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DEBARATI GHATAK

MANAS SATPATHY

AGRIPRENEURSHIP: Helping Revive Smallholders

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Promoting a community-based model of agricultural advisory services through Community Service Providers has helped PRADAN improve the lives of smallholder families through increased agricultural productivity

Abstract

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SMALLHOLDERS CONSTITUTE nearly 80¹ per cent of the total farm households and make up one of the largest constituencies among India's poor. Their food, nutritional security and poverty alleviation pose great challenges. Their lives can be improved only by increasing their agricultural productivity and by promoting off-farm rural employment. This requires appropriate technology dissemination systems, which will equip them with modern practices, in both farming and off-farm activities. This paper captures the lessons from PRADAN's

experience in improving the lives of smallholder families through increased agricultural productivity by promoting a community based model of agricultural advisory services. Other actors may find this useful for adaptation in different contexts.

Introduction

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In spite of several initiatives that have been introduced since Independence, neither the public extension system nor the market has been able to reach the millions (200–400) of smallholders in the remote areas of our country. Their low self-efficacy, the lack of belief of outsiders in their capability, the ignorance of public extension workers about the

¹Chand, Ramesh, P.A. Lakshmi Prasanna & Aruna Singh, "Farm size and productivity: Understanding the strengths of smallholders and improving their livelihoods", *Economic & Political Weekly*, Supplement June 25, 2011, vol. xlvi nos. 26 & 27.

New models have to be developed to ensure that these families have access to the right information, as well as knowledge and skills to optimize the productivity of their livelihood activities

needs of these smallholders, and the unwillingness of specialists to live and work in such areas are some of the reasons for the current state of affairs.

As a result, the productivity of most of the on-farm and off-farm activities that they are engaged in varies from 50–65 per cent of the national average. To ensure their well-being as well as to meet the national food demand, this situation cannot be ignored or be allowed to continue. New models have to be developed to ensure that these families have access to the right information, as well as knowledge and skills to optimize the productivity of their livelihood activities.

Efforts are on to come up with an appropriate model of extension into these areas. PRADAN, a not-for-profit entity, working for the socio-economic empowerment of rural communities in the most poverty-stricken pockets of seven central Indian states, has been promoting Community Service Providers (CSPs) for many years now, to successfully address the challenge.

The uniqueness of PRADAN's approach is that the women from disadvantaged households, who are organized into SHGs,

select, engage and supervise local youths to work as CSPs to help their members adopt modern practices and to access markets.

The lesson is that when CSPs identify an enterprise to support the production system, they not only benefit the community by advising them on the scientific practices, they benefit themselves by finding a means of earning. It becomes a win-win situation for both the community and the entrepreneur.

Context

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The promotion of farm and non-farm livelihoods is an integral part of PRADAN's strategy to improve the quality of life in most-neglected rural areas. Severe material deprivation diminishes people's ability to visualize a better life for themselves and to take charge of working towards it.

All such livelihood activities involve the provision of extension and technical advisory services to rural communities. These ensure critical access to the knowledge and information needed to increase the productivity and the sustainability of farmers' production systems. Such services play a significant role in risk management, by providing

timely information to farmers on input use, scientific production practices, disease and pest management, the markets, etc.

Although the public extension system in India has widened since Independence, it still does not reach a large number of smallholder farmers and other vulnerable groups, primarily in remote areas. Moreover, the models of extension of the government and the private agro-dealers do not meet the needs of smallholders in hilly and undulating areas. This is, usually, due to the high transaction costs of reaching these pockets, the lack of crop and livestock management solutions suitable to these conditions and, also, a lack of willingness by extension specialists to live and work in such remote and, sometimes, unsafe areas.

The PRADAN Experience

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In the beginning, PRADAN's professionals played the role of extension agents for various livelihood activities, which they identified and promoted. This helped them develop context-specific solutions, in response to ecological and socio-cultural demands. When the prototypes

This model has been quite successful, in terms of making a large number of farming women adopt modern agricultural inputs and practices, at a relatively low cost. They have begun to earn a good price for their produce

were well-established, the idea of taking them to a larger number of families was explored. For the families engaged in farm-based livelihoods, the following services were found necessary: asset creation through government grants, working capital mobilization through credit, supply of quality agricultural inputs, knowledge and skill transfer for soil health management, training on nursery raising, crop production, crop protection, farm mechanization, post-harvest processing, and marketing.

PRADAN, then, came up with a community-based model to provide services related to knowledge and skill transfer, Natural Resource Management (NRM)-based asset creation, and marketing to fill the gap left by the state. Women were organized into SHGs to mobilize credit for their members, and local agro-dealers were oriented to provide quality inputs on time. Specialized and intensive training was provided to a few selected youth from the community, on locally appropriate farming practices for crop, soil, water and livestock management.

The CSPs, then, promoted a basket of livelihoods, which

PRADAN regularly reviewed and supported. The curriculum of the training and its design kept in mind their educational level of the farmers. To help farmers gain more information and confidence, they were taken on exposure visits to those sites, where communities had adopted similar modern practices.

Initially, men were chosen as CSPs. Subsequently, when PRADAN's focus shifted to empowering women SHG members by enhancing their skills and capabilities in agriculture, some interested women were groomed to be service providers. After a few cycles, the processes of selection and training were standardized. Communities selected candidates against a list of agreed criteria such as: 20-40 years of age, class VIII pass, acquainted with modern farming, not completely occupied in farming, owning a mobile phone, being socially accepted, and possessing a mode of conveyance. Practice-based training programmes were developed, mainly at the village level, to prepare CSPs for the various activities promoted by the organization.

The exposure to the communities, where the impact of similar

activities was visible, was made more interactive, to inspire them and help them learn better. PRADAN mobilized the resources for the training of the CSPs and for the remuneration of these service providers. Their remuneration depended on the number of families they served and the tasks they performed. Weekly meetings were conducted with CSPs by the staff of PRADAN, to assess their progress and provide ongoing support. Periodic refresher courses were conducted to improve and refine their knowledge and skills, based on the feedback on their experiences.

This model has been quite successful, in terms of making a large number of farming women adopt modern agricultural inputs and practices, at a relatively low cost. They have begun to earn a good price for their produce. This experience has now been adopted by many NGOs as well as by the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), the national flagship programme for poverty reduction/alleviation.

Being employed by PRADAN, the CSPs were more accountable to the organization than to the community. In fact, they preferred to be known as

Meeting the full cost of the CSPs through contribution from the community has always remained a concern. In our society, where paying for information is not the norm, it was hard for CSPs to get a reasonable payment from their own community

PRADAN's employees rather than as service providers to the community. In the process, the community largely remained at the receiving end and could not demand improvement in any of services provided. This also required steady monitoring by PRADAN, to have the desired results. We, therefore, planned to gradually make the model demand-based so that CSPs would be employed directly by women's institutions.

We encouraged SHG members to collect a service charge fee from the participating families, to meet the cost of CSPs. And because the community was not ready to bear the full cost because the rates fixed were too high according to them, the shortfall was met by PRADAN. Interestingly, when they were asked to pay, the enrolment of farmers decreased. The response gradually improved in the subsequent years and it resulted in greater ownership by the community. They selected the CSPs, allocated them responsibilities, monitored their work and paid them as per the work.

PRADAN's role became then, largely, to train CSPs so that

they were competent enough to fulfil their responsibilities. We also linked them to the local agro-dealers so that they could access the latest information and pass it on to the communities. With experience, we introduced a biodata format, written test, and group discussion for the community to administer and select better candidates. The new CSPs were attached to older CSPs for on-the-job training.

This also made the discontinuation of CSPs in the older areas easier. After acquiring the required knowledge and skills, the communities would stop using the services of CSPs and would demand new services. This was a challenge when the

CSPs were employed by PRADAN. The new system, significantly, increased the coverage under different livelihood activities.

Meeting the full cost of the CSPs through contribution from the community has always remained a concern. In our society, where paying for information is not the norm, it was hard for CSPs to get a reasonable payment from their own community. This became a hindrance to sustaining the CSPs' interest in further learning and in providing quality services to the community. External financing, thus, was always required to train and engage the CSPs. Had it been remunerative, CSPs would have been charged a fee for the training.



To attract more people and to increase demand for the services of CSPs, PRADAN provided knowledge of modern farming as complementary to the other services

Learning from the agro-dealers, who provided knowledge free of charge to increase their sales, PRADAN focussed on promoting entrepreneurs, in partnership with Transforming Rural India (TRI) in the next phase. PRADAN provided missing services such as input supply, including seedlings, irrigation, mechanization and marketing for which the community was willing to pay. To attract more people and to increase demand for the services of CSPs, PRADAN provided knowledge of modern farming as complementary to the other services.

Accordingly, PRADAN selected high-performing CSPs and trained them on visioning, achievement motivation and business plan preparation, in addition to opportunity identification, credit access, etc. After the training, they were promised a stipend of Rs 3000 per month for a period of six months, to select an enterprise of their choice, prepare a business plan, secure bank loans and launch the venture. This has worked quite well. Most of the trained entrepreneurs have been

able to start businesses of their own by providing several services to farmers on a remunerative basis.

