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SAHANA MISHRA

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# SELF HELP GROUPS: Empowering Agencies

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SHGs are living organizations and need to be allowed to grow organically in response to internally identified needs rather than be directed by outside entities that have the narrow aspirations of economic growth only

## Introduction

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**W**OMEN'S SELF-HELP Groups (SHGs) have become the panacea for every problem related to poverty, and the overall well-being in rural India. The formation of SHGs of poor women, and the consequent pumping of credit to these groups, has helped eradicate poverty. Women are believed to be more judicious and are more inclined to think of their family's needs, and are, therefore, likely to utilize the available funds judiciously.

That women are prudent and take care of their families is true. However, it is difficult to imagine

that a structural problem such as poverty can be eradicated only by easy access to credit. Deep-rooted structures of gender, caste, class and religion, which aggravate poverty, can hardly be challenged when SHGs are formed with the purpose of credit delivery alone. Access to credit serves only a tiny part of the big problem. In many cases, it fails as well. However, the SHG credit linkage model is now being replicated all over India and women's SHGs are being formed and nurtured across the country with an agenda of poverty alleviation through access to credit.

Having worked in the development sector, I have learned from my experience that SHGs can do wonders if formed with the purpose of solidarity and mutual help, and supported with finance, as per the credit needs of the poor women. However, it is difficult to imagine such groups being effective



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## Women of rural India can address issues of poverty by accessing credit, along with technical knowledge enhancement, solidarity, participation in politics, etc.

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if formed with a short-lived agenda of credit delivery alone. This was already proved by the implementation of Swarna Jayanti Grameen Swarojgar Yojna (1999–2012). The scheme was, at best, only a moderate success.

Some may argue that several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in India have successfully established the SHG model as one of the ways to eradicate poverty and of women's empowerment and, therefore, consider it to be a successful model. This is true if I take the example of PRADAN, one of the leading Indian NGOs. Organizations such as Myrada and Andhra Pradesh Mahila Abhivruddhi Society (APMAS) Society have also worked extensively and established that the women of rural India can address issues of poverty by accessing credit, along with technical knowledge enhancement, solidarity, participation in politics, etc. However, there are many differences between these experiences and those seen when the formation of SHGs has been scaled up to a national level, with the major focus being accessing credit. In the latter process, when the number of SHGs is scaled-up, short-term agendas become the focus; the women, having come together, develop aspirations

around monetary gains, without actually assessing their absorption capacity. The potential danger in this approach is that it gets shattered immediately if their aspirations are not fulfilled for any reason. I draw on my experience of over two decades as a PRADAN professional to reflect on factors that make some SHG processes more successful and enduring than others.

### **Forming SHGs the PRADAN way**

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PRADAN is one of the pioneers in promoting women's SHGs in rural India. Till date, PRADAN has organized 600,000 women in these collectives; 10 to 20 village women in each collective come together every week to save a minimum amount and manage the business of lending. Through the SHG activity, PRADAN has tried to collectivize women, who are most disadvantaged socially, politically and economically. The aim of SHGs, in all these three spheres, is to enable women to collectively strive against the tide and exercise choice. PRADAN has always prioritized its agenda of combatting poverty through economic means, and it has also aimed to support women to be independent socially, economically and politically.

The prominent thought behind the agenda of economic independence has been to bring women together to save their own money collectively, and to make themselves economically capable enough to get out of the trap of local moneylenders. These moneylenders are the biggest gainers even when the loans are as small as Rs 200 or Rs 500. Crop failure, health hazards and huge expenditure incurred for rituals have always forced women to pawn their ornaments. Not only ornaments, women and men in poor tribal regions are forced to sell their farm and forest products early just to repay the loans or, sometimes, just the interest amount, because the moneylender charges compound interest. The women in remote villages found their primary SHGs helpful because these provided them an alternative to rushing to the moneylender to beg for a mere Rs 200 or Rs 500.

The women found it rewarding when they managed to free their land from old mortgages and proudly started cultivating it. They also valued their SHGs when a pregnant woman was saved because she had the funds to hire a vehicle worth of Rs 700 or Rs 800 to reach a hospital from her remote village at the eleventh hour.

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Our experience corroborated what numerous research papers have shown—that an SHG is the strongest social weapon for the social transformation of millions of rural people, even if it may not be the panacea for poverty eradication

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SHGs gradually started working as small banks and the women began to use the funds to expand their traditional business of farming, fishing or other enterprises. Together, they then approached the banks for the amount they needed. There have been numerous examples of women taking loans from banks and starting bigger enterprises or some women starting new enterprises. However, they were not dependent only on banks or outsiders to give them the money. They first used their own money and went to the banks only when the funds fell short. There was no concept of any grant. SHGs were founded mostly on the basis of mutual help (pooling own savings for availing credit at the time of need) and not on the basis of receiving grants from others.

The mutuality was important because it brought other values to the institutions such as 1) camaraderie with each other; 2) the sense of fulfilment from being helped by each other; and 3) the pride of beating the existing exploitation. These feelings of fulfilment, pride and mutual support do not come instantly. It is a journey and every SHG has its own journey, different from that of others. Apart from some basic rules and regulations, SHGs are autonomous enough

to decide where and when they should meet, the rate of interest to charge, the amount of money needed through bank linkages, the selection of their group accountant, etc. Our experience corroborated what numerous research papers have shown—that an SHG is the strongest social weapon for the social transformation of millions of rural people, even if it may not be the panacea for poverty eradication.

PRADAN greatly values these SHGs through which women get an opportunity to come together to help each other and explore new paths of life and livelihood. Collectively, they have been able to negotiate with the family and society to leave their homes not only to go to cultivate the fields as labourers but also to go to the bank to avail of credit for their groups, and to blocks and *panchayats* to get their village plans sanctioned. Gradually, they have been able to enter the political space and acknowledge their identity as women farmers, women *mukhiyas* (leaders). To attain this, PRADAN invests in capacity-building processes for SHG members. This, in turn, results in women's institutions making decisions in various spheres.

Along with organizing capacity-building events, PRADAN, as a facilitating agency, provides space to women leaders to take decisions as individual members as well as members of the institutions. In the process, members as well as institutions travel the path of empowerment.

### **The mainstreaming of SHGs**

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Twenty years down the line, the scenario has changed. The SHG has become the mainstream strategy of socio-economic progress. Promoting SHGs, linking them to banks for credit services and giving women the knowledge and skills for expanding their existing livelihoods and establishing new livelihoods are being done to scale. Heartening it is to see so many women in the public space, negotiating with public institutions and transacting in thousands and lakhs of rupees. However, it is disheartening to see them talk only about transactions, disregarding transformations that have taken place. Why does this happen?

The main reason is that SHGs are now being promoted in hundreds of thousands within a very short time by mobilizers, leaving very little space for women to decide



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and act on their own. Large amounts of money have been pumped into SHGs from the very beginning, not allowing the women to build self-reliance. Bank linkages are planned and done on a large scale for a prescribed amount, as decided by the bankers, without taking into cognizance the needs of the women and their capacity to repay. The process of mutual help, joint development, acceptance and internalization of SHG rules and norms are now, largely, missing.

Yes, credit is certainly a life-line for rural women. However, managing credits in groups, under the present terms and conditions, requires a different orientation altogether. At least, the opinion of each woman in the group should count. They should also have a say in the timing of the linkage and in the amount that the groups are allowed to avail of through the linkage. However, both the decisions are taken as per the convenience of bank managers rather than that of SHG members. Second, credit access is not backed by service delivery. Poor women are left to themselves to avail of services such as dairy farming or poultry and goat rearing, to strengthen their livelihoods.

If we aim at strengthening livelihoods through credit linkage, we must take into account the need for end-to-end services. There may, of course, be some outliers that could excel without this support. But what about the large mass of poor women, who need substantial hand-holding to succeed? Not only the required services and hand-holding, but the approach of SHG promotion to scale also leaves very little space for capacity-building programmes essential for such decentralized organizations to grow, to take decisions and to deliver on their own capacities. Without that capacity-building, vibrant villages and vibrant decentralized democracies cannot be imagined.

The problem gets compounded when the collectives are seen as

mere instruments of political mileage. Our political leaders leverage votes quite easily, either through legitimate means of credit linkage or by reaching huge numbers through the use of technology. Crores of rupees are spent on events, to which SHG members are transported for the sake of publicity.

Several government programmes are now being planned for implementation through SHGs. So that village infrastructure can be improved. The village children would get nutritious food. But it is unfortunate that, more often than not, there are disadvantages. Often, these time-bound projects force women into corruption. The burning example is the toilet construction for SHG members. Because this has to be done within a short time-



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The big question this gives rise to is: after giving money to SHGs, either for credit or for any developmental project, who is to ensure that the engineer, the veterinary doctor, the school teacher are available to help the women when they need it?

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span, SHGs are bound to depend on contractors, who charge heavy bribes to finish the toilet construction on time. And as a result, poor quality infrastructure is being constructed with the hard-earned money of the poor women.

Another example can be given to illustrate this. A few years ago, in a small village of Odisha, SHG members were assigned the work of pond renovation. As per the provision, they mobilized labourers, completed the work and called the engineer-in-charge to come and complete the measurement work. However, the engineer-in charge took four months to come to the site and measure the work, and that was after the rainy season. As a result, due to heavy rain, the earthwork measured by the SHG and the earthwork measured by the engineer showed a difference and, ultimately, the poor women incurred loss.

The women asked me if they should bribe the engineer to get the measurement done correctly. We discussed the issue and I then left it to the women to decide. They decided not to use bribes, no matter how much loss they had to bear. But it was not an

easy decision, when the choice was loss to individual members vis-à-vis bribing. The big question this gives rise to is: after giving money to the SHGs, either for credit or for any developmental project, who is to ensure that the engineer, the veterinary doctor, the school teacher are available to help the women when they need it? In the absence of the required support, the women fail to repay the loan and implement the project and, in the end, they become demoralized. The social capital mobilized for socio-political transformation also loses confidence and energy for positive change. The power game completely demolishes a relationship of the community and establishes the relationship of winner and loser, receiver and gainer.

The governance machinery at the grass roots will remain dysfunctional if the last bastion of independent collective voices in the villages is co-opted, with the grass-roots women's collectives turning into an extended arm of service delivery, a service delivery that is already itself riddled with corruption and leakages. Will that not defeat the very purpose of promoting SHGs?

## Conclusion

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In this scenario, the big question is, "What is the right way?" Should SHGs merely become a conduit to deliver credit or political mobilization and not be a pathway to empowerment? This is a pertinent and a very important question in the context of the most marginalized in our society: the poor women in our villages. SHGs have the potential to be the pathway for development and empowerment. However, in the absence of proper hand-holding, space for independent voices and required service delivery systems (government and non-government), the result is diluted. Promoting agencies forget that SHGs are living organizations and should grow organically along their natural self-driven path rather than be directed by outsiders, aspiring only to economic growth. We must work for the day when SHGs become truly empowering agencies rather than mere tools for implementation.

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# CREATING A SAFE SPACE FOR WOMEN

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As important as it is to identify and support viable livelihoods in villages, equally vital it is that issues of gender and sex, gender and patriarchy, and gender and violence are discussed in safe spaces such as SHGs, Clusters and Federations, helping women live lives of equality, dignity and freedom

**R**AJNI (NAME CHANGED) WAS IN deep distress. Her husband and her in-laws shunned her. She had brought disgrace upon them. Her father and brother rebuked her for her conduct. All the villagers agreed that the *jati panchayat* had rightly punished Rajni because she had brought such shame to her family.

Rajni's fault was that she had dared to hold her brother-in-law's hand to stop him beating her and had shouted at him. Her brother-in-law felt humiliated...he could not believe that a woman

of his house would resist him. He had only been punishing her for her misconduct.

He took the matter to the *jati panchayat*. Acknowledging the disrespect and shame that Rajni had brought to him and his family, the *jati panchayat* ordered Rajni to feed the entire village with traditional *murga-roti* (chicken and bread). She was also made to publicly apologize to her brother-in-law. Their version, "*Chahe kuchh bhi ho jaye, ek aurat apne jeth ka haath kaise pakad sakti hai* (Whatever the situation, a woman cannot hold her brother-in-law's hand)."

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As a para-legal and in order to support women in distress, Reena used to go to the block headquarters, the police station and to other places

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Rajni had no choice but to succumb to the verdict. She took a loan from her brothers, to arrange for the feast.

Three months later, a trained para-legal worker, Reena (name changed), came to the same village, Udadna. She was there to conduct training for the village women, mostly around matters of domestic violence. As a para-legal and in order to support women in distress, Reena used to go to the block headquarters, the police station and to other places. Yet, back in her own home, her husband did not want her to go out for work. He doubted her, believing that she had relationships with other men. He

used to remain inebriated most of the time and, lately, had started beating and abusing her. When she used to resist, he would call the *jati panchayat*.

The last time, the leaders of the *jati panchayat* had listened to both the parties. As expected, Reena was fined Rs 1,000 and was asked to respect her husband and to follow his orders.

Reena did not let the case rest there. She said that she would only pay the amount if her husband stopped abusing her and started working. Surprisingly, her voice was heard. Reena stopped going out for work. Her husband, however, didn't stop the abuse;

he became more violent. And the leaders of the *jati panchayat* did not intervene on her behalf.

### **Grounding the Problem**

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Such stories are fairly common to come by when working at the grass roots. The case being highlighted is from Narayanganj block in Mandla district, Madhya Pradesh. Narayanganj is an idyllic block in the vicinity of Kanha National Park. Gonds and Baigas are the predominant tribes living there. Although it is believed that tribal women have more freedom compared to those in the mainstream, cases of violence against them are frequent and





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"Hamein apni samajh banani padegi (We need to build our understanding)." This statement became one of the action points of the Federation

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the norms of the community are primarily biased toward the men. Moreover, the women themselves believe that there is nothing wrong in such norms. They succumb to all such atrocities without any resistance and also live in fear of repercussions if they were to resist.

In Narayanganj, PRADAN has mobilized more than 10,000 women into Self Help Groups; the women have further congregated into village-level Clusters and block-level Federations called Ekta Mahila Sangha. One day, Shanti (name changed) arrived late for a Cluster meeting. Her cheeks were blue with bruises. When asked, she said that her husband was against her attending these meetings and had hit her to stop her. She had managed to come with the support of some senior SHG members. She couldn't control her tears as she spoke. Some other members wept in silence as they listened. Shanti was not alone. If this was the plight of Federation leaders, one could only imagine how alarming the situation might be for others. Clearing the lump in her throat, a member said, "*Aaj chup rahe to hamesha chup rahna padega aur aise hi sehna padega* (If we do not

raise our voice now, we will suffer in silence our entire life)." This was in 2017.

When finalizing the annual plan for the Federation, one of the issues that surfaced was the issue of violence. Some Federation leaders resisted saying, "*Ghar ghar ka mudda hai. Apni rozi dekhe ya ye? Auraton ki kismet mein yahi likha hai* (This is a common household issue. Should we think of our livelihood or this? It is the fate of women, we should just bear it)."

Others said, "*Peechhe na hate, ye adhikar ka mudda nahi barabari aur samman ka mudda hai. Agar barabari bhi nahi to yeh meeting ka bhi kya fayda* (We shouldn't step back. This is not about only our rights but also about equality and respect. If there is no equality, what is the point of us meeting)?"

Such discussions began happening in subsequent meetings and, finally, it was decided that the initial steps should be to discuss this issue with other members in SHG and the Cluster meetings. "*Hamein apni samajh banani padegi* (We need to build our understanding)." This statement became one of the action points of the Federation.

### **Collectives: Awareness-building and Sharing Platforms**

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What followed was a series of central-level trainings to one or two members of each VLC from about 20 villages. Topics such as gender and sex, gender and patriarchy, and gender and violence were discussed and debated. Members who attended the training started sharing their learning further and created awareness. The effect was that the women, who would earlier shy away from discussing these matters, found a safe space in the SHGs and the VLC and were able to openly confide in other members. Many cases related to violence were shared in these forums.

There were mixed feelings in the SHGs when such cases were shared. Voices that were heard more frequently had statements such as, "*Kitta sahe* (How much should we bear)?" Some others said, "*Ye hamara adhikar hai ki hum apni baat kahein aur kisi se maar na khaye* (This is our right that we are heard and are not abused by anyone)." Some others took a different stand, "*Wahi aadmi ke saath rehna hai wahi ka burai karein, aur aiso kar rahe hai* (We have to stay with the same men,

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## Many women started realizing their plight and began to share their stories in these trainings and in other forums

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and here we are cursing those same men)." Some shared, "*Maar khana to hamari kismet mein hain, woh pati hai, maar hi sakta hai* (Getting beaten is our destiny, he is the husband, he can hit us)."

### Reena's Case Again

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Reena had been suffering in silence. It was unbearable for her that whereas she helped women in distress, in her own house she was succumbing to the unwanted whims of her husband and his family. She knew the law; she knew that whatever was happening with her was wrong. Other SHG members had told her to attend SHG meetings and go to the block to attend other meetings regarding her work as a para-legal worker.

Encouraged, she started going back to SHG meetings and other forums. One day, her husband came home with his friend. They started drinking and he asked Reena to cook chicken for them. Although she did not want to, she cooked. Not liking the taste of the chicken, he started hitting Reena in front of his friend. She ran away. With the support of other para-legal workers, she filed an FIR under Section 498A of the IPC (Indian Penal Code), a non-

bailable offence. Her husband was immediately jailed.

Owing to pressure from her relatives and the villagers, Reena withdrew the case after one month. Her husband came back home. Overwhelmed by the consequences, he mended his ways. He no longer interfered in Reena's work. "*Sahi kare tene, aadmi ko seekh deni chahiye* (You have done the right thing, man has to be taught a lesson)."

### Taking the Legal Way

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Such cases were discussed in various women's forums. The PRADAN team, meanwhile, was continuing with the training on gender. One of the major strategies was to promote and create awareness through a Gender *Sathi* (resource person), a person who imparted training to the women on the issues of gender, patriarchy, gender and livelihood, gender and violence, etc. Many women started realizing their plight and began to share their stories in these trainings and in other forums. Reena was one of the Gender *Sathis*. Her case was highlighted as a success story: if she could stop the violence against her, why could not the others? Taking their case to the *jati panchayat*

no longer served any purpose. On the contrary, the *panchayat's* support of the men and penalization of the women gave the men more impunity. Taking the matter up legally, through the police and the courts, could be an alternative solution.

Another woman, Sheetal (name changed) elicited Reena's support and lodged a case against her husband, for physically abusing her. He also had a relationship with another woman. Intervention by the police helped. Her husband stopped hitting her although he continued his relationship with the other woman. Sheetal did not want to leave her husband and, therefore, continued to live with him, well aware of his infidelity.

Taking a case to the police also had difficulties. Whereas women like Reena, who were more exposed to the outside world, could take their cases to the police, it was not easy for some of the other women. First, they would be dependent on others for support. Fighting legally would involve hassles such as visiting the police station, going to the court, bribing, etc. Officials at such places are not co-operative and are not sensitized to handle such cases. Moreover, such actions would mean facing the



Sensitizing men on gender-based violence had very positive implications. Role reversals and constructive dialogues during the trainings helped men see things from a different perspective

ire of their family members. Women wanted to live peacefully with their families. They also did not want the issues of their family and their village to go to the courts. Also, all cases were not of absolute violence, there were varied issues, which could be better dealt with at the community or village levels.

### Back to Village Forums

Apart from the *jati panchayat*, another platform, promoted by the Madhya Pradesh government, was functional at the village level. Called Shaurya Dal, it was promoted under Tejaswini project in Paraswada. Shaurya Dal comprised five women and five pro-active men. These members were selected in the *gram sabha*. This group's role was to curb violence and atrocities against women and girls, with the philosophy that the solution of all the problems lies within the community. Although this initiative was being implemented in the village, the women were not aware of it. Neither did they know who the members of the Shaurya Dal were, nor did they know its role.

Revamping the Shaurya Dal seemed to be a better strategy

### Initiatives by the Shaurya Dal at a Glance in Narayanganj, MP (2017-18)

Intervention villages	72
Cases reported to Shaurya Dal	87
Cases resolved at the community level	53
DIR/FIR lodged	21
Types of cases	Domestic violence, witch- hunting, child marriage, dispute

to address domestic violence. PRADAN consulted with the Tejaswini staff at the district level and the Department of Women and Child Welfare. A rigorous training architecture was designed to sensitize Shaurya Dal members, with the support of organizations such as the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) and Jagori. Members were trained on issues of gender and sex, manifestation of patriarchy, violence and its types, relevant laws and constitutional rights, provisions under Domestic Incident Report (DIR), etc.

Many cases were taken and analyzed; what could be the various options for resolving these cases? Sensitizing men on gender-based violence had very positive implications. Role reversals and constructive dialogues during the trainings helped men see things from a different perspective. These members were exposed to the

police station, the block and the district headquarters and the Women and Child Development department.

Some of the interventions, besides training, to strengthen the Shaurya Dal were:

1. Training SHG members as para-legal workers and promoting Gender *Sathis* to become members of the Shaurya Dal.
2. Sensitizing and training the men in the Shaurya Dal
3. Following up the cases resolved by the Shaurya Dal regularly
4. Documenting all the proceedings of the Shaurya Dal
5. Establishing and maintaining linkages with departments such as Women and Child Development police, BDO, PRI, etc.

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Representatives need to be aware of their role and also be capable and sensitive enough to deal with the cases that come up in these forums

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Gender-based violence against women is deeply rooted in our society. Such violence occurs often within the family. And it is perpetuated by societal norms. It is normalized, and women themselves do not find it wrong if men abuse or hit them. They continue to suffer in silence because they have no space or forum to raise such issues. Whereas traditional spaces such as the *jati panchayat* have a bias against women, legal spaces are also insensitive and inconsiderate. Women also fear

the dire consequences of taking legal action because they have to remain in the same society and neighbourhood.

Forums such as the Shaurya Dal are good initiatives; however, just forming such structures is not enough. Representatives need to be aware of their role and also be capable and sensitive enough to deal with the cases that come up in these forums. In Narayanganj, members of the Shaurya Dal, both men and women, are being trained to look at the issues from

a gender lens. It becomes more effective when the men talk on the issues of women. Challenging patriarchy may be a long haul; however, the greater need is to provide a safe space where women's voices are heard and solutions are provided so that there is equality and respectful coexistence within the family and in society.

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# KORAPUT DISTRICT: A Sustainable Livelihood Prototype

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"Shifting from individual-focused sectoral thinking to livelihood-basket thinking" proves very successful in Lamtaput block, Koraput district, resulting in enhanced farmers' income, establishing women's identities as farmers and integrating ecological aspects so as to generate sustainable livelihoods

## Introduction

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**M**OST DEVELOPMENT POLICIES AND interventions talk about strengthening livelihoods for dignified living and economic prosperity. Although there may be many debates around whether strengthening livelihoods is enough to reduce various forms of inequalities, such as those based on gender, caste and class, in the end, most of these arguments locate the failure to reduce inequalities on the approach taken.

As Datta et al. (2014) note, "Most development programs till recently have focused on individual beneficiaries and most of these programs also have been sectoral. Shifting from this individual focused sectoral thinking to livelihood-basket thinking has often not happened." The argument, then, is that improving livelihoods has tremendous



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A thorough situational analysis was carried out, over a period of almost a year, to identify locally grown crops, the various agricultural practices followed, the perceived challenges, and the possible rationale for the existing gaps

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potential to address the different facets of inequalities, provided that the approach for executing it is planned appropriately.

### **PRADAN's experience in Lamtaput Block, Koraput District, Odisha**

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Lamtaput is located 60 km from the district headquarters in Koraput. Koraput is part of the Kalahandi Balangir Korapur region, known for its abject poverty. Low literacy has been a root cause of the vulnerability, discrimination and injustice; Koraput ranks 631 out of the 640 surveyed districts, in its rate of literacy (TOI survey). Agriculture is the primary source of livelihood for almost 60–70 per cent of the households of Lamtaput. Many depend on only rain-fed agriculture, due to the very poor irrigation facilities available. Paddy and millet are the two major food crops.

Until 2010–11, the majority of the farmers used to grow vegetables, solely for domestic consumption. PRADAN started working in Lamtaput block in 2012. In the last six years of engagement with the community of Lamtaput block, PRADAN has developed an area-based comprehensive

livelihood prototype, which has helped the community take ownership, has led to the participation of a majority of households in the programme, has ensured a significant return on investment for 60 per cent of the participating households and has also helped in addressing the issue of gender gap.

### **How did this evolve?**

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To start with, social mobilization was given utmost importance. Becoming associated with the existing women's SHGs and assisting in the formation of new SHGs were adopted as means of social mobilization. PRADAN helped facilitate periodic meetings of these SHGs, to discuss village issues, find solutions and take action accordingly.

In its engagement with different SHGs, PRADAN discovered that there was a need to help these groups come up with a comprehensive village plan. Therefore, the PRADAN team asked the SHGs in all the 60 revenue villages to prepare a comprehensive village development plan. It carried out perspective-building of SHG members, helped them develop

planning modules, choose appropriate planning tools and prepare the village plan. The process brought out the people's inclination to agriculture as a means of livelihood.

Subsequently, a thorough situational analysis was carried out, over a period of almost a year, to identify locally grown crops, the various agricultural practices followed, the perceived challenges, and the possible rationale for the existing gaps.

Certain options were then zeroed down upon. Each option was piloted and, subsequently, scaled up. Gradually, the combinations of options being piloted and scaled up took the shape of a prototype. The entire process took almost three to four years. The basket of options comprised:

1. Adoption of improved agricultural practices for finger-millet cultivation
2. Adoption of improved methods for paddy cultivation during summer
3. Inter-cropping in pipla plot for its optimal utilization
4. Promoting local seed-preservation of the preferred crops, as identified by the community

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The average yield in the traditional method (broadcasting) used to be 4–5 quintals per acre. With the improved method, the average yield of finger millet has come up to 12–14 quintals per acre

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5. Introduction of organic remedies for crop protection
6. Taking measures to address the gender gap

### **1. Adoption of improved agriculture practices for finger-millet cultivation**

Finger millet is an important cereal crop in Koraput district because most of the rural populace consumes it as one of the staple foods. The adoption of improved practices in finger-millet cultivation primarily includes knowledge-building of women farmers around seed selection, seed treatment, nursery raising, line transplantation, inter-cultural operations and the application of organic remedies.

PRADAN is currently working in all the 15 *panchayats* in Lamtaput block, where approximately 8,112 farmers cultivate finger millet, following improved methodology in an area of 4,811 acres. The average yield in the traditional method (broadcasting) used to be 4–5 quintals per acre. With the improved method, the average yield of finger millet has increased to 12–14 quintals per acre. This level of productivity not only ensures the availability of stock for round-the-year consumption

for a family but also the selling of a minimum of 10 quintals of finger millet in a year, that is, an additional income of Rs 15,000–20,000.

The improved method added value in a number of ways. The seed rate was low, thereby keeping the input costs low. The time for weeding was reduced, thereby reducing the drudgery for women farmers significantly. Being less labour intensive, it also helped to address the issue of labour crisis during the peak agriculture season. Additionally, it led to a significant increase in production, that is, three to four times more than the earlier yield.

The new method was standardized in the region through demonstrations. In the financial year 2012–13, PRADAN started the intervention in a few of the villages of Jalahanjar *panchayat*. To start with, only a few farmers from five adjacent villages came forward to adopt the practice. The result was remarkable, and in the next year itself, approximately, 500 farmers from the adjacent *panchayat* took it up.

The experience of 500 farmers helped in reaching out to 2000

farmers the next year and, today, over 8,100 farmers have adopted the new method. The very sound demonstration of the improved method has played a key role in such wide replication. Several trainings were conducted on seed selection, seed treatment, nursery raising, line transplantation and the preparation of organic products at various levels.

The new method was further established through convergence with a government programme. In the pilot phase, the method was launched through the joint efforts of the Assistant Agriculture Officer, Lamtaput, and PRADAN, and the seeds were distributed to the farmers under the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana, RKVY. Later on, the farmers received support from the Orissa Tribal Empowerment and Livelihood Programme Plus project, in the form of implements and a millet processing unit. Recently, the entire initiative has been recognized by the Odisha state government's special millet programme. It's a five-year long programme and is committed to up-scaling millet cultivation, end to end, across the state.

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The first year's experience in Mojhaput not only led to the replication of the method for every piece of millet-growing land in Mojhaput, but also in many nearby villages

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### **Mojhaput Village Shows the Way**

The initiative around millet development started in Mojhaput village, Jalahanjar *gram panchayat*. Thirty-three families dwell in Mojhaput, of which eight families belong to the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and the rest are 'potters', belonging to Other Backward Castes (OBCs). Although pot-making is the traditional occupation of 25 potter families, they have been primarily dependent on agriculture for their livelihood, mainly due to very insignificant returns from the pot-making activity. Two to three households are landless. The average landholding, per household, is around two to three acres.

Finger millet and paddy have been the two major food crops grown here. Vegetables such as potato, onion, cucumber, chilly, bitter gourd, beans, tomato, etc., used to be cultivated during the *kharif* season only. Agriculture used to be pursued for fulfilling people's consumption needs. The village has 40 acres of land, of which 15–20 acres was utilized earlier for growing finger millet (using the broadcasting methodology), in order to meet round-the-year consumption needs. A thorough analysis of the gaps of the existing practice revealed the need for applying some principles of the System of Root Intensification (SRI) for the cultivation of finger millet. Because some of the principles of SRI were followed, it was called an improved method.

The planning was facilitated at the village organization level. Twenty-seven families agreed to try out the new method, with each farmer agreeing to experiment only on a very small piece of land because they were not sure of the results. Several trainings around nursery raising, transplantation and intercultural operations were conducted to build knowledge of the women farmers on the new technology.

Rita Kumbhar got the highest yield in the village, that is, almost four times the earlier yield. For Rita, however, the most fascinating experience was the use of the weeder because it led to a substantial amount of reduction in her drudgery.

The first year's experience in Mojhaput not only led to the replication of the method for every piece of millet-growing land in Mojhaput, but also in many nearby villages. Farmers from distant villages were invited for exposure visits to Mojhaput and, today, 8,112 families of Lamtaput block have adopted this technique for growing millet on 4,811 acres of land.

This positive experience of increased production of finger millet increased the confidence of the women. The culture of regular discussions in the village organization, comprising three SHGs, remained alive. Over a period of time, and owing to this culture of regular discussions and collective action, the village organization of Mojhaput could address and solve other issues as well, such



**Finger Millet Mojhaput**



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Through joint consultation with the community, PRADAN facilitated the women's collectives to cultivate paddy in summer through the adoption of an improved method, which is basically a method where selective components of SRI are followed. The results are encouraging

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as the lack of a school in the village, the absence of an accessible road and the lack of drinking water. In short, in the process of evolving an integrated area-based prototype, Mojhaput pioneered the up-scaling of millet production through the adoption of an improved method of millet cultivation

### **Improved practices in Machhakunda**

Most of the paddy lands in Lamtaput are located in the line of drainage, resulting in heavy water-logging during *kharif* cultivation. The productivity of the monsoon paddy is far below the standard. Through joint consultation with the community, PRADAN facilitated the women's collectives to cultivate paddy in summer through the adoption of an improved method, which is basically a method where selective components of SRI are followed. The results are encouraging.

PRADAN started by piloting the methodology in one particular patch called the Machhakunda, comprising three adjacent *gram panchayats*. Machhakunda is one of the interior-most pockets of Lamtaput and its villages are 20–45 km from the block headquarters. The area is topographically a little different from the rest of the patches of the block. The average rainfall in Machhakunda is higher than that of the rest of the patches of Lamtaput and it has only three types of land, that is, high-land, homestead land and low-land, which is basically the drainage line. Summer paddy intervention was aimed at optimal utilization of the lowlands of the area.

As reported by the farmers, prior to the adoption of the improved method, the average yield per acre was 14 quintals, which has gone up to 25 quintals after the intervention. Almost 50 per cent of the farmers could sell 10 quintals of paddy in a year, after storing grain for the current year and the upcoming year's household consumption.



**Summer Paddy Machhakunda**

After successful demonstration at the Machhakunda patch, several exposure visits were conducted for farmers from other *panchayats*. Currently, a large number of families have adopted summer paddy cultivation, using the improved method.

Also, some farmers of the Machhakunda area have been identified as resource persons for the cultivation of summer paddy by the nearby Malkangiri district. These resource persons provide training to the farmers of Malkangiri and, thus, the model is no more confined to only the Machhakunda area, but has spread to the adjacent district of Malkangiri.

In this way, the experience in Machhakunda played a pioneering role for wider replication of the improved method of summer paddy cultivation.

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In the last three years, PRADAN has conducted a concrete experimentation on kharif vegetable cultivation in the Pipla plot, without affecting the productivity of Pipla

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## **2. Improved practices in summer paddy cultivation**

Eighty per cent of the paddy land of Lamtaput is basically the drainage line, and it remains water-logged during the *kharif* season. Paddy cultivation using the improved method in summer, therefore, emerged as an important option for Lamtaput. The following case substantiates how it became standardized.

## **3. Inter-cropping in pipla plot for its optimal utilization**

Pipla (*piper longum*) is a medicinal plant that grows only in limited areas across the globe and Lamtaput is one

among those naturally blessed areas. The lands, where pipla is grown, is mostly stone-fenced and is entirely protected from the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Farmers used to apply heavy amounts of farm yard manure to grow only pipla. During 2011–12, only 5–10 per cent of the families of a village used to grow pipla and, currently, it has increased up to 50–60 per cent. In the last three years, PRADAN has conducted a concrete experimentation on *kharif* vegetable cultivation in the pipla plot, without affecting the productivity of pipla. The major value addition was in helping the farmers in timely cultivation, selection of crops, adoption of

practices such as seed selection, seed treatment, the use of organic remedies and in marketing.

A 25-decimal pipla plot, inter-cropped with chilly and ginger, can easily ensure Rs 25,000–30,000 of net income for a farmer, excluding the income from pipla itself. A farmer can also grow some other crops such as pumpkin and cucumber as a boarder crop in the pipla plot. However, the price of pipla is declining significantly each year and that has attracted PRADAN's attention. As a first step, PRADAN conducted a value chain study, and subsequently, engaged in the designing of an intervention.

### **Story of Ballel village: A live example of a pipla plot model**

PRADAN started its work at Ballel in 2012 and currently there are 14 SHGs in the village. Of the 150 households in Ballel, 110 of them have a pipla plot. During the initial days, pipla was a high-valued crop, ranging in price from Rs 600–1000 per kg, depending upon the quality. Because the return was good, more households started growing pipla and those already growing pipla started increasing the area for pipla cultivation. However, because of the absence of a perfect market, the price of pipla declined sharply in the last four years (price ranging from Rs 80–100 per kg, depending upon the quality). Therefore, the farmers were in strong need of an alternative.

PRADAN worked with the women to find a way out of the situation. The farmers used to cultivate many vegetables such as chillies, beans, tomato, ginger, pigeon-pea and pumpkin, in the pipla land, in a very sporadic manner, just to meet their own consumption needs. For the last three years, the farmers have focussed on growing vegetables on a commercial scale in this land. The major areas of interventions by PRADAN have been around identifying, farmer-wise, two major crops as cash crops, seed treatment, nursery raising (using a raised-bed), inter-cropping, single nursery transplantation and

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After witnessing the experience of Ballel, many villages have started planning other crops in their pipla plots in the same way. Currently, this model has been replicated in approximately 50 villages of 7 gram panchayats of Lamtaput block

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the use of organic remedies. Through these interventions, PRADAN helped the farmers utilize the pipla plot optimally and enhance their income.

The farmers faced the following problems: Having and caring for individual nurseries, individual planning and management of crops, variations among families in terms of scale and productivity, and not being able to find a proper market or a reasonable price for their product.

Women farmers of Ballel started exploring the way to mitigate this marketing issue. All the members of the 14 SHGs have now formed a Village Organization and meet regularly (last Wednesday of every month) to discuss these issues. Finally, in the *kharif* season of 2017, they planned the cultivation in their pipla plot, using the production-cluster approach, meaning that every farmer will raise a nursery at the same time, transplant during the same period and market the produce collectively. This ensured that all the farmers received an equal price and got a fair deal through collective bargaining. Through the process, the women directly interfaced with the market and took all market-related decisions.



**A Pipla plot in Ballel village**

At the end of all these trials, the major crops (as decided in the consultations with the farmers), have been ginger and chilly, with pumpkin and papaya as additional crops. A 25 decimal of pipla plot can ensure a profit of Rs 25,000–30,000, excluding the income from the pipla.

After witnessing the experience of Ballel, many villages have started planning other crops in their pipla plots in the same way. Currently, this model has been replicated in approximately 50 villages of 7 *gram panchayats* of Lamtaput block. In the evolving of the integrated area-based prototype, therefore, Ballel's experience has played a pioneering role.

#### **4. Promoting local seed-preservation of preferred crops**

In most of the interventions, the return on local varieties has been more lucrative for farmers. Building on this, enhancing the

knowledge of women's collectives on seed preservation evolved. This also includes research on a number of varieties of seeds available in the area, the experience of cultivation with each variety, sample collection and the preservation of those

sample seeds. For example, approximately 16 varieties of chilly seeds are available at Lamtaput, and some villages have started preserving such local varieties. Similarly, seeds are preserved for crops such as millet, ginger and other vegetable crops.



There is ample scope for further improvement of production and productivity of ginger for raising the income level of the farmers. Yield-loss under real farming conditions can be attributed to several biotic and abiotic factors

### Dabuguda and Chopa production cluster

Ginger is predominantly cultivated in the Patangi-Similiguda-Nandapur blocks of Koraput district in different cropping systems, usually as a sole crop. New cultivation practices were introduced and adopted by a large section of ginger growers. At a later stage, however, many farmers gave up ginger cultivation whereas some others are still struggling to survive because, over the last 15–20 years, diseases have severely affected the crop, resulting in a decline in the yield ratio from one ‘seed’ rhizome to 8–10 harvested rhizomes to only one to two or three. There is ample scope for further improvement of production and productivity of ginger for raising the income level of the farmers. Yield-loss under real farming conditions can be attributed to several biotic and abiotic factors. Important among them are improper mother rhizome selection as seed material, lack of seed treatment, poor drainage, lack of knowledge on crop rotation, faulty cultural practices and lack of timely plant protection measures.

The cultivation of ginger on a commercial scale is a new phenomenon for the farmers of Dabuguda and Chopa villages of Lamtaput block. This started to meet the demands generated by SHGs for less labour-intensive income generation and high-value crops with low volume.

### PRADAN as a facilitator

PRADAN started working in these villages in 2011–12 and organized the women, forming SHGs to initiate savings and credit activities, along with building a perspective of sustainable livelihood from agriculture. Gradually, these SHGs were federated into village-level Clusters (Village Organizations, VOs), to discuss various village-level affairs. They also became a part of the Dabuguda *gram panchayat* level federation. GPLF.

Several perspective-building trainings and exposures were organized by PRADAN for SHG leaders on various themes.

Institution Building	Agriculture	Governance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training on SHG principles</li> <li>• Training on SHG book-keeping and auditing</li> <li>• Training on leadership</li> <li>• Training on gender and discrimination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training on SRI with millet</li> <li>• Training of PoP of vegetable cultivation</li> <li>• Training on IPM</li> <li>• Training on livelihood planning</li> <li>• Training on WEAI &amp; women as farmers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training on MGNREGA and grievance redressal</li> <li>• Training on different government schemes</li> <li>• Training on gram sabha and palli sabha</li> <li>• Training on the electoral process and panchayat governance</li> </ul>

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Gradually, seed production and preservation emerged as an important approach in the integrated prototype and, currently, there is deliberate focus on developing one or two villages of every *gram panchayat* as seed villages, to ensure the timely availability of quality seeds

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Kansula Nani, an SHG member, initiated a discussion on the ginger cultivation programme. She talked about it in her SHG group and, subsequently, it was discussed by the VOs and in the other SHGs, to build consensus on commercial ginger cultivation. PRADAN guided them by making them understand the rationale and the Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threat (SWOT) around the activity. The concept of an Agricultural Production Cluster originated and, gradually, farmers understood the need for collectivization in agriculture.



**A ginger plot in Dabuguda village**

However, one of the major challenges faced by our Agriculture Production Cluster members, initially, was the availability of quality seeds. The seeds that were sourced from outside were not only costly but also insufficient, and did not even translate into the desired levels of production. To counter this impediment, PRADAN helped women SHG leaders to come up with an innovative solution. They decided to produce their own seeds by marking out certain zones for the production of quality seeds.

A few group members were unanimously elected and the others agreed to purchase the seeds from them on a cost basis. The selected members were further trained in seed preservation techniques. Thus far, 35 women have been engaged in the production of a variety of spice seeds and around seven hectares of land have been put under seed cultivation.

The significant aspect of this technology intervention was the introduction of a high yielding variety of seeds, crop rotation, soil treatment with trichoderma, the use of *handikhata* for disease control and *jeevamruta* for soil health improvement.

This led to the availability of quality seeds for a majority of the households of Dabuguda and Chopra. This was followed by almost all the households of these two villages venturing into ginger cultivation on a commercial scale, through the APC approach.

The experience of Dabuguda motivated farmers from other villages to preserve seeds for the major crops chosen by them. For example, Burudiput village demanded training on chilly seed production; in 2017–18, this village preserved approximately 50 kg of chilly seeds. Gradually, seed production and preservation emerged as an important approach in the integrated prototype and, currently, there is deliberate focus on developing one or two villages of every *gram panchayat* as seed villages, to ensure the timely availability of quality seeds.

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Knowledge-building around various organic remedies, prepared from the locally available material, has proved to be interesting for farmers. This is primarily because of the positive results and because it involves very low investment of the farmers

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## **5. Introduction of organic remedies for crop protection**

Knowledge-building around various organic remedies, prepared from locally available material, has proved to be interesting for farmers. This is primarily because of the positive results and because it involves very low investment by farmers. Almost 60–70 per cent of the agricultural families, currently, have started using these remedies.

From the beginning of PRADAN's intervention in 2012–13, the team focussed on guiding farmers to grow crops using organic remedies. A thorough analysis of the farmers' usual practices of crop protection has helped the team to figure out how a farmer can, gradually, switch from inorganic practices to organic ones. In the beginning, only two remedies, that is, insecticides (*handikhata*) and fertilizers (*jeevamruta*) were introduced and, in subsequent years, the use of these became more extensive.

Currently, some entrepreneurs have been identified by the Village Organizations and they have been trained to run the

Non Pesticide Management shop in order to ensure timely availability of appropriate organic remedies for farmers; having understood the positive impact of such measures, farmers are willingly buying such organic products. Today, almost 60 per cent of the farmers take care of a majority of the problems in crop management through organic remedies.

## **6. Taking measures to address the gender gap**

The institutional mechanism for rolling out everything was primarily women's SHGs and their larger collectives. The rationale for having such an institutional mechanism in place was not only the 'efficiency' aspect but also the 'equitable' aspect. Needless to say, women, in spite of sharing 80 per cent of farm responsibilities, live as 'farm labour' and the consequences of that on gender relations is huge. They don't have any decision-making power, no right over assets or any control over the income, none or an insignificant time for participating in any social forums and no leisure time for themselves. Rigorous trainings, on such aspects, helped

women in the collectives to become aware, triggering interest in taking action to change the situation.

At every step of the intervention, various gender-based gaps were considered carefully and measures were also devised for addressing the same. For example, technical knowledge-building for women on various agriculture practices, helping them to get linked with various stakeholders for inputs, and frequent market exposures have encouraged women farmers to participate in the input decision-making process, follow up on crops appropriately, know market dynamics and, thus, be empowered to finalize the deal when selling their produce. This has given them some control over the income.

The use of women-friendly farm implements has contributed significantly in reducing occupational health hazards for women. Most of all, through periodic participation in SHG meetings and its larger collectives, women's participation in other public forums has increased manifold. As stated by most of the women, now-a-days they don't fear interacting



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Each of the interventions can be replicated through a community-led mechanism after a sound demonstration and can reach a critical scale. Also, although one patch/village pioneered an activity, it also adopted the other activities that were demonstrated by the other village/patch

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with outsiders, government functionaries or market players.

### Key learnings

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The experience from Lamtaput does suggest some qualifiers for any livelihood prototype to be considered as comprehensive.

- *Significant income/return:* In Lamtaput, it was significant. In terms of income, it is almost 'double' of what 60 per cent of the participating families were earning prior to the intervention.
- *Participation of the majority, including the poorest of the poor:* Almost 80 per cent of the total outreach households could participate.
- *Low external dependency, that is, intervention plans are based upon locally available resources:* Intervention plans (that is, the combination of millet intervention, summer paddy intervention, pipla plot model, local seed preservation and promotion of organic practices) were totally based on what people were already doing and the existing resources.

- *High predictability of returns through selection of appropriate activities:* For example, the combination of crops selected in Lamtaput assured high predictability.
- *Robust enough to accommodate variations that exist, at the family as well as area levels:* This has been taken care of through diversification of options.
- *Replicable, scalable and sustainable:* Each of the interventions can be replicated through a community-led mechanism after a sound demonstration and can reach a critical scale. Also, although one patch/village pioneered an activity, it also adopted the other activities that were demonstrated by the other village/patch. For example, although Mojhaput was a pioneer for millet intervention, it also adopted the summer paddy cultivation method, the pipla plot model, organic practices, etc., through learning from other villages.
- *Takes care of the existing gender-based inequalities:* This aspect was given utmost priority at each step. A few outcomes of the same are enhanced participation of women in

input decision-making, market exposure for women, reduced drudgery and, to some extent, enhanced control over income.

The entire experience also suggests some concrete steps to identify and ground potential livelihood prototypes for the majority, that is:

- Starting with institution-building, so that a forum for regular discussion on any issues affecting their life would be in place.
- Through continuous associations with these institutions, understanding people's preferred themes in terms of livelihoods.
- Mapping the existing practices, available resources, current gaps (including the gender gap) and the scope for intervention for people's preferred themes.
- Finalizing and mutually enforcing a basket of appropriate and sustainable livelihood activities that will ensure a good match of people's (all households, including the poorest) needs and aspirations and also optimal utilization of available resources.

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PRADAN's experience of leading a successful farm-based livelihood intervention in Koraput shows that instead of focussing on a single approach, a context-specific mixed approach is likely to work best

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- Finalizing institutional mechanisms for grounding planned interventions and ensuring that it is collective-led.
- Demonstrating each of the activities thoroughly and ensuring the percolation of the same across the board, so that in the end, the adoption of the entire basket is possible.
- Helping people adopt ecologically sustainable practices in each activity.
- Building awareness continuously in the institution on the gaps revealed in gender relations and, accordingly,

devising strategies to reduce the gap at each and every step.

### Conclusion

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PRADAN's experience of leading a successful farm-based livelihood intervention in Koraput shows that instead of focussing on a single approach, a context-specific mixed approach is likely to work best. In this case, it involved identifying millet and pipla as the crops to work on, carefully designing and implementing a process that ensured women's participation at every step, and adopting organic methods of agriculture. This comprehensive

approach not only increased the income of the participating families but also helped women establish their identity as farmers and integrated the ecological aspects so as to ensure that the livelihoods generated were sustainable.

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# SUSTAINABLE INTEGRATED FARMING: A Scalable Model for Small and Marginal Farmers

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Conceptualizing and grounding a development model appropriate to the diverse needs and priorities of different sections of the community, and, at the same time conserving the eco-system of the local livelihoods is a challenge of a very high order.

LIVELIHOOD STRENGTHENING HAS, FOR MANY good reasons, continued to dominate the development effort of most government and non-government agencies concerned with the poor and marginal communities in rural India. However, often, they miss the integrated reality of the livelihood eco-system of the community and adopt theme-centric or activity-specific interventions that fail to bring any significant impact.

The poorer the household, the higher is its livelihood portfolio. This can be for several reasons—to diversify risk, optimize the minimal resources it owns or has access to, or meet its various uncertain needs.

On the other hand, conceptualizing and grounding a development model appropriate to the diverse needs and priorities of different sections of the community, and, at the same time, conserving the eco-system of the local livelihoods is a challenge of a very high

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Even though women toil hard and do more than 70 per cent of the work in agricultural fields, their identity as farmers is hardly recognized

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order. However, the following experience from Keonjhar, Odisha, provides an answer to such a challenge and is worth considering for large-scale replication.

### Contextual Issues

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Tribal communities such as Gond, Bathuli, Kolha and Munda, and OBC communities such as Mahanta are the major inhabitants of Keonjhar. Agriculture is the predominant activity here, comprising small and marginal farmers with average land-holdings of around 2 acres each. About 50 per cent of the land is un-bundled upland whereas the rest is medium and lowland. Most of the families cultivate paddy in the *kharif* season and grow vegetables, along with some pulses, in the *rabi* season, utilizing the residual moisture in the paddy land or using water lifted from ponds, wells and seasonal streams on a small scale.

Other than agriculture, the rearing of small ruminants and backyard poultry have been the next most significant livelihood contributor, especially for the poor, the marginalized and the women. Besides agriculture and

livestock, people rely on non-timber forest produce (NTFP) collection from nearby forests and wage labour, for their livelihoods.

In 2013, Odisha Livelihoods Mission (OLM) and PRADAN became partners for implementing the Mahila Kisan Shashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) project in four blocks spread over three districts in the state, including Patna block, Keonjhar district, to strengthen the livelihoods of the community by:

- A. Strengthening the identity of women as farmers
- B. Promoting sustainable agriculture
- C. Integrated livestock promotion

### A. Strengthening Women's Identity as Farmers

Even though women toil hard and do more than 70 per cent of the work in agricultural fields, their identity as farmers is hardly recognized. Women do many of the difficult farming tasks such as sowing, nursery raising, transplanting, weeding, thinning, harvesting and storage. Similarly, although they do most of the house-work, they are not the owners of a single item in their homes. Women agricultural labourers, are an 'invisible' workforce, which see working on farms as an extension of their roles in the family whereas others regard them as unpaid assistants to their husbands.





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Some of the factors contributing to this include their enhanced knowledge of agriculture, especially related to non-pesticide management (NPM), improved livestock rearing, linking with the market both for input procurement and selling of output, and awareness regarding different government schemes

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## Interventions

After an initial round of discussions with women SHG members, the reasons for this unjust position of women in farming were attributed to the following:

- a. Women do not have proper knowledge about agriculture and livestock rearing.
- b. They do not have exposure to markets for input and output linkages.
- c. They do not have information about government schemes.
- d. They do not have land in their name.
- e. They do not participate in various farming-related decisions.
- f. They do not consider their own contribution to the agriculture sector as significant.

Following this, carefully designed events were organized to create mass awareness programmes and to sensitize women to assert themselves as farmers. Various training and planning exercises were undertaken to build this identity. The focus was not only on enhanced income but also on strengthening the

role of women in decision-making about agricultural production, ownership of assets, control over the use of income, leadership in the community, and negotiation within the family for redistribution of care work.

*Mahila kisans* (Women farmers) have now started participating actively in taking decisions related to agriculture. Some of the factors contributing to this include their enhanced knowledge of agriculture, especially related to non-pesticide management (NPM), improved livestock rearing, linking with the market both for input procurement and selling of output, and awareness regarding different government schemes. This has also helped

build the confidence of SHG members.

## B. Promoting Sustainable Agriculture

The following key components were covered under the sustainable agriculture farming system:

- a. Adoption of System of Crop Intensification (SCI) principles for crop production
- b. Trellis method of creeper cultivation
- c. Vegetable cultivation using organic practices
- d. Small-scale irrigation intervention
- e. Drudgery reduction



**Nursery bed preparation**

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## The raised-pit method helped in conserving soil moisture and supporting vigorous root growth

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### **a. Adoption of SCI principles for crop production, especially with paddy**

Paddy is the major food-crop in the area and as a measure to ensure food security, SCI principles for crop production were introduced. In transplanted fields, the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) principles were applied whereas the Direct Seeded Rice (DSR) principles were applied in the uplands. In both the cases, the seeds were segregated according to their quality, using the brine water test. In SRI, one or two young seedlings were transplanted in a square grid at a sufficient distance from the next, based on crop height and canopy coverage whereas in DSR, the seeds were sown in lines. In both the cases, two to three rounds of weeding operations were carried out using mechanical weeders.

In both the cases, nutrition and plant protection measures were taken by adopting various organic methods. Green manure was also applied in SRI fields. This was easily adopted by the farmers and proved to be very effective. The yield increased from 2–3 to 4–5 tonnes per ha, thereby ensuring additional food security of five to six months for most of the families.

### **b. Focus on traditional creeper cultivation through the introduction of a trellis**

Traditionally, people in this area grow creepers such as cowpea and bitter gourd. They used to grow these on wooden twigs collected from the local forest. With the rapid decline in forest coverage, farmers found it very difficult to collect twigs and wooden poles. Production was also very minimal and, furthermore, long dry spells affected productivity drastically. The major interventions planned in creeper cultivation were:

- Selection of seeds and varieties suitable for the region
- 4 x 4 ft spacing and planting the seeds in raised pits of 1.5 x 1.5 x 1.5 ft size.

- Filling the pits after mixing sufficient amount of organic manure.
- Making a heap after pit-filling to prevent the seeds from rotting in heavy rainfall.
- Construction of a trellis, using bamboo poles, nylon nets and polymer wires, to ensure better growth with minimum usage of wooden poles and twigs

Through these practices, most of the problems faced by the farmers were addressed and the production went up significantly. The raised-pit method helped in conserving soil moisture and supporting vigorous root growth. Also, crops could be protected in dry spells, and production period increased by about one more month.



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The introduction of drudgery-reduction machines such as weeders, reapers, ridgers and diggers enabled the women to manage their agricultural operations easily and on time. This has led to an increase in productivity

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### **c. Focus on promoting cash crops using organic measures**

Most of the SHG members had 10 to 20 decimals of homestead land. The plan was to mobilize them to cultivate vegetables in the *kharif* season, and as much as possible in the *rabi* season, by adopting organic practices. Therefore, besides promoting creepers for nutrition and as cash crops in trellis, the cultivation of solanaceous crops such as brinjal, tomato, chilli and potato were also promoted as cash crops. The major interventions in cash crop cultivation were:

- Preparing the nursery for healthy seedlings (covering with mosquito net).
- Proper spacing at the time of transplantation.
- Sufficient amount of organic manure such as *Jeevamrit* and *Ghan Jeevamrit*.
- Timely irrigation and inter-cultural operations.
- Spraying organic products such as *Nimastra*, *Brhambhastra* and *Mahulastra* at regular intervals.

### **d. Introduction of Group Managed Small Irrigation Structures**

Small irrigation infrastructure systems such as the construction

of farm ponds and ring wells in seepage lines and the lifting of water from semi-perennial streams by using diesel pump-sets, among small groups of farmers are some of the widely replicable irrigation systems established in the area. Irrigation infrastructure such as this has now been developed in collaboration with the Agriculture Department and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Each of these can support about half to two acres of land/four to five farmers each, thereby generating an income of about Rs 30,000 to Rs 50,000 annually. This also serves to protect the main paddy crop in dry spells, which are now more common.

### **e. Introduction of women-friendly farm equipment to reduce drudgery**

Besides the above interventions, the introduction of drudgery-reduction machines such as weeders, reapers, ridgers and diggers enabled the women to manage their agricultural operations easily and on time. This has led to an increase in productivity. The details of this intervention are captured separately under the drudgery reduction section here.

### **C. Livestock Intervention**

Livestock in the area had a high mortality rate owing to the following challenges listed:





CAHWs (mostly women) have been groomed as entrepreneurs and are getting payment from the community as per their services. Each CAHW caters to 100 farmers and earns about Rs 3,000 monthly

- Frequent outbreak of deadly diseases such as *Peste des petits ruminants* (PPR) in goats, new castle disease and fowl-pox in poultry, leading to 50–70 per cent goat/sheep mortality and 70–90 per cent bird mortality.
- Existing government or private systems failed to provide critical vet services such as vaccination, de-worming and first-aid/vet services in the villages.
- Know-how related to rearing practices was mostly poor among farmers (poor quality night shelters, in-breeding, no supplementary food, etc.).
- Low herd size: There was an inability to attend the threshold scale and low potential to actualize the profits.
- Service delivery mechanism by grooming local Community

Animal Health Workers (CAHW) as entrepreneurs was introduced to ensure critical services such as regular de-worming and vaccination of all the small livestock (backyard poultry, goats, sheep, etc.) to curb mass mortality and to train farmers to adopt various improved rearing practices.

Gradually, farmers intensified their activity to maximize returns, as well as ensure a good return to the local trained service providers for their sustainability.

The Integrated Livestock model focusses on strengthening small livestock such as goats and poultry, reared by a family in an integrated manner. The focus is on local breeds and to build on the existing stock of a family. The prototype will comprise four to six hen units with a flock size of 50–100 and two to six mother

goats with a herd size of 8–20. The activity can be managed by the family along with their existing livelihoods engagements. Looking at the contextual differences such as the extent of the homestead land and the scope of grazing, the following three models can be adopted by the farmers.

#### Interventions

##### i. *Developing sustainable service delivery systems*

The objective was to establish the vaccination and medication service system in a sustainable manner at the door-step of the farmer. CAHWs (mostly women) have been groomed as entrepreneurs and are getting payment from the community as per their services. Each CAHW

**Table 1: Integrated Livestock Models Adopted by Farmers in Patna Block**

Models	Context	Unit Size		Total Net Annual Return (Rs)	Investment (Rs)	
		No. of Mother Goats	No. of Hens		One Time	Annual Recurring
Model-1	Medium scope for both BYP and goats	2	2	<b>17,250</b>	10,000	4,250
Model-2	High scope for BYP and low for goats	2	4	<b>26,000</b>	12,000	6,500
Model-3	High scope for goats and low for BYP	4	2	<b>25,750</b>	18,000	6,250



Regular meetings of all CAHWs take place at the block level to facilitate work, track the progress vis-à-vis the plan, address concerns and monitor their efficiency

caters to 100 farmers and earns about Rs 3,000 monthly. The maintenance of a cold-chain is the most critical aspect in the vaccination process. An existing medicine shop owner has been commissioned to supply the vaccines, de-worming and first-aid medicines to CAHWs and to ensure cold-chain maintenance. The SHG collects the payment from individual farmers and makes the payment to the CAHWs during SHG meetings. Regular meetings of all CAHWs

take place at the block level to facilitate work, track the progress vis-à-vis the plan, address concerns and monitor their efficiency.

## **ii. Improving rearing and management practices**

Although mass mortality can be checked through regular vaccination and de-worming, the intervention should include other components such as nutrition, housing, breed improvement,

and a curative disease-control mechanism. CAHWs not only demonstrate improved practices but also train SHG members in these practices by using various audio-visual tools and on-field demonstrations.

Through this process, mortality due to deadly diseases has completely stopped in the area. De-worming has been very effective in promoting weight gain as well as in the vaccination process. The average stock has

**Table 2: Intervention in BYP and Goats**

Intervention Components	BYP	Goats
Regular vaccination	Doorstep vaccination against RD (Ranikhet Disease) and Fowl Pox; Cold-chain establishment	Regular vaccination against PPR, Enterotoxaemia (ET) and Goat Pox; Cold-chain establishment
De-worming	Regular de-worming every three months	Regular de-worming every three months
Proper night shelters	Proper hatching space, protection from predators, etc.	Opening for ventilation, regular cleaning, leak-proofing roof, etc.
Feeding practices	Supplementary feeding for chicks and hens; Feeders	Supplementary feeding for newborn kids and pregnant goats
Breeding	Selective hens; Proper hatching practice	Timely castration
Medication service	First-aid services such as the provision of tetracycline power, use of onions, garlic, etc.	Preventive care of minor problems such as diarrhoea, gas, etc.
Predators/Accidents	Care for chicks grazing in the backyard during the initial period. Proper hatching arrangement to protect eggs from predators.	Care for kids: Keeping the kids under close supervision, especially in the backyard.
Caring practices	Provision of clean water, cleaning of sheds, season-wise care of chicks such as providing heat in winter, protecting eggs from heat, etc.	Care for kids, care of mother goats during late pregnancy stage, provision of clean water, etc.

By the end of the project, about 3,000 women farmers were covered, of which about 75 per cent adopted different prototypes and realized an average additional income of about Rs 30,000, in addition to increased food and nutritional security

increased to an average bird flock size of 50–60 birds and the goats have increased from an average herd size of three to four to about 15–16 in number. Most of the families are earning an average income ranging between Rs 20,000 and 30,000, besides consuming about two to three birds every month.

#### **Adoption of Pro-poor Livelihoods Prototypes**

Different kinds of farmers choose different prototypes and each of these prototypes have the potential to meet food sufficiency and bring about significant income, with a potential for large-scale replication. By the end of the project, about 3,000 women farmers were covered, of

which about 75 per cent adopted different prototypes and realized an average additional income of about Rs 30,000, in addition to increased food and nutritional security. Many farmers are still in the process of adopting the prototypes in the project as well as in convergence with various government programmes under the Department of Agriculture.

**Table 3: Livelihood Prototypes Adopted by the Farmers in Keonjhar**

Prototype	Land type	Unit	Intervention	Net Return	Adoption
Food grain productivity enhancement	Medium land	1 acre land	SRI and DSR principles of paddy cultivation	Additional 10 quintals of food grain	60%
Rain-fed vegetable cultivation	Medium and up-land	40–50 decimals	Vegetable and pulse cultivation with sustainable practices	Rs 30,000 to Rs 40,000	15%
Irrigated vegetable	Homestead land	15–20 decimals	Vegetable cultivation with sustainable practices - 2 seasons	Rs 40,000 to Rs 50,000	25%
Small livestock	With about 50 decimals backyard	For 2–4 mother goats and 4–6 hens	Vaccination, de-worming, supplementary feeding and improved shelter	Rs 15,000 to Rs 20,000	70%

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During implementation, the visioning exercise and the exposure visits of the women members helped in broadening their perspective on collective farming

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### Case Study: Jashoda Mahanto's Success Story

Jashoda Mahanto, a single woman and an active *Mahila Kisan*, lives with her aunt in Budikapudi village, Patna block in Keonjhar district. They have about 20 decimals of homestead land and 65 decimals of lowland. There is a well in their homestead land and they have a pump-set. Jashoda, along with SHG members Sukanti and Labanga, got this support from MKSP two years ago. This year, sprinkler sets have been provided to the group. Jashoda also has a vermi-bed in her homestead land, with the support of the Horticulture department. She and her aunt have taken up the cultivation of cowpea under the improved trellis method in 10 decimals of land, and tomato and ginger in another 10 decimals of land in their homestead. Under MKSP, Jashoda learned about the different, improved agricultural practices such as the pit-method of planting, application of compost, seed treatment, proper sowing of seeds, and the preparation and use of organic manure. She earned about Rs 18,000 by selling cowpeas, tomato and ginger in the local Turumunga market.

She also applied some principles such as seed selection, seed treatment, line transplanting and the application of organic manure in paddy. Jashoda told us that in the last three years she has seen a significant increase in the yield of paddy from about 10 quintals to nearly 17 quintals.

Jashoda and her aunt have also started rearing goats. During the last two years, from one mother goat they now have five adult goats and two kid goats, and have sold two goats for Rs 6,500. She now also has 35 poultry birds. With the help of the local CAHW, the livestock has been vaccinated, resulting in a significant reduction in mortality rates. Jashoda has also started focussing on proper feeding and shelter of the livestock after being trained on feed management.

From poultry, she is now able to earn about Rs 10,000 per year, almost double of what she used to earn earlier; her family consumes about 20 birds every year. Now Jashoda is a confident farmer. Her annual earnings have gone up by about Rs 40,000, along with increased food security for four months. Much of this cash income comes to her; her say in the family has improved significantly thereafter. People are recognizing her as a model *Mahila Kisan* in their area.

### Learnings and Best Practices

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Overall, the study team made the following observations that can be adopted as best practices in other areas:

- The programme design in itself, wherein the women are the

participants, enabled them to take an active part in the implementation of the project.

- During implementation, the visioning exercise and the exposure visits of the women members helped in broadening their perspective on collective farming.

- Most of the organic extracts are prepared by the women in their homes; therefore, their dependency on the market and their men-folk has come down significantly. This has helped build ownership, their participation in and knowledge of farming, along with an

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The beauty of this approach also lies in the way the villagers, especially women, have participated and become agents of change to sustain this effort

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equitable competency to participate in decision-making.

- Creation of a pool of women farmers as community resource persons (CRPs) automatically enhances the participation of women in various training events. This increases the women's motivation to participate and learn from CRPs.
- The manual on sustainable agriculture practices, which was with the CRPs, has been very useful for members and women farmers.
- Women are now accessing and using women-friendly implements such as weeders, markers, ridgers and paddy transplanters. Because the manually-operated implements can be easily operated by women, the dependency on outsiders or even on their men has come down. The use of these implements has helped in reducing drudgery, and saving time and money with increased effectiveness.
- The approach of a production cluster helped in produce aggregation and selling. The

collective selling of their produce not only helped women have access to and control over their income, but also helped in establishing linkages with the market, contributing to enhancing the identity of women as farmers.

- Small livestock rearing is largely done by women. They are greatly benefitted by this simplified livelihood intervention, which does not require much investment or external support. This also ensures income in the hands of women and the nutritional security of family members.
- With the establishment of various activities in the locality such as rain-fed agriculture, irrigated agriculture and integrated livestock, women from different socio-economic segments can now identify their best-suited activity combination/prototype as per their interest and priority.

### Conclusion

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The experience shared here has certainly proved to be highly

effective in bringing significant improvement in the economic well-being of most of the households in the area, including the poorer ones. The beauty of this approach also lies in the way the villagers, especially women, have participated and become agents of change to sustain this effort. The eco-system of the livelihoods in the area has been activated with localized knowledge and service system in place, linkages with relevant agencies such as the market force, banking system and government departments, along with various natural resource conservation measures to enhance the carrying capacity of the area. Although many more improvements can be included, the interventions have certainly shown the path for many to follow, especially those who are in the serious business of addressing rural poverty sustainably.

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AKHILESH SHARMA

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# BUILDING TRUST WITH THE SURJAPURI COMMUNITY

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Reminiscing about his early days as Development Apprentice in the village, the author muses on his learnings and challenges as he begins to understand the challenges and tries to build inroads of trust with the women in the community

## Beginning My Journey

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**U**NDERSTANDING THE Context of a community, I learned, is the first step in being able to work with them. My first realization of this was when I was in Kalpeer village. I had freshly joined the Bahadurganj team of PRADAN in Northeast Bihar and was accompanying my colleague to the village.

It was getting late and among the few persons there was a young man with luggage. He said he was going to Punjab to work. Out of concern for him, I said that he should leave soon otherwise he would face

a problem because this was such a remote area. The young man took umbrage and in an annoyed tone said, “Aap to sheher ke rehne wale hain, humein kuch samajhte hi nahi, kya nahi hai hamare pas, kyonki aap padh likh liye to aap achchhe hain aur hum pichhde (You belong to an urban area so you demean us. We have everything we need; just because you are educated, you think you are better off and we are backward).” I was dumbfounded by this statement. Perhaps, he was right. Born and brought up in a metro city, I did have a perception that rural areas were backward and downtrodden.

Soon after this incident, as part of my assignment as Development Apprentice in PRADAN, I entered the life-world of the community. To understand the context of the village and of the community, I was

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Aambari mainly comprises the Surjapuri Muslim community, who speak the Surjapuri dialect. I must confess, here, that being a Hindu, I initially, had many reservations about staying in a Muslim village. I had to stay with them in their homes and I feared that I would not be accepted

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to stay in Aambari village for 15 days. Aambari mainly comprises the Surjapuri Muslim community, who speak the Surjapuri dialect. I must confess, here, that being a Hindu, I initially, had many reservations about staying in a Muslim village. I had to stay with them in their homes and I feared that I would not be accepted.

My fear came alive when I began to feel unwanted in this village of 35 families. I noticed that the people would change the subject of their discussion when they saw me approaching. There were women SHGs in the village and whenever I sat in on their meetings, they would only address me to ask me when they would receive the loan and of how much. I had no answer to these questions. The women would not interact directly with me and the men would always posture as if they knew everything and did not need to take my opinion on anything. They would talk about mobile phones, bikes, refrigerators and everything except for themselves and their life-world.

This indifference of the people was painful. I also came to know that there were some arguments among some of the families about why a Hindu boy was living in their house. They questioned the purpose of my stay.

I became frustrated and fearful. It was becoming difficult for me to complete my village stay. I was about to quit, when I thought that, maybe, I needed to understand the community better. I needed to understand their point of view and 'why they were the way they were'.

### **Taking the First Step**

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None of the villagers was keen to enter into a dialogue with me except the house owner where I was staying. I found it difficult to start conversations. I, then, started observing their life from close quarters and realized that the community, which comprised around 60 per cent of the total population, and were in a majority in Kishanganj district, felt neglected and insecure. The market in the area was controlled by upper-caste Hindu migrants, who had arrived and had settled here from other districts of Bihar. The community was very religious; yet they felt insecure. The insecurity was largely because of what they were seeing and hearing in the media and in the local conversations at the haats (market squares), where several discussions took place around the current situation of minorities in the country. It was making them hold on to their faith more strongly.

I found that their reservation towards me was mostly because they didn't trust me and thought that I would not respect their religion, their way of living or their food habits. I realized that I also had reservations about being a Hindu living a Muslim area. Understanding their point of view helped me, and I realized that I had to break the ice and had to build a rapport with the people.

To build a relationship with the people, I began to enter every household of the village. I had random talks. Initially, they did not respond to the way I tried to engage with them such as scheduling a group meeting with them and talking about various things. I remember the first meeting I had organized with two SHGs and to which only four women turned up. The members didn't find any kind of excitement in an SHG meeting. The sole question that they had was when they could get a loan. Other than that, the women were not interested in any discussion. I myself was confused as to what the role of an SHG was. Whereas the SHG programme had so much scope, in this area of Bihar, I only saw the people consider it as a medium to get credit. I began to lose patience. Once, in my frustration I told my team mates that we should not work in that village because the people were

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I was rather shocked because I did not expect they would ever trust me enough to share such personal details. I realized that this was a result of the amount of time that I had spent in the community. They now felt connected and comfortable

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not really interested in anything but getting a government subsidy and loans.

All my efforts at building a rapport with the people did not work. My stay in the village ended but I continued working in the village and with the Surjapuri community. Although not very clear about how to crack the nut, I remained persistent...sitting with the women in their SHG meetings, chatting informally with the men. I continuously questioned the reasons and the need for setting up an SHG in this community and particularly in this village; it was obvious that if I wanted to engage with them for a long period of time I would have to get to know them. I would, at some point, have to ask them why they didn't do anything for their hamlet and why are they were continuing to live in subaltern conditions.

### **Surfacing the Skull**

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My discomfort mainly came from their practices of giving a religious angle to all their activities. People, by and large, have the habit of linking everything to religious beliefs, even if it is not mentioned in the religious scriptures. I believe that societies (Hindu or Muslim), have interpreted texts as per

their convenience to maintain the status quo of certain systems or an ideology. However, I could see a lot of contradictions in what the Surjapuris were saying and what they were doing. People in the village told me that they were followers of Islam, and because of that, a woman needs to be under the veil and under no circumstances should she be seen by other men. In practice, there was a contrast; the women were engaged in livelihood activities such as poultry and goat rearing, and I found them quite open in interacting and haggling with male hawkers.

As time passed, the situation changed a bit in my favour and I began to be more accepted by the community. For me, being in a Muslim community and listening to them freely expressing themselves was a learning opportunity. Contrary to my earlier notion, women were confronting the men on some of the discriminatory behaviour that they were exhibiting against women, and the women were also talking to strangers like me with ease. Gradually, the men also began to participate proactively in the discussions. And the women began to take part in the local discussions, in which usually only the men participated. My perspective on discrimination shifted as I took

part in discussions and debates with the villagers and began to build personal connect with the families.

One day, during a conversation on women's health, Nazli Begum, a resident of Aambari said, "Jab wo aate hain to humein karna hi hai, hum mana nahi kar sakte (Whenever the husbands return, we need to submit to their sexual desires; we cannot say no)." At first, it was awkward to hear this as well as hard to believe that the women would have this conversation in my presence. I was rather shocked because I did not expect they would ever trust me enough to share such personal details. I realized that this was a result of the amount of time that I had spent in the community. They now felt connected and comfortable.

I heard Meinaz Khatun saying that they were not allowed to use contraceptives. These stories, and the pain with which the women shared them were disturbing. At the same time, it emerged that these women are hopeful that the situation would change. They said that the men have restricted their mobility in the garb of protection; however, in their homes, they suffer pain and humiliation. I saw how the young girls of the village were not allowed to go to the market on their own or to

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In almost every Surjapuri hamlet, there were a few families, who controlled the affairs of the hamlet. These families were mostly well-connected and had political clout

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buy the things that they wished. They were always accompanied by an older woman or some man of the household. They could not do anything without taking the consent of their guardians. I wondered why this was so. The primary reason for this was the fear in the community that the young girls would elope and they used this fear to refer to the restrictions imposed by their religion as a last resort, stating that the girls and women are meant to be protected. These young girls and women did not hesitate much in interacting with strangers like me, for example. But the villagers feared what society would think or say about this.

The women said that the girls always have restrictions but that these restrictions increase manifold, once a girl gets married. After a Nikah, the girl's husband and her in-laws take control of her movements. I tried raising this issue in the village, but the villagers, at best, gave a dull response and said, "What is in our hands, if we are not going to allow this practice, our sons-in-law might annul the marriage or it might lead to other atrocities on our daughter. Where will we find a man, who will provide us all the freedom we all want?"

Sakina, a 16-year-old girl, said, "Hum taiyyar the hi nahi shaadi

ke liye, par usne dhamki diya tha ki jaan de dega (I was not ready for marriage, but the groom threatened me with committing suicide)." Sakina's husband belongs to the family into which her elder sister is married and for the sake of saving her sister's marriage, she had no choice but to submit.

In almost every Surjapuri hamlet, there were a few families, who controlled the affairs of the hamlet. These families were mostly well-connected and had political clout. They made the norms based on their own vested interests. Some of the villagers shared that if they were to try to overturn these norms, they would be discarded by the community.

Be it any kind of government contract in the area or any facility or scheme provided to the village, these few families were the first ones to avail of them. In Aambari hamlet, Md Islamuddin's family holds authority and power. He was an ex-Ward Member of the village; his son is the current president from the hamlet and his daughter-in-law is the member of the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI).

Once Md Manjur, the eldest son of Md Islamuddin, sought my help to accompany him to the Block Development Office to have a discussion on a scheme related

to an overhead water tank for his hamlet. I was overwhelmed, as well as excited, to see how much this person cared for his villagers, that he was ready to offer his land for an overhead water tank and was also trying to convince the officer that it would be for the well-being of the hamlet.

Eventually, I realized that his family would always grab any opportunity that was coming for the village. I got to know that another person of the same hamlet also wanted to build the overhead tank on his land, but was unable to do so. When I asked him why, he kept mum for a while and then said, "Dada wo log kar rahe to hum nahin kar sakte hai (Brother, since they are installing the overhead tank, we won't get the chance)."

In another instance, an old man named Dalu, aged about 72 years, who resided at the extreme end of the hamlet, along with his five sons, was still waiting to get those entitlements from the Indira Awas Yojana, which he was supposed to get in the 1990s. His entitlements were deviated to other villagers and, even in the same hamlet, to the people who offered bribes. He was, in fact, certain that he could not avail of the facility without offering a bribe to Md Islamuddin. He waited for the PRI elections and approached the new Mukhiya for



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The women of Aambari, then, made a resolution to fight against the malpractices in the centre and to try to get their entitlement from the nearest ICDS Centre. This was the first time that the women understood the strength they wielded if they worked together

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his entitlement. All his entreaties fell on deaf ears. He did not get his entitlement because of Md Islamuddin's son's objections, and all that remained with him was a painful story to tell.

### **Dream or Need**

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Once, in a meeting, discussing the entitlements in the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, the women said that they rarely get such provisions. The women of Aambari, then, made a resolution to fight against the malpractices in the centre and to try to get their entitlement from the nearest ICDS Centre. This was the first time that the women understood the strength they wielded if they worked together. I helped the women get more information about their entitlement in the ICDS and we discussed what action they could take.

The women wrote a letter to the Sevika (anganwadi worker) and stated the issues they were facing. Such a step, taken by the women, was bound to create some turbulence. The first to react was Md Manjur, who told me brusquely that this would not solve anything and by such steps the villagers would not even get what they were receiving at

present. He, then, threatened me that he would take stern action against me and block my entry into the village if I did not stop instigating the women.

I tried to talk to him but he was not ready to listen and so I, finally, told him to talk with the women. If they did not want my intervention, I would not come to the village. He left the place in anger. He again came and started shouting at me and this time it was not me but the women who confronted him. The women said, "Tumko mahine ka ration aur baki saaman milta hai, humein nahi milta; isliye tum chup raho (You get the monthly ration from the Centre and additional benefits; we get nothing, so don't interfere.)"

Later, the SHG members told me that these families would not allow any change to take place because they were the perpetrators of all such malpractices. The movement was successful in a sense that the Sevika acknowledged their problems and later, in the evening, the Sevika's husband paid a visit to Aambari, apologized for the inconvenience and assured the villagers that they would get their due benefits from the ICDS Centre, as sanctioned.

When I interacted with the women on the health issues, I got to know that those who are better off prefer private clinics to government hospitals. I met a woman, who lost her first child during delivery; the reason was that the child was delivered by the help of local dai (midwife) at home. This is one of the common practices in the area. I asked why, in modern times, they preferred the dai over the government hospitals and the reason they gave was quite shocking. They said that they didn't believe in the government-run hospitals because the staff was very rude and offensive. They also did not take proper care. The villagers, largely, either preferred private hospitals or got treatment from the local quack or dai.

Rozina Begum, said, "Dada, humko kya pata hai kahan jana hai, pehli baar tha ye, didi log batayi paanch hazar taka lagega haspatal mein; hum to kama kar khate hai, zameen bhi nahin hai to ghar mein hi kara liye. (I didn't know where to go, it was my first time, and some women told me that I would need Rs 5000 to get hospitalized. We are daily wage earners and don't own any land, so I went for delivery of my first child at home.)" With sorrow in her eyes, she shared that her child had died. She delivered her second child in a private hospital

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This power game has tied everyone's hands, making the vulnerable more vulnerable, wherein people cannot express themselves and, even if one rare being does so, he or she will be suppressed

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and paid a hefty amount of Rs 15,000.

There was a strong perception in the village that government run hospitals and the nurses along with the ASHA were of no use because their services were not adequate. Md Halim, a local quack, further added that government hospitals were also not affordable because the people needed to buy all the medicines required. They also needed to bear the extra cost of the ambulance and other travel expenses, and women, who did not have the available cash, opted for delivery at their house.

## Musing

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What is the purpose of my telling these stories? Does it really provide any solutions? When I reflected on the instances that took place, I found that the community was trying to move ahead in their life and in doing so were not conscious of those around. I began to engage more in my new field and spent relatively less time in Aambari. One day, it occurred to me that my absence or sporadic presence was not fair to the village. With this regret, I went to the hamlet and had a discussion with the people. They welcomed me with jokes and

several rounds of sharing. I came to know about the status of the movement they had undertaken on ICDS.

Kamrun Begum shared, “Kaha ‘bhaiya’ ek mahine se to hadtal hi chal raha hai. Abhi hartal band hua to ek bar mila (The ICDS staff have been on strike. The strike ended, and we got our entitlement this month).”

To this, I asked how much ration they had received; giggling, Nurzabi Begum answered, “Hum log ko to pura mila (We got our full ration).”

I asked them about the others in the village; they said, “Why should they get any? They were not with us during the movement, so they cannot reap the benefit. If they want to get something, they would also need to go to the centre and claim their entitlement.”

I was in agony after listening to this and realized that they were leaving behind other members of the hamlet and were only concerned about themselves. My engagement had not brought the effect that I had desired to bring.

As I venture into new villages, my belief is getting stronger, day by day, that there are many factors that affect people and

poverty. The one factor, however, which I consider very dangerous is the polity and the power play. Everyone seems to be busy holding and exercising power for the benefit of themselves; the villagers are no different, as if they are a part of the same system. This power game has tied everyone's hands, making the vulnerable more vulnerable, wherein people cannot express themselves and, even if one rare being does so, he or she will be suppressed.

I am not sure whether I understood the Surjapuri community. However, I am happy that I was able to build some trust with the Surjapuri community, especially with the women. People no longer stop their conversations when they see me passing. No heads turn in suspicion when I enter a house and chat randomly. This building of trust continued when I was transferred to Koraput district in South Odisha in the beginning of 2018. The community changed, the context changed but still when I walk around the villages of Koraput, I feel connected. I see a little of Surajapuri here in this tribal land too.

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Creeper cultivation using  
a trellis in Keonjhar,  
Odisha (p. 26)





PRADAN is a non-governmental organization registered in Delhi under the Societies Registration Act. Working with small teams of professionals in several poverty clusters in seven states across central and eastern India, PRADAN builds and strengthens collectives of rural women, in order to stimulate their sense of agency and help them occupy space as equals in society. PRADAN professionals work through these collectives, to enhance the livelihoods and overall well-being of women, thereby striving for a just and equitable society.

*Newsreach* is an endeavour by PRADAN to reach out to the world by sharing stories of the struggles and the hopes of the rural poor, and inspiring friends and well-wishers to get involved and participate in bettering the lives of marginalized and vulnerable village women.

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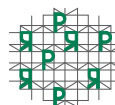
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Akhilesh Sharma  
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