



Jangal Mahal Development Cluster (JMDC)

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Jangal Mahal Development Cluster is spread over parts of three districts along the western border of West Bengal, namely, Bankura, Purulia and Paschim Medinipur. The cluster has 54 backward blocks. Santhal, Gond and Oraon are the dominant tribes of this region. Nearly 47 percent of the families live below the poverty line. One-fifth of the total area is under forest. The region is deficient in water resources due to plateau structure and the absence of perennial streams. It has undulating terrain with forest covered uplands and terraced farm low lands. Between the forest lands (in the upper ridges) and low lands, there are wide fallows or marginally cultivated lands. People have bunded these lands to grow rice to meet their need for food. However, erratic monsoons adversely impacts agriculture and pushes people to migrate to other places to earn a living from menial jobs. People in the forested areas collect and sell firewood that depletes the forests.

OVERVIEW OF PRADAN'S OPERATIONS IN JMDC

Particulars	DC Total	PRADAN Outreach
Districts	3	3
Population	5.1 million	440,360
Percent of Rural Population	95	100
Percent of ST and SC Population	45	51
Households	1.01 million	88,072

Particulars	Scale
Number of SHGs	7,531
Number of VOs	458
Households covered under Livelihoods	33,578
PRADAN teams	7

Themes	Community Collectives
INRM	3,896 Families
Health and Nutrition	891 SHGs
Education	13 VOs
Gender and Governance	1,649 SHGs

PRADAN started its operation in JMDC in 1986. Initially, our engagement in this area was around natural resource management based livelihoods promotion and SHG based community mobilization. Later, we intervened in issues related to women empowerment through work on gender justice, functional literacy, and rights and entitlements.

We work in this area in partnership with other agencies including Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Gram Panchayats and government departments. We have also collaborated with International Water Management Institute (IWMI), Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), IIT

Kharagpur and many other partners to research and develop farm prototypes.

Usharmukti – Natural Resource Management for Farm Productivity

Degradation of natural resources is a growing concern for Jangal Mahal as it adversely affects the life and livelihood of local people. Realizing the need for substantial investment in these resources, we collaborated with the Panchayati Raj Department and Bharat Rural Livelihood Foundation (BRLF) under project Usharmukti to mobilize funds for rejuvenating the seven major rivers in western parts of West Bengal. The project included six other CSOs as partners; funds for the project were drawn from Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Since the project inception in September 2017,

MGNREGS functionaries were oriented on natural resource management in 22 blocks. The project will revitalize 400,000 hectares upland, and irrigate 300,000 hectares agro-land. It will benefit 500,000 families spread over six districts, 55 blocks, and 472 Gram Panchayats.

Our project team has started working with MGNREGS functionaries and the representatives of Gram Panchayats and blocks to plan and implement livelihood prototype through the Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) approach. The communities have submitted Detailed Project Reports (DPR) sharing their ideas of development and possible solutions to the persisting problems of aridity and scarcity of water resources.



Photo: Sourangshu Banerjee

From Fallowness to Fertility

Mano Kotal was skeptical. The resource mapping of her barren lands was being planned. In the past, there had been many such discussions with little action. “Would it be any different this time?” wondered the Lodha women.



Photo: Sourangshu Banerjee

Lodhas belong to the lowest strata in the social ladder in Nayagram block of Jhargram district of West Bengal. Their lives are worse than those of other landless settlements in this rain deficit block. With the decline in the demand of caste-based occupations, landless groups like Lodhas, Kumhars, Sabars and Mochis have been pushed to the extreme margins. Over the years, various initiatives have resulted in granting them some land by the government but these tend to be at the forest fringe and not conducive for agriculture. Unfortunately, the poorest in the villages have the poorest land.

Under the Usharmukti program, PRADAN was engaged with the communities, including 29 Lodha families, for developing a continuous stretch of highly undulating terrain. The federation leadership in Jhargram was at the forefront of this change. They called a meeting to discuss the issue of land reclamation, but the men in the community were indifferent. This was despite the fact that the leadership had already met the Gram Panchayat and block officials many times to mobilize much needed capital investment for the farms in the village.

Sabitri Murmu stated, on behalf of the SHG federation, that apart from work on land reclamation, they also wanted something unique for the women of the village, leaving everyone in the hamlet perplexed. A Gram Panchayat meeting was called for.

This meeting was attended by PRADAN professionals, Gram Panchayat officials, block officials and community members from several villages. Most importantly Mano and women from the Lodha community stood shoulder to shoulder with the federation leadership in this process. The SHGs forwarded two proposals: one on land development in the village and another on an exclusive initiative for women in the village. Both were wholeheartedly accepted. What unfolded a day later gave everyone in the village much hope and joy.



Photo: S M Faisal

Entire fields from ridge to valley of the watershed were physically surveyed. The women of the SHG carried tapes and resource maps and colored the paper demarcating water bodies, farms and forest fringes. It was the first time that villagers were actually putting together their plan on paper. Major focus of the planning process was to bring as much upland under treatment as possible. The other focus was infrastructure building through the lens of gender equity. The capacity building of women and the fact that the Integrated Natural Resource Management planning was being done at their behest was a major first step. The planning team visited every farm. Mano was very clear where her pond needed to be constructed.

“Eikhane hole bhalo hobe.”

“This is the best spot for the pond.”

In a month's time, the entire planning and resource mapping exercise was completed in the area. As work commenced under the Usharmukti program, there is a new sense of ownership and pride among the women of the Lodha community. The women's federation is the harbinger of hope for ultra-poor families in Nayagram.

And to top it all: work on the unique project proposed by the federation has also started, two fields suitable for playing football, are being developed exclusively for women!

REJUVENATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES ACROSS PRADAN LOCATIONS

Like JMDC, this year, natural resource management work was taken up in a number of DCs. We facilitated VOs in preparing and implementing comprehensive natural resource management plans

under MGNREGS. The work by PRADAN under MGNREGS has benefitted 51,392 families, and strengthened agriculture-based livelihood program with improved water and land resources.