Some of the most prominent businesses are agricultural input supply, poly house nursery to supply healthy seedlings, accessing government subsidies to procure agricultural machinery and providing rental service, and marketing of vegetables and fruits to distant markets and enterprises such as Mother Dairy. This seems to be a win-win situation for both the CSPs and the farming community. It can self-sustain after the initial financial assistance to train and support CSPs. They may even pay for their own training.

Conclusion and Way Forward

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A suitable rural extension model has to be an integral part of sustainable agriculture and livestock development strategies. To promote the exchange of information and facilitate wider dissemination and uptake of improved farming practices, the

entrepreneur—or, in this case, an agripreneur—model seems to be the best to establish a strategic alliance between producers and service providers. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have created more options for CSPs, to provide advisory and extension services, considered an added advantage to these entrepreneurs.

PRADAN is assessing if this model can be scaled up to cover large numbers of farmers. It would, in that case, require quality training, finances—both grants and loans—and continuous support for a period of 6–12 months, to help CSPs stand on their own feet. CSPs find it a challenge to obtain a license from the government to sell fertilizers and pesticides. The advocacy for favourable policies may, therefore, be vital to support these entrepreneurs run their ventures successfully. They could, then, provide critical information to smallholders, to revitalize Indian agriculture.

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DEBIKA GOSWAMI

BEYOND ELECTORAL POLITICS: Women in Local Governance in Haryana

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Encouraging women to stand for elections to the local bodies is one step forward; empowering them with knowledge and skills in planning and decision-making must necessarily follow if women need to be active creators of their own future and not figure-heads and proxy figures for the men in their families

IN 2016, THE FIFTH GENERAL Panchayat Elections of Haryana witnessed the election of a greater percentage of women despite the dwindling pool of eligibility due to the introduction of new rules such as the education criterion. The overall representation of women across all levels of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) was 42 per cent as compared to 36 per cent in the previous term.

In addition, the 2016 panchayat polls had more educated members in PRIs because all the women

candidates, who secured seats in the elections, fulfilled the mandatory education criterion. This, of course, can be considered as an achievement in a state such as Haryana, where the sex ratio of women to men is 879 : 1000, and the literacy rate of women is still as low as 64.94 per cent.

Despite the increase in the number of women at the village-level governance in Haryana, some of the questions worth reflecting upon are: Does the improved percentage of women in the PRIs of Haryana also ensure their active and effective political participation? Do they have any real power

For the last two-and-a-half years, after the elections of 2016, have these women exercised the power bestowed upon them or have they gone back to their household cocoons after their electoral wins?

to influence democratic decision-making?

To answer these questions, we started out by looking at what happens to the elected women representatives beyond the electoral politics. For the last two-and-a-half years, after the elections of 2016, have these women exercised the power bestowed upon them or have they gone back to their household cocoons after their electoral wins?

We interviewed 12 *sarpanches* (village council heads) and 10 *panches* (members of the village council) from five districts of Haryana, namely, Faridabad, Mahendergarh, Nuh, Sonapat and Yamunanagar. Some interesting conversations and revelations emerged. Let us consider a few case examples in this regard.

Anita Yadav, *sarpanch*, Sihar village, Mahendergarh district, has studied up to Higher Secondary and is not only very conversant with the major functions of the *gram panchayat* (village council) but also with the important government programmes designed for the benefit of rural citizens. Despite having good knowledge about her role and responsibilities as the *sarpanch*, she says she feels

stifled and is unable to voice her opinions freely in the presence of male community members.

“A *sarpanch* can be a change-maker and can create linkages between the government and the villagers,” says Richa, the *sarpanch* of Sugh Majhri village in Yamunanagar district. She is highly qualified, with an MBA degree in Finance and is competent to handle difficult functions such as accounting and audit. The residents of Sugh Majhri, however, think that she, being rich, elite and educated, does not have much connect with them and is not concerned about holistic village development.

Raveena, another *sarpanch*, has a Masters degree to her credit; yet, she did not know about the mandatory education criterion when her elder brother asked her to contest for the position of *sarpanch* in Kota village, Nuh district. Her educational qualifications were used by the men of her family, to secure power for themselves because they wanted to work on her behalf in matters of village governance. To date, all her plans regarding the functioning of the *gram panchayat* await the approval of her elder brother.

Belonging to the Other Backward Castes (OBC) category, Rajbala of Khedla village, Nuh district, had to experience both electoral as well as social strife. The men of the opposing party in her village filed a case against her in the District Court, alleging that she had submitted fake educational qualifications. Besides, rumours were spread to malign her character. Despite such challenges, the villagers elected her as the *sarpanch* because of the proven transparency of her work, her confidence and her decisiveness. As the village head, she aims to work for the improvement of the impoverished and weaker sections of society, and faces stiff resistance at every step because she belonged to the OBC category.

An expert in martial arts, Heerni Sharma of Tilpat village in Faridabad district could not continue her studies beyond the secondary examination. After being elected as *panch*, she has not only been able to identify the major issues such as sanitation, drinking water and electricity that troubled her fellow villagers but has also persuaded the *sarpanch* to incorporate the same in the Village Development Plan.

One of the foremost reasons behind this limited success of elected women representatives is their lack of awareness about the functions of the *gram panchayat* and the roles and responsibilities conferred upon them

Heerni radiates hope when she says, “Non-government Organizations (NGOs) or community-based organizations must provide training and help in the capacity building of elected representatives, especially because government training programmes are not enough.”

This is in striking contrast to the story of Mukesh, the *panch* of Nizampur village in Mahendergarh district, who despite having the necessary education criterion, has no clue about her role and responsibilities as an elected representative. She has not received any direction from the *sarpanch*, nor does she have any insights or ideas with regard to developing her village during her tenure.

Look at the facts presented in these examples of elected representatives: An aware woman paralyzed by patriarchy and the structural inequalities associated with it; a highly educated woman unable to stand up for the disadvantaged due to the diversity of interests related to class and caste differences; a young, educated girl forced to be the mere front while her male relatives wield power and take decisions; a woman belonging to the OBC category fighting caste

and class barriers, and displaying self-esteem and agency; a young bride, despite not being highly educated, overcoming her lack by using her skills of observation and reflection; a newly elected woman *panch*, who has no support or guidance of the *sarpanch* or the other *panches*.

Elected women representatives can play a critical role in two major tasks of the *gram panchayat*, namely, preparing development plans, and implementing and monitoring government programmes. Unfortunately, most of the elected women representatives, despite having the requisite educational background, are unable to influence decision-making, with regard to these two tasks.

One of the foremost reasons behind this limited success of elected women representatives is their lack of awareness about the functions of the *gram panchayat* and the roles and responsibilities conferred upon them. These women, despite having the required educational criterion, are unaware of the regulatory functions of a *gram panchayat*, the processes of participatory planning and budgeting, and the provisions of government-

sponsored schemes and projects, and their management. They are also not well-prepared to support and supervise local institutions in their accounting and audit functions, or to maintain and manage their office space. Besides, the lack of computer application skills and their lack of understanding of the Right to Information lead them into additional backwardness.

Yes, structural and caste inequalities still matter. And because of these, women are subjected to discrimination regarding access to opportunities and resources such as education, health and other services. Women, who are elected as representatives, are also no exception, and as a result, are often seen lacking in confidence and agency, in skills of articulation and comprehension. Often, they do not believe they can work independently and depend on either their male relatives or influential men of the village community for decision-making, accounting and maintaining financial records, the use of technology and for matters that require physical mobility such as attending meetings and trainings. These factors cumulatively restrict the elected

Creating structured training programmes, exclusively designed for these elected women representatives, is one of the most crucial requirements for capacitating them to perform their roles and responsibilities well

women from becoming dynamic leaders; in effect, they are token representatives and do not really play an active and effective role in village governance.

What can be the panacea for these problems?

No doubt, creating structured training programmes, exclusively designed for these elected women representatives, is one of the most crucial requirements for capacitating them to perform their roles and responsibilities well. Such programmes can also serve as platforms for women to meet, interact and learn from each other. The involvement of not-for-profit organizations, which have regular experience in working with rural communities, will add value to the training programmes organized by the government.

The example of the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA), which is an autonomous training, research and consultancy organization under the Ministry of Local Self-Government, Government of Kerala, is worth mentioning in this regard. The many capacity building interventions on local governance and decentralization

of KILA include training, action-research, publications, seminars and workshops, consultancy, documentation, hand-holding and information services. It also runs a one-month certificate course on Panchayati Raj for the elected representatives for capacitating and preparing them to function well on the ground.

Equally or even more important is to make elected women representatives digitally literate. This becomes singularly relevant because the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, through its E-*panchayat* Mission Mode Project, is willing to use information and communication technologies (ICT) for not only automation of internal work-flow processes of *panchayats* and improved service delivery to citizens but also to increase capacity building of *panchayat* representatives and officials, and improve the efficiency and the right to information (RTI) compliance of *panchayats*. On the whole, digitization of *panchayats* will lead to local self-governance becoming more inclusive, responsive, accountable and transparent. With the *panchayats* being at the interface of rural citizens and

governance structures, elected representatives of *panchayats*, including women, who serve as the lynchpins in all the development activities in the villages, must learn and equip themselves with skills to use computers to manage their work-related responsibilities. Hence, sessions for basic digital literacy must be incorporated in their training curriculum.

