

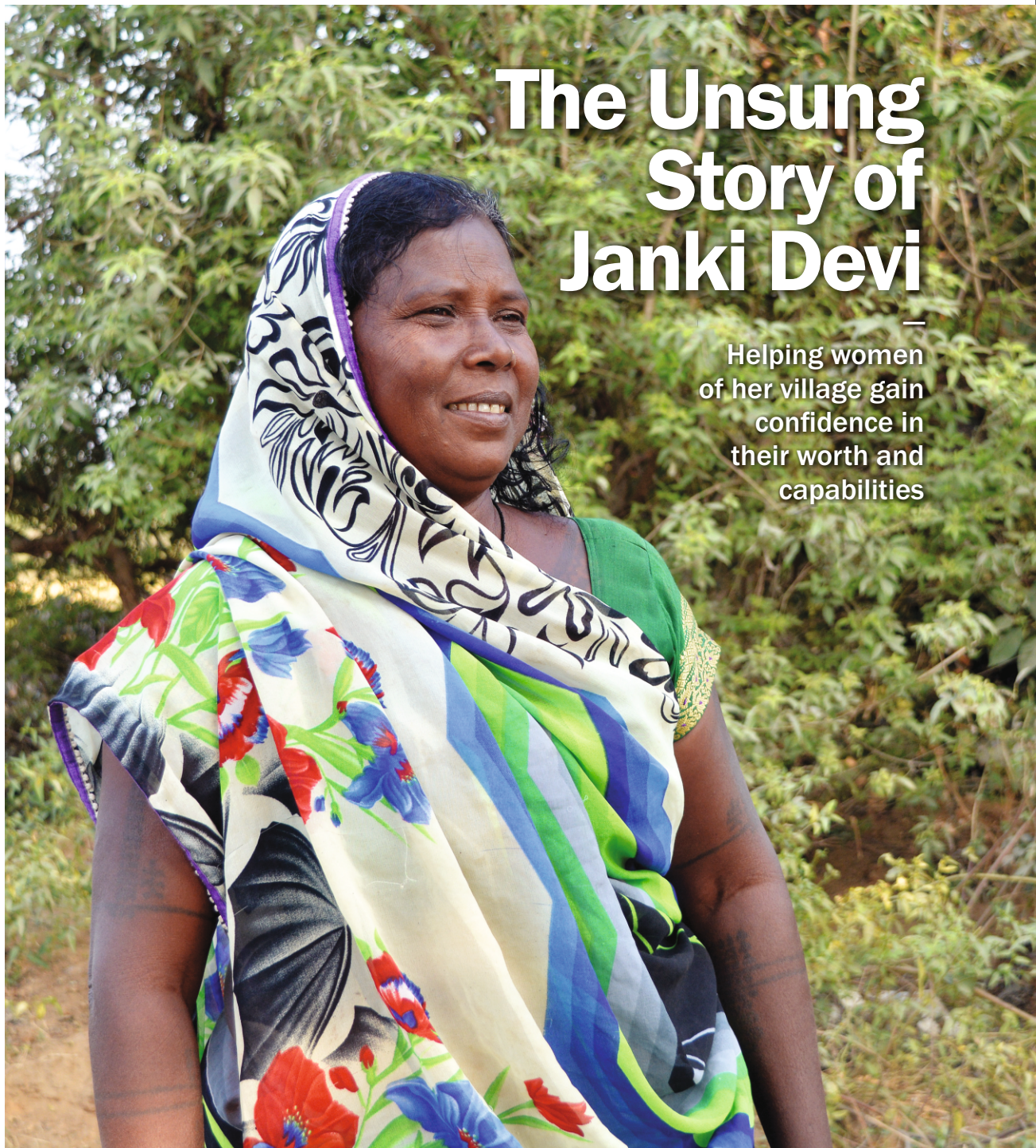
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THE LIVELIHOODS AND DEVELOPMENT BIMONTHLY

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The Unsung Story of Janki Devi

—
Helping women
of her village gain
confidence in
their worth and
capabilities



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Way Beyond Being Just Service Providers

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GENDER ROLES: The Community and the Self

...

Recognising the subtle ways in which gender roles are inculcated in girls as they grow up, the author realizes that rural and urban society alike continue to foster and typify a woman's way of being

MY LIFE WAS WONDERFUL, especially because I was an only child. I was allowed to do anything I wanted and was frequently told by my mother, "*Tui amader sudhu meye nosh, amader chele o tui.* (You are not just a daughter but a son to us.)"

Oh! This was a prized compliment from my parents. But looking back, I wonder whether it really was a compliment or was it just another one of those endless gendered expectations imposed upon a girl. I am not sure of what it really was. The more I work on training women in the community about gender

roles, the more I realize how 'gendered' my own life really was.

Growing up, I truly thought that my parents were liberal, albeit just a little protective about my safety. My cousin brothers, however, would also be scolded like I was and I thought that we were equal. I went to a good school (girls only). I was never expected to do a single chore at home. My mother used to say, "*Ekhon onek somoy ache kaj korar, age porasona to kor, ranna poreo sikhte parbi* (You have got loads of time to do chores, first study properly. You can learn cooking any day.)" But as I grew older, I became responsible and began helping my parents in work.

It all started from the reflections I gained in all those trainings. The trainings were not only about methods and theories but also gender discrimination in practice. And from these learnings, I gained a deeper perspective about myself and my life.

I also went through a stage when I became lazy and started avoiding some of the chores, drawing such statements from my parents, “*Kaj na korle sasurbarir lokera bari pathiye debe*. (If you don’t do any work, your in-laws will send you back.),” or “*Ki je hobe ei meyer?* (What will happen to this girl?)” But it was said in fun (or so I thought) and I always took it lightly. Of the two, my father was always the more serious one and every decision was announced by him, after consultation with my mother. I was always a little afraid of him but I also knew that he loved me very much. He always corrected me, “*Eto jore hasar ki ache?* (What is there that you have to laugh so loud?)” or “*Pa choriye boste nei*. (Don’t sit with your legs spread out.),” or, “*Emon kore meyeder cholta nei, payer awaz howa bhalo noy*. (Girls should not walk like this, footsteps should not be heard.)” Upon reflection, I realize that such comments were never directed at the boys that I grew up with.

I am sure many of you will, by now, be thinking, “This is very normal,” and “This has happened with me as well.”

When I was young, I thought I had the most perfect life

any girl could have and that whatever my parents said was for my betterment as a woman. But realization dawned upon me later, thanks to all those years of education followed by my work at PRADAN. My experiences changed my outlook towards life. All the trainings that we conducted at PRADAN, especially the gender trainings, invested in the members an ability to recognize the language of discrimination. It was only then, that I understood what gender discrimination was and how and it played out in our lives sometimes, without our realizing it.

It all started from the reflections I gained in all those trainings. The trainings were not only about methods and theories but also gender discrimination in practice. And from these learnings, I gained a deeper perspective about myself and my life.

I saw that I was every bit what every other woman was, caught in the black hole of gender roles. I saw how I had covered myself in a robe, believing it to be a glamorous and shiny royal robe. I had been happy in my belief that I was supposed to perform certain responsibilities in my life and that

I would need to learn them when the time came.

I never learned how to cook properly. When I wanted to learn my mother would say, “Darling! You have to learn it someday. No need to come in now. Stay away and study.” I now realize that my mother was not being generous but was only enrobing me in the belief that I would someday have to take on the responsibility of cooking for, and feeding others, even if I studied and acquired a ‘high standard’.

I had previously believed that the women in the communities that we were working with were poor and were in the clutches of caste, class and gender, and we needed to really work with them on gender. But this assumption was shattered on the very first day that I walked into the community to preach about gender and gender roles.

I heard them say, “*Hume pata hai ki kya sahi hai aur kya galat! Lekin hum isi gaon mai rehte hai, dusre kya bolenge?* (We know what is right and what is wrong! But we live in this village, we can’t oppose the norms. What will the others say?)”

I thought of how we get into these gendered roles in society from childhood. We see it in our families and in society around us and that is how it becomes so internalized.

“Mai nahi ja sakti meeting me dada logon ke saath, wo log bolenge ki mai acchi aurat nahi hoon. (I cannot go for meetings with the men. They will say I am not a good woman.)”

“Didi, mai to jaise bhi kar rahi hoon, lekin apni beti aur bete ko sikhaungi.” (Sister, I am enduring all this in whatever way I can, but I will teach my daughter and son.)”

It is very frustrating to see that women are not able to take a stand for themselves. I have, on several occasions, become angry and, at times, have scolded them and then left. But later, when I have reflected, I have had a flashback of my mother and myself.

I am a woman from the urban areas where it is professed that life is less gendered and less conservative. I think of how free and independent women in the cities are. And then, suddenly, I am called back to look at myself. “Hey! Who do you think you are? You are not independent or free!” I, then, begin to think of all the instances when that is really not the case.

I began to realize that I was no different from the village women we were training with on creating

awareness of gender roles. My parents had always said, “You are a good daughter.” The definition of the words ‘good daughter’ is highly gendered because it speaks of a girl who never quarrels, respects everyone, speaks softly, does not have any addictions, is single and is untouched. These are all qualities to be portrayed to society. I am not ‘good’ because I am an educated, confident and fearless girl, who takes up challenges in life. I am not appreciated for who I am.

In the community where I work, I see girls getting married by the age of 16. Thank god! I have not been forced to get married by that age. I have not been subjected to that. I am happy to be different in that respect. Hey wait! Wait! Why am I feeling so happy?

I remember a conversation I had with my mother recently. Mother had casually thrown this at me, “You need to marry by the age of 26–28 years.”

I had responded, “Well, okay!”

Mother: “We will find a boy who is elder to you, tall, handsome with a higher paid job and belongs to a high status family.”

At other times, she has complained to me, “Why do you

need to do a field job? See, your complexion is getting darker day by day. Who will marry you?”

When I recall these conversations, I realize that I am no different from the village girl, who also needs to marry into a better family and to a ‘superior’ husband and where the girl needs to be homely and beautiful. I am supposed to be marrying to be a ‘wife’ and not a ‘partner’.

I thought of how we get into these gendered roles in society from childhood. We see it in our families and in society around us and that is how it becomes so internalized.

When I was pondering upon it after the gender trainings, I realized how deeply entrenched it was. I knew I was supposed to study, marry, bear children, take care of the house, cook and do a job. Is it expected of me because I am a woman?

One day, my mother called me up while I was in office. She told me that she felt worthless and was a prisoner in my father’s home. I was surprised at her breaking down before me. I consoled her and tried to pacify her. The next day, I went for a meeting in the community where I had a discussion about women’s lives.

The biggest dilemma that I face in all this is whether I can practice what I am preaching to the community. Am I ready to take on that challenge of confrontation in my own life as I am teaching the women to do?

They said that they are only wives and mothers. Most of them had even given up their hobbies and dreams after their marriage because they could not move out from their homes.

Sitting there, I saw a glimpse of my mother's life, or my life, in their stories. Deprived of resources or belongingness (a woman's so-called home is not really her own), she is just a housewife without any hobby to keep her entertained and no social life to speak of. At times, it strikes me that a city woman's life is even worse than that of the deprived women I am working with. At least in the villages, people like us are investing time and effort to help them better their lives. What about all those who face the same life in the cities? I would say that they are in a worse state.

The biggest dilemma that I face in all this is whether I can practice what I am preaching to the community. Am I ready to take on that challenge of confrontation in my own life as I am teaching the women to do? It is said that preaching is easier than practising what we preach in our daily lives. And I struggle with this dilemma every time I encourage women to take a stand.

The struggle is not because I fear I cannot fight for myself but because I would have to fight against people, and in this case, my parents and my loved ones. This brought to me the realization that we expect the villagers, who are already disadvantaged and who live in an environment where conservatism, gender, caste, class, patriarchy and poverty are the norm, to revolt against the system. This realization has kept me in check, and made me aware of the limitations of the solutions we present to them and an understanding of the choices they make. It has also helped me temper down my expectations. I notice that they are working more towards changing the life of the next generation. I am hopeful that this eradication of gender discrimination will be possible over time, over generations. We can only help them to progress towards that. In such a situation, I also see the struggles I went through and how I would not be giving my next generation such a life.

That hope keeps me going forward. On the personal level, continuous negotiations persist in various situations and, in most cases, discussions have worked in convincing my parents. It is easier to fight outside the perimeter of

our family and say, "Accept me the way I am."

Usually it does not stay at that level because the increasing intensity will one day put me in direct confrontation with my dear ones, when I will have to fight. Will I have the ability and the courage to fight in that situation? Will I be able to challenge them and not compromise?

I can feel the confusion ebbing and flowing like a tide and, oftentimes, flooding me. For the time being, I am sure of one truth and I would like to say this to my parents:

"Mai apki beti hi banke rehna chahti hoon. (I want to be a your daughter only.)"

Because, I want to be responsible and not fall into any gender role!

—

Aranya Biswas is based in Petarbar, Jharkhand

A CYCLE OF CHANGE

...

Coming together as a group, collectively staking their right to making decisions about what crops to grow, challenging prevalent traditions, the women of the SHG find their confidence and strength by becoming forces to reckon with in their community.

THAT DAY WAS LIKE ANY OTHER NORMAL DAY. I was on my way to Sundari village for an SHG meeting at Bartoli...my head buzzing with plans. I reached the meeting and was welcomed by the *didis* of the SHG with folded hands and smiling faces. This SHG was not new to me. I had been here several times earlier, to plan their agriculture.

I was greeted with the 'dream come true' words by Sther *didi*, "*Agle saal ke liye hum sab abhi se tayyari kar rahe hain* (We are planning for the next year now)." She was a member of the Champa Baha Mahila Mandal. The confidence in her voice and the sparkle

of pride in her eyes amazed me and took me back the timeline and her transformational journey flashed before my eyes.

Several questions erupted in my mind. Is this the same SHG that was apprehensive about practising agriculture last year? Is this the same Sther *didi*, who had given up all hope of earning from agriculture in summer? Is this the same SHG that was always seeking support from me in every decision on livelihoods? That day...I felt that my continuing efforts to bring change in their existing practices was successful. 'What has happened to them?' I wondered. The courage, the confidence, the decision-making ability...where had these all come from?

The low confidence and the misery in the voices of the *didis* told of their past failed experiences in agriculture during the cruel drought season. The wrinkles above the eyebrows, the corners of their lips touching the chin and their cold tired breath tugged at my heart.

What was their driving force, and from where had they drawn the energy to take a stand? I realized that some questions could only be answered by turning back and looking into the pages of past and reflecting on the journey.

BACKGROUND

Sundari *panchayat* is located in Torpa block of Khunti district, Jharkhand. Just as its name suggests, it is a beautiful *panchayat* surrounded by a hilly terrain, divided into 12 hamlets and two villages. Sundari Bartoli is one of the hamlets of the *panchayat* and it was the very first field handed over to me as a fresh recruit and where I first directly became engaged with the community. It was quite easy for me to build a rapport with the community. Very soon, the unfamiliar faces turned into known names and, with the flow of time, I developed a relationship with the people and the hitherto-unknown tribal women became my *didis*. I became connected with their lives; the SHG has given me the opportunity to take a sneak peek into their joys and their sorrows.

The summers were almost upon them when I first reached, and

I could see the anxiety on their faces. On exploration of their problems, I discovered a long list of difficulties that restricted them from practising agriculture. The non-availability of water for irrigation, the lack of knowledge about the seeds and nursery, etc., stopped them from cultivating their land. The low confidence and the misery in the voices of the *didis* told of their past failed experiences in agriculture during the cruel drought season.

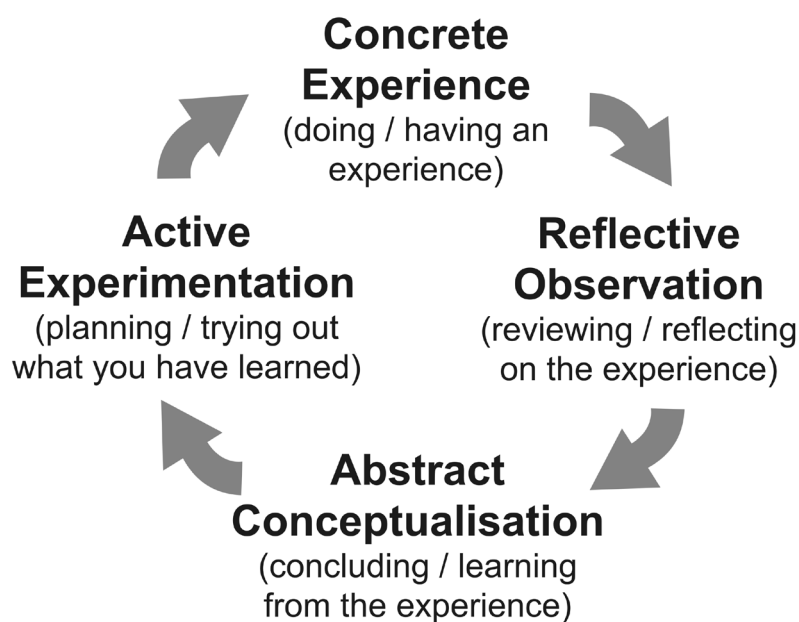
The wrinkles above the eyebrows, the corners of their lips touching the chin and their cold tired breath tugged at my heart. That was the day when the initiation of a new chapter had started. The SHG Chameli Baha Mahila Mandal came together and decided to experiment with planting bitter gourd (locally known as *karela*) for the first time in their hamlet because it required less water and was less prone to diseases. Although they had planted the local variety of bitter gourd earlier, it was a new experience for them to plant the hybrid variety of the vegetable. I remember seeing the mixed expression of happiness, to learn new things, and a curiosity to see the awaiting changes, on their faces.

FROM THE PAGES TO THE GROUND

Back then, during the initial days of my Development Apprenticeship, I tried to understand the concept of the learning cycle. David A. Kolb with Roger Fry created this famous model out of four elements: concrete experience, observation and reflection, the formation of abstract concepts, and active experimentation, testing it in new situations. I tried to understand it and replicate it with the SHG members. The principle of Kolb's learning cycle is that we all follow these four stages of learning as we acquire knowledge, experience and skill.

1. Concrete Experience: A new experience of a situation is encountered, or an existing experience is reinterpreted.
2. Reflective Observation: of the new experience. Of particular importance are any inconsistencies between experience and understanding.
3. Abstract Conceptualization: Reflection gives rise to a new idea or the modification of an existing abstract concept.
4. Active Experimentation: The learner applies these to the

For me, agriculture is not natural; it is a human invention. From here, the journey of learnings and experimentations began...by gathering appropriate learning experience and awakening the mind to observe, evaluate and recall what we experience.



world around them to see what emerges.

Learning is an integrated process, with each stage being mutually supportive of, and feeding into, the next. It is possible to enter the cycle at any stage and follow it through its logical sequence.

However, effective learning only occurs when a learner is able to execute all four stages of the model. Therefore, no one stage of the cycle is effective as a learning procedure on its own.

All this may happen in a flash, or over days, weeks or months, depending on the situation, and

there may be 'wheels within wheels' of processes at the same time. Although this was a kind of learning-by-doing phase for me, I underwent each of the phases of the learning cycle with the villagers and saw a transformation in myself and my partners, that is, the SHG members.

CHANGE BEGINS

For me, agriculture is not natural; it is a human invention. From here, the journey of learnings and experimentations began...by gathering appropriate learning experience and awakening

the mind to observe, evaluate and recall what we experience. Initially, the ruthless words from the husbands and the demotivating comments from other SHG members prevented the women from walking on this road of transformation. I remember in the very first meeting on agriculture, the women were quite low on enthusiasm. Although they wanted to do something...for the family...for their livelihood..., they were afraid of failure and of non-acceptance from their *dadas* (husbands). These fears stopped them from taking quick and confident decisions.

For the women of the community, it was an attempt to try a new vegetable crop for the community; for me, it became an attempt to make the SHG a platform to draw out the thoughts in their minds and convert them into reality. Not only this, I was looking at the whole scenario, which was a different perspective. Women worked from dusk to dawn for the families, from the fields to the kitchen, but still could not take a decision about which crop to cultivate. In the second SHG meeting with the same group, there was nothing different except that I noticed that a few of the stronger voices were taking the lead.

The unity, the enhanced knowledge, the timely monitoring and the evