHG federations is an integral part of our SHG programme. It serves the essential agenda of social mobilisation, which is a key to enabling poor communities for livelihoods. Does this mean that the only agenda that the federations have is the social organization of poor people?

We, at Pradan, have promoted a three-tier format for the federations. There is the SHG at the hamlet level, the Cluster at large village or Panchayat level and the Federations at the Block level. Technically speaking both the Cluster and the Federation are federations of



SHGs. Because they have evolved from the SHGs, the agenda of the federations would also emerge from the agenda of the SHGs. The SHGs essentially play four roles:

- **Mutual help:** This includes peer support, adjustment with each other, making space for each other, support in times of crises and building social capital. Sympathy and empathy, equality, interest in each other and mutual respect are the pre-conditions for mutual help.
- **Financial intermediation:** This includes forms of financial services, bank linkages, financial planning, and linking with the larger financial market. The pre-conditions are financial discipline, peer influence, trust, transparency, fair play, equity, easy access, security and ability to negotiate with external institutions.
- **Livelihood planning:** This includes resource mapping, planning, judicious use of credit, asset creation, income enhancement and reducing vulnerability. The necessary pre-conditions are sharing resources and information, peer learning, challenging, motivating and developing a 'livelihoods vision'.
- **Empowerment:** This includes influencing the environment, being a pressure group, accessing services, accessing crucial decision-making spaces in the village and outside, and an enhanced sense of dignity and self respect, self confidence, ability to negotiate within the family. The necessary pre-conditions are risk taking, emotional support, solidarity, concern for society, awareness about broader issues and rights, enhancing horizons.

Except for the small savings and credit activity, there is nothing in the elaborate list here that happens exclusively in any one of the tiers. The SHG-Cluster-Federation is a continuum where these functions are carried out to varying degrees as per the structure of the forum. The structures support each other in playing these roles effectively.

The role distribution in the SHG-Cluster-Federation continuum happens in various different ways, yet it is possible to discern a pattern here. Role differentiation can be based on territory, on number aggregation and on the types of issues addressed.

The roles of these three institutions vary based on the geographical area they represent. The SHG at the hamlet level has a member base of about 20, from as many families. The issues that pertain to the hamlet or maybe the village are discussed here. These could be about the livelihoods possible there, the lack of drinking water and so on. The Cluster is an association of SHGs from nearby villages. The issues discussed in a Cluster will span the whole panchayat. Similarly, a Federation spans the whole block, and issues discussed here are those that affect the whole Block or maybe the district. These territory-based issues are mostly about infrastructure and livelihood opportunities.

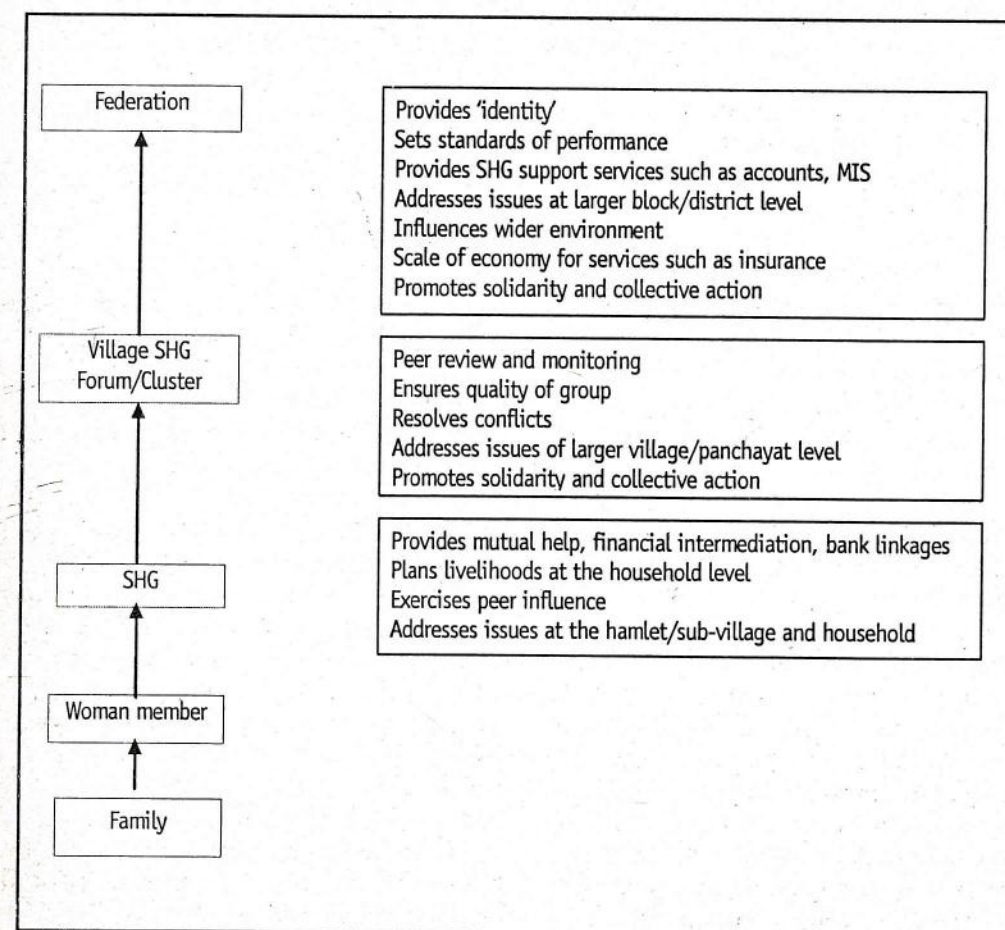
The second set of roles, differentiated across the three levels, are number based. An SHG may have a membership of about 20 members, a Cluster may have about 200 members and a Federation may have around 3,000 members. Various services could be aggregated that could allow cost-effective delivery across these levels. While the SHG deals with savings and credit, the Cluster deals with bulk processing of bank loan applications, following up on loan repayments, etc. Services

that require large numbers such as insurance are better hosted at the Federation level.

The third set of roles is based on the types of issues addressed. The three levels deal with issues at different levels. The SHG represents each family, so the issues that are of concern to each family are to be dealt with there. Savings and credit, livelihood planning, personal conflicts and other problems, and so on find place in the deliberations there. The SHG also discusses issues that deal with the hamlet or the village.

The type of issues addressed in a Cluster changes. The representations at the Cluster level are from individual SHGs, not from families. The issues that are deliberated there, therefore, are about the groups, their quality of performance and any related issues, linkages with the local stakeholders and so on. Very personal issues may also find place in a Cluster but these are taken up more to support the SHG in dealing with them rather than as direct action. A Federation deals with issues related to the larger world, the rural poor or women.

**Box 1 : The roles at the three levels may be summarised as follows:**





The Clusters and the Federations are federated structures. Both these structures play non-financial roles according to the broad policy that Pradan has adopted. The financial roles are limited to the SHG because the most basic requirement of financial contract, that is, peer information, exists only at the SHG level, where face-to-face interactions are possible, and members reside within the vicinity. The higher tiers do not have the advantage of having all the members sitting across each other and verifying loan plans and passing it on the basis of direct questioning. Loan utilization and repayment-related follow-ups are possible with the individual borrower at the SHG level. The Cluster and Federation are not suitable for transactions that require follow up at the individual level on a regular manner. But they are appropriate for issues that go beyond the individual. Therefore, the distribution of roles across the primary- and secondary-level structures reflects a similar pattern.

Let us understand the functioning of the apex-level Federations in detail.

### Definitions

The term "Federation" has been defined in various ways by different organizations. Some of them include:

A Federation is 'an association of autonomous bodies uniting for common perceived benefits'. (FWWB, 1998)

A Federation is a network of several SHGs and a structure or body evolved by SHGs themselves comprising representatives from all member SHGs, with the aim of supporting member-SHG to attain the goals of economic and social empowerment of women members, and their capacity building. (TNCDW, 1999)

A Federation is a network, association and coalition of primary organizations to

collectively achieve what they cannot do alone.' (Sa-Dhan, 2003)

An SHG Federation is a democratic body formed with a certain number of SHGs, functioning in a specific geographical area, with the objective of uniting such SHGs for a common cause and for achieving these causes, which an individual SHG cannot do. In short, an SHG Federation has to necessarily be of SHGs, by SHGs and for SHGs. (An APMAS paper, 2005)

The commonly accepted concept of a Federation is that it is a solidarity association of women. Most of the promoters at least at the level of definition do not attribute a financial role to the Federations.

Let us look more closely at each of the functions of Federations, as presented in the diagram conceptualized by Pradan.

### Provides Identity

This is one of the most important functions that a Federation plays. It is about discovering the common identity of the women, something that transcends identities related to village, caste, status, political affiliation or even culture. The identity as women becomes prominent and unifies each and every member. It also provides the basic driving force for the members to come together and sets the framework for a collective agenda. It is the most challenging feature of a Federation. It is easier to identify attributes or traits that separate one person from the other but very difficult to find factors that unite. It is relatively easier done in smaller collectives because there are more apparent similarities, but as the group gets larger, the challenge to find unifying factors gets tougher. Unless the group is able to identify and regularly reinforce this common identity, it becomes difficult to keep the group together.

The common identity becomes clear only when all the members are able to articulate a common super-ordinate goal. The super-ordinate goal requires struggle, demands that everyone put in their best and is relatively long term. There is no one standard way of strengthening the sense of identity, but it is important that deliberate exercises such as large meetings and other collective events are organised regularly. All events, meetings and other functions need to be used to revisit the super-ordinate goal and reinforce the collective identity.

### Promotes solidarity and collective action

This is one of the fundamental reasons for the existence of a Federation. There are many areas such as access to rights and entitlements, and influencing decision-making at the village level or the block/district level that require all the SHGs to come together. Collectively it achieves what cannot be achieved individually. There is need for people to come together and create a coherent community around themselves. Villages are not just collection of families and communities are not just collection of villages. Strong solidarity collectives of poor people need to be created. Poor people, especially women, must help each other, stand in for each other, strive to solve each other's problems themselves and form pillars of true grass roots democracy. Only this can force the panchayats, State and other institutions in the village to function in a manner that is poor-friendly.

### Sets standards of performance

The apex nature of the Federation allows it to set the standards of performance for the members and the groups. The purpose of a collective is to continuously challenge current standards and achieve higher standards. Unless the collective body, through various processes and events, conveys to the

constituents the urgency to keep bettering themselves, it can lead to stagnation.

### Addresses issues at the block/district level

The formation of a Federation at the block level allows it to address issues at that level. There are forums and decision-making bodies at the block and district that again need to be sensitized and activated, to prioritise issues pertaining to the poor communities and the women. The Federation has to set up mechanisms to continuously engage with these important bodies and drive their agenda. The Federation, thus, has to play a collaborative as well as influencing role.

### Influences the wider environment

Along with the formal bodies, such as the panchayat and the district administration, the peoples' collectives have to play the role of influencing the general development discourse at the local level, which is friendly to the better-off and elite sections, patriarchal, and sidelines the poorer castes and classes. Again concerted collective action can lead to a change in the mindsets and the traditional stereotypes.

### Scale of economy

There are various livelihood services around which Federation can organize itself to function in a cost effective manner. These are often seasonal, one-time services but have a favourable impact on procurement or marketing costs. An example would be the collective procurement of farm inputs such as seeds or fertilizers during the farming season. Then there are services such as insurance which require numbers to be provided cost effectively. One must note that the once-in-a-while service such as collective procurement or selling is different from insurance in which there is need for regular engagement and long-term commitment.



### **Providing SHG support**

There are a variety of services that the SHG requires that can be cost effectively provided at the Federation level. Support for day-to-day functioning, accounts and MIS, hosting the Computer Munshi, facilitating mutual learning, conflict resolution support, and so on are services that can be hosted centrally. The Federation will have to design systems and processes in order to ensure these services.

### **Structure of Federation**

The Federation has a three-tiered structure. At the base, there is the SHG, the SHGs send representatives to the Cluster and representatives from the Clusters form the block-level Federation. The Governance functions are carried out by these representatives. The agenda for the Federation, therefore, mostly emerges from the deliberations in the SHGs. The effective functioning of a Federation assumes that the Clusters and the SHGs are functioning effectively. The representatives from the SHGs to the Clusters and from the Clusters to the Federation are selected by the members based on their ability to represent the forum, their concern for others and their willingness to work with others. As in a true democracy, these representatives hand over responsibilities to others in regular periodicity, ensuring that over a period of time everyone gets a chance to occupy leadership positions.

The operations at the three levels are carried out differently. At the SHG level most of the agenda are taken care of in the SHG meetings. At the Cluster level most of the agenda are carried out in the meetings but there are also activities such as group visits, which are carried out outside the group meetings. At the Federation level, we see that most of the agenda takes place outside the monthly meetings of representatives. The services that

a forum provides the women or the SHGs outside routine meetings will have costs associated with them, which will have to be met from contributions. The SHG members contribute to meeting these costs by volunteering time or by paying in cash. Over a period of time, it is important that the Federation evolves a revenue model for delivering these services.

### **Role of Facilitator**

Pradan plays the role of a facilitator and helps the growth of the SHG-Cluster-Federation structure into a robust organization. Through appropriate facilitation, Pradan staff tries to ensure that the SHG members collectively evolve a perspective about the organization and strive to develop the same as a coherent institution. Pradan also tries to ensure that the roles that the respective levels are supposed to carry out are internalized by the women and they develop the appropriate awareness, skills and attitudes required. The SHGs and the Federation also may need the services of a variety of resource persons, both SHG members as well as non-SHG members, in order to ensure the carrying out of roles. There are a large variety of skills required for delivering the long list of services listed across the three levels. The skills range from doing routine accounts maintenance, auditing, facilitating livelihood planning, meeting facilitation, resolving conflicts and interfacing with the markets. Not all these skills are available with the women or others in the village readily. Thus Pradan has to help the SHGs and the Federations identify the skills required, the persons who can deliver these services, provide training and help integrate these resource persons with the SHG-Federation structure.

### **Some cautions in promoting Federations**

Given the current euphoria surrounding Federations wherein a number of state

governments have formulated guidelines for establishing Federations and even the Government of India is contemplating setting up a national-level Federation, it is easy to get carried away by the idea. But it is important to halt and question whether we need to set up Federations. It requires long-term commitment because Federations do not get set up overnight. Some of the cautions that need to be exercised when planning a Federation are as follows:

#### ***The perspective***

Who owns the idea of the Federation? Whose vision is it? The more the vision is that of the external intervener the more difficult it is to sustain. The need for a Federation has to emerge from the SHGs and it has to be well articulated by the SHG members even before they start federating at the Cluster level. This articulation of the vision and goals, and the roles of the three tiers have to be reinforced through repeated references. And for the Federations to be community-led, these have to necessarily emerge from the community itself.