An off-shoot of digital literacy is mobile literacy; a majority of women representatives seem to be uncomfortable in handling smart phones, either because of they do not know how to or because it is a social taboo. Educating women representatives to use smart phones is extremely critical, especially now when the use of mobile-based apps for information dissemination is a well-known approach, even in government circles.

The collaborative initiative, 'E-Shakti', by the Government of Madhya Pradesh and the telecommunication service provider Bharti Airtel, is an exemplary move in this respect. The programme was launched to create Internet awareness and literacy among rural women, which included a few elected

Investment in creating a sense of agency and empowering women with skills to form coalitions and alliances, to voice their views fearlessly and to negotiate with patriarchal restrictions imposed upon them better, perhaps, is the only way to restore women's dignity as elected representatives despite differences in class, caste and economic status

women representatives as well. Even women employees of various government departments were included in the programme. The training empowers women with knowledge of the Internet and helps them adopt it in their daily lives. Besides a basic knowledge of the Internet and email, the training includes an introduction to various government portals and mobile apps, IRCTC and so on, and how to access these through mobile phones.

Efforts of not-for-profit organizations in building the capacity of these women through separate training sessions is an additional and very valuable accompaniment. The SM Sehgal Foundation, a not-for-profit organization, working in Nuh district of Haryana since 1999, has introduced specific training programmes for women representatives in village-level institutions such as *panchayats*, school management committees, Village Health, Nutrition and Sanitation Committees by forming *mahila sangathans* (women's collectives). Through these collectives, the message of the importance of collective action is reinforced among women representatives, besides

generating awareness about their roles and responsibilities as members of these institutions.

Complementary to this initiative, the Sehgal Foundation has also designed Women Leadership Schools (WLS), exclusively for women community members, to train and empower them to become advocates of their own development. WLS provides women with information about government programmes through which women learn about crucial issues, such as food security, health and nutrition, RTI, and social security programmes.

In addition, in order to ensure better delivery of public services, women in WLS are also trained to apply for, and claim, their entitlements and to appeal to the appropriate government officials, in case their rights are delayed or denied. This instills in them a sense of agency to work for their own as well as the common good.

The trainees of WLS in Khan Mohammadpur village in Nuh district, Haryana, stood up against the corrupt practices of the local ration dealer, who was not distributing the stipulated amounts of subsidized food items as promised under the Targeted

Public Distribution System (TPDS). The women complained to the *sarpanch* and, later, to an officer of the Food and Supply Department. This alarmed the dealer, who hurriedly distributed food grains to approximately 1,000 beneficiary households.

Investment in creating a sense of agency and empowering women with skills to form coalitions and alliances, to voice their views fearlessly and to negotiate with the patriarchal restrictions imposed upon them better, perhaps, is the only way to restore women's dignity as elected representatives despite differences in class, caste and economic status. And this can be achieved, not just by attending training programmes conducted by government and non-government institutes but with the holistic support of the family and the wider social environment.

Making PRIs more inclusive for women functionally, and not just constitutionally, is a constant endeavour. The much-celebrated mantra of 'women's empowerment' that is limited to only providing parity in access to opportunities and resources to women, although having the potential to address some of the

Only when elected women representatives are able to prioritize their own agency will they be able to realize their full potential and expand their opportunities and choices

existing challenges for elected women representatives is, beyond doubt, a limited approach.

There is need, therefore, to broaden the notion of women's empowerment. Only when elected women representatives are able to prioritize their own agency will they be able to realize their full potential and expand their opportunities and choices. This will also enable them to focus effectively on issues such as child marriage, female foeticide and infanticide, improved access to daycare and schooling for children, an area that all-male *panchayats* are inclined to disregard.

Exemplary stories of women sarpanches such as Sheila Devi from Jharki Bisalpur village located in the forest-dominated Koderma district of Jharkhand are immensely inspiring in this regard. The perseverance and courage she showed in overcoming patriarchal and caste-based distinctions, without getting diverted from her sole objective of village development, is unparalleled.

Sheila Devi works as the *sarpanch* independently. She maintains a lot of caution in dealing with men, especially those from the upper-caste. Her enthusiasm and honesty brought to light issues such as child marriage, female

foeticide, the improvements required to make schooling and day-care accessible for the girl child and other issues, often ignored by all-male *panchayats*.

Examples like hers testify to the fact that developing confidence and a sense of agency are the prime factors that help women representatives overcome hurdles and make local self-governance more effective and inclusive. The case of participation of women representatives in local governance in Haryana is also no exception.

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NEHA JOSHI, SUHASINI BALI, MAHENDRA KUMAR SINGH AND SATISH PATNAIK

IN QUEST OF FELLOW TRAVELLERS ON A ROAD LESS TRAVELLED: Destination Mendha

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Questioning the dominant mode of life and livelihood choices and critically analyzing the development interventions aimed at attaining them, the villagers of Mendha choose the most suitable method of a collective way of life for them, with a sustainable form of governance mechanism and ecology, adherence to values, stakeholder mobilization and horizontal spread in nearby villages

MENDHA, A SMALL VILLAGE IN GADCHIROLI district (Maharashtra), holds a special place in the development arena of India. Today, when most of the development models for rural India are centred on individual aspirations and an extractive mode of production, Mendha adheres to a commune life-world, defiantly yet non-violently.

PRADAN organized an exposure visit for its professionals from 26 to 29 August, 2018, to understand the relevance of what was being done in Mendha to their own context. They were accompanied by leaders of three villages—Jana in Gumla district, Jharkhand; Chattania in Singrauli district and Jharna Ghughri in Dindori district, Madhya Pradesh.

The visit aimed at understanding this unique model from the 'worm's-eye' view, at redefining engagement within PRADAN and at creating

The nature of actions undertaken by the Collectives in Mendha, since the 1980s, often questioned the dominant mode of life and livelihood choices and critically analyzed the development interventions aimed at attaining them. This critical and constructive perspective led them to choose the most suitable method of the collective way of life for them

vibrancy for the collective way of living among the participant villagers. The village-level leaders, who participated, became the co-researchers in the Action Research (AR). The AR intends to explore sustainable means of intensification of livelihood in different socio-ecological systems to create alternative models, along with re-skilling the community. The three partners of the Action Research on Sustainable Intensification (ARSI) are the villagers, Azim Premji University (APU) and PRADAN.

The nature of actions undertaken by the Collectives in Mendha, since the 1980s, often questioned the dominant mode of life and livelihood choices and critically analyzed the development interventions aimed at attaining them. This critical and constructive perspective led them to choose the most suitable method of the collective way of life for them.

The ongoing journey for a better life is based on exploring the best practices of the past, questioning and reflecting their current actions and accepting feedback to bring about change. Study groups, or *adhyayans*, are made at each *gram sabha*, for the problems of today, its implications on

tomorrow and solutions in the long run. Hence, Mendha seemed ideal as a potential partner for the researchers because by the end of the AR, the villagers would be questioning critically the ubiquitous, extractive, individual enterprise and, yet, continue learning and practising the collective way of living.

Village-level researchers-cum-leaders coming together for the exposure visit also helped in building a shared understanding of the AR. This was the first time they interacted with each other, shared their experiences and discussed a future course of action. They were helped to keep in touch with each other over the phone at least once a month for peer learning. During the exploratory visit, they shared their plans with each other and also improvised on them, based upon inputs from the others.

After discussions and going through the relevant literature, the three pertinent areas of exploration deduced by all the visiting participants were:

- a) Governance and systems of the village, including common fund management
- b) Forest rights and *gram daan*

- c) Well-being, youth and linkages with stakeholders

This led PRADAN professionals and the villagers to divide themselves into three groups, with participation from each of the geographical areas, to explore the above aspects. Each evening, the respective teams sat separately and built a shared understanding of the findings and sharpened their questions for the next day. This helped the participants to juxtapose their own context with the journey of Mendha and identify aspects that needed further investment and strength that could expedite their movement. Each day, for some time, all the participants sat together to listen and learn from the villagers of Mendha and empathetically engage with each other's AR journey.

PRADAN professionals saw Mendha as an AR over a long period of time and drew lessons for their way of engagement with the community. The movement of Mendha is deep, in terms of the realization among the people and their adherence to values, with a sustainable form of governance mechanism and ecology. Interestingly, it is also thick in terms of its stakeholder mobilization and horizontal spread in nearby villages.

Community work in the village is part of every individual's duty. Everyone residing in the village contributes their labour, resources and time for the development of the village

Governance and Systems of the Village

The villagers of Mendha adhere to the principle of, “*Delhi me humari sarkar; gaon me hum hi sarkar* (In Delhi, we have our government; in the village, we are the government).” This exemplifies the spirit of ownership that the villagers of Mendha have adopted. Over time, Mendha has worked on building internal sustainable systems. The *gram sabha* in the village ensures everyone's participation in the meetings, be it men, women and youth.

Mendha village is divided into three hamlets and the *sabha* takes place at the hamlet level first. At this level, it is ensured that everyone participates in the meeting. In case someone is engaged in some other work, she or he has to inform the *gram sabha* prior to the meeting. This ensures everyone's participation, making it a platform where all decisions are taken through consensus. Even if a single person disagrees with any decision, that decision is not passed.

The *gram sabha* has many groups, based on different themes, which have their own rules and responsibilities. For example,

forest conservation, forest rights, education, MGNREGA, biodiversity, youth, justice and SHGs. Community work in the village is part of every individual's duty. Everyone residing in the village contributes their labour, resources and time for the development of the village. The villagers have also given importance to study circles called the *adhyayan* groups, in order to study any issues that may arise.

The villagers have formed a *gram kosh* (village treasury), in which money comes from several sources. Each villager contributes 10 per cent of his/her income to the village fund; they do this only when they have been given work by the *gram sabha*. The fund is utilized when required for marriages, education or any emergency in the community. The *gram sabha* lends money to the villagers from the fund and the person taking the loan, returns it within a year without any interest. In case there are many requests for a loan, the *gram sabha* gives priority to those in dire need. Those who are not able to pay back the money are helped by the others to raise money from any work done.

The *gram sabha*, therefore, ensures that the basic needs

of the villagers are met. It has systems in place to monitor and evaluate the functioning of the *anganwadis*, *gram kosh*, etc. The village has its own set of rules and regulations that govern its day-to-day functioning as well as the use of its resources.

The village has many committees that look after different affairs of the village. The idea of having separate committees evolved during the discussions in the village meetings when the villagers realized the need to enhance efficacy and accountability. It has a forest protection committee that looks after its forests; a grain bank committee, an education committee, a law and order committee, and many more. Primarily, these committees have been formed to share the responsibilities of protection and development of the village and the villagers. Every committee has a set of rules that govern its functioning and also describe the roles and responsibilities of each of its members. All these committees finally report to the *gram sabha*.

Mendha has women's SHGs that also monitor the functioning in the village by being part of different committees,

The villagers have collectively defined the rules and regulations for the protection and the management of the forest. There are patches of the forest that are completely inaccessible and protected

thus ensuring the efficient management and governance of the village. The number of committees and *adhyayan* groups varies as per the need of each village.

The homogeneity in the governance of Mendha has worked to rekindle traditional values and to adhere to norms. This was challenging in many of the AR villages, inhabited by people of different castes, tribes and other prevalent forms of marginalization, in terms of resources and social constraints. The only institutions that the AR villages could identify to invest in are the women's SHGs along with their associated tiers and village-level traditional committees. They initiated discussions in the SHGs about the formation of men and youth groups in the village, along with investing in strengthening traditional village committees. One village also decided to start a grain bank, and all the three villages have agreed to start a *gram kosh*.

Community Forest Rights and *Gram Daan*

—
The ever-existing struggle between the indigenous tribal groups and the forest department intensified in Mendha after

the *ghotul* (a traditional village structure for common gatherings and important meetings) was brought down by a forest official. This propelled Mendha to undertake the process of claiming community forest rights under the Forest Rights Act 2006. This Central Government Act ensures a community's rights over forest land, which they are majorly and, traditionally, dependent upon. The Forest Rights Act has evolved with the idea that no one can preserve, conserve and manage forests better than indigenous groups.

A friend and a social activist from Maharashtra, Mohanbhai Hirabai Hiralal guided the Mendha *gram sabha* through the process. The *gram sabha*, here, is in complete charge of the process and has claimed 1,800 hectares of forest land, in and around Mendha. This forest is rich in bamboo, which the villagers harvest and sell through the *gram sabha* by calling for tenders. The *gram sabha* has sold bamboo worth Rs 1 crore and 25 lakhs. This money is now used for all *gram sabha*-led activities.

Since then, Mendha has sold huge amounts of bamboo. Owing to the sale of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) and, in particular, *tendu* leaves, Mendha has had a stable income over

the years. The villagers have collectively defined the rules and regulations for the protection and the management of the forest. There are patches of the forest that are completely inaccessible and protected. In collaboration with the forest department and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), they have undertaken plantation and water conservation measures in their forest. They have also initiated a tree nursery and forest produce processing centres in the village, based on their traditional skills. They have community oil mills, bamboo craft centres, honey processing units and NTFP godowns for nuts and other forest produce. Every day, four volunteers go to the forest for micro-level management and surveillance.

The *gram sabha* imposes a penalty for breaking community laws. Annual plans are made for fuel usage and people take turns to bring firewood and other resources from the forest. Mendha has recently applied for a *gram daan*, a provision by the Central Government, which promotes a *gram sabha*'s ownership of all the village land. This has been a topic of discussion in the *gram sabha* for

Mendha has also made a considerable investment in its upcoming generations. The youth have a very crucial role in all the community work. Together, they raise plant nurseries and re-plant the saplings in the forest

at least three to four years, with everyone trying to understand and come to an agreement. They arrived at the consensus that all individually owned land would be donated to the *gram sabha*. The respective land users would continue to use the land as earlier and contribute a portion of their produce to the *sabha*. Individual sale and purchase of this property would be prohibited. The *gram sabha* would also be responsible for providing land to the needy and the landless residents of the village. The forest is one of the major pillars of their collective way of existence.

The documentation for the *gram daan* in Mendha is almost complete. Currently a part of Lekha *panchayat*, Mendha will, by adopting this Act, be an independent *panchayat* by itself henceforth. Government schemes and funds allocated to a *panchayat* will be allocated to Mendha *panchayat* and a secretariat will be established to run the system. This, in itself, illustrates self-rule and governance.

For the participants of the AR, Community Forest Rights (CFR) was something new and the idea that the village belongs to the forest, along with generating revenues for all sections of the village was very appealing

to them. They agreed to start exploring CFR. One forest village called Jharna Ghughri became a revenue village through CFR. The villagers of Mendha showed an interest in starting the discussion on CFR. But the researchers of all the three villages arrived at the conclusion that discussion around CFR and the *gram sabha* requires strong unity and conviction in the village. For this, they have decided to start hamlet-level/tola-level meetings and to initiate some collective actions that may help them foster mutual help and fraternity.

Well-being, Youth and Linkage with Stakeholders

—

Mendha has also made a considerable investment in its upcoming generations. The youth have a very crucial role in all the community work. Together, they raise plant nurseries and re-plant the saplings in the forest. Everyone above 18 years of age must compulsorily attend the *gram sabha* in Mendha, which they do regularly. There is a separate meeting for the youth, in the *ghotul*, a place that is made especially for youth interaction and education on the values of life, the art of ideal living and on tribal customs.

The young villagers get together and plan all the festivals and occasions. Earlier, education related to life was imparted to young boys and girls in the gatherings. Now, the youth talk about issues that arise and resolve any disputes between boys and girls. All cultural activities are also taught and practised in these meetings. Hence, the platform helps the young generation learn about their culture and understand their role as citizens....lessons so important because the young will carry forward their lineage.

The youth also migrate to nearby cities for work seasonally. Though the migration rate is not very high, the villagers say that it has increased over the last few years. This year, more youth have migrated in search of better opportunities. They usually return with two-wheelers and comparatively stylish *avatars*, trending among the youth.

AR researchers instantly saw the similarity in the trend of youth issues and migration between Mendha and their own villages. They questioned the lack of earning opportunities in the village to cater to the aspirations of the young people and their attraction to lavish urban lifestyles as well as issues with the

The women of Mendha have had to struggle a lot to save their traditional space. They fought with the forest authorities when the latter brought down their *ghotul*

existing education system, which makes the youth look for jobs rather than becoming farmers. These questions need further, in-depth exploration before arriving at any conclusions. Hence, they have decided to include as many young folk as possible in all the forums and interactions in their village to understand their aspirations.

Women's Struggle in Mendha

The women of Mendha have had to struggle a lot to save their traditional space. They fought with the forest authorities when the latter brought down their *ghotul*. The women argued with the forest authorities and said, "You take wood from our forest and sell it to the companies. We have been living here for so long and we have been protecting the forests and you can't even let us take the wood from the forest to create our traditional space." The women then decided to go to the jungle overnight to get wood and they created their traditional space again.

When the forest authorities came to destroy the *ghotul* again, the women made it clear that if that happened, they would go to the forest again, cut trees and build another *ghotul*: the

forest authorities would then be responsible for the destruction of the forest. At this, the forest authorities gave up and the women celebrated.

When recollecting their struggles, the women in SHG meetings also discussed domestic violence and non-cooperation of family members. When they returned home late in the evenings from these meetings, discussing issues at home and also related to the *ghotul* struggle, their families refused to open the door and many of them were forced to sleep outside their houses in common spaces. These issues were collectively raised by them at the *gram sabha*, the very next day, where the *sabha* condemned the behaviour of their respective families. No stern action was taken against the families; however, the women are grateful to the *gram sabha* for listening to their issues.

Cases of domestic violence are also addressed by the *gram sabha* by charging penalties from the offenders.

1. First-time offenders pay a fine of Rs 250 to the *gram sabha*.
2. Second-time offenders pay a fine of Rs 800 and feed the whole village.

3. Third-time offenders pay a fine of Rs 1600 and feed the whole village.

The offences are often justified by the men, who say that the women are not doing their part of the household chores or are not keeping the food ready when they return home from work. This is also widely accepted by the women, some of who say, "*Khana samay par nahi diya toh pati marega hi*. (If we don't serve food on time, obviously we will get beaten up.)"

The women also shared that they have to stay outside the village, in a separate home, during menstruation as per the practice of the locals. They have to cook their own food there and they cannot enter the village during those seven days. Usually, these houses are *kuchha* (make shift) houses; in Mendha, however, they have constructed two cement concrete houses for this practice in the outskirts of their village. The villagers themselves contributed their labour for this. In Mendha, for the last few years, women are allowed to enter the village but are not allowed inside the houses during these seven days. As a relief, they shared that they can now take cooked food in a tiffin from their homes. Surprising it is that, in a village

The struggle of the villagers of Mendha has had a great impact on the government in terms of accountability of its policies. This has helped in sensitizing the bureaucracy, responsible for various programmes and policies

like Mendha, the women face such a bizarre discriminating practice till today.

In comparison to the men leaders, women leaders were not very visible in the forefront. They are a part of every *gram sabha* committee; however, their contributions in the committee, apart from their fight for the *ghotul*, are hazy.

AR researchers found that the women of the SHGs and their participation in various discussion forums in the village have made them more empowered. The women also address issues of gender discrimination. They thought that the movement in their own villages would be more holistic because of the presence of strong women's collectives.

Mendha village is exemplary in terms of its thoughts on democracy, self-governance and egalitarianism. It has found its own ways of subsistence without becoming dependent on anyone. The villagers adhere to the idea of a 'commune'.

Devaji Tofa, a community leader of Mendha, mentioned that having one's own governing system took Mendha towards

independence and self-sufficiency. And this has only been possible because of the power of the Collectives. The struggle of the villagers of Mendha has had a great impact on the government in terms of accountability of its policies. This has helped in sensitizing the bureaucracy, responsible for various programmes and policies. Today, the information of any development programme assigned for that area reaches the village easily and the village takes decisions; the forest department also co-operates with them in protecting the forests. Officials in the government hesitate to take bribes from the villagers of Mendha, and many government officers bring outsiders on visits to this village. The struggle of the villagers has brought it recognition.

Mendha is an inspiration for the nearby villages. Rather than remaining as an oasis of the alternative, Mendha has become a flowing river of the alternative and has nurtured nearby villages to take collective action to preserve the forests and fight for their rights. As many as 40 nearby villages have made Collectives to take decisions together to develop their village and to selling NTFP. Over the

last two to three years, they have been selling *tendu* leaves like the people of Mendha, and the money received is being utilized for the development of their villages.

The percentage share of the money for several development actions by various committees is taken together by the leaders of the group of 40 villages. Mendha faces a problem in selling its forest produce due to the stiff competition with the forest department and the monopoly of the traders. Now that many villages have a similar agenda and are fighting for their rights over their forests, they, as a force, are planning to negotiate in the market for a fair price and for their sovereignty. Today, when Maharashtra stands tall with maximum land under CFR, Mendha and its influence in Gadchiroli (the only district in country with the highest amount of CFR) is its backbone.

Over a period of last three months, the village-level leaders have initiated some action in the villages. The meetings with the villagers resulted in three different kind of actions, depending on their context. In Chattania of Deosar, which is more diverse in terms of class and caste, villagers started groups

Jana village of Gumla has initiated work around CFR. They have opened a *gram kosh*, discussed CFR in the *gram sabha*, formed a forest committee and are preparing documents to share with the stakeholders to have access and control over their forest

for men and a grain bank, with a belief that these initiatives will help them break social taboos of sitting together and sharing of food among the different sections of society. Jharna Ghughri village of Amarpur initiated meetings in their hamlets with both men and women of the village to understand how they can stay united. This helps strengthen their women SHGs. Along with this, the leaders are also

conducting a series of meetings in the village, to arrive at different action ideas. Jana village of Gumla has initiated work around CFR. They have opened a *gram kosh*, discussed CFR in the *gram sabha*, formed a forest committee and are preparing documents to share with the stakeholders to have access and control over their forest. All the village-level leaders meet regularly in their respective villages after the exposure visits

and are in touch with the leaders of other villages. The villagers of Mendha are taking these initiative ahead as a group.

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NEERAJ JOSHI

CHANGES THROUGH PARTICIPATORY THEATRE

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Using themes that address issues alive in the community in street plays, the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' gives the villagers the opportunity to observe as well as act, making spectators 'spect-actors'. Entertainment and education go hand-in-hand, creating a powerful impact and heralding change

ONE EVENING, DURGAPRASAD, A CONTRACTOR from Mohgaon, came to visit Kumharra village to discuss matters with the *sarpanch* of the village. As he entered the village, he heard a voice resounding in the village: "*Bhaat baad mein khabo, natak dekhan jabo* (Have your food later, come to see the play)"; "Aao aao natak dekho...natak dekho...bin paise ka natak dekho (Come, come to watch the play...watch the play....watch the play for free!)"

Puzzled, he approached the *sarpanch's* house. As he interacted with the man, the calls outside became louder. His curiosity got the better of him and he stopped his conversation with the *sarpanch* mid-way and went out to see what was happening.

Durgaprasad followed the sound and came to a well-lit verandah of the *panchayat* office, which was filled by community members. Seeing such a large gathering of people at such an odd time surprised Durgaprasad.

Durgaprasad was stunned by what he saw. For the first time, he was witnessing a street *natak* (play), which engaged with the spectators and required their participation to take the play to its conclusion. The actors were not talking down to the spectators; instead, there was a dialogue with the spectators, to generate critical thinking

He approached one of the community members to inquire about the gathering.

“*Saheb, natak dekhan aayen ne*, (We’ve come to watch a play, Sir)” was the response.

His conversation was interrupted with someone calling out, “*Jai Sewa, Ram Ram, Sita Ram*” and the crowd of people reciprocating in similar manner.

Durgaprasad saw a young person asking the crowd, “*Kya aap natak dekhan chahabo?* (Do you want to watch a play?)” With this began a dialogue between him and the members of the community. A group of performers then acted out a situation where a husband abandons his wife and brings home a new partner. The performers highlighted the plight of the women and asked the community members whether or not such a situation was acceptable; and whether anyone from the community would be willing to change the situation. The community members proclaimed that the situation was, indeed, not acceptable because this was unjust for the woman (being abandoned by her husband). Some of the community members approached

the stage and confronted the husband (the Oppressor).

This was followed by another performance by the group, which focussed on the adverse consequences of alcoholism. The performers highlighted how the regular consumption of alcohol could break families, divert students from engaging productively to enhance their future, fatal aftermaths and how alcoholism could act as an obstacle to the growth and well-being of society.

The performers paused mid-way with an image: of liquor being prepared in a village, the men spending time drinking alcohol, the women worried about the preparation and consumption of alcohol in the villages, the youth being attracted towards alcohol consumption and gambling. Again, a few questions were put to the community members and the members were asked whether the situation presented before them was acceptable or not. “*Aap joh yeh natak dekho, kahin samaj mein aais? Yeh jo aap dekhav, woh sahi hai ki galat?* (What did you understand by seeing the performance? What you have seen, is it right or wrong?)”

Again, some of the community members came forward and attempted to change the picture. The woman, who was preparing alcohol, was handed a *tasla* (pan shaped instrument used in construction work to carry stones or cement) and *fawda* (hoe), indicating that instead of preparing alcohol, she could work under MGNREGA, to strengthen her livelihood. The youth, who were enjoying drinking and gambling, were given books and bags, symbolizing that instead of wasting time, they could read to improve their future. Alcohol mugs were taken away from the men, who drank alcohol, and they were united with their families (grieving women). The community members transformed the scenario from one highlighting the problem of alcoholism and its fatal consequences, to one that presented happiness and prosperity.

Durgaprasad was stunned by what he saw. For the first time, he was witnessing a street *natak* (play), which engaged with the spectators and required their participation to take the play to its conclusion. The actors were not talking down to the spectators; instead, there was a

PRADAN organized a series of workshops to help us understand the concept of the TOTO and in how many ways villagers are oppressed

dialogue with the spectators, to generate critical thinking. With many questions in his mind, he approached the group of actors comprising young, dynamic and energetic people.

Hirdesh, one of the actors, revealed that they were members of the Theatre of the Oppressed (TOTO), the objective of which was to primarily capitalize on the energies of the youth, to address issues of villagers and to generate an interface with community members/stakeholders, to trigger changes. Other group members joined the conversation and proudly shared about their journey. “So far, we have performed in 44 forums and generated self-empowering processes of dialogues with the community around issues such as the menace of dowry, the value of MGNREGA, the evils of corruption, the problems of discrimination against the girl child, female foeticide, inequality, alcoholism, and drudgery,” Hirdesh said.

Durgaprasad was in awe of these dynamic and energetic young performers. He enquired about the group’s inception, spirit and journey to achieve the desired goals.

Nidhi, a group member, said that they were members of the Yuwa Shaastra Programme, initiated by PRADAN, in collaboration with Budhner Narmada Mahila Sangh (BNMS).

“The Yuwa Shaastra Programme helps youth to identify and articulate their aspirations, which then empowers them to make informed choices. The Programme has been structured in a way that it creates collaborative spaces for the Collectives and the Youth to be oriented on nutritional, governance and gender attributes, thereby ameliorating their village society. Of the 630 youth mobilized, overtime 24 of them expressed interest in

acquiring theatrical skills and in using these skills to bring about change in society. PRADAN organized a series of workshops to help us understand the concept of the TOTO and in how many ways villagers are oppressed. Intense discussions were carried out in the presence of PRADAN professionals, to highlight the importance and advantages of having a vision. Through activities such as micro-lab, image-making and identification, trust fall, the baby kangaroo game, the mapping of feelings and the aspiration mapping exercises, we enhanced our ability to identify issues relevant to the self and society, empathise with self and others, process our feelings



Over the years, attempts have been focussed on building an understanding of the community and their strengths. This exploration has, in turn, led to community members claiming public spaces as citizens, defining development for themselves and enhancing agriculture productivity

and develop understanding and trust within the group. Such workshops led to some of the youth being able to firmly decide to take up the path of theatre, to bring about the desired change. We were 14 in number and we decided to devote our energy and time in the self-empowering processes of dialogue; we organized ourselves into a group and pledged to generate critical thinking among the masses.”

Shayam, another member, joined the conversation. “Our first performance was in the village of Sakri, where we highlighted the issue of dowry and female foeticide; after that, there was no looking back. What followed was a series of performances touching upon sensitive issues and, thereby, generating empowering dialogue within the community. By being part of brainstorming sessions organized with PRADAN professionals, we were able to identify issues in respective villages. With time PRADAN professionals connected us through the village leadership to collectively identify issues prevalent to the village or area. We are now more confident when performing, selecting issues and preparing the script. Further, we have also evolved, with respect to attracting more crowds

(through *pheri*-group members moving about in the village with instruments, raising slogans and songs to invite community for the theatre) and have also experimented with image theatre (depiction of relationships, emotions and realistic situations through images as developed by Augusto Boal). Initially, the group members required support for mobilization in the village and someone from PRADAN for the role of the Joker. Because we are new to the concept of TOTO and Joker, we were not confident to play the role of the Joker. The Joker’s role becomes very crucial in the act as it is the Joker who initiates the theatre, bridges the gap between actors and spectators and concludes the theatre. However, now we are confident and we have performed in locations other than Mohgaon and also at a function organized by the block administration. Through TOTO, we aspire to change society and gain recognition.”

Many questions arose in Durgaprasad’s mind. Why was PRADAN developing such a group? How would the group sustain itself? What was the larger objective for such an engagement? How long would PRADAN support this group?

These questions forced him to enquire about the people behind all this. The group members directed him to a PRADAN professional, who was, by then, helping some members of the group to pack the props.

Hesitantly, Durgaprasad approached the PRADAN professional, introduced himself and praised the act showcased by the youth. A friendly response from the professional provided him a window to explore the questions running through his mind. Durgaprasad shared his experience of the evening and the thoughts that arose in his mind. With a smile, the PRADAN professional took a pause from the packing and shared PRADAN’s vision with him and how it aims to create a ‘just and equitable society’.

The intervention in Mohgaon began in July 2009, he said: “Over the years, attempts have been focussed on building an understanding of the community and their strengths. This exploration has, in turn, led to community members claiming public spaces as citizens, defining development for themselves and enhancing agricultural productivity. However, more needs to be done to help the

In Mohgaon, theatre was seen as a form of engagement, which would encourage a democratic interaction in the community, resulting in analyzing the root causes of the situation and the collective exploration of solutions

community to take charge of their own lives. Thus, it is imperative to engage with the community to restate and ground their sense of agency, that is, 'I matter'. Consequently, there were thoughts about utilizing the energy of the youth, in collaboration with the women's collectives, to bring about empowering changes. Further, in Mohgaon, theatre was seen as a form of engagement, which would encourage a democratic interaction in the community, resulting in analyzing the root causes of the situation and the collective exploration of solutions. At present, in Mohgaon, there are certain issues as gender-based violence, exclusion of youth from village functioning, issues with respect to education that need immediate attention and action. Introducing TOTO to the youth will sensitize them with issues of discrimination and generate new opportunities to connect with the masses for well being of the area."

He continued, "Therefore, the youth who were enrolled under the Yuwa Shaastra Programme were offered the opportunity to acquire theatrical skills and mark a change. Those who were willing were educated about TOTO, a form of participatory theatre. It

gives a spectator the opportunity to observe as well as act and, hence, the spectators become 'spect-actors', forming a popular, community-based education, grounded on the vision of Paulo Freire, in the book *'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'*.

"Young people willingly volunteered to be part of this initiative and set the norms themselves, with respect to the frequency of meetings and the gatherings post sunset (that is, to gather after completing work for the day). Seeing this group's engrossed engagement in TOTO, and their motivation, we (the PRADAN team) thought of popularizing this group and providing them an alternative livelihood option, along with their becoming change agents (like PRADAN professionals). With this spirit, we organized a series of workshops, comprising a mix of theoretical and theatrical understanding and performances in villages—the idea being to learn by doing. Over time, the group members were introduced to the art of facilitation and they learned how to design a script and connect actors to the issues of the village. Group members enhanced their ability to create and facilitate the forum and realized the importance and role of the

Joker. Witnessing such a young group enacting such issues has been appreciated by the members of the women's collectives too. In Mohgaon, we perceive this group as a powerful medium to trigger critical thinking among the community members and find real solutions. This requires constant engagement with the community; at present, the focus of the group is to select a cluster of villages and embed with the community for a considerable period to discover the real issues and their solutions. We believe that the joint venture of the BNMS, PRADAN and the TOTO group will result in awakening the critical thinking process of the community, leading to social action for a 'just and equitable' society."

Durgaprasad was amazed at what he had witnessed and at being introduced to an alternative form of engagement, which encourages the community itself to analyse and introspect rather than being preached to by some outsider. So far, he had viewed theatre as a source of entertainment or as a medium to propagate issues/ideas in the society. However, that day, he witnessed a form of theatre that bridged the gap between the 'actor' and the 'spectator'. He saw the spectators engaging in self-

Boys in the group have become gender sensitive and accompany the girls to their homes post performances. Boys also have to face anger from their families because this activity is not viewed as a productive one. However, given all these odds, the group has so far performed in 44 forums voluntarily

empowering processes of dialogue and learning the ability of critical thinking.

Involving the youth in this forum and viewing them as change agents seemed to him a fruitful approach. Through this, the youth would also develop critical thinking and could partner with the women's collectives, to move closer to a just and equitable society. On visiting villages in Mohgaon, for work or otherwise, he himself had observed youth whiling away time. TOTO could certainly bring out the best in the youth and initiate the desired changes through collective action. Duragaprasad was overwhelmed by the performances and the interaction with the youth group. He liked the confidence and

spirit of young individuals who have been volunteering, taking time from their daily schedule to come together and creating such empowering forums. He found these youths are empowered as they themselves are fighting against the social odds at the home front. Nidhi, a woman member of the group, has to bear the family's anger for reaching home late. Most of the forum meetings take place late in the evening and there are times when she reaches her village very late. Boys in the group have become gender sensitive and accompany the girls to their homes post performances. Boys also have to face anger from their families because this activity is not viewed as a productive one. However, given all these odds,

the group has so far performed in 44 forums voluntarily. Members have convinced their family members to embark on the journey to become successful entrepreneurs. Durgaprasad became aware of a group of youth who were different from the rest he had known. They were vibrant, energetic with a vision for themselves as well as society. He was convinced of better days ahead where communities will oppose the policies that violate the principle of equality and inclusiveness. Wishing for more such forums, he left on his bike for Mohgaon.

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SATISH PATNAIK

THE NARRATIVE OF DEVELOPMENT: In Search of an Alternative

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Realizing that the world of consumerism and many of the interventions carried out in the name of development will take their people away from traditional practices and habits that have sustained them in good health over centuries, the Kandho tribe takes active steps to resist any outside help that will snuff out age-old, time-tested resources and ways of living and life. In this, they are helped by Living Farms, a civil society organization, in South Odisha.

The Backdrop

AT 2 A.M. ON 17 JUNE 2018, THE train dropped me in the sleepy town of Muniguda. Harsh, the only person I knew there, was waiting for me. As we started walking towards the vehicle, my exposure to the work

of Living Farms (a civil society organization, CSO, in Odisha) began. Our car reached Bondichuan village of Bisam Cuttack block at around 11 a.m. The villagers (including some from nearby villages) were waiting for us and apparently had begun gathering there since 10 a.m. All of us sat under a large mango tree. The occasional falling of ripe mangoes brought a twinkle to the sad eyes of the older women and mischievous smiles to faces of the young folk.

They are the progeny of nature and protecting nature is their duty. The oldest person of the gathering narrated the importance of staying in villages and the need for a forest around each village. The forest gives them food, shelter, water and medicines

The mango tree was at the base of a hillock, where shifting cultivation was being practised. The trees on the hillock had been burnt, as was the practice. Beyond the hillock, lush green mountains were covered by monsoon clouds. From the meeting place, we could see a small cluster of houses in the village. Goats and cows occasionally walked by as we proceeded with the meeting. And amid this unique setting, the story of the alternative unfolded.

Kutumb and Kunia

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The meeting started with introductions, where we were referred to as *kunia* (guests) to their *kutumb* (family). Jagannath Manjhi, the facilitator of the meeting, informed me that, in their Kui language, *kutumb* means family and all the Kandho people, no matter where they live, belong to one family. They are the progeny of nature and protecting nature is their duty. The oldest person of the gathering narrated the importance of staying in villages and the need for a forest around each village. The forest gives them food, shelter, water and medicines. They also said that around 30 per cent of the food on their plate comes from the forest and they substantiated the claim

with a report of a study by Living Farms.

Gradually, with modernization, values and cultural practices had become diluted. Before the villagers could prepare themselves and keep their culture intact, rapid modernization had taken control of their lives. This led the villagers to meet, reflect and critically examine the changes taking place and to initiate alternative actions for a meaningful existence.

The initiative started with realizing that their food diversity was decreasing. Over the course of the last nine years, many transformations had taken place in their food habits. There was, within the *kutumb*, a revolution and a resistance, in non-violent ways, to these external forces. They were able to reinstate the use of their traditional food among the *kutumb*.

In recent years, the *kutumb* has been successful in restoring diverse seeds, important for their unique agro-ecology, and consume healthy food, suitable for their lifestyle. The villagers exchange seeds annually within the *kutumb*, thereby ensuring a steady supply of indigenous seeds, and practice

mixed-cropping as per their age-old tradition and which is scientifically backed as a desired practice of agriculture.

Whereas hybrid and high-yielding seeds are available in neighbouring shops as well as the agriculture department, the villagers stand united in their determination to preserve their traditional seeds and food. This resistance stems from their adherence to their culture. Although they are aware of the lucrative offers of eucalyptus and teak plantations and cotton cultivation, they have decided that no Kandho family will plant these because it would be detrimental to the unique socio-economic systems of the Eastern Ghats.

For this, they have urged government departments not to supply high yielding seeds and chemicals in the villages. They have also requested the forest department to stay away from their forests and not ruin the inherent diversity with a silvi-cultural and commercial plantation mindset. Recently, the villagers have rejected the interventions of many NGOs and government departments when they found that the project is against the beliefs of the *kutumb*.

'A Kandho must live in harmony with nature, practice traditional, mixed cropping-based agriculture, enjoy diverse foods and respect the collective way of living'. Based on these values, the villagers question the interventions of external agencies and take their own decisions

This united stance of non-violent resistance and negotiation is a unique tale rekindling the Adivasi life and world.

Beliefs and Practices

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The villagers consider the forest and the soil to be their mother, which needs careful nurturing. An elder in the meeting asked, "If chemicals are applied to the soil, the food will become poisonous. How can you poison your own mother's milk?"

The villagers listed several practices that demonstrate that their cultural identity stems from living in harmony with nature. As an example: no cultural festival is complete without the home-prepared *irpi kalu* (Mahua beer) because the Earth God can only be satisfied when that is offered. The Mahua flower, fruit and seeds from the jungle are not only essential for celebrations but

also are important ingredients in their food and in the fodder for their livestock. Mahua is a gift of nature and they understand its judicious use.

Every month, the people of the *kutumb* celebrate different festivals. All the adult men and women sit together and discuss pertinent issues. During these meetings, the norms on forest produce collection, cutting of trees, burning of forests, cultivating crops and seed exchange are finalized. No further meetings are required, except in an emergency when they call special meetings.

Unity is their prime power. Living as a *kutumb* facilitates the men, women and youth to sit separately in their respective groups and make action plans, as per the decision of the *kutumb*. These smaller groups often influence the *kutumb* to discuss important issues in their meetings.

Why and since when

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The villagers clearly support the move to resist all outside interventions that take them away from their traditional and time-tested practices and

engagement with nature; in fact, they are jubilant about the alternative life that they are carving out. In 2009, when some villagers and professionals of Living Farms prepared a crop diversity chart, they realized that the severity of poor food diversity had taken place in the area ever since hybrid, high yielding seeds and the promotion of monoculture were introduced. They started educating the people about dietary diversity and promoted mixed-cropping with traditional varieties. By the time they restored the diversity to some extent with around 2000 families, they confronted another hurdle: the shame the Kandhos felt about their own food despite being aware of its nutritive value.

In their interactions with the higher-caste people, school teachers and shopkeepers, they sensed that they were being constantly mocked about their food practices. The influence of the external world and the market coerced them to adopt foods that were costly and placed strain on their household budgets. In order to be accepted by the larger society, they began to give up their traditional food practices, leading also to severe malnutrition.

They held meetings and workshops highlighting the nutritional benefits of traditional cultivated and non-cultivated foods and cuisines. Following two years of rigorous investment, the villagers, especially the younger generation, acknowledged the importance of food sovereignty

In 2012, the elders of the *kutumb* initiated an internal revolution by encouraging the consumption of traditional food and also instilling pride in their heritage. They held meetings and workshops highlighting the nutritional benefits of traditional cultivated and non-cultivated foods and cuisines. Following two years of rigorous investment, the villagers, especially the younger generation (those who were going to school and having mid-day meals), acknowledged the importance of food sovereignty.

Simultaneously, because most of their food and household requirements came from the forest, the women started raising their voice against the strict regulations imposed by the forest department and the atrocities meted out by the forest officials. Their continuous resistance to the department and its policies bore fruit: the villagers restricted the mobility of the forest department in their forests and have applied for Community Forest Rights (CFR) for their village forest. Although CFR is yet to be awarded to them, they have gained better control and access over the forest since 2016.

In recent *kutumb* meetings, the issue of the younger generation

being swayed by modernization and their propensity to migration were important topics for discussion. With the mushrooming of residential schools and different skill-building trainings, the young were unwilling to stay in the village or work in the fields. Along with this, the illusion created by TV and mobile phones attracted the youth to the labour markets in cities. Unfortunately, once there, they get trapped in the lower tiers of the unorganized labour sector.

The youth find it challenging to live frugally. The *kutumb*, therefore, facilitated the formation of many youth groups. These groups engaged with the youth (both boys and girls) to reorient them with the values of the *kutumb*. Currently, the *kutumb* is also making Odiya-to-Kui dictionaries for the younger generation, to learn the local Kui language.

In the last five years, many activists and experts have engaged directly with the villagers through workshops. The impact of these workshops is evident in the people's sharing and actions. With Living Farms, the villagers have documented their learning and also are collaborating in many

research projects, to influence policies to be more pro-nature.

The leaders, who participated in the workshops, facilitate in the decision-making and action plans of the *kutumb*. The leaders have negotiated with some development agencies (NGOs) to modify their projects, as per the decisions of the *kutumb*. For example: they have accepted the safe drinking water project but have influenced an NGO to change their chemical intensive agriculture intervention into sustainable farming. Looking at these benefits, the Kandhos of Gudari block have started relearning mixed-cropping, improving their village governance, and gaining greater access and control over the forest.

Women and Decisions

Women took centre stage in the protests against forest department. Due to their active participation, the officials of the forest department backed out and the Kandhos are now able to access the forest without any fear. Although time and again, the villagers have emphasized that women play an important role in *kutumb* meetings and in other protests, women remained

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silent throughout the meeting that I attended. Even after some exploration on the nature of women's participation during the discussion and the decision-making processes, there was hardly any response from the women. Professionals of Living Farms later said that the women participated in the protests and worked on the decisions of the *kutumb* actively but they seldom voiced their views in meetings. This would definitely require an internal change on how the women saw themselves in a traditional Kandho society.

Youth and Alternatives

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The members of the youth group said that their role was to influence youngsters to respect and follow the *kutumb* culture and ethos. They have uprooted the eucalyptus plantation, helped in the promotion of mixed-cropping, revived the celebration of old festivals such as Meria and stopped the celebration of Hindu festivals among tribals in their locality. In the class and caste struggle with the upper castes, Kumuti and Shundhis, the youth play a major role in preparing and sharing communication material.

With the initiation of youth groups in 2016, the focus was on influencing youngsters about the detrimental effects of mobiles and TVs. They realized that the kind of education that they were getting did not equip them for life or the world. On the contrary, it made them dependent on externals for livelihood choices. In many villages, the youth are no longer migrating and have stopped going for skill development trainings as well; they are, instead, staying in the villages and practising agriculture. According to them, skill-building programmes make them cheap labour in big cities and they lose their freedom. Instead, they are now conducting workshops with the village youth, regarding the benefits of imbibing traditional knowledge and skills more efficiently and staying in the village. Some families have also banished TVs from their houses.

Answers and Silences

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During the whole interaction, the villagers seldom talked about internal conflicts within the *kutumb* and their mechanism to address future threats. There are still significant numbers of Kandho villages that do not

follow this type of *kutumb* culture and have an influence on these resisting villages in many ways. The youth, usually, get attracted to a 'bling' lifestyle. There are many families, who still go for teak and eucalyptus plantations and cotton cultivation, which is against the decision of the *kutumb*. When asked about these, the people said that the *kutumbs* were ill-prepared to address these issues as of now but are vigilant about them.

They attempted to influence the stakeholders to make Pradhanmantri Awasik Yojana (PAY) in the way traditional Kandho houses were made; however, apart from allowing this in some sporadic cases, such changes for all PAY houses was rejected by the block officials. Yet, a majority of government schemes and projects of NGOs are not changing, even after the repetitive insistence of the villagers.

As I started to pen down my learning, I was struck by two aspects. First, I think that the participation of women in *kutumb* meetings and their position as decision-makers in this alternative is very crucial. Currently, the

Two major threats loom large over the initiative. The first is the volatile, political nature of the area with Left-wing extremism and aversion of the state to the tribal movement (these are the mineral-rich blocks near Niyamgiri)

journey of the *kutumb* lacks systemic understanding and detailed investment for better involvement of women. Second, some of the youth are taking radical measures; however, will it help them in their quest? Their political intent for an alternative life seems inspired by new social movements; in the Schedule-5 area, however, better amalgamation with the system is perhaps a desired way out. This is important because many investments of the externals are contrary to the ethos of the *kutumb*.

Two major threats loom large over the initiative. The first is the volatile, political nature of the area with Left-wing

extremism and aversion of the state to the tribal movement (these are the mineral-rich blocks near Niyamgiri). The second is individual interest vs. the collective way of life. Among the villagers, some are opting for chemical-intensive agriculture and eucalyptus plantation. Some are not following *kutumb* decisions and continue to work on individual interest. The *kutumb* is yet to figure out how to address these.

The light in these dark times is the constant support of Living Farms. Enhanced awareness of their agro-ecology and an attempt to make sovereign village clusters with solidarity economy are the alternatives we need and the

kutumbs are pioneering these. Maybe, together they will find answers.

The villagers insisted I dine with them. The Sun, before going to sleep behind the mountains, lingered for a few more seconds while I relished the local dishes prepared by the villagers. On my way back in the twilight, I wondered, “Am I the same inquirer-explorer that I was in the morning or am I the guest that the villagers greeted a few hours ago or have I transformed in some way to be part of their *kutumb* now?”

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PLASTIC BOTTLES: Paving the Way to Perennial Farming

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Finding a new use for discarded plastic bottles, now a ubiquitous and deathly hazard to the environment, a little revolution is underway in a tiny block in Khunti district, where tribal farmers are using it to water their crops in an innovative way through *machan* cultivation, opening up possibilities of greening land that lies arid most of the year.

DID YOU EVER THINK THAT the waste plastic bottle, which creates pollution, can ever be used for agriculture, especially in drought prone areas? Yes, it is being done by the tribal communities of Karra block of Khunti district, Jharkhand, by utilising discarded plastic bottles in farming.

The farmers of Karra block have experimented with using an advanced and unique technique of

machan (trellis) cultivation with bottle irrigation, which has transformed their drought-hit terrain into a green area. Karra is a drought-prone block, with acute water shortage, leading to an alarming food security situation. Almost 25 per cent of the households migrate, usually from December and up to June. Some of the families migrate for more than 10 months because there is very little engagement in agricultural activity during that period due to shortage of water.

Machan cultivation, or a 'multi-tier' system of cultivation, involves the simultaneous growing of multiple crops on the same land, to fully utilize vertical growing spaces, with the help of used plastic bottles for irrigation

The Indian Gramin Services (IGS), with financial help from the Indo-Global Social Service Society (IGSSS), incubated the concept of *machan* cultivation with bottle irrigation in this community towards the end of 2015. *Machan* cultivation, or a 'multi-tier' system of cultivation, involves the simultaneous growing of multiple crops on the same land, to fully utilize vertical growing spaces, with the help of used plastic bottles for irrigation.

IGS has acted as a catalyst for change in this area through the implementation of the 'Creating Livelihood Adaptation under Drought (CLAD)' project under IGSSS. The objective is to increase climate-resilient farming, to overcome adverse socio-environmental conditions. The families in these villages suffered from such extreme water crisis that when we asked them about the cultivation of creeper crops, their one and only one answer was. "*Humare gaon mein pani ki bahut samasya hai, isliye hum logon ko bade paimane pe kheti karne me bahut dikkat aati hai* (We have an acute water scarcity in our village, so cultivating on a large scale is a big problem for us)."

Against this backdrop and through intensive participation and interactive exercises, IGS sowed the concept of *machan* cultivation. With the use of local available bamboo, polymer wire and fishing net wire, a *machan* is constructed and waste water bottles are used as an irrigation source.

In late 2015, Ranjan Sanga was the first farmer in Ludru village to come forward and experiment with *machan* cultivation through bottle irrigation. Earlier, he cultivated paddy and grew creepers on the ground. He did not get a good quality of

vegetables because the vegetable crop would rot and be infested with pests. Until two years ago, his family used to struggle to sustain themselves in the peak summer season. After he adopted *machan* cultivation, however, he plants ridge gourd and pointed gourd in the *machan* and planted chilli and tomato on the ground. He now remains very busy plucking and marketing his produce all through the year. The method of cultivation has enhanced his income by more than Rs 10,000 per month.

Delighted, he says, "*Maine yeh machan aur bottle dwara kheti*



Figure 1: Bitter gourd cultivation on a *machan*

The major challenge was to convince the families about the irrigation facilities as well as about the quality of the produce

karke apne kheti ka kharch ko ghataya. Ab main bachche ko English medium school bhej raha hun, jo ki mera sapna tha. Main abhi azola pit banaunga aur kheti me azola ka upyog karunga (I have reduced my cost of cultivation by growing vegetables on the trellis. Now, I am living my dream of sending my child to an English medium school. I will now make an Azolla pit in my field and use it for cultivation)."

For bottle irrigation, a farmer requires a one-litre plastic bottle for each bamboo pole. The bottle is filled with water and attached upside down (Figure 2). With a

rope to the pole and a small hole is made in the bottle cap from which water drips down slowly and goes to the root of the plant. The dense soil retains the water as it drips on it. The water drips slowly and directly around the roots; therefore, it is available to the plant for a longer time, the plant thus get optimum water for its use. The water in the bottle lasts for a day and the bottles are refilled in the morning.

Machan cultivation leads to an increase in the production of various crops grown by the farmers and reduces the cost of production. It gives scope for

multi-tier and inter-cropping of many varieties of crops such as creeper crops in the *machan* and horticulture crops below the *machan* shed. It enhances resource utilization as well as profitability. Bottle irrigation reduces environmental pollution by reusing empty bottles; it lowers water usage because the soil retains the moisture in the roots of the plants and it also restricts the growth of weeds that grow when the entire area is watered.

The major challenge was to convince the families about the irrigation facilities as well as about the quality of the produce. Farmers have, traditionally, been doing creeper cultivation but they usually used dry tree branches for the creepers to grow. Or the creepers were usually grown on the roof tops of the houses or on homestead land, and the crop was mostly meant for household consumption. Farmers were introduced to creeper cultivation as a cash crop on a trellis in the medium uplands. In the improved trellis system, farmers now prepare the trellis using bamboo poles for pillars and GI wire



Figure 2: Construction of a *machan* with water bottles

However, all apprehensions were put to rest once the first crop was harvested. The farmers earned a minimum of Rs 10,000 from one decimal of land, with minimal irrigation through the year

and fish net thread, both more durable and cost-effective.

Initially, the farmers were resistant to this new method because the construction of the *machan* incurred a cost of around Rs 3000 to 5000 depending upon the size of the plot. Farmers were also apprehensive that using very little water and irrigating with bottles would not sustain the growth of the plants, which

would then die. However, all apprehensions were put to rest once the first crop was harvested. The farmers earned a minimum of Rs 10,000 from one decimal of land, with minimal irrigation through the year.

At present, Karra block is filled with green vegetables and a variety of crops. Many agri-households now cultivate all year long. Farmers are now

growing both creeper plants and horticulture crops at the same time and at the same place. It's a new beginning for them. Through the modest support of IGSSS, more than 15 households are full of smiles; the aim is to witness such smiles in all the other households as well.

—
Debarati Ghatak was earlier working with
Indian Grameen Services, Jharkhand

Theatre of the Oppressed is used as a participatory tool to generate awareness in villages about different issues (p.24)



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

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

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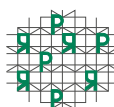
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Women of Mendha proudly show their protected forest to Suhasini Bali during the exposure visit to Mendhalekha, Maharashtra

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