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The Night of the Skirmish

A Fight for Mother Nature



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ASHUTOSH MISHRA

DEVELOPMENT—of the People and the Field

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What comprises the core of development? To my mind, development happens when people begin to believe that they matter—that they have a right to lead a life of dignity and assert their rightful place in society.

Preamble

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The kind of person required for the development sector needs to be conceptualized in the context of development itself. My view is that people are at the centre of ‘development’. If one were to ask the question: “Development for whom?”, the answer would obviously be, “For the people.”

It stands to reason, then, that the centre of attention has to be the people. Their lives need to be touched and transformed—from a life of

hopelessness to one of hope and faith in the future... from a life, the theme of which may be ‘I can’t’ to an unshakeable belief that, ‘I can’.

Development is about people and not projects

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At the heart of the matter is clarity about what comprises the core of development. To my mind, development happens when people begin to believe that they matter—that they have a right to lead a life of dignity and assert their rightful place in society.

Focussing on the development of individuals is an ‘expensive’ proposition. We need to be able to

People who wish to contribute to development need to have ample inner reserves of strength, courage and character to be in a position to extend a helping hand to somebody else in need

stimulate, nurture and sustain the sense of agency of groups and of collectives. Any change in society, in any case, even when inspired by an individual, has eventually to engage the hearts and minds of the masses.

This does not in any way imply that techno-economic approaches to development need to be ignored. I believe that the *means* need to be differentiated from the *ends*—the means being, predominantly, human and collective processes.

Empathic engagement—Touching people's lives

The medical field seems to have begun to recognize that the power of the human touch is critical for diagnosis as well as for the well-being of the patient being treated. This is so despite all the stupendous technological advances that have been made in the field of medicine.

In the field of development, empathic engagement with the 'other' is the key to sparking hope and change, which may acquire a life of its own. Empathic engagement entails

not only putting oneself in the other person's shoes but also responding to the feelings and needs of the people—their *feelings* of hopelessness and hope, and their *needs* for succour, expression and freedom.

Young educated minds

As Deep Joshi, in his post-Magsaysay award interview to NDTV, said, "The brightest of the brightest minds need to apply themselves to the most intractable problem that the nation is facing—that of poverty."

I agree. Young educated minds with qualities of head and heart need to be brought into the fold to address the problems of endemic poverty. When nurtured in a culture of empathy, coupled with an education that sharpens their minds, people are likely to evolve into persons, who can identify problems and respond with an empathic heart.

These individuals will need to believe that they are the chosen ones—that they are meant for the purpose. Their orientation for the 'job' is, therefore, critical. And yes, nurturing and supporting

them in their work in the field is equally essential.

Inner calling, reaching out and resonance

People who wish to contribute to development need to have ample inner reserves of strength, courage and character to be in a position to extend a helping hand to somebody else in need. Being able to integrate within, the disparities without will need an emotionally stable and grounded personality. Such a person will draw meaning in her or his existence, deriving joy from triggering transformation in others. The major motive may well need to be 'extension'—reaching out to others and providing support.

Any profession is lifeless without the person being drawn to it by a sense of inner purpose and meaning—wherein she or he is able to visualize and experience the merger of their work with their being. The grooming provided to these youngsters needs to stimulate and reinforce this sense of purpose and meaning so that there is a rich resonance between what a person does and her or his being.

Education begins in the dust so to say. Students and their teachers, along with the community, are committed to explore, study and come up with ideas that can address the real-life problems they encounter on a daily basis.

Spirit of enquiry and exploration

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There are no ‘final’ answers to the issues of poverty and development. Anybody who is engaged with the issues of poverty will need to be in the field with a spirit of enquiry and exploration. Even when she or he may seem to have arrived at a ‘correct’ diagnosis or a feasible solution, the person’s willingness to put it to test against the ground reality and the community in context, will perhaps, eventually, decide the efficacy of any ‘diagnosis’ or intervention.

Freedom to think, to act and to be

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And finally, Tagore comes to the rescue: Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high...

To be able to value and understand the meaning of freedom, one needs to truly experience it in one’s own life. The young minds need to be nurtured to think without fear, see possibilities rather than

constraints, develop the courage to say ‘No’, and be comfortable in their own skins—to know deep inside that they have made the most meaningful choice that they could have ever made in their lives.

A word or two about education programmes that could be designed and delivered to fulfil the areas of attention mentioned here.

I tend to think of a grass roots-up approach. By this, I mean, the grass roots is truly the ‘classroom’. Education begins in the dust so to say. Students and their teachers, along with the community, are committed to explore, study and come up with ideas that can address the real-life problems they encounter on a daily basis.

Relevant conceptual discussions help make sense of the phenomena observed and encountered. These discussions, or discourses, if one may choose to call them so, are needed to help discern patterns and develop systemic thinking, to evolve sustainable solutions.

As can be envisaged, a fair amount of work needs to happen on the process front—processes that equip a person with orientation and skills in group work to those that cultivate habits of empathy. The field needs to be the ‘live’ classroom, wherein these are nurtured, reinforced and developed. It is rather inefficient to help develop these in the usual classroom and then hope to transfer them to the field.

Regular deliberations about what is happening to the lives of the ‘students’, as they live and learn in such conditions, need to be an ongoing part of the system of education. A mentor, who is available on an ongoing basis, will help the process of grooming a student to involve as a development professional. Ideally, no more than five students should be assigned to a mentor—a mentor who will be their friend, philosopher and guide.

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THE NIGHT OF THE SKIRMISH: A Fight for Mother Nature

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Having realized the vital importance of preserving the forest in which they live, the women of Hakimsinan become fiercely protective of the trees and will go to any lengths to stop indiscriminate felling. This is their commitment to, what they consider, their 'mother'—the jungle that has nourished them for centuries

It was a cold night in the month of January, the moon shining bright in the clear night sky when a voice rang out loud, "Who are you to stop us from cutting these trees? Have you breastfed these *saal* trees? Move away or else we will not let you go alive."

Lakhimoni Soren retorted, "No one can breastfeed their mother. This forest is our mother. If we have to give our lives for this mother of ours, we will."

One of the tree fellers held his cutlass close to Lakhimoni *di's* throat, tying it with the towel that she had wrapped around her neck.

Hakimsinan is a village on the fringe of a forest, located on the eastern side of Ranibandh block, in Bankura district of West Bengal. The village is mainly inhabited by Santhals and is more than 170 years old. The Santhals are followers of '*sari dharam*', meaning 'true religion'. The foundation of this religion lies embedded in these people's belief in the

The consequences of the felling were faced by the women, who were responsible for collecting firewood to prepare the day's meal for the family. The women were also unable to gather the other forest produce they could sell

nature surrounding them. The word 'sari' comes from 'sarjamda' meaning *saal* tree.

Be it a religious ceremony or social function in the village, the presence of a *saal* tree is mandatory. The women of the community, especially, are very attached to the trees because their families are dependent on the natural resources of the forest. In the village, it is the women of the house, who think about gathering firewood for preparing meals. They also use various forest produce such as *saal* leaves (leaves of *Shorea Robusta*), *kochra*, *kend* (*Diospyros Melanoxylon*), *saal daton* (twigs of *Shorea Robusta*), *mohul* (*Bassia Latifolia*), etc. They make plates, extract oil for bartering or selling in the weekly markets and earn some money for the family or even for saving up in Self-Help Groups (SHGs).

Hakimsinan witnessed the formation of the first women's SHG (Hakimsinan Mahila Swanibhor Group-1) in 2000. For the first time, the women went outside their homes and village to various trainings and interacted with people outside. According to them, it was during those trainings and discussions that

topics regarding natural resources came up.

Hiramoni *di* recalls some words from her first-ever training, which had a great impact on her and has stayed with her. "*Dada gula kotha bolte bolte bollo je gram tomader, jongol tomader, setake rokkha to tomader e korte hobe, tomra sobai ekhon onek shoktishali karon tomra r eka nei* (The trainers told us during the discussion that the village belongs to you, the forest belongs to you and you need to take up the responsibility of safeguarding it because now you all are very powerful because you are not alone)."

On their return from the training, the women discussed these words in their group. It was not that they had not witnessed the felling of trees before. However, after their group discussion regarding safeguarding their forest, this activity of felling trees made them realize the loss that they were incurring.

A major portion of a canal passed through the village of Hakimsinan. During its construction, almost all the villagers had to give away some portion of their land and that meant a loss of a lot of the

vegetation. Following this, in the successive years, there was either continuous drought or heavy rainfall, which had a negative impact on the production of crops.

For the people of Hakimsinan, the primary livelihood is agriculture; because nature did not support them, they incurred heavy losses and it became difficult for them to feed their families. For these forest-fringe areas, using forest produce for their daily use and consumption was quite normal. Gradually, the villagers began to look at the forest produce in a commercial sense. People started to cut the trees and sell the wood in nearby local markets or to timber mafias. This became a regular event.

The consequences of the felling were faced by the women, who were responsible for collecting firewood to prepare the day's meal for the family. The women were also unable to gather the other forest produce they could sell (*saal* leaves, plates, oil of *kochra* in exchange for cooking oil, salt, etc.), and earn some money to sustain their families. In terms of firewood, the women had to subsequently travel longer distances to collect the same,

When the women started to talk about this in the village, the people did not pay much heed to it as though it was nothing of importance

which became a part of their daily activity.

Lakhimoni di recalls “*Amader ekhane tokhon jongol bole kicchu chilona, sob boro boro gach gula kete nicchilo, diye hate bikto. Jongol pura faka hoy gechilo kono boro gach r chilona* (We did not have any dense forest around us anymore because all the big trees had been felled and sold in the weekly market. Our forest was almost empty; all the big trees had been cut).”

The women of the SHG felt very connected with the forest and were bound by this issue of protecting their natural surroundings, especially the forest. The group members shared, “*Didi, amra to jongoler moddhey theke boro hoychi, amader songsarer sob kajei jongol theke kicchu na kicchu amader lage. Jemon ghorer dorja bhangle kath ana hoy, ghor bananor jonno kath ani amra. Koto somoy emon hoyche je diner por din amra boner fol khey katiyechi karon dhan bhalo hoto na. Ei jongol amader onek kicchu diyeche* (We people have grown up amidst the forest. In our everyday life, the forest plays a very important role because we use its produce in our households. When we have to make doors or have to build our homes, we take wood from the forest. We have spent

days eating only different fruits from the forest because we did not have ample paddy production that time. This forest has given us a lot).”

When the women started to talk about this in the village, the people did not pay much heed to it as though it was nothing of importance.

The unwanted felling of trees continued and the women felt helpless at one point of time. The only resort they had for themselves was their group. They again met to brainstorm as to what can be the possible way out of this situation. They then came up with the idea of approaching the Beat Officer (Motgoda Range) and discussing the issue with him. Fifteen women of the group visited the Beat Officer and shared their problem of how the forest was being degraded every day.

The Beat Officer first asked them to discuss this issue in the village once again so that the villagers know about it and can think of ways to stop the unwanted felling of trees. The women agreed and came back and shared the issue in the village; little did they realize that the tree fellers were not only from outside but also from their own village. Thus, it was very

obvious that the women did not receive a very positive reaction from the villagers. Only a few men from the village supported the women in this cause.

The struggle was not only for their resources but also for the moral principle they had connected to...that they had a responsibility towards the forest. When nobody in the village stood by them, the women of the group stood with each other. They decided to keep an eye on the forest and warn the tree fellers. During the day time, they used to take their cattle for grazing inside the forest and during the night time, the women used to keep a watch from 10 pm till 1am. They used to take their sickles, sticks and lanterns for self-protection.

During the monsoons whenever, the women got the news of any tree felling, they ran to the forest to catch hold of the culprit.

Sundari di recalls one such incident, “*Ek din jhoroner somoy sokal belay didira amra khobor peyechilam je lokgula jongole gach kathe. Onek didi ra khete dhan lagatechilo tokhon amra du tin jon didi grame chilam. Sunei amra kojon chutechilam jongol e, Lakhimoni di to or bhaiyer bitike kole niyei chutechilo* (One day, during the rainy season, we got the news

The men turned around and were astonished to find the women in the forest at that late hour. They became angry because it was a hindrance in their task

that people were felling trees in the forest. During that time, the members of our group were busy in their fields because it was paddy transplantation time. Only two or three women were present in the village. We did not waste any time. Immediately, on getting the news, we ran towards the forest. Lakhimoni *di* ran with her niece in her arms).

The women caught one of the culprits red-handed. They complained to the Beat Officer about the incident. Impressed by their perseverance and commitment to saving the forest, the Beat Officer rewarded the group with a machine for stitching *saal* leaves and making plates. This was an acknowledgement of their efforts. However, according to the women this was not the ultimate justice because the forest was still not safe from the tree fellers. The women came back and continued with their vigilance; in 2005, an incident changed the whole scenario.

The women decided that they themselves would refrain from cutting wood; if they required to cut a tree, they would discuss it with a committee and seek permission before cutting a tree. Till date, they follow this rule and this applies to every individual

using forest wood. However, this rule had a long trail of struggle and sacrifice behind it.

On a Monday in January 2005, two days after the weekly market, the women got the news that a few people from their village planned to fell some trees. Six women set out for the forest to stop the felling. They took their sickles and sticks with them. The night was cold and the forest was pitch dark. The only source of light was the moon shining above. The women knew that the tree fellers would complete their task in the dark of the night. They went and started waiting at the edge of the forest, which marked the border of two villages, namely, Hakimsinan and Tungcharro. They reached the location by 1 am and waited till 3 in the morning.

They heard the sound of axes chopping the tough bark of the tree. Two men were engaged in the task and the most devastating truth for these women was that one of them was from their own village. However, there was no place for sympathy or mercy because for the women, the cause was much bigger than the people involved.

Lakhimoni *di* took the first step towards the tree fellers and the

rest followed. She shouted, "*Ei tora keno emon kore jongol take sesh korchish bolna...er por to amader jongol bole r kicchui thakbe na. Katish na bolchi* (Why are you cutting the trees and finishing the forest...soon we will have nothing called a 'forest' around us. Stop the cutting)."

Hearing this, the men turned around and were astonished to find the women in the forest at that late hour. They became angry because it was a hindrance in their task.

One of them replied, "*Toder mohilader kono kaj nai naki...rat birete jongole ghure bulchish. Ja ja (toder baap r swamir) jomite ja giye dhan kat ge...amader kaj korte de* (You women have nothing better to do that is the reason you are roaming about in the forest at this late hour? Go and toil and cut the paddy in your father's and husband's fields. Let us do our work)."

The women expected such hostility and mentally they were already prepared to face the situation. Hiramoni *di* replied, "*Tomader ke etto bar kore amra bolchi gach na katte tao tomra keno katcho? Ei jongol ta sesh hoy gele to amra kono kicchui korte parbo na* (We have requested everyone so many times to stop felling

Today, the timber mafia is afraid of this group of women because they are fiercely protective of their forest and are completely fearless

forest trees. Why are you still not listening? If we destroy this forest, we will not be able to do anything)."

The women tried to negotiate and make the men understand the situation. However, things were not that easy. For the men, it became a question of prestige...a loss of face in front of the women.

One of them shouted "*Ei toder etto ki re jongol bachanor jonno?? Tora ki ei saal gachgula ke buker dudh khaiyechish naki?? Ja ge nijeder songsarer kaj kor ge... amader kaje bandha didi to mere debo toder*" (Why are you women so interested in saving the forest? Have you breastfed these *saal* trees? Go and do your household chores...if you come in the way of our work, we will not let you go alive)."

The women were now hell-bent on stopping the tree fellers. They wanted to put an end to the insults, dominance and sense of failure once and for all. All of them stood close to each other; Lakhimoni *di* replied, "*Maa ke keo dhudh khawate pare? Ei jongol ta to amader mayer moto...koto ki niyechi amra ei mayer kach theke. Take rokkha korar jonno jodi ajke amader jibon jaye to jabe. Kintu ei jongoler gach amra katte debo na* (How can

somebody feed milk to a mother? This forest is like our mother... we have taken so much from this mother of ours. If in protecting this mother, we need to give up our lives, we will. But we will not let people cut trees from this forest)."

This statement was enough for the men to get a dose of the women's commitment; they understood that these women were not going away easily. One of the men caught hold of Lakhimoni *di* by the towel she had wrapped around her neck and brought an axe near her throat in a position to hurt her.

In the meantime, the news of this situation reached the village and two or three men came to the forest to support the women. There were, in total, 10 people in the forest and Lakhimoni *di* was in the hands of one of the tree fellers. The women pulled Lakhimoni *di* from the tree feller's grasp. Together, they warned the tree fellers.

Day was about to break and the tree fellers sensed a hint of danger. They did not want to engage with the women any more. They quickly left the forest and the women came back with the resolution of getting back to the forest authorities.

They went to the Forest Beat Officer. This time, they were determined to find a sustainable way of safeguarding their forest. They shared the incident and it was enough for the Beat Officer to understand the intensity of the situation.

When the women came back after meeting the Beat Officer, they had got the permission of levying a fine of Rs 5000 for any unwanted tree felling. There was *dhol jari* (beatings of the drum). This rule of levying fine for the unwanted tree felling was propagated in the four forest-fringed villages of Halludkanali *gram panchayat*. The tree feller with whom the women had had a confrontation was charged a fine and was warned that if he did the same again, he would be tried for the offence.

Today, the timber mafia is afraid of this group of women because they are fiercely protective of their forest and are completely fearless. Being the first women's SHG of the area, it has witnessed many hardships. At the same time, the group members have inspired many women in their village and neighboring villages to come together and do something meaningful. The journey of self-reliance started in 2000 with one

The women have proved that it is only how one connects with one's environment that matters—a connection that a child has with a mother, a connection that is emotional, beyond replacement and very personal

group and today, in 2018, there are 11 groups in the village.

Today, when these women are asked about their journey and struggle regarding safeguarding the forest, they do have a sense of satisfaction because at some level they did succeed. The result is that there is a full-grown forest near the village. However, they also have a sense of incompleteness because they have not been recognized by the Village Forest Committee yet.

The Committee does not inform them about its meetings. The women, being the fighters they are, go and sit in the meetings and keep themselves updated about the proceedings of the Committee. According to them,

“Jongol bachate amader ke keo boleni, amra nijerai bujhechilam je jongol na thakle amra thakte parbo na tai aj amader meeting e ora na dakleo amra jabo karon jongol ta to amader maa. Amra joto din achi chesta kore jabo ei maa ke rokkha korar. Amader pore amader chela meyera korbe (Nobody has asked us to save the forest. We understood that without the forest, we would not survive. So whether they call us to the meetings or not, we will attend the meetings because this forest is like our mother. For as long as we live, we will continue to protect it and after us the next generation will do the same).”

Today, there is a lot of discussion about conservation of natural resources and sustaining the

same. There are theories that define and redefine scenarios in and around. However, irrespective of all this, the women have proved that it is only how one connects with one's environment that matters—a connection that a child has with a mother, a connection that is emotional, beyond replacement and very personal. Every human being has once felt the intensity of this relationship...probably that same intensity is needed today to give a better tomorrow. The women from Hakimsinan have paved a path...we have a choice of whether we want to follow it or not.

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ASHIS CHAKRABORTY

TASAR SERICULTURE: Women Make it Profitable

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Initiating the revival of the silk value chain, with women at the helm, has given these women the opportunity to demonstrate that they have the discipline required in silkworm rearing and *tasar* seed production, leading them to be sericulturists, environmentalists and traditional scientists

The forest covers of Jangal Mahal, where Maoists first began their activities and where the Maoist menace held sway until just a few years ago, have now become the breeding ground for silkworms. The farmers of Jangal Mahal are now in a well-to-do state through the cultivation of silkworms. Post the Maoist rampage, the wheels of prosperity have not stopped at spinning yards of silk only but have led to the construction of bridges in and around the villages, at the outskirts of the previously Maoist-infested forests. These bursts of development have given an impetus to the zeal of the peasants engaged in the cultivation of silkworms, encompassing more and more families into the silken net.

Besides the cultivation of silkworms in the forest covers, many households have been engaged in *tasar* seed preparation since 2014. With government aid, the villagers have used their own land to

Earlier, the silk cultivators had to purchase tasar eggs from the government Sericulture Department; and as they now produce the tasar eggs themselves, the profit margins have increased

construct seed production units for the production of their own quality seed, thus generating employment in the villages. The ‘*tasar* cocoons’ thus prepared here are sent by truck to the silk mills of Bankura’s Bishnupur, Purulia’s Raghunathpur as well as the silk mills of Odisha. Silk threads produced in these mills are utilized in making *sarees*, *kurtis* and other clothes.

Over the last four years, this cultivation has been revitalized with a new zeal, with the villagers engrossed in rearing silkworms. On the other hand, with government help, *tasar* seed production has started. In the words of silk cultivators, Basanti Mahato and Shankuntala Mahato, “On whatever little land the villagers have, paddy is grown, but only a meager quantity. From July to January, everyone becomes engaged in silkworm cultivation.” *Arjun* and *Asan* trees, essential in this cultivation, are found in large numbers in this area. Consequently, these trees are keeping the fires of the hearth burning. Earlier, the silk cultivators had to purchase *tasar* eggs from the government Sericulture Department; and as they now produce the *tasar* eggs themselves, the profit margins have increased.

The pace and amount of cultivation has been so prolific, that merchants bring *tasar* cocoons in truckloads from Belpahari. The silk yarn produced from these are sent to the *saree* mills of Bhagalpur, Murshidabad, Benaras as well as Sonamukhi, a relatively small region. In the words of the merchants, *tasar* cocoons can be purchased from Jangal Mahal for six months in a year only. For the other six months *tasar* cocoons have to be purchased mainly from Chaibasa and Madhya Pradesh. If they can have their requirement supplied from Jangal Mahal, the transportation costs get mitigated. *Tasar* cocoons sell at a profitable price and Jangal Mahal now finds itself engrossed in silk cultivation.

The Jangal Mahal Cluster

The Jangal Mahal area comprises the erstwhile areas of Manbhum, Mallabhum and Jhargram on the borders of Purulia, Bankura and Jhargram districts of West Bengal that fall in the south-eastern part of the Chota Nagpur Plateau. The region is populated by Scheduled Tribes and Castes—Santhals, Kols, Oraons, Cheros, Kherwars, Bagdis, Bowris, Tewirs, Bhuiyas,

etc., which make up 45 per cent of the population of the region.

The percentage of population below the poverty line is 47 per cent; therefore, this is considered one of the poorest parts of West Bengal. The population of the Jangal Mahal comprises 1.85 per cent of the total population of the state; on the other side, this region has almost 10 per cent of the total tribal population of the state. The area also has 11 per cent of the total forest cover of West Bengal. The area, in the context of poverty indicators within the districts, also shows a contrasting deficit. Jangal Mahal has 39 per cent of the tribal population and 47 per cent of the total forest cover of the district. The region is characterized by a high concentration of tribal population, high forest cover, affected with Maoist violence, and is low in Human Development Indices (HDI).

Landlessness is high in the area, in spite of the small size of households. The households in the Jangal Mahal region are very vulnerable because almost 80 per cent and more have land that is less than a hectare. The land in the western part is undulating, lateritic, and with low water-holding capacity. Agriculture in

Overall, the level of vulnerability of households is very high, with respect to income, health, education and food security. Multiple factors contribute to this, and these are compounded by infrastructural deficits and lack of sufficient cash-based income sources

this part is mostly rain-fed; as a result, most of the lands are under mono-crop cultivation. The per capita income of the people living in this part is much lower than the average in the district. As a result, other indicators of human development such as the literacy rate and women's literacy rate are very poor, and the infant mortality rate (IMR) and maternal mortality rate (MMR) are high. The situation of women in households is more critical according to the National Family Health Survey-2 (2001); the mean Body Mass Index (BMI) of tribal women aged 15—49 in West Bengal is 18.2 and the nutritional condition is considered to be super critical. The situation is worse among tribal women as a socio-economic category, with 64.2 per cent of the women being below the mean BMI of 18.5.

The combination of an undulating and hilly terrain and high rainfall produces high micro-level variability in the region. One encounters diverse conditions, with regard to soil, slope, water availability, soil depth, et al., within the boundaries of even the smallest of villages. Although there are variations across the upper, the middle and the lower watersheds, the overall pattern repeats itself in micro-watershed after micro-watershed, village

after village—dry up-lands with shallow soils, dry mid-lands with deeper soils and wet low-lands with deep soils. This is combined with the absence of a strong agrarian tradition, poor connectivity, weak public services, poorly developed markets and lack of market orientation. The area has a sub-humid climate with an average annual rainfall of 1,300 mm. However, due to a high variability of monsoon rain, low moisture-holding capacity of the soil, the absence of developed aquifers due to the hard rock substrate, and high run-off due to the undulating terrain, agriculture is fraught with high risk.

Overall, the level of vulnerability of households is very high, with respect to income, health, education and food security. Multiple factors contribute to this, and these are compounded by infrastructural deficits and lack of sufficient cash-based income sources. Coping mechanisms are extremely limited, with respect to credit, the level and quality of access to the Public Distribution System (PDS) and entitlements, and lack of income to address vulnerabilities. Multiple interventions, focussing on these vulnerabilities, are necessary to bring in lasting change.

Tasar activity

Farmers have reared the *tasar* silkworm and processed silk cocoons into yarn and fabric in India since time immemorial. The insect species *Anthereae mylitta* are reared on host plants such as the *Terminalia spp.*, found abundantly in the tropical sub-humid forests covering the states of Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Telengana. *Tasar* silkworm-rearing is a traditional practice of the forest-dwelling communities, to supplement their livelihoods. Most of the silkworm rearers belong to indigenous communities (categorized as Scheduled Tribes in the Indian Constitution). Cocoons, made of silk filaments that have commercial value in the market, are harvested at the end of the silkworm-rearing cycle. According to The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), India's annual silk demand is about 25,000 MT, whereas production is 17,000 MT. The gap is bridged with imports from China.

In West Bengal, in the area covering the three adjoining districts of Jhargram (erstwhile West Midnapore), Bankura and Purulia, the forest is spread over an area of approximately

Tasar sericulture is widespread in the entire region and has long been an important traditional practice of a number of tribal communities that live there

1,450 sq km, with over 3,46,000 households (as per the Census 2011 data and in the 12 blocks that PRADAN operates) living in the forest and on the fringes of the forest. *Tasar* sericulture is widespread in the entire region and has long been an important traditional practice of a number of tribal communities that live there.

Income from the sale of *tasar* cocoons was initially lucrative. However, over the past three decades, there has been a steady decline in the production of *tasar* cocoons, affecting the livelihoods of a large majority of silkworm rearers. By 2010, more than 75 per cent of silkworm rearers in this region had dropped out of production. This was also witnessed as the general trend of the sector across the country. Acute poverty and lack of livelihood options pushed people to chop down trees in the forest. This time, the *tasar* host trees, previously zealously protected by the silkworm rearers in the interest of livelihood, were also not spared. This resulted in a drastic reduction of the carrying capacity of the forests.

A PRADAN investigation (through a baseline study) revealed that the lack of availability of quality seeds

(eggs of healthy *tasar* moths) was the main cause of such a rapid decline of the sector. Sericulture is a state subject and *tasar* seeds are traditionally supplied by the Department of Handloom and Sericulture of the Government of West Bengal, in collaboration with the Central Silk Board, a statutory body under the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, and for the overall development of silk in the country. *Tasar* seeds are prepared through a scientific process in the state grainages (seed production centres) to produce what are called Disease-Free Layings (DFLs), gathered from healthy moths free of the deadly silkworm disease, Pebrine. Their DFL status is ascertained through rigorous microscopic examination.

The state has been supplying DFLs to silkworm rearers for 40 years; for a majority of this period, *tasar* silkworm rearing was carried out by producers individually. There were no efforts in West Bengal to organize the rearers into collectives. In the first decade of the supply of DFL, the quality of seeds was good, boosting cocoon production in the area. However, starting 1980s, the quality of the DFLs became questionable, with low and unpredictable supply. The poor quality of DFLs led

to frequent disease outbreaks and crop setbacks. Silkworm rearing became unprofitable and risk-prone for producers, who were already socio-economically vulnerable. With the production cluster shrinking rapidly, the services of the market became unavailable.

DFL seeds were then taken on loan from local moneylenders, who procured DFLs from government-run grainages. The same moneylender would arrive as a trader to buy the harvest (cocoons) from the rearers. The market was tightly controlled upstream and downstream by traders. Open markets did not exist for the producers; they were exploited in a closed system, in which they were virtually captive labourers of the moneylender-petty trader nexus. To contend with the dire situation of the *tasar* silk sector in West Bengal, three institutions worked together to revitalize the sector, focussing on the empowerment of women.

Initiatives by PRADAN

PRADAN initiated work on *tasar* cultivation in West Bengal in 2014–15 through the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana – Non Timber Forest Produce

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(MKSP-NFTP) programme. In the very first year, PRADAN engaged with 480 families and, by 2017–18, 2,066 families were engaged in *tasar*-based activities in Binpur-2 and Ranibundh blocks of Jhargram and Bankura districts. The project was initiated, in collaboration with the existing SHGs, their *Upasanghas* and *Sanghas*, apex-tier collectives of SHGs at the *panchayat* and block levels, respectively. The idea of *tasar* as a livelihood initiative was mooted across these tiers, and interested members were brought under the umbrella of the Tasar Vikas Samiti (TVS), a livelihoods group for *tasar*-based activities. As many as 65 women's TVSs were formed, and the women were trained in scientific aspects of *tasar* culture. Some members were trained to examine and prepare disease-free *tasar* eggs. This was followed by the construction of 39 grainage buildings and one Basic Seed Production Unit (BSPU) for preparing *tasar* eggs, as per scientific parameters. Select *tasar* farmers were also trained to take up *tasar* seed crops. All the TVSs were further federated into a state-level entity called 'Jangal Mahal Mahila Tasar Chasir Dal Community Trust', registered under the State Trust Act. This Trust basically looks after the

backward and forward linkages of DFL indenting and cocoon marketing along with stakeholder management.

In order to give the required thrust to this sectoral initiative, PRADAN further set up a subsidiary organization called the Tasar Development Foundation (TDF). This is fully integrated in the management and governance structure of PRADAN and is registered under the Company Law under Section 8 of the Company Act 1956. TDF is led by professionals, who have cutting edge knowledge and expertise of the sector. The Foundation is dedicated to building and sustaining linkages between key stakeholders in the sector, and pushing the frontiers through extension, research and development, policy advocacy and by preparing skilled human resources for the sector.

The major focus of this initiative is to address the twin issues of lack of supply of quality eggs and the absence of fair markets for cocoons. PRADAN believes that these challenges are best addressed through Producer Organizations (POs) because they have a long-term stake in the activity and they can harness the power of the collectives,

to organize critical production services and deal with markets on fairer terms.

PRADAN recognized this as an untapped resource and emphasized the involvement of women to revive the *tasar* sericulture sector. Women were previously barred from taking part in silkworm rearing; traditionally only male members of tribal households (including children) reared silkworms in forests. However, women's entry into the sector has proved necessary to break a significant barrier towards equal participation of women in supporting livelihoods and to reinvigorate a sector in distress.

PRADAN and TDF have been working to expand the scope of livelihoods for primary producers through innovation, adaptation and creating supply chains, policy advocacy with the government, attracting investments and coordinating stakeholders in the sector.

TDF builds the capacity of silkworm rearers, grainage workers and cocoon aggregators, with the ultimate goal of involving women in production systems and of building their confidence in self-management.

PRADAN and TDF have been working to expand the scope of livelihoods for primary producers through innovation, adaptation and creating supply chains, policy advocacy with the government, attracting investments and coordinating stakeholders in the sector

TDF also helped producers set up 'Jangal Mahal Mahila Tasar Chashir Dal Community Trust', and trains members in governance and management of POs. Building and strengthening POs to organize production and marketing systems involves capacity building to manage the entire seed vertical (nucleus seed, basic seed and commercial seed) for the supply of high-quality eggs, aggregating produce and creating linkages with fairer markets. Finally, PRADAN/TDF has been promoting new ideas and technologies and conducting skill enhancement through its training material, Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-based training programmes and moderate use of audio visual presentations.

Jangal Mahal Mahila Tasar Chashir Dal Community Trust

The PO Jangal Mahal Mahila Tasar Chashir Dal Community Trust is an endogenously-formed PO, covering areas in Jhargram, Bankura and Purulia in West Bengal. This PO was formally established and registered in the category of a Trust in 2014, and undertakes commercial activities. It is a 'women-only' organization

serving the interests of its 2,066 members. To be members, women must be active in *tasar* rearing or seed producing. The majority of PO members belong to tribal communities, which tend to lag behind in all major parameters of human development and face significant socio-economic barriers.

The PO has a simple two-tier structure at the village and state levels. At the village level, women from similar socio-economic situations are organized in Self Help Groups (SHGs). These SHGs also provide a way for women to save money and access credit. The women meet informally at the village level and interact on a regular basis, planning, implementing and building their knowledge. The membership of the Jangal Mahal Mahila Tasar Chashir Dal Community Trust is large; therefore, it is not feasible for all 2,066 members to interact effectively. The village-level groups choose a representative, who participates in the monthly meeting of the PO at a central place, to discuss local and broader issues of development. All the members of the PO have the opportunity to participate and meet once a year in the Annual General Body Meeting.

The role of the PO in Improving *Tasar* sericulture

The role of the PO is to supply seed and inputs. Seed Production Centres produce an average of 400,000 DFL units that are sold at commercially viable rates, to cater to the 2,066 silkworm rearers on a first-come, first-served basis. Through this model, the Jangal Mahal Mahila Tasar Chashir Dal Community Trust has played an important role in increasing the production of quality seeds and marketing the harvest.

Access to quality seed is the most critical input for silkworm rearing. Prior to the establishment of the Jangal Mahal Mahila Tasar Chashir Dal Community Trust in 2014, *tasar* seeds were neither available locally nor did the farmers have access to it. As many as 39 new Seed Production Centres were set up that are fully owned and operated by the PO. As a result, rearers have greater access to eggs, with quality seed available at present in the villages, produced by the village-based women testers. The PO has established a comprehensive quality regime for eggs and rigorously monitors the

It is a 'women-only' organization serving the interests of its 2,066 members. To be members, women must be active in tasar rearing or seed producing. The majority of PO members belong to tribal communities, which tend to lag behind in all major parameters of human development

production process. The operation engages over 400 skilled and semi-skilled workers. With silk producing families purchasing the eggs locally, the availability of the seed is assured and rearers can access other related services from the PO, including input supply for host tree maintenance, prophylaxis, and disease and pest control.

The Trust also plays an important role in the aggregation, distribution, management of surplus and deficits of eggs in the region. The Jangal Mahal Mahila Tasar Chashir Dal Community Trust also facilitates marketing of the harvest through a number of mechanisms such as open auctions, administering the Minimal Support Price, MSP, (a market intervention by the Government of India to insure agricultural producers against any sharp fall in farm prices). Some states also declare the MSP (because sericulture is a state subject) through the Central Silk Board of the Ministry of Textiles, aggregation of produce and negotiating prices with multiple traders. On an average, the Trust supports the marketing of 1.5 crore pieces of cocoons annually. The annual average sales volume (including cocoons and DFLs) is approximately Rs five crores.

The services provided by the Trust have enhanced self-reliance amongst producers. The scientific practices adopted have brought down the silkworm mortality rate drastically. Silkworm mortality usually happens from different pathogenic infestation such as virus, bacteria, protozoa and fungi, and also from attack of various pests and predators. Silkworm survivability and production have increased significantly, resulting in lower production costs. The key input is DFLs, and its consumption has declined, as per the baseline of MKSP, from 311 units of DFLs to 165 DFLs units per rearer.

The transition

The institutional arrangement between the Jangal Mahal Mahila Tasar Chashir Dal Community Trust, PRADAN and the government has yielded the emergence of a robust silkworm value chain from a fragile, forest-based income activity. In the past four years, the number of silkworm rearers has increased from 480 to 2,066. There have been significant increases in productivity (more than 300 per cent from the baseline), which has enhanced livelihoods. The revitalized silk value chain features improved



In the past four years, the number of silkworm rearers has increased from 480 to 2,066. There have been significant increases in productivity (more than 300 per cent from the baseline), which has enhanced livelihoods

technology, better service delivery and enhanced price realization. Further, the means of transformation with a focus on the POs has included the poor in the entire value chain, with economic and social effects at silkworm value chain, household, and community levels.

The transformation was predominantly led by the women in the POs, who are conspicuous at every critical node of the production system. The initiative to revive the silk value chain with women at the helm has created an opportunity for women to demonstrate that they have the discipline and punctuality required in silkworm rearing and *tasar* seed production, in addition to the capacity to maintain the required hygienic conditions in the rearing field and seed production, essential for quality production of eggs and enhancement of productivity. The women have also gained valuable financial management experience through the POs. Moreover, through their four-year-long endeavour, they have capitalized and demonstrated an earning of nearly Rs 68,000 per family from *tasar* sericulture over the period.

At the household level, changes have taken place in gender roles. *Tasar* rearing has promoted

women's empowerment. The transformation of the sector is now predominantly led by women, who had been barred from participating in silkworm rearing in traditional systems. Before POs were established, women were not allowed to visit the *tasar* fields; their role was limited to taking food for men. Now, the women participate equally in *tasar* rearing. The women have been investing their earnings from *tasar* rearing in the education of their children, the healthcare of their family members, food and seasonal vegetables, releasing land from money-lenders, renting land to grow paddy, and creating savings in the bank. Some women also invest in other income-generating

activities, such as setting up a grocery shop or improving their housing conditions.

The economic effects at the community level have been significant. The value chain promotes employment: the number of silkworm rearers has increased from 480 in 2014 to 2,066 in 2017, an increase of 430 per cent. This suggests a proven competitive advantage in utilising slack labour and idle assets of poor households. The commercial cycle of silkworm rearing is between September and November. In the *tasar*-producing regions, there is only one crop, that is, paddy; after paddy transplantation in August, communities do not have any



The ongoing success of this innovative arrangement among a PO, an NGO and governmental institutions is the result of a strong commitment and an appropriate division of labour between partners

work till the paddy harvest in December. During this idle period, *tasar* silkworm rearing begins and the entire family engages in related activities. The incremental productivity has increased 366 per cent from nine cocoons per unit DFL to 42 cocoons per unit DFL, with a 250 per cent increase in income from Rs 24 per unit DFL to Rs 113 per unit DFL. The overall increase in income has resulted in reduced poverty, reduced migration and increased investment in productive resources. These productive resources include the purchase of agricultural implements and tools and technologies, bulls for ploughing, land, and motorcycles and mobile phones, construction and repair of houses, and enrolling children in private schools.

Enabling conditions: Key factors for success

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The ongoing success of this innovative arrangement among a PO, an NGO and governmental institutions is the result of a strong commitment and an appropriate division of labour between partners.

The Trust is in charge of supply and of marketing the produce. The PO was founded on the

principles of solidarity, reinforced through a strong focus on economic benefits, members' effective control in organizational governance, and their financial contributions. The PO is a single-purpose organization; its specific mission is the development of silkworm-rearing activities. This sole mission is clearly articulated in its vision: sustainable income, assured productivity, dignified vocation for women.

The system of rotational leadership ensures that no special interest groups are in charge of the PO. All Board positions are for a fixed period of two years, which ensures that the positions do not become power centres and leading to broad-based leadership. A culture of democracy and consensus-building is actively nurtured. In addition, the management structure in the PO is separate from its governance structure. The PO engages a professional manager to maintain efficient functioning, and the staff have the requisite knowledge, expertise and value systems to work with high standards of performance and accountability.

POs are partially financially autonomous, generating resources through membership fees of Rs 100 per rearer, the

production and sale of DFLs and the service charges collected from facilitating the sale of cocoons. This income is used to pay for different services provided in the production of DFLs, rearing of *tasar* silkworms and the support given to the seed producers and rearers.

The cost of capacity building, human resources and asset creation is not part of the business model and must be leveraged from sources such as MKSP whereas the operational cost is partially borne by the community. The farmers pay for the cost of seed, but services (advisory services and training) and equipment, based on new scientific initiatives and technology, is given by MKSP, which charges for the services and equipment only if they prove to be profitable or when the farmers have developed the skills to use them.

PRADAN, the development partner, has been working with a participative bottom-up approach, social mobilization and farm-based livelihoods for nearly two decades. For the *tasar* sericulture initiative, PRADAN/TDF provide regular training on technical know-how, institution building, financial management and scientific

Women have not only shown that they are knowledgeable about the environment, they are also protective and caring

practices, which help rural women build confidence and knowledge, and engage in a vocation that was previously believed not to be their domain. PRADAN's engagement brought a package of comprehensive support to the initiative, including critical input-output linkages, organization development of the PO, training of producers, policy advocacy and funding.

Another success factor for *tasar* sericulture value chain relates to the support of the Government of West Bengal, which has made public investments available through its flagship programme (MKSP) to meet the costs of asset and capacity building for producers. The Central Silk Board has also played a key role in simplifying technology for grainages, and formulating policies to favour the expansion of grainages in the private sector. It has developed schemes to offer central support to individual and community-owned grainage enterprises to expand the PO business in the *tasar* seed sector, and has conducted training courses for the staff of the PO, to build their knowledge and expertise in the sector. Finally,

the Central Silk Board has developed a legal framework (Seed Act) that defines and administers quality norms for DFLs, to create a level playing field by fixing the price of DFLs.

The initiative was further helped by the keenness of the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, to invest in the *tasar* sector, and the policies of the central government to push silk exports, thereby increasing the demand for *tasar* silk in both the domestic and international markets. The availability of skills among producers and their access to forests (in forest revenue lands, which are agricultural lands that may not be used for industrial or residential purposes) meant that the conditions were ripe for the revitalization of the *tasar* silk sector.

The key factor, however, is women's participation, which not only broke the traditional taboos but also systematically helped them regain control of their lives so that they could meet their obligations and contribute to the economy amidst the conflicts of work and life. The participation of women as labour force has

increased substantially albeit with emerging challenges; it has, indeed, proved that women are significant actors in natural resources management and they are major contributors to environment rehabilitation and conservation.

Their direct contact with the environment and technology has increased the depth of their knowledge. Women now serve as sericulturists, environmentalists and traditional scientists. Women have not only shown that they are knowledgeable about the environment, they are also protective and caring (Shettima, 1996). Being primarily responsible for domestic and household management, women interact more intensively with both the natural and the built environment than men. Therefore, there is need to appreciate the various ways women have actively participated in *tasar* cultivation and management, integrating these into an environmental management programme.

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CHAMELI'S BLUE CYCLE

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Igniting hope and nurturing potential in women is better achieved by example rather than any theory or sermon.

Chameli proves to all her fellow SHG women that, with self-belief and a drive to succeed, all of them together will be a force to reckon with, a powerful voice for women's upliftment and standing in the village

The story began a few years ago. It was the last day of the exams for the students of Class IX. A gush of students came out of the examination centre. Chameli was one among the several youngsters checking the question paper and estimating her marks. She was elated. All her exams had gone well and she expected a good result. She had always dreamt of becoming a teacher, and the thought of teaching students exhilarated her. She suddenly remembered that her mother had asked her to come home as soon as the exam got over. She rushed home only to find the family of her late elder sister in the house. Chameli's parents were sitting on the floor and pensively listening to her brother-in-law.

Chameli's sister had died three months back, leaving behind a two-year-old son. Her brother-in-law now wanted to marry Chameli so she could take care of the child. She was shocked. Why her? She hadn't

Four years passed since Chameli had got married. She gave birth to a girl, who had physical disabilities. Her life revolved around looking after her home and the two children

even finished her schooling. She protested to her parents but her voice remained unheard. Her father brusquely told her, *“Iss larke ka kya kasoor hai? Tumhari behen ki jagah sirf tum hi le sakti ho, yeh bohot achcha prastav hai. Wo acchha aadmi hai, tum padhai aage kar lena.* (What is the fault of this boy? Only you can take place of your sister; this is a very good proposal. He is a very good man and you can continue your studies later).” Within the next few months, Chameli was married to her deceased sister’s husband.

Once married, Chameli’s life changed drastically. She was tied down with household responsibilities. Her only solace was her sister’s son. Although a responsibility, she liked playing with him. Her husband ignored her as well as the child. He left them for an outstation job in order to earn a better and secure income; however, that never made a difference to the finances available to the household because he only sent home a paltry sum of money.

Four years passed since Chameli had got married. She gave birth to a girl, who had physical disabilities. Her life revolved around looking after her home and the two children. Being homebound, she felt throttled

and helpless. During this time, when she was in distress, she happened to meet the Local Resource Person (LRP)—Vikrant Kumar—from an organization called Society for the Upliftment of People with People’s Organization and Rural Technology (SUPPORT).

The organization was promoting a Self Help Group (SHG) and Chameli readily joined it. Seeing her interest, the LRP motivated her to join other skill building and training programmes organized by SUPPORT, especially for women farmers. Although hesitant in the beginning, Chameli took the first step. Her fellow SHG members assured her of their support.

Chameli was exposed to the women’s SHG programme, a micro-finance and entrepreneurship development initiative in Jharkhand, to help rural women invest in small savings and skill building for micro-level agriculture and horticulture-based business enterprises. Under the programme activity of the SHG, she underwent vocational training on ‘Kitchen Gardening’, a value chain of potato, tomato and chilli, and on linkages with the Farmers’ Produce Organization (FPO). She also underwent

vocational training on small-scale business development.

Chameli promoted SHGs in her own village and imparted skill building training to SHG members. She later started going beyond her village boundaries, to support other women’s SHG programmes. In the beginning, it was a struggle for her. Chameli had to overcome her fears and negotiate with her family members. *“Pahle pahle jub main aas-pas ke gaon me jaane lagi, mere mann mein bhay aur utsukta dono hi tha. Main sochne lagi thi ki main kaise kar paunga yeh kam. Kabhi kabhi ghar aate aate shyam ho jata tha aur gharwale kaam chhorne ke liye bol dete the.* (In the beginning, when I started going to the nearby villages, I had a lot of apprehensions as well as enthusiasm. I used to wonder how I would manage to do the job. Sometimes, it got very late in the evening and my family members would ask me to leave the job).”

It was a difficult phase for Chameli. She juggled between her responsibilities at home and the demands of her work. *“Main teacher to nahi ban payi par jo kaam kar rahi hoon wo bhi kuchh aisa hi hai. Ab mein bacchhon ko nahi mahilaon ko sikha rahi hoon. Mujhe apne liye yeh to karna hi*

Chameli was selected as one of the Internet Saathis in the programme. She attended the Training of Trainers and became a Master Trainer in the Internet Saathi programme. Being an Internet Saathi, she was given a blue cycle and a blue kit meant for trainers

tha. (I couldn't become a teacher but what I am doing is similar to teaching. Now, instead of children, I train women. I have to do this work for myself)," Chameli asserted. She decided to pursue her dreams and eventually succeeded in convincing her family to let her work.

Being engaged with the women's SHG programme gave Chameli a purpose. She wanted to be a part of a profession like that. She started visiting the families of group members, to understand their issues. She accompanied the staff from SUPPORT, slowly learning communication and facilitation skills. "*Humare yahan gaon ki zyadatar auratein padhi likhi nahi hoti hain. Unko sab koi chizon ke liye ghar se permission lena parta hai; aise me unko lagta tha yeh dal banana, baithak karna, sanstha jana, bank jake kam karna unke samajh ke bahar hai.* (In our villages, most of the women are uneducated. For everything that they wished to do, they need the permission of the family; they, therefore, think that this work of group formation, attending meetings, going to the agencies, or going to the bank, is not for them)."

She motivated the women to join an SHG. With her efforts, 36

SHGs were formed. The women's perception of themselves changed as they gathered for weekly meetings, to discuss various issues, including going to the bank to receive bank loans, etc. Chameli became an active participant in various forums, attending SHG Federation meetings, *gram sabha* meetings, *panchayat* meetings, among others. She became the leader (*Netri*) of the Churchu Nari Urja Maha Sangha—an SHG Federation. Things were going well for Chameli. Her struggles were reaping fruit now.

In 2016, Tata Trust and Google India initiated a special programme jointly called the 'Internet Saathi' in Jharkhand. The programme aimed at addressing the gender disparity in Internet use in rural India. The lack of Internet literacy puts women in rural India at a further risk of getting marginalized in society. The programme trained women to use the Internet and benefit from it in their daily lives. Chameli came to know about the programme from the SUPPORT staff. She was attracted by the prospects of the programme. She was very keen to learn about the Internet but never thought that one day she herself would become an Internet Saathi. Chameli was

selected as one of the Internet Saathis in the programme. She attended the Training of Trainers and became a Master Trainer in the Internet Saathi programme. Being an Internet Saathi, she was given a blue cycle and a blue kit meant for trainers.

"Main humesha se hi kuchh banna chahti thi. Internet Saathi ne mujhe woh mauka diya. (I always wanted to become something in my life; Internet Saathi has given me that opportunity)," Chameli says. As an Internet Saathi, Chameli travels to villages and teaches SHG women about the Internet and its uses in daily life. She teaches women how to use the Internet through their smart phones or tablets for the purposes of banking, transferring money, learning about agriculture—diseases, pest attacks and the solutions and also about the various government schemes and benefits available to them.

"Internet bahut kaam ka hai. Ab hum sab kuchh us se pata laga sakte hain. Kabhi kabhi internet se alag alag khana banane ka video dekhte hai, gaana sunte hai. Bahut achha lagta hai. (The Internet is very useful, we get to know everything. Sometimes we also look at cooking videos

Chameli is a known face now. “Aas paas ke gaon ki ladkiyan mera naam nahi bhi janti hon, par neeli cycle sab pahchante hain. (Girls from nearby villages may not know my name but everyone recognizes my blue cycle).”

and different recipes and listen to songs. We like it very much),” Chameli says impishly.

Chameli is a known face now. “Aas paas ke gaon ki ladkiyan mera naam nahi bhi janti hon, par neeli cycle sab pahchante hain. (Girls from nearby villages may not know my name but everyone recognizes my blue cycle).”

She not only works with SHG members but also trains *aanganwadi* workers and adolescent girls on issues such as menstrual hygiene, early marriage

and pregnancy, education, child marriage prevention and girls’ education.

Chameli’s earning of Rs 6,000 has created a big shift in the way her family now accepts her. She is respected and has a say in family matters. From a docile homemaker, Chameli is now an important decision-maker in the family. Her views in household matters are taken seriously. Her income and savings have helped her meet the family’s health expenses, her son’s school fees and other household expenses.

Chameli’s husband, who was unsupportive of her work in the beginning, is now living with them and has started helping her in the household chores.

Even with her busy schedule, she takes out time to help her son in his studies. Her son is now in Class IX. With a little smile on her face she says, “Main hamesha chahti tha ki mera beta bara hoke teacher bane, lekin Hindi cinema dekh dekh ke wo police wala banna chahta hai. (I always wanted my son to become a teacher, but after watching Hindi movies, he wants to become a policeman).”



Chameli (in a white saree) as a panelist in the Womenwill/Today event in Mumbai.

Thousands of women in the villages of Jharkhand are living in just one chapter (a life that was bound by social, economic, psychological factors). Would the next chapter of their lives ever open?

In 2017, Chameli became the first worker of the 'Internet Saathi', who represented the women of Jharkhand state in an All India-based Event "Womenwill/Today—Story of the Internet Saathi." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TABwCLpptGs>).

The Global Citizen programme sponsored by Google-India was held in Mumbai to felicitate the best practitioners under the Womenwill programme. Chameli participated in the panel discussion on the session held on Internet Saathi and received the award for becoming one among the 10 best performing professionals of India.

"Shuruwaat ke dino mein, bare sarkari office ke logon se baat karne me ghabrahat hota tha...bank mein jake thik se form bhar payenge ki nehi, kasie baat karenge, kaise

samjhayenge yeh sab dar lagta tha? Lekin dhire dhire sab thik laga. Fir jab mujhe hawai jahaz mein Mumbai bheja gaya, programme ke liye, mujhe dar laga. Lekin baki mahilayen mere liye khush thi. Maine bhi socha ke mujhe yeh karna hi parega, abhi toh kisi se bhi acche se samjha ke baat karne mein bhay nehi hota. (Initially, I felt very hesitant talking to government officials...how would I make them understand, how would I fill the forms in a bank? Gradually, I gained confidence. However, I felt fear again when I took the flight to Mumbai. All the other women were happy for me. I also knew I have to do it. Now, I have no fear in explaining things to anyone.)" Chameli shared in the SHG Federation meeting. She encouraged them by saying that if she could, they could all do the same. The only thing they have to do is to support each other.

Thousands of women in the villages of Jharkhand are living in just one chapter (a life that was bound by social, economic, psychological factors). Would the next chapter of their lives ever open? Chameli was lucky to get the opportunities and prudent and courageous enough to grab those opportunities. To begin a new chapter in their lives, the women need to be supported. Not only the support that Chameli mentioned, that is, women supporting each other, but also through all of us working in the development sector. We need to unleash the potential of each woman so that women, living in the most deplorable conditions, get the green signal to ride their 'neeli (blue) cycles'?

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Soumya Banerjee is pursuing PhD from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. He was earlier working with SUPPORT in Hazaribagh, Jharkhand.

REARING SMALL LIVESTOCK: A Source of Nutrition and Income

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Focussing on a much-neglected activity—small livestock rearing—and adopting modern methods under the guidance of trained Community Animal Health Workers has brought about a sea change in the lives of the villagers, who were hitherto buffeted by the vagaries of the weather and annual disease outbreaks

“I had 30 backyard poultry birds and four goats. I was expecting an income of Rs 16,000 by selling the stock. But the sudden outbreak of Newcastle and PPR diseases killed 25 birds and all the four goats. I tried everything to save the animals. The local practitioner took a hefty amount as fee but nothing happened. We were broke. It was a very difficult situation. We were in debt,” recounted Laxmi in grief.

Laxmi’s family has still not recovered from the loss. Like Laxmi, many other families in this remote village—Kusumba of Kathikund district in Jharkhand—had suffered these sudden losses. “There is high risk in livestock-rearing and that is the reason we are afraid to increase the stock,” says another farmer.

Even though people suffer heavy and sudden losses in livestock-rearing, small livestock-rearing is one of

In a good season and on an average, families earn around Rs 15–25,000 per annum from livestock-rearing, depending on the stock size

the major sources of livelihood for the families in Kusumba village. Livestock is intrinsic to the family's culture and is a reflection of their socio-economic status. Explaining the importance of livestock in their life, SHG members say, "In spite of the mass mortality of animals, we do livestock-rearing because it gives us a social prestige. We sacrifice the birds during festivals such as *Gawali Puja*, *Bandana Parab*, *Sohray*, *Bada Din*, *Kali Puja*, *Durga Puja*, *Khamar Puja*, *Surjau Puja*. When guests come home, we serve them meat from our own stock, as our way of honouring our guests. We do not buy meat from the market."

In a good season and on an average, families earn around Rs 15–25,000 per annum from livestock-rearing, depending on the stock size. SHG members say livestock-rearing, especially backyard poultry rearing, can be managed by anyone very easily because the labour required is not much and the input costs are not very high. Birds and goats graze freely and are supplemented with a little bit of stall feeding. Birds roam around in backyards whereas goats have to be taken to the forest for grazing.

Livestock is raised in mixed farming systems; these activities are normally integrated into the existing farming systems: produce meat, eggs, surplus stock, use of fertilizer, etc. Backyard poultry and goats can be kept on small farms that do not have large fodder resources. Farmers do not require much technical knowledge. It is a simple practice, usually carried out by women.

Many consider small livestock as their ATMs (Automated Teller Machines) because one can easily sell the stock, in case of any exigency. Women often prefer to engage in livestock (small ruminants and poultry) to other livelihood options. This helps them establish their identity as farmers.

Small livestock, although an important component of the poor people's economy, has largely been neglected by policy-makers, researchers and practitioners. Agriculture has mostly been limited to cultivation whereas livestock (especially small livestock) has always been given step-motherly treatment. Cultivation is seen more as the men's domain, and small livestock-rearing falls under the purview of women. That may also be the cause for neglecting it and treating it as an insignificant economic contributor with very little scope of growth.

In Kusumba village, the women's collective-led livestock-rearing activity started with a discussion among the members of a Self-



Members identified that the critical gap in their activity was due to improper rearing and non-availability of preventive and curative health services, resulting in the mortality and morbidity of livestock. Two members from the VO were selected to become CAHWs after some training

Help Group (SHG) in a Village Organization (VO, called Naya Kiran Mahila Gram Sangathan, Kusumba,) meeting when planning for livelihood options. Many families have very little land whereas some are landless. Agricultural activity is rainfall dependent with very little contribution to household income.

The topography of the village, like many villages in Kathikund block, is undulating in nature. Families find it difficult to irrigate their fields. Less than 10 per cent of the area has irrigation facilities and people are heavily dependent on rain for cultivation. With such uncertainty in farming, families choose other options such as livestock-rearing, labour work or stress migration to make both ends meet. Whereas labour and migration are common among men, women are mostly engaged in livestock-rearing. Livestock-rearing provides them cash, which helps families in distress. However, because mortality rates of livestock are very high, rearing livestock are also uncertain. Families are wary of increasing their livestock, fearing frequent epidemics.

A baseline survey was conducted on livestock-rearing

in the *panchayats* of Bartalla, Dhawadangal and Jhikra; Kusumba village falls under Bartalla *gram panchayat*. The study revealed that families, on an average, rear 16 birds, including chicks, and five goats. At least twice a year the birds are afflicted by Newcastle disease, leading to the death of about 80–90 per cent of the poultry. Fowl-pox occurs at least once a year, affecting 40–70 per cent of the birds. Similarly, PPR in goats occurs every alternate year, resulting in the mortality of about 60–90 per cent of the goats.

The current support system from the veterinary department is not efficient and there are not enough Livestock Inspectors (LIs) for all the villages. The veterinary official's visits to the Block Veterinary Hospital are limited to once a week. Many families, therefore, rely on quacks, who charge hefty amounts for treating birds and goats without any guarantee of results.

The same situation was observed in the villages of Patna block, Kendujhar district in Odisha. Due to the continuous efforts of the women of Baitarni Mahila Sangh (BMS)—a block-level Federation—and support from

PRADAN, the mortality of the livestock has been controlled. An exposure visit was planned for the representatives of Naya Savera Mahila Sangh (NSMS), Kathikund, to understand the intervention in Keonjhar district.

In Patna block, women are doing integrated livestock activity collectively. The services of the Animal Husbandry Department being poor, the Federation has created a revenue-based system to provide the services at the doorstep of its members. Community Animal Health Workers (CAHWs) have been selected from the village and trained to provide regular health services to farmers. The intervention started with the objective of meeting an additional Rs 15,000 income for families, after household consumption. Another important objective is to enhance the buffer stock of livestock, to make it a robust and reliable coping mechanism against financial stress. As a strategy, the Federation is working to cover all areas and is providing veterinary care services at the doorstep such as on-time vaccinations and deworming, maintaining the cold chain and arranging for regular interaction between the CAHWs and the farmers.

Currently, around 1500 families in Kathikund area have adopted the improved practice of integrated livestock-rearing and have realized the benefits

The visit to Kendujhar had a very motivating effect on the Federation representatives. They shared their experiences and impressions of the visit with other members at the VO meeting. Members identified that the critical gap in their activity was due to improper rearing and non-availability of preventive and curative health services, resulting in the mortality and morbidity of livestock. Two members from the VO were selected to become CAHWs after some training. Trainers were called from Kendujhar. They stayed in the village and guided the CAHWs on how to provide services to the farmers. In all, 13 CAHWs and two master trainers were trained, to ground the activity.

With the help of trained para-vets, an awareness camp was organized at the village level. Flex, videos shows, role-plays and mass awareness camps were used to create awareness among the farmers. These village-level meetings helped farmers understand the situation and they learned that they could earn profits if proper health-care was ensured for the animals.

To begin with, birds and goats were de-wormed. When the farmers became confident, they were entrusted with vaccinations

for diseases such as Newcastle disease and PPR, pox. The farmers readily paid the cost of the services, which was kept at Rs 25 per animal. The results were soon to be seen. In the next three months, although the disease spread in the area, the mortality rate decreased drastically, in comparison to earlier times. The difference was also visible when compared to the villages where health services were not initiated. With low mortality of livestock, the farmers were more confident about investing in increasing their stock of birds and goats. Reduced mortality and increased stock helped the families gain substantial profit from the activity.

“Every year my birds and goats used to die due to disease. I was left with only two hens and one goat. Now I have 19 birds and six goats. Our CAHW has trained us on how to take care of the livestock. She has explained to us when to give them medicine, what sort of care needs to be given and also how to take care of their feed and shelter house. All our SHG members save some amount of money for vaccination and deworming. We pay Rs 2 per hen and Rs 7 per goat,” said Kadmi Devi.

Sonoti Mohli from Kusumba village said, “Our CAHW visits us regularly. He gives us training on proper rearing of livestock.



CAHW deworming the bird

Developing a sustainable delivery mechanism is very critical for the activity. Regular and timely services are provided at the doorstep. A cold chain unit is being managed by a local entrepreneur, who coordinates between the medicine supplier and the CAHW

We give timely medicines to our livestock and have even made separate sheds for goats and hens. I have 12 hens and five goats now. We regularly consume eggs and meat, and this year earned Rs 7000 by selling my livestock.”

Developing a sustainable delivery mechanism is very critical for the activity. Regular and timely services are provided at the doorstep. A cold chain unit is being managed by a local entrepreneur, who coordinates between the medicine supplier and the CAHW. The CAHWs meet the SHGs once a month to discuss any health issue. SHGs collect the money from the farmers for the services received and pay the CAHWs. All CAHWs hold a monthly meeting at the Cluster

level for planning and placing orders for medicines and other support services required. They are regularly trained by master trainers and external resource persons.

On an average, farmers earned Rs 10,000 in an year excluding the present stock and their own consumption. The yearly incomes are expected to rise in the next two to three years as the stock size of the livestock increases gradually. Women farmers are especially happy because the income directly comes into their hands and they are able to meet their own needs and the needs of their children. The consumption of birds in these families has increased; on an average, each family consumes two or three

birds a month and regularly consume eggs.

After this initiative of the Collective, the men of the community have begun showing an interest in learning about livestock and helping women take up livestock-rearing because it presents an opportunity for livelihood. The initiative is being taken forward in other villages such as Kanahidih, Chichro, Bada Dhaniyapahari, Jamchua and Jhikra. Currently, around 1500 families in Kathikund area have adopted the improved practice of integrated livestock-rearing and have realized the benefits.

Ashish Kumar is an Executive with PRADAN and is based in Kathikund block, Jharkhand.

WOMEN AND ANAEMIA

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Calling for a concerted effort by civil society organizations to address the alarming reality of anaemia in rural women between 14 and 49 years of age, this article focuses on the necessity to improve personal and individual lives, an aspect that has so far been ignored in the endeavour to bring about financial stability by enhancing livelihoods

Seema Kullu, carrying her newborn son on her back, waited in the queue to give her blood sample to check her haemoglobin (Hb) level. The result, when it came, was far from satisfactory. The Hb level was 7.0 g/dl, which is a critical anaemic condition.

Seema is a member of the SHG formed by PRADAN—a civil society organization (CSO) working with women's collectives, to enhance their income through various livelihood interventions. She also earns from working under MGNREGA in Basia block, Gumla district, Jharkhand.

According to a survey conducted by National Family Health Survey (NFHS) in 2005–06, 70.6 per cent of the women between 15 and 49 years in Jharkhand were found to be anaemic. When we presented this data to the women's collectives that we work with, they decided to conduct a camp in one of the *panchayats*, where the HB levels of the SHG women and the MGNREGA workers would be tested. The average level of HB across 56 women, who attended the camp, was 8.8g/dl with nobody having a normal Hb level of 12g/dl.

PRADAN has been working with women's collectives in Gumla for the past 18 years. It has been able to

The question, however, arises, “Why has there been no substantial improvement in the individual/ personal lives of the women even after PRADAN’s successful intervention in enhancing livelihoods and incomes of the households?”

organize collectives that have enabled development and have helped to adopt certain best practices in agriculture, for example, vegetable cultivation, mango plantation, improved paddy, seed treatment and floriculture. Poultry and goat rearing have also been introduced and have become good income-generating activities.

PRADAN has also worked to introduce backward and forward linkages of this agricultural produce by creating agriculture production clusters (APCs), whereby a relatively large number of families have become involved in common agricultural practice. By creating models for income enhancement through various livelihood interventions and engaging with collectives, PRADAN has helped boost the income of many families.

Lalita Oraon from Palkot says that the mango plantation on half an acre of her land, using PRADAN’s model, has increased her household income by Rs 25,000 every year. This is a significant rise in income. When we talk with the collectives about the impact that they have experienced since they have become a part of an SHG, we usually hear that their management of finances has

improved through the savings-and-credit activity that goes within and outside of the SHG. In addition, their incomes have risen through collectively planned agricultural practices with modern techniques. Therefore, from the above experiences, we understand that PRADAN has been successful in working with the collectives to build upon their existing economic activities and to help generate more income. Many families (56.64 per cent) of the 68,042 families that have come into the SHG fold in Gumla that PRADAN has engaged with have benefitted from the intervention.

Lalita and Seema come from similar kind of worlds.

The question, however, arises, “Why has there been no substantial improvement in the individual/personal lives of the women even after PRADAN’s successful intervention in enhancing livelihoods and incomes of the households?”

The larger goal of PRADAN is to help co-create a just and equitable society. However, at the confluence of class, caste and gender, it is quite evident that women are the most vulnerable, and due to this vulnerability, their pursuit of healthy and

dignified living is hampered. The acute condition of anaemia in the women of Jharkhand can very well be associated with the vulnerabilities discussed below.

Seema Kullu lives in Tetra village in Basia block. Her world is very similar to that of the other tribal women of her village. She gets up at 4 a.m. and starts doing household chores such as cleaning, fetching water, cooking food, getting the children ready for school, etc. By the time the morning chores are over, it is already 8 a.m. She then goes to the farm with her husband and works in the field there until noon. She returns and serves food to all the members of the family. In the afternoon, when most of the family members rest, she takes the cattle out for grazing and returns in the evening. After coming back, she starts to prepare dinner and the family eats dinner at around 9 p.m. Seema eats after everyone has finished eating and finally sleeps by 11 p.m.

This is the routine, with minor variances, of most women in the region. They seldom get time for rest or leisure. As a result, taking care of their own health and well-being has never been a high priority. Clearly, the division of work is skewed heavily in favour of men.

There are other aspects of the existing social system that further marginalize and oppress women. We have personally heard from a number of women that they are not allowed to eat non-vegetarian food during menstruation whereas during menstruation is when they need more nutrition

There are other aspects of the existing social system that further marginalize and oppress women. We have personally heard from a number of women that they are not allowed to eat non-vegetarian food during menstruation whereas during menstruation is when they need more nutrition.

Patriarchy also contributes to the marginalization of women and limits their access to resources. For instance, Seema does work under MGNREGA, which gives her Rs 168 for one day of labour. Her husband also earns the same amount. However, her husband spends that amount according to his will on items such as alcohol and food, whereas Seema does not. She hardly ever spends her earnings on herself, neither on any material desires nor on her own nutritional needs. Instead, she brings the entire earnings home to be used for the welfare of her family. This particular example is reflective of the fact that patriarchy does not allow a woman to have control over her own income and resources and that she has to constantly compromise her interests and individuality for the larger well-being of the family. The same does not apply to men.

We also see that Seema's access to the money she earns through livelihood-based activities, by being a member of the SHG, is also minimal. And this is probably the reason that, even after seeing an enhancement in income and mobility, not much has changed in the individual lives of women. Therefore, we see that Seema's present health condition is an outcome of these social circumstances. The state, civil society and community-based institutions must take cognizance of these conditions of marginalization.

Anita Devi, an auxiliary nurse mid-wife (ANM) in Basia, said that a number of Primary Health Centres (PHCs) remain closed even on working days. ANMs are a focal point through which the government tries to take its healthcare system to the last mile. Given this fact, there are still many vacancies that need to be filled. The department, at the most basic of levels, is heavily understaffed. Health camps, that are to be held on a regular basis, take place intermittently with long gaps. The national guidelines on how to control iron deficiency, or anaemia are:

1. To bring to the attention of Programme Managers the

serious negative consequences of anaemia for health and physical growth, mental and economic productivity of individuals and populations

2. To broadly identify platforms of service delivery and indicate the role of service providers
3. To lay out Iron Folic Acid (IFA) supplementation protocols across the lifecycle for the prevention of anaemia
4. To define a standard treatment protocol for facility-based management of mild, moderate and severe anaemia, segregated by levels of care

In a survey conducted by the Model Districts Health Project, Earth Institute, Columbia University, in 2014–15 in Simdega district, Jharkhand, ANMs were assessed for their knowledge of anaemia. Some of the findings of the survey were really pitiable. As many as 64 per cent of the ANMs in the sample had not received any training in the Anaemia Control Programme. When they were given a scenario of a four-month pregnant woman's HB being 8g/dl, only half of them could identify it as a case of severe anaemia. This underscores that

As long as the state does not show any will to increase the spending, the situation is not likely to change significantly. Therefore, public action and advocacy becomes imperative

their knowledge on HB levels and types of anaemia is very poor. Most of the ANMs (81 per cent) did not have any knowledge of the recommended IFA (Iron Folic acid) dose. This lack of awareness greatly impacts their counselling capacity to encourage women to consume IFA. Clearly, ANMs need to be given training on a large scale and improved supervision and staffing are required in order for existing healthcare facilities to be implemented in their entirety and reach those who need it the most.

Problems of infrastructure, human resources and the general capacity of public health systems can also be attributed to the fact that the central government's spending on health is only one per cent of the nation's GDP. This suggests that as long as the state does not show any will to increase the spending, the situation is not likely to change significantly.

Therefore, public action and advocacy become imperative.

Looking back at what PRADAN has managed to achieve, therefore, in the time that it has remained engaged with the community, one realizes that there is still a lot to be done. Keeping the gender, health and nutrition needs in perspective, we need to engage with two major stakeholders—community institutions and the state. PRADAN needs greater expertise in themes such as gender, health, nutrition, etc.; therefore, tying up with other CSOs that carry a certain capacity in these areas of development will be beneficial. A collaboration of this kind will also help us capacitate our own understanding and the modes of practice around these themes.

Also imperative is the active involvement of academicians, social scientists, researchers,

activists, etc. As an outcome of this engagement, the effort will be to see community institutions as agents of change, which can and will trigger a counter culture, so that taboos, myths and other such aspects of their social system that propagate marginalization can be revisited. In case of the latter, CSOs (including PRADAN) can form a pool or a forum, wherein the state's policies are reviewed and amendments suggested as a part of policy advocacy. This pool of CSOs can also help build the technical capabilities of the state on issues of social concern, including health. Community institutions also need to be strengthened in relation to the state so that they can exert pressure as and when service delivery suffers or any rights to dignified living are violated.

Pushkar Jha and **Meraj Uddin** are working as Executives in PRADAN and are based in Palkot, Jharkhand.

FREE-GRAZING CATTLE: Overcoming the Menace

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Large tracts of up-land areas in Godda district of Jharkhand are left unutilized and uncultivated and are almost considered redundant by the villagers. Not because the land is uncultivable or because they don't want to cultivate this land, but because they can't. All because of a very strange practice here...that of free-grazing cattle

“The land is the only thing in the world worth working for, worth fighting for, worth dying for, because it's the only thing that lasts.”

Gerald O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*

— Margaret Mitchell

The background

In the backdrop of this piece are two *panchayats*—Chandana and Kusmaha—in the Sundarpahari block, of Godda district, Jharkhand. Godda happens to be one of the most underdeveloped districts in Jharkhand¹, and Sundarpahari is touted to be its least developed block. Barring two hamlets of non-tribal families, the Santhal and the Pahariya tribes entirely dominate these two *panchayats*. According to

¹<http://devinsights.co.in/district-level-development-jharkhand/> - Retrieved on 3/04/2018

Every year, around mid-January, after the Santhal festival of *Sohrai porb*, domesticated cattle are untied, left to roam free and enter the fields, regardless of who the land belongs to

block officials, a major chunk of the Kusmaha *panchayat* falls under the CPI (Maoist-infested) area and a dedicated task force is stationed there for security reasons.

The Santhals and the Pahariyas are both involved in domesticating indigenous cattle breeds (cows, oxen and calves), utilized primarily for ploughing and rarely for milk. The excess animals are sold in the weekly cattle *hatiya* (village market) at nearby Banka or are purchased by traders directly from the villagers.

Kharif crops such as paddy and maize are at the core of agricultural production here. Other crops such as horse gram (*kurthi*), seasonal vegetables and sweet potato occupy a peripheral position in the annual crop itinerary. Rabi crop, as a practice, is a long-lost one and almost negligible in these regions; crops such as mustard and Bengal gram are sparsely grown. The cultivated lands in the region are mainly low-lands, mid low-lands, and homesteads. Large tracts of up-land areas are left unutilized and uncultivated and are almost considered redundant by the villagers. Not because the land is uncultivable or they don't want to cultivate this land, but because

they cannot. All because of a very strange practice there...

Every year, around mid-January, after the Santhal festival of *Sohrai porb*, domesticated cattle are untied, left to roam free and enter the fields, regardless of who the land belongs to. Even a week after the festive season is over, merry-making continues and people, especially the men, indulge in heavy drinking. It is considered beyond the spirit of the spirit to go and tend the cattle. When the monsoons (mid-June) arrive, the villagers go to the forests to fetch their cattle; the animals remain tied till January and the next year this cycle is repeated.

All this would have been absolutely acceptable had it merely been a part of their culture without any untoward consequences for anybody. To those unfamiliar with the people, this is true, to some extent. But it certainly has ramifications.

As the wizened village-folk say, 10 or 15 years ago, this was not the case. The society adhered to strict tribal laws. Those were the times when agriculture was considered pious and was one of the crucial means for dousing the fires in the belly. Animals, howsoever important they were, were kept

away from the crops. Dedicated people (usually children and the elders) would shoulder the responsibility of grazing cattle in the designated commons. In case some itinerant cattle entered the crop-fields, the owner of the cattle would be fined. All this happened because a crucial tribal law enforcement machinery was in place.

Apart from *kharif* cropping, *rabi* crops were also sown and the yields were sufficient to cater to the villagers' healthy lifestyle. Paddy, pigeon-pea, maize, Bengal gram and millet constituted the *kharif* crop, and mustard, linseed and horse gram were the main *rabi* yields. The oil and protein components of the diet of the people were obtained from their own fields.

Now the situation is different. As modernization found its way inward, new trends of seasonal migration have crept in, and the 'Dilli-' and 'Bambai-' returned mobile flashing young generation has shunned the old tribal customs. Animal grazing laws have taken a backseat and, subsequently, as soon as the paddy harvesting season is over, the animals are left open for uncontrolled grazing. The results have been disastrous for

Over a period of time, rabi crop cultivation has become negligible. The precious and nutritious crops such as linseed, Bengal gram and new ones such as wheat are not in trend anymore

the community. Almost nobody cultivates pigeon-pea; a very cheap and no-maintenance crop, which is a big source of protein. Over a period of time, *rabi* crop cultivation has become negligible. The precious and nutritious crops such as linseed, Bengal gram and new ones such as wheat are not in trend anymore. Whosoever even dares to sow these suffers because the animals graze on the crops and nobody empathises with the cultivators. Consequently, as a norm, selected crops are sown and, that too, on nearby lands, taking care that animals do not damage the crops.

The Intervention

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From an outsider's perspective, this is a serious issue. Having large tracts of land, and yet not farming because of fear of domesticated cattle eating the crops is an agrarian misadventure. Interestingly, this problem has been contained (to some extent) in several other *panchayats* such as Bara Dhamani, Kairasol and the nearby Budhikura. This issue was discussed with the Village organization (VO) members and some of them even had an

'exposure' visit to Budhikura. After the exposure visit and the initial rounds of discussion with community members, awareness was created and an understanding regarding the issue was built.

- **Cultivation of pigeon-pea (summer variety)**

Pigeon-pea is a rain-fed and low-input requirement crop, which, unlike paddy and maize, requires very little water and nutrient management, and is apt for cultivation in arid lands here. It is a low greenhouse gas-releasing crop and is a crucial nitrogen-fixing legume.



During a field exposure visit, promoting the cultivation of pigeon-pea

It was not enough to merely convince the people to take up the new crops; they also needed to be persuaded afresh into containing their cattle

Nevertheless, our focus on pigeon-pea is entirely due to its field retention period of nine months. It is sown in June-July and is harvested by March-end. Also, since pigeon-pea is sown by broadcasting and doesn't need any special care (or any care) or round-the-season maintenance, it was an automatic selection for the up-lands.

If a village were to grow pigeon-pea, the crop would stay in its up-lands till March and would achieve three targets simultaneously—utilization of

unused up-lands, cultivation of this highly protein-rich legume and controlled rearing of animals, thus allowing for *rabi* crop cultivation. Whereas it is seemingly simple, the issue of animals being let loose for grazing cannot be controlled by only one village. There will be considerable opposition from adjoining villages. However, if a large number of contiguous villages were to adopt this practice, it would become sustainable.

Because of the lack of consensus, this strategy was carried out

in only two *panchayats*. Many meetings were held, both at the VO and the informal village levels. Non-SHG community members were also included. When the villagers were convinced, another problem arose—seed availability. Although community members agreed to cultivate the land and were willing to support the strategy, they had no access to local seeds. The seeds were available in the adjoining villages of Budhikura and Jhilua *panchayats*; yet, we were sceptical about farmers making the effort to procure the seeds on their own.



An interaction and planning meeting during a field exposure visit

Sagar and Kadampur villages made their own *adhgadha*. Without any external involvement, intra-village chieftains met over several rounds and reached a conclusion to set up the *adhgadha* to contain the cattle

Purchasing and distributing seeds was another humongous task that also involved money collection. Every time the seeds arrived, new indents would be made as more members became interested in cropping. Taking new indents, procuring seeds from individual farmers and bringing it to the village, therefore, was a routine exercise for almost a fortnight. After this, villagers eventually began to grow this variety in their fields.

• **Exposure to the field**

Come December, we began to hear hushed talk of villagers wanting to set free their cattle by January. Again, a new set of challenges presented itself. It was not enough to merely convince the people to take up the new crops but they also needed to be persuaded afresh into containing their cattle.

Community members (SHG and non-SHG) were taken on exposure visits to Kundada and the villages of Jhilua *panchayat* (Godda block) in batches. The *Manjhi Hadam* (Santhal chieftain) and other influential people were invited to the group. The exposure visits included walks through the fields, and discussions with SHG members.

The benefits of growing pigeon-pea on fallow land were discussed as was the mechanism to control loose cattle. The area had the advantage of a government-built *adhgadha* (traditional community animal enclosure) whereas ours (the intervention areas) had no such facility. Some of the visiting community jokingly asked whether they needed to make their own *adhgadha*?

When they came back to their own villages, the community members met and took some decisions.

Its consequences

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• **Adhgadha construction**

What I thought was a sarcastic comment was considered by the villagers to be a serious issue. Sagar and Kadampur villages made their own *adhgadha*. Without any external involvement, intra-village chieftains met over several rounds and reached a conclusion to set up the *adhgadha* to contain the cattle.

This decision was conveyed to other villages during a *hathiya*.

Once the *adhgadha* was operational, whosoever brought

loose cattle to the shelter would get Rs 10 as incentive. The owner would pay the fine for the cattle and take it away. A record was being maintained of the incoming cattle and of the owners reclaiming it.

Sagar village was able to cultivate wheat, with an average yield of 70 kg per family. The entire *adhgadha* operation captured around 150 cattle and yielded Rs 23,000 cash to the community.

A decision is yet to be taken about its utilization. The *adhgadha* construction is another point of motivation for the adjoining villages. Because their cattle had been caught and they had to pay fines, they were motivated to prevent any further detention of their cattle. The only way out would be to grow pigeon-pea in their vacant fields as well.

• **The pigeon-pea harvest**

The villages—Sagar, Chandana, Kadampur, Tetariya, Damru, Kusmaha— of the two panchayats took up the crop and, after some initial failures, were able to protect it. However, the villages of Angwali, Bariyarpue, Paharpur and Dumki suffered acute failure due to the lax attitude of certain community members.

When the intervention includes large areas, the rate of development is bound to be slow. However, if we are able to stabilize this practice of pigeon pea cultivation in fallow lands and ensure its harvest, the intervention is bound to catch on in other areas.

In one instance, out of sheer adventure, the cattle were left loose and it initiated a domino effect of sorts and everybody let out their cattle.

An average of 50 kg yield of pigeon-pea was harvested. Poor agriculture practices and lack of nutrient management could be attributed for this. No doubt, this will be further taken care of during the upcoming season.

• **Rabi cultivation**

Although this intervention was not taken up very actively by the team, certain patches did grow crops such as wheat, horse gram and flax. The one that deserves mention here is the production of wheat in Sagar village, which despite periodic animal encroachments yielded around a quintal on an average.

The Way Forward

Taking forward the agenda of last year, the villagers have planted another crop of pigeon-pea this year. The surrounding villages have also taken up this initiative. The new villages of Chhota Sindhri, Ghorawali, Angwali, Bada Haripur, Chhota Haripur and Khepadih have joined in.

This year, the team plans to take up the *rabi* cultivation with greater zeal. Also, since we are working on a sustainability mode, the search for indigenous flax seeds will be a difficult exercise for the team. Yet, it will be taken up with enthusiasm.

Not taking any chances, the same set of exposure visits will be planned with the new villages.

Of course, there have been setbacks as well. Certain villages such as Paharpur, Bariyarpur and Kusmaha will not be taking up pigeon-pea this year because they are wary of the cattle from the *panchayats* of Goradih and Susni. Also, some new initiatives were taken up in a few villages in Goradih *panchayat*, but these are yet to materialize in the field. However, the team is hopeful of future missions in these areas.

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Ashutosh Mishra is an Executive in PRADAN and is based in Sundarpahari block in Jharkhand.

New built Adhghadha for the cattle in
Budhikura village, Sundarpahari,
Jharkhand (p.38)



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.

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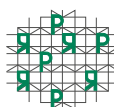
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Ashish Kumar supervises the CAHWs deworming the goats in Kusumba village, Kathikund, Jharkhand

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