#### ***Ensuring member ownership and member governance***

In spite of the need emerging from the community, it is difficult to make these institutions truly community-led and managed. There are issues such as the lack of information, lack of capabilities and our own lack of trust in the people, which can lead to Federations getting more Pradan-owned and managed than community-owned and managed. This is a recipe for creating permanent liabilities for Pradan.

#### ***Broad-based leadership***

This also draws from the above. There is a danger of a few articulate members controlling the organization, in the absence of true democratic processes. From an efficiency point

of view, this might be a desirable model, because things are predictable and take less time. For microfinance operations or for market linkage activities, predictability and efficiency are key success parameters. However, from the point of view of Pradan, in which equity considerations are also very important, a few members controlling the organization may not be a desirable scenario.

#### ***Ensuring that SHGs do not get subordinate to Federations***

Federations operate under the principle of subsidiarity. This postulates that the tasks or functions that can be done at a particular level need to get done there itself. It says that the secondary tiers are actually subsidiary to the primary tiers. It has been seen, however, that in many Federations, the promoter exercises control through the Federation leaders, making the SHGs or the members less effective in participating in governance.

#### ***Diseconomies of scale***

A Federation provides a scale of economy, but we must understand the bringing together also has heavy costs. As long as the SHG is confined to the hamlet level, it is small and is run by the members as part of their daily routine. But organizations such as the Cluster and Federation, which go beyond the village, demand extra time and energy investments from a large number of members. This requires massive mobilization, and effort to maintain the motivation of the members in participating in the governance. Again, there are enormous costs in terms of money and time. The promoter and the SHGs need to be absolutely clear as to why the Federation is needed and who is going to play what role.

#### ***Finding staff who sustain long-term interest in the Federation***

This is a crucial issue of the promoting



organization. Facilitating the emergence and establishment of a Federation is something that takes about five years. Even before embarking on such long-term ventures, the promoting organization has to be clear that staff members, willing to provide such commitment, are put on the job. As it happens in many field locations, the constant turnover of the professional staff does not provide a favorable scenario to promote Federations.

#### ***Evolving a revenue model, in the absence of microfinance services***

As Pradan's policy, a Federation does not take up financial functions, which deprive them of the revenue financial services delivery generates. In the absence of a designed cash flow, the Federation has to depend on member contributions on a regular basis, which as we know is a very difficult task. Whereas it is easy to mobilize contribution for tasks that

can be attributed to a specific time and space and very concrete outputs, such as the services of a group accountant, it is difficult to raise contributions for more intangible functions such as building good will or establishing linkages. Building a revenue model around non-financial functions is a challenge that faces Federations.

#### **Conclusion**

An SHG-Federation creates a sense of identity and fills in the much-felt, institutional gap of the poor people. A Federation helps mobilize resources, both its own as well from outside, for the development of its constituent members. Federations do create favourable conditions for the growth and development of poor people but there are some precautions that one needs to consider when promoting such a collective.

## **Strength in Togetherness**

**Mahila Mandals come forward to fight against witch-hunting and to protect the lives and the dignity of women**

Utkarsh Mishra

### **The Young Wife**

Everything was normal in Budni's life when she got married, except for a few sarcastic remarks of her in-laws, regarding some household chores. There was nothing unusual about this; it happened in every village household. She tried her best to mould herself to her roles as wife, daughter-in-law and mother so as to be recognized as a worthy woman. She gave birth to a boy (now 10 years old) followed by two daughters (4 and 1½ years now), healthy and sound. Her husband was a mason on contract labour in Orissa. He stayed away from the family for 4 to 6 months every year. His income was more than sufficient to run the family and meet the household needs.

In the summer of 2003, Budni's husband brought home a second wife (*Choti Aurat*), negating the value of his earlier marriage and without Budni's consent. He had met his second wife at his workplace. The new bride was fairer than Budni and younger too. Budni did not complain. She welcomed *Choti Aurat* warmly into the house. There was very little communication between the two women despite Budni's efforts. Soon the household split into two. The two wives stayed in two separate thatched rooms and ran fairly separate households. Budni knew that 'things had changed'. Whenever their husband came home from his workplace, which was once a month, he had his food with Budni but spent every night with his newly wedded wife. Budni still did not complain.

Things became worse when *Choti Aurat* delivered a child. This was the first time she fought with Budni. She saw Budni and her children as a threat to her own child,

especially with regard to matters concerning property rights, inheritance and the sharing of love and affection by the other family members. Her insecurity made her bitter about Budni. To top this, Budni saw her husband becoming closer to his second wife and caring less for Budni and her children. Her in-laws too turned against her. They started abusing her and speaking ill of her to the neighbours. This had not happened before the second marriage.

### **Mishaps in the Neighbourhood**

By coincidence, several incidents took place of untimely deaths and of people falling ill among their relatives and extended families in the neighbourhood. Sukumar Gundua's children repeatedly fell sick. Sukumar was 45 years old and had married twice. His second wife had one child. When this child was one year old, she conceived again. She had to stop breast feeding the first baby because of her pregnancy. The child died due to lack of proper care. The second child had a brain haemorrhage (locally known as '*Hirani Bimari*') when it was one year old and died too. These deaths shocked everyone.

Twenty-five-year old Summi Gundua, another relative, lived nearby. Her house was hardly ten leaps away from and facing Budni's house, where the single hand-pump of the community was located. Summi's husband had suffered from partial paralysis and had stomach problems too. He was also in great pain, which increased in winter, incapacitating him totally.

Thirty-year-old Chumani Gundua had taken a loan of Rs 150 one-and-a-half years earlier from Budni but had never repaid her. Chumani was going through tough days and Budni had



never insisted on the loan being repaid. Suddenly Chumani started avoiding Budni.

Budni had always had good relations within her tribal and village community. Chumani Gundua and her husband would share their joys and sorrows with them. Nanaki Gundua spent several hours a day at Budni's house. They participated in the ceremonies and the festive occasions. Palo Gundua, a friend from her own clan, used to feed Budni's children whenever she was out for work. Budni was an active member of her village SHG that was supported and facilitated by Pradan. The other SHG members found her humble and punctual at the weekly meetings.

*Choti Aurat's* insecurity and fears led her to speak ill of Budni to their family members and neighbours. She spread rumours about Budni having the soul of a devil inside. *Choti Aurat* was, perhaps, the first to blame Budni for all the misfortunes that happened or were happening in the neighbourhood. She claimed that Budni's evil presence in the village had killed Sukumar Gundua's children; that Budni had performed black magic on Summi Gundua's husband, resulting in the paralytic attacks; that Budni was responsible for the prolonged illness of Nanaki Gundua's children; and that the reasons for Chumani Gundua's household crises, starvation and hardship were also due to the presence of the evil spirit in Budni. Convinced that these allegations were true, the men and women of the neighborhood labelled Budni a 'witch'.

### **Budni's plight**

Budni's life became difficult. Even her children were not spared by the villagers. Whenever Summi Gundua saw Budni's 10-year-old son, she assaulted him and threatened him by saying that she would one day cut him into pieces. The little boy frequently heard these abuses; gradually, the verbal abuses turned

into physical torture. The villagers started beating him whenever they found him out in the street alone. The boy cried every day, holding on to his mother and asking her why such things happened to him and not to any of his friends. Even her daughter was assaulted a couple of times, causing deep trauma to the child.

Despite these incidents, Budni remained patient and calm. Her husband was a silent spectator to these episodes. He never seemed to take these incidents seriously and hardly stayed at home to listen to her agony and pain. He did not intervene or not did he seem interested in the matter. He seemed inclined to favour his second wife. The men and women of the village too were witness to these events but never uttered a word. They gave their tacit consent by their silence. Though the SHG members were surprised by the events, they chose to keep themselves out of the situation.

On 14 June 2007, Budni's husband was out at work. Her son was playing in the lawn in front of their house. At 8 in the morning, Budni went to fetch water from the hand pump near Summi Gundua's house. Summi was standing at the door. Suddenly, Summi started abusing Budni, calling her a *dain* (a woman who worships evil powers or indulges in witchcraft, has belief in magical spells that harness occult forces or evil spirits to produce unnatural effects in the village). Her husband joined her and accused Budni of having devoured their two children. He declared that very soon she would devour the rest children in the village. Summi told Budni to either shift the hand-pump to her verandah or stop taking water from it. Screaming at the top of her voice, Summi said that by touching the water pump, Budni made the water impure and thus spread a whole lot of diseases in the village, with the intention to kill people.

At that time, Budni's son was attempting to climb a jackfruit tree near the pump to pluck jackfruits. Budni, not knowing what to do, scolded him and asked him to get down, saying that the jackfruits were not edible and he should not touch them because if their neighbour's children ate them, they would certainly fall sick, and Budni would have to take the blame for it. She went into the house.

Chumani Gundua, who was standing nearby, heard Budni. She became very angry. Chumani called Summi and both of them pulled Budni out of her house. Chumani dragged her by her long hair. Budni was brutally beaten up. Her wrist was twisted and blows were showered on her face, chest and back. Her bangles broke and cut her, they scratched her with their nails and there were blood stains everywhere. The men folk gathered around and urged them on to take revenge. Her in-laws were mute witnesses, resolved not to intervene. Somehow Budni managed to escape the violent hands.

Budni went back to her house. She had been afraid for her children during the whole episode. She scrubbed the kitchen utensils with ash but her mind was totally numb, as she recalled what had happened. Her tears flowed endlessly and heart beat faster. She cooked food for her children. But she was not able to swallow a grain of rice that day. With the hope that her husband would arrive in the afternoon and would retaliate, she sat quietly in a corner.

At around noon, her husband returned from work. He had heard what had happened. The men of the neighbourhood had taunted him when he was on his way home. They jeered him and said that he too should learn the art of witchcraft from his wife. Her husband kept silent and did not respond or resolve the

conflict or the blame. The sun set and the sky turned dusky.

Chumani and Summi came for Budni at about 7 p.m. to beat her up again. Her husband did nothing but stood still. *Choti Aurat* came and took her husband away from the scene. Her mother-in-law tried to resist out of mercy but she was severely beaten and thrown aside by Budni's father-in-law. Once again the violent hands went into action. Budni was injured badly. She sank down in pain. Three more women joined in and the atrocity was more severe than before. Budni was beaten for almost an hour but there were none to listen to her screams. The men, watching their wives, were standing close by and abusing Budni. They advised the women to take her to the *Ojha* (local name for an exorcist). A few from the crowd also suggested that Budni should be beaten with a broom and made to wear a broom on her naked chest, a belief they thought would cure her of the evil spirit.

Blood dripped from Budni's body. They had used sticks and fists to beat her. The bangles she had worn, in the name of her husband that morning, were spread in pieces on the floor. Her skirt and blouse had been torn away. Everyone let leaving her alone with the silence. The silence penetrated her body and soul. It devoured her dream of a sweet home. And yet, the silence was her only companion.

The following morning, the five women again came to Budni and physically assaulted her. This time they used fresh green branches and brooms. All the branches broke on her head and back. They scratched her entire body with their long nails. These caused new wounds for the third time even when the earlier ones were still fresh.

### **The Ojha's Remedy**

Budni's mother was called from a nearby



village, half a kilometer away. The five women, Budni's mother, one villager and her husband took Budni to Chakradharpur in a tractor. Budni's mother was made to shoulder the expenses. Budni's skirt and blouse were all torn. She was almost naked when she was taken to Chakradharpur. Her two older children were taken away to her mother's place by her brothers. Her youngest child was with her trying to drink her mother's milk. They took a bus from Chakradharpur to Chaibasa to a bigger *Ojha* (*Bara Sokha*). The *Ojha* was not there and so she was taken to Mahulisai, to a couple known to practice *Ojhagiri* (practice of salvaging people, especially *dains*, from the shadow of the evil powers). The five women returned for home. Her husband and her mother were standing near her when Budni told the *Ojha* what had happened. The *Ojha* told her that she was innocent and was not engaged with any evil power. "*Tum dain nahin ho sakti ho,*" he said, and told her mother and her husband that she was being trapped by the ill motives of a few people. Budni was very happy to hear the *Ojha's* words, and resolved to settle things to normal.

#### At her maternal village, Klundu

The three came back to her mother's house by train. She went to the village head, Mundaji, but he was not available. Then she approached the three *Mahila Mandals* of Klundu village and informed the group members about what had taken place. These women belonged to the same cluster as the SHG that Budni was a part of. A joint meeting of the three *Mahila Mandals* was called in which she narrated the story of her victimization in the name of witchcraft. Her husband accompanied her but never uttered a single word. The only thing he told the group members was that he was not present when these incidents happened.

The *Mahila Mandals* came to the village in

which the incident took place. Budni pleaded with Mundaji to call a joint meeting with the villagers and impart justice to her. Despite the initiative of Mundaji, none of the villagers turned up for the meeting and the hearing could not take place. The SHG members wanted to discuss the entire matter with the villagers in the meeting, in order to hasten the process of justice delivery. But the effort proved futile.

The *Mahila Mandals* of Klundu village then went to the nearest Police Station (PS-162) under the jurisdiction of which Golasai village fell. They could not file a complaint because the PS in-charge was absent. The next day, the *Mahila Mandals* went to the police station again. In the application, Budni asked for protection of her life and dignity because she was constantly being threatened by the men of Golasai. This was the first time that Budni wanted to take legal action against her victimizers. The police officers did not take any action against the offenders. This situation remained as it was for a week. The members of the *Mahila Mandals* agitated and the police officers took some action. They went to the five women who had beaten up Budni and gave them a mild warning. They did not register a complaint or a First Information Report (FIR). The men in the village continued to threaten Budni. In the meanwhile, her husband left for Orissa without giving any valid reason. He promised Budni that he would be back by 12 October.

Budni wants justice and says, "I am haunted by what happened and wonder how to get justice. I am still not clear about what to do or how to go about it." She had taken the initiative to get justice by mobilizing the *Mahila Mandals* and approaching the police administration. She even tried to convince her husband that she was not an evil spirit. She thinks her husband understands this and

believes her. Yet, she found it difficult to trust him. He had not asserted anything and his responses seemed most ambiguous. She did not know if her husband would take her with him to their house and face resistance from the villagers. Her husband did not seem to even care about their young children, who were now with Budni at her maternal home. Even during the meeting of the *Mahila Mandals*, her husband was neither offensive nor defensive, nor did he pro-actively help Budni get justice.

When her husband left for Orissa, *Choti Aurat* left for her mother's place. Budni worried that her old in-laws were alone. She wanted to be with them and take care of them. She wanted *Choti Aurat* to forget all their grievances and stay together like a happy family. "*Wapas ghar jana chahti hun. Wahin ghar basana chahti hun. Pati ke ghar rahne ka bahot man hai mera.*" She suspected that her jealous neighbours were trying to ruin her household. According to her, she was not the only target; the villagers wanted to victimize her entire family. The neighbours were jealous to see their happy family and were therefore playing such a game. 'Justice' was a very vague notion for her and she had no clarity about how it would restore her marriage and take her back to her husband's place. Budni was unsure of her husband's stand on these incidents. She wanted to go back to her husband's house with dignity and respect, and this would be 'absolute justice' for her.

Despite all these incidents, Budni valued her husband next to God and expected him never to betray her trust. She bore no grievances against her husband even though she knew that her husband neither spoke up for her nor protected her. One woman from the neighbourhood felt that Budni's husband was taking advantage of her sentiments and emotions, to escape from responsibilities.

Attempts to understand these were heartbreaking for Budni. She thought her husband should be given another chance. At the same time, she was losing patience. She looked forward to the next joint meeting of the Klundu village *Mahila Mandals*, due on any date after the paddy crop harvest. Budni had faith in her friends from the *Mahila Mandals*. She worried that if her husband did not support her, she would be left alone to fend for herself and her young children. She had sleepless nights remembering the house that she had entered as a newly wedded woman. In case her husband abandoned her, she would have to face the stigma of being a *dain*, which she felt was worse than being a widow. But she was clear that, "*Agar sab kuch galat hua, pati palat gaya, nyay nahin mila to main court mein bachaa sab ke kharch ke liye arzi dunggi. Lekin aisa na karna pare to achcha hai.*" (If the things go wrong, if my husband betrays me, if I do not get justice, I will file a petition in the court, for the expenses of my children. But it would be better if I do not have to do all this).

#### Mahila Mandals Takes Steps

In order to help clusters take up such issues systematically, Pradan organizes Gender Orientation Programmes for representatives of clusters in West Singhbhum. The training focuses on how members can introspect and act in situations that affect them adversely. Budni Gundua had participated in one such four-day, residential programme, held in September 2007 in Chaibasa. During the training, 49 members of 18 *Mahila Mandals* of the Sagesai cluster shared their views and experiences. As the training proceeded, they became more comfortable sharing their life experiences. This helped to break all the boundaries, notions and social constructs that had been wrongly articulated in their lives. Self realization through gender sensitization techniques heightened the awareness of the



members. The participants resolved to change and confront demeaning practices and social processes, which were the root cause of their subordination and exploitation. The members themselves realized the strength behind unity and proposed to fight and confront such practices.

Budni stood up and shared what was 'burning inside' her. She spoke of her agony and how all her efforts proved futile in getting justice. Many women had had similar experiences, in which they themselves were victimized or someone known to them were being punished for no fault of theirs. Their wounds were laid bare afresh. All the SHG members decided to help Budni in her struggle to ensure that she gets repatriated in the same village. This gave Budni courage and confidence. The cluster jointly decided to take the initiative and get justice for Budni.

At the end of the training, the highly motivated groups of women decided to go to Golasai. Budni was sent back home to her mother's place at Klundu. Shanti Mehra, the resource person for the training programme, too accompanied them. All the women of the Golasai village were invited to join the forum and discuss the gender-related issue.

The discussion was deliberately general in the beginning and did not focus on Budni's case. Women from the Golasai village and the Sagesai cluster SHG members joined their hands to fight against the stigmatizing of women in the name of witchcraft. About 129 women formed a huge circle and took the oath never to victimize any women in the name of witchcraft nor let others do so. To everybody's surprise the five women, Summi Gundua, Chumani Gundua, Sukumar Gundua, Palo Gundua and Nanaki Gundua, who had physically tortured Budni realized what their mistake and apologized for what they did to

her. They realized that because of being born as a woman, each of them was equally likely to be stigmatized in the name of witchcraft, as long this evil is in practice in their community. They too joined the circle where the oath against witchcraft was being taken. They pledged that they would change the perpetrators' or people's mindset by creating awareness so that further victimization can be checked. In case the perpetrators continue to victimize any woman, they would not hesitate to take collective action against them. They took the oath invoking nature, the earth, the trees, the mighty sky, the sun and *Desauli* (in *Sarana* religion, the tribal community worships a bunch of Saal trees in the near by forest called *Desauli*) as witnesses to their resolution. These elements are integral to the life and society of the indigenous population residing in Chota Nagpur Plateau. The spell-binding moments lasted for long. Each woman came to the centre of the circle, held up mango leaves, rice grains and Doob grass (*Cynodon dactylon*) in her palm, and took the oath.

The men witnessed the day-long process. They were deeply disturbed by what they witnessed and were clueless as to how to deal with such a huge crowd of women demolishing the age-long belief in witchcraft. A traditional tool of systemic exploitation of women — the *dain pratha* — was being snatched out of the hands of the villagers and the women were taking an oath to eradicate it. Those who were the perpetrators in Budni's case declined to take any oath against the practice of witchcraft. In front of the huge crowd, the men claimed that if Budni entered their village they would burn her alive and cut her into pieces. This greatly hurt the sentiments of women, who had taken the oath to abolish this practice. It was a crisis situation because the cluster had determined to bring justice to Budni under any circumstances.

Following this threat, the members unanimously decided to file an FIR in Sonua police station on the behalf of the cluster. Twenty-three women, including Budni, signed the FIR. In the FIR they asked that legal action be taken against those village men, who illegally threatened Budni. The first day, the police refused to lodge the FIR, giving several excuses. The FIR did not get lodged till 9 p.m. All the women stayed nearby in an SHG member's house. After a two-day struggle, they were finally able to lodge the FIR against the villagers who had threatened Budni. The police tried very hard to avoid registering the case but they had no other option but to record the complaint. The police then took action and the identified villagers were rounded up. In the presence of these village men, an *Ekrarnama* was prepared, wherein both the parties — the 23 cluster members and five men (the main culprits) — were asked to sign. Through this *Ekrarnama*, the men were asked to promise not to harm Budni or victimize any woman in the name of witchcraft in future. This ensured that Budni regained her lost dignity and respect as she desired and also in a manner which would be in her best interests. Following this, the case was closed.

Budni now resides at her maternal place with her children. She has chosen to stay with her parents because most of the time her husband is out on work in Orissa. Despite the collective action taken by the cluster, she still feels scared to go to her husband's village. Remembering the threats she had heard from the men who wanted to kill her stops her from stepping foot in the village. The FIR was her last resort. Her son goes to the village school. She earns a living by working on other people's agricultural fields. She carries her little daughter to her workplace. She is happy that her husband comes to meet her and is not betraying her. He gives her money for taking care of their children and to meet the household expenses. Her in-laws too met her recently, and she was extremely excited over this unexpected visit. They spent a day with her and brought gifts for their grand children. The SHG women often pay her a visit and this gives her an opportunity to laugh and smile. Budni is thankful to these women, who stood by her and fought to restore her dignity and identity — aspects that are essential for one's being.



## Cluster Adhiveshan

Organizing Cluster Adhiveshans has helped to promote and strengthen community-based institutions as well as enhance the agency of SHG members.

Tarun Shukla

The residents of Barakhurshi were simply baffled by the flood of women marching to the venue in early March this year for the Cluster Adhiveshan (Convention). The members of the Self-Help Group (SHG) of Barakhurshi Panchayat congratulated each other on the great success of the Cluster Adhiveshan of the Harekrishna, Maa Ganga and Mahuliya clusters, which it had organized. The villagers had never imagined that these small SHGs would become so big in such a short span of time.

### What is a Cluster Adhiveshan?

A cluster is a group of 10 to 15 SHGs belonging to adjacent villages, which meets regularly every month; each SHG is represented by two to three members. A Cluster Adhiveshan is an annual gathering of all the SHG members of a cluster. It increases the bonding between SHG members, strengthens solidarity among the women and enhances mutual learning and visibility, thereby strengthening the cluster as a body. A Cluster Adhiveshan is a forum to demonstrate the collective strength and unity of the SHG members. It helps in sensitizing local stakeholders such as the village *pradhan*, the Block Development Officer (BDO) and the bankers about the gathering strength of the SHG movement in the villages. Compared to the much larger gathering—the Mahadhiveshan—of SHG members at the project level, there is greater involvement of each SHG member in a Cluster Adhiveshan because it is organized at the panchayat level.

A Mahadhiveshan is a huge event, in which eminent persons from the locality are invited. It gives considerable visibility to the SHG programme. Even though the Jamshedpur Team had scaled up its work and was engaged in a number of livelihood projects, it had not organized a Mahadhiveshan since 2004. The

professionals were completely tied up with the field projects and there was a shortage of staff. They felt that such an event would require that the team provides assistance to the clusters in the planning and organizing, and it did not have the time.

In their cluster meetings, the SHG members of the area recalled their experiences of the last Mahadhiveshan they had attended, how excited they had been and how charged-up they had felt during and after the event. Not all the memories were positive, however. Some members expressed reservations, in particular, about many of the women feeling lost in the large crowd. In the flurry of speeches and cultural programmes, they said they had often found it difficult to feel involved and had felt that they had become mere spectators. As it happens in large gatherings, everyone did not get an opportunity to participate.

### The Need for a Cluster Adhiveshan

When the matter came up for discussion in the team, a need was expressed for more decentralized events such as big gatherings at the cluster level, which could then be built up to a large gathering at the project level. The team decided to organize a series of Cluster Adhiveshans rather than a Mahadhiveshan right away. A Cluster Adhiveshan would be like a mini Mahadhiveshan in design, and the SHG members would take charge of the event.

The team discussed the need for a Cluster Adhiveshan and its objectives. A Cluster Adhiveshan would help mobilize SHG members and strengthen unity and solidarity among them. It would provide a platform to encourage the emergence of leaders from among the SHGs and the clusters. It would help increase awareness about Agro-Horti cooperatives and poultry cooperatives. It

would be a venue for the recreation of SHG members. It would sensitize bankers and administration about the SHGs and the needs of its members. It would increase the involvement and ownership of local stakeholders such as the *manjhi* (headman of the Santhal community at the village level), the Gram Pradhan (traditional headman of the village) and other important members of the village community, who would be invited as guests to the Cluster Adhiveshan. It would increase the stake of the SHG members in the event by calling for contributions in cash and kind for organizing the event, with minimal support from Pradan. It would strengthen the clusters.

In order to increase the ownership of members of the whole process, we decided to propose that the SHGs contribute in cash and kind for the conduct of the events. We thought that we would bear the shortfalls, if any. We discussed that, as professionals, we would only help in disseminating ideas in cluster meetings and help in responsibility allocation. This would be for the first time that SHG members would be organizing such a large function themselves, using their own resources. We would act as troubleshooters in case any problem arose in planning and conducting the event.

We proceeded to share the concept of a Cluster Adhiveshan with the SHG members in their cluster meetings. The members were very excited about organizing such a grand event at the village level. They considered it an opportunity to show their strength and unity to the villagers, especially to those who were still not convinced about the SHG movement that the women were a part of. They thought that the Cluster Adhiveshan would help them establish their identity and gain popularity among peers.

### Cluster Adhiveshan at Dalapani

I, as a facilitator in one of the cluster meetings, asked the SHG members to recall

the Mahadhiveshan they had last participated in. They remembered the thrill they experienced on seeing thousands of women come from different places to the great fair. The roads were all jammed with the huge gathering of women and the atmosphere reverberated with the slogans of '*Mahila Mandal Zindabad!*' (Long Live Women's SHGs!). They grew nostalgic when they described the ambience. I asked them if they wanted to create the same ambience once again in their villages. They replied, "Yes!" in unison, but were not sure if they could do so by themselves, especially since it would mean shouldering all the responsibilities of organizing and conducting the event. They had always been participants and, therefore, had no idea about the processes.

I assured them that we would be there to help in organizing the event and in detailing out the program provided they took the lead role. They were relieved to hear this. Together, we started planning the details of the Cluster Adhiveshan. Several aspects had to be kept in mind. We had to prepare a schedule of events for the day and then proceed to discuss and plan each event in detail. A list of guests had to be drawn up and the responsibility of inviting them had to be allocated. A compere/anchor had to be selected. Arrangements for the logistics such as tents, loudspeakers, chairs, food, etc., had to be made. The sports and games to be conducted had to be identified and prizes for the winners had to be decided upon and procured. The stalls highlighting livelihood interventions had to be designed. Slogans depicting the work of the Mahila Mandals (SHGs) had to be created. And contributions by the SHG members—cash and otherwise—collected.

Once the detailing of tasks was complete, we drew up a chart showing the responsibilities to be taken by each SHG, its members and me. Each SHG assigned three of its members to form a core committee to oversee the different tasks to be carried out. They gave



me the responsibility to invite guests such as the Bank managers and from the officers from the administration. The rest of the tasks, including the invitations to be given to various village leaders, were divided among the members. Shyamcharan Hansdah, a service provider was selected to be the anchor/comper for the event. The Mahila Mandal Community Developer (MMCD), or SHG service provider, was given the role of keeping track of the finances and accounts. The members also decided to organize a community lunch and a dance performance. The budget estimated was Rs 10,000 approximately. Finally it was decided the members of the core committee would meet 15 days prior to the Cluster Adhiveshan to monitor the progress.

### Community Lunch

In one of the cluster meetings, the SHG members discussed if there should be provision for lunch. The argument in favour was that taking lunch together increases solidarity and cementing bonds. I was a bit apprehensive about the idea of lunch as each Cluster Adhiveshan was going to be attended by more than a thousand people, including SHG members, their spouses and other villagers. So I tried to dissuade them about the lunch part. But the members were so excited that they had already decided on the arrangements required for the lunch. The total number of SHG members in the clusters was 500. So each SHG member would contribute Rs 20 and 1 kg rice along with firewood, utensils and other necessary things required for the event. All the SHG members would have a meal together.

However, during a cluster meeting at Dalapani, there was resistance about having lunch during the programme from non-tribal members. They argued that it was not possible for them to eat lunch with tribal women. To this, one of the SHG members from the tribal community replied that most of the members have been part of the SHGs for the last six years and the SHG movement has helped in

bringing about mobility for all women, in contrast to the earlier times when they used to be confined in homes. They have seen improvements in their standard of living since the time they joined these SHGs. During various meetings of SHGs and elsewhere also, women of different communities have started mingling with each other. Despite all these things, if untouchability had not been erased from the minds of the members, she considered the SHG movement a failure. She concluded by saying that if all fellow-women could not sit together to have a meal on a day on which they would be celebrating their unity, it would be better for her to leave her SHG. Upon hearing her words, all the SHG members clapped and reiterated support for the community lunch and felt that they would together show all the villagers that they have come of age and have left behind the age-old practice of untouchability.

I felt rewarded on realizing that these women were more mature and intelligent than what we perceived them to be. What helped them hold such views was the exposure they received and the provision of a platform and opportunity for them to search for and establish their own identity.

### Design of Cluster Adhiveshan

The design of the Cluster Adhiveshan emerged out of the discussions that were held in different core committees. There was no standard design. The design was left flexible to suit local conditions. A typical Cluster Adhiveshan has several components:

- March to the venue in a disciplined manner
- Raise slogans related to the SHGs and its activities
- Sing welcome songs in tribal and non-tribal languages
- Inauguration of the programme: Chief guest and representatives of each SHG light the lamp
- Speech by the chief guest
- Worshipping of the groups' books of accounts and cash box

- Variety programmes by SHGs - song, drama and dance
- Presentation of Agri-Horti cooperatives and sample vegetable collections in the stalls, along with a diagrammatic presentation of the cooperative
- Motivational speech by Agri-Horti Cooperative President
- Sports and games for SHG members
- Prize distribution for best SHG (according to McF grading, based on Meeting Regularity, attendance, Saving Regularity, Saving Rate, Interest Payment and Portfolio at Risk), best SHG doing livelihood, best accountant, best SHG member and winners of sports and games
- Farewell speech by representative of the core committee, motivating and calling for next year's participation
- Community lunch for all SHG members, guests and visitors
- Farewell community dance in traditional style involving all SHG members and visitors

### Highlights of the Cluster Adhiveshan

In all, a total of 14 Cluster Adhiveshans were held. Although we were initially apprehensive about the idea, the whole experiment put the community in the forefront. During the initial Cluster Adhiveshans held in Harina, Kunabera and Dalapani, we had been on our toes, and had asked all SHG leaders and a few members of different core committees to be present and witness the great happening. By the time three such Adhiveshans were held, the team members had developed a lot of confidence. We had obviously underestimated the capacity of the community! Once we realized this, we too became participants in the programme. The community took total charge of organizing and hosting the mega-events. From the collection of contribution money to managing guests, to organizing dance, songs and drama, the SHG members managed everything. I think it was only our fears that had stopped them from demonstrating earlier how empowered they had become in due course of time. The representatives of the

Bank and the Block commented that SHG movement was really bringing about changes at grassroots level. The local dailies reported these Cluster Adhiveshans and the SHG members felt proud seeing the photographs of their Cluster Adhiveshan in widely read, local newspapers.

### After the Cluster Adhiveshan

When a Cluster Adhiveshan was over, there was increased attendance of SHG members in cluster meetings. Interaction in these meetings has become more animated, and members now discuss how to make their SHGs better so that they can win the prize for the best performing SHG in the coming year. During meetings, members give examples of the Cluster Adhiveshan and the SHGs that received prizes, to motivate each other to perform better. I am happy about the satisfactory conclusion of this totally inclusive programme. But the best thing is that for the first time our SHG members organized programmes on such a huge scale, with the Pradan professionals taking on the mentor's role only. And with each Cluster Adhiveshan, the role of the Pradan professionals will only decrease because the village women will excel in managing such big events on their own.

The decentralized approach helped create a large pool of SHG leaders at the panchayat level, who will implement development tasks in the near future. The involvement of village *pradhan* and *manjhis* has also helped create an identity for the SHGs. Their speeches, during the event, mentioned the work and achievements of the SHGs and have motivated other women in the villages to form SHGs. There has been demand for opening new SHGs in the villages, thereby helping us approach area saturation. They have already identified the dates for next Cluster Adhiveshan and keep reminding each other to start preparing for the same after Durga Puja (that is, October). The foundation of a new tradition is laid. It will continue as an annual event, reminding the SHG members of the essence of their *Mahila Mandals*.



## Being an agent of development

Choosing to work with a grassroots organisation in the rural and remote area of Jharkhand was a transforming experience

Arunavo Ghoshal

### Me, myself

I was born in November 1984 in Kolkata, West Bengal. I was brought up in a middle class family. My father is a Civil Engineer in a Government office and my mother is a homemaker. My sister is two years younger to me and is currently preparing for her B.Sc. final year exams. When I was a child, my parents were constantly worried about where I was because I suffered from asthma and at times it could be life threatening too. I could not participate in sports or play with my friends because after just a minute or two, I used to feel extremely exhausted. Having no choice, I had to sit to a side and watch my friends play. Days passed, I grew up alone, helpless, frustrated and exhausted. But I never voiced my feelings to my parents knowing that that would be even more worry for them.

When I passed the fourth grade, I joined the Ramkrishna Mission School in Malda, counted among the best institutions in the state. There too, I continued to watch while my friends played during the break and the games periods. Our headmaster was a Ramkrishna Mission monk. One day he called me aside and said that he had been watching me for about 15 days. He asked me why I did not participate in any sport or games. He listened to my explanation very patiently. After a few moments of silence he said, "Do you know how many children in this world, just of your same age, aren't lucky enough to find time to play because they have to earn their own living? Now at this stage of your life, you may find yourself isolated but remember everybody has a purpose in life and may be God has made you for a special purpose. So, think of it from now on before it gets too late."

I do not know what happened to me after that conversation but within a few days time, I found myself sitting in the library, reading spiritual books. Everyday, after returning from school, I would ride long distances on my bicycle, beyond the boundary of the town, exploring villages and forests. There was nothing else I did but ride, exploring new places. Surprisingly, I also got over my illness and life started becoming much more exciting than I had ever imagined.

### Before life started as a Pradanite

As I write this article, some fundamental questions related to my existence arise in my mind. "Who am I? What do I want from life? Where am I and doing what? Am I on the right track to get whatever I want from life?" These questions have always been with me.

Earlier, these questions puzzled me. I did not find any single answer to these questions. I resorted to analyzing my way of choosing, selecting or making decisions. And ended up with several conclusions which were contradictory to each other!

After school, I joined the Engineering College, Kolkata. By the time I completed my graduation, I believed I had the answers to most of my questions but still wondered if I was on the right track to get what I wanted from life. The more I thought about it, the more confused I became. In May 2007, I graduated as an Instrumentation Engineer. My engineering degree proved to be an adequate qualification for the recruiters from the software companies. I was flooded with lots of 'gorgeous' opportunities and appreciation from all sides. My 'well wishers' constantly

advised me about the choice I should make to gain access to a 'bright' career and 'secure' future bolstered by a huge salary. I was astonished that nobody thought of asking me what my wish was. Surrounded by such 'well-meaning' people, I began to believe that I had no right to take any decision of my own and that I was bound to follow the track chosen by the rest of my world.

I felt like a mere puppet with no feelings, being instructed to become a money making machine. I participated in the selection process of a renowned company to experience the recruitment process. And I was selected. But the corporate world did not interest me. I had heard a lot about the bitter experiences of my seniors from our college. I could see no option before me that would free me from all these burdens, barriers and huge mental pressure. And then Pradan came to our campus for recruitment.

### Choosing the path

I had never heard of an NGO organizing an on-campus recruitment process. My curiosity about Pradan was aroused. I wondered why an NGO wanted to recruit people from the electronics, computer science, electrical or IT backgrounds and what their work there would be. Just the day before the recruitment process, I browsed through Pradan's website and saw pictures of people working in rural areas. I read about the organization's work, achievements, vision, mission, etc. What struck me was that people with higher qualifications than mine were working in the remotest villages for the betterment of the poor. I made a quick decision to participate in the recruitment process.

Next day, while watching the audio-visual presentation in the conference hall of the campus, I suddenly discovered that this 'might be' what I was looking for, what I wanted to

do. In the presentation, I saw well-educated and confident people sharing their feelings and their reasons for choosing the rural development sector. I was moved by their emotions and their attachment to their work with the rural poor. I had been a little unsure about working with an NGO; but after seeing the presentation I thought that this would definitely be the right path to choose. I was comfortable visualizing my future in the frame of that presentation. There were 400 applicants, of whom 13 were selected. My confidence grew when I found my name among those selected, not just because I was chosen out of so many aspirants but because people from the sector found me worthy to be trained. I was at the threshold of a new life; and when I exercised the freedom to make my own decision, I was elated. At home, there was the expected crisis, as my relatives, well-wishers and parents were not sure of the decision I had made. I did not want to upset my parents and so I shared what I genuinely felt deep within me with them for the first time. They gradually understood my views and assured me that they believed in me.

### My initial days

I was to join on 1 August 2007 and report to the Team Leader (TL) of the Godda project. On the morning of 31 July, I took the train to Bhagalpur railway station. The journey from Bhagalpur bus-stand to Godda bus-stand is unforgettable. I could never have foreseen that one neck-breaking journey that awaited me. The condition of the roads was pathetic and the bus seemed to literally be tossed up and down. It took three long hours to reach Godda. I freshened up in a nearby hotel and ventured out to look for the Pradan office. A grocery shop owner suggested that I look for the Tasar office instead of Pradan office. The rickshaw ride to the Pradan office was a replay of the bus ride; to top it all, had started to pour by then. On reaching the spot as



described by the people, I saw a board hanging from a pole and I figured out that I had reached my place. As I entered the office, I saw a man sitting at a computer and a lady, sitting opposite to him, talking on the phone. They looked at me and asked if I needed any help. I introduced myself and they gave me a warm welcome. The man at the computer was the Team Leader of the Godda team Mr Binod Raj Dahal and the lady was an experienced long timer with Pradan, Ms Bala Devi. After a brief introduction, we talked about various things. They asked me to come the next morning with all my certificates, for completing the joining formalities.

Coincidentally, the next day was their regular team meeting. The two other new DAs, Manoj and Tarak, and I were introduced to the team. To my surprise, the atmosphere of the meeting was very informal compared to the notion I had about office meetings. They discussed various issues that seemed serious and relevant to me and all the team members participated equally in the deliberations. For the next five days, I was involved in the initial field exposure after which Manoj and I were asked to go to Sunderpahari, a sub-location of the Godda project.

Initially it was not easy for me. I was a city-dweller; it took me time to adapt to the surroundings. The living conditions were actually below what I thought was a minimum standard. It took a while for me to adjust to the housing facility, infrastructure, services and social life there. We were given a house that was slightly away from the office. It was actually a brick structure shed with earthen tiles. But I got a shock when I realised that there was no toilet. I worried about how I would manage. For the next 7-8 days, until it was time for the Village Stay, my daily routine was to wake up early morning and run to the office because, fortunately, the office had a bathroom.

The initial week or so, we visited the fields with the professionals and became familiar with the work there. I used to leave home for work at 8 in the morning only to be back by 9 at night. Sometimes, I really found it hard to find time for myself from these varying working hours. I was astounded to see the hard work of and the dedication with which the Pradanites engaged with the community.

As days passed, my lifestyle changed. I think that my present way of life is more disciplined compared to my haphazard lifestyle in the city. I used to be a late riser and would go to sleep as late as 2 or 3 in the morning. Now-a-days, I wake up by 7 in the morning and manage to go off to sleep before 12. I also try my best to be punctual whether it is for personal work or for professional work. Yet some things have not changed. I am still a die-hard fan of rock music, good food, adventures and Hollywood movies. I try to fulfill these interests after I return home from work. I do not find it difficult to maintain a balance between my personal and professional life.

### Learning in Pradan

I little realised that seven months have passed; I performed so many different tasks and learnt so many new things. My engagement with the communities has taught me about their lifestyle, culture and language. My first requirement was to become familiar with the tribal language, Malto. In some villages, one could barely find a person who understands and speaks Hindi. Initially the Community Resource Persons (CRPs), who accompanied me, translated for me and the villagers. I knew that in order to become truly efficient, I needed to be able to address and communicate directly with the community. Not knowing the language made the villagers reluctant to share their views or problems with me. It took time but the situation is far better

now because I can communicate with the villagers in their own language. On the one hand, it helps me to relate with them in a better way and on the other I am more acceptable to them.

As a member of the Godda team, what was a wonderful experience was the process through which a development professional emerged from out of an Apprentice. Though the process is continuing, the journey so far has been an exciting experience. The deep relationship between the villagers and the professional, the level of faith between us struck me the most. During my Village Stay, I was thrilled to see and be a part of the different cultures and customs of the people. This helped me decide whether working in this sector is what I want to do. By being associated with Pradan, I feel proud and sure that I have chosen the best vocation.

My main learning during the SHG and Village Study orientation programmes was of exploring various angles while analyzing a certain situation or event. For example, I had pre-determined notions about solving problems in the community and never got into exploring other options to resolve any matter. But now, I have internalized the practice of generating new options along with the community while looking for solutions to a problem. Apart from this, the two programmes helped me understand the theoretical model and its practical applications. For example, in the Pradan SHG literature, the practice of paying a fine if anyone misses a meeting is mentioned. This helps ensure regular attendance in SHG meetings. However, I saw that the weekly savings of members is as low as Rs 5. Implementing a fine here is not feasible. We try to motivate members by making them aware of the importance of regular saving in the SHG and its significance in their lives.

At the end of the day, we have seen that peer pressure by members seems to work very well.

In the Village Study programme, which was an exciting experience for me, I wanted to know and understand all the relevant dynamics, especially the human drama; people-to-people relationships, power relationships and their effect on the whole community. Obviously, there were also some statistical records about natural resources, households, population, health, education, landholdings and other important factors that I had to look into. But I was more interested in the people. After all, I thought, it is the people that we are working with and working for.

The Foundation Course-I gave me the opportunity to meet my batch mates, who are also working as DAs in the various locations of Pradan. The inputs that I got from the resource persons as well as my peers help me work more efficiently in the field. If I had not got this forum for sharing and learning, I feel I would have had to struggle in the field by trial and error till I found the right option. Recently, I went to Dumka to understand a very interesting concept, that is, Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM). The session helped me engage in planning for development activities with an entire village. Currently, I am engaged in INRM planning for a village named Pakhrikuta, where I am also conducting family-based planning with the community.

A team meeting is held for two days every month. It is a forum that encourages all members to discuss and share issues related to work done in previous months, analyze outcomes and explore strategies, approaches and agendas. I actively participated in these meetings. Crucial decisions are made that



would not have been possible without the participation of all the team members.

When I am asked to write a report about my 'feelings', I feel privileged, because these are the feelings that my relatives or well-wishers had never wanted to know about. I have also found a new set of 'relatives' in my team. They understand and recognize me as an individual. I am confident that I have chosen the right track for myself in life, a decision that had bothered me till I joined Pradan. The appreciation from my team members and the outcomes of my intervention that are visible to me in the community gives me the confidence and courage to continue here.

### **Looking forward**

Most of the villages I am working in are located on the undulating hilly terrain of the 'Rajmahal' range. It is a rocky, slippery and hilly terrain and, at times, it becomes difficult to travel to the villages because most of them are not connected by roads. Even in these conditions, I do not feel disheartened; rather, I want to reach out to more and more people who are needy and be able to ensure them a

life of dignity with a brighter better future. This feeling generates both interest and love for my work.

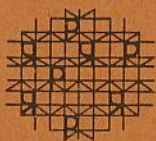
My focus in my work is on the better health of the SHGs and planning for livelihoods with them. I am also engaged in INRM planning which is a new activity in our area. I have realised that it is always essential to understand the dynamics of the community, its culture, beliefs, disbeliefs, and all related things before offering one's own ideas, hypotheses and understanding. I know that I have to learn a lot.

All my relatives and friends now are gradually understanding, appreciating and accepting my work in these remote rural villages. This boosts my energy and confidence level. However, I cannot see what stops young and qualified people from choosing this sector for a vocation. We need to do a lot of thinking on this aspect if we want to see India as a 'developed nation' rather than a 'developing nation'. I hope to contribute my bit by proudly being associated with Pradan.





**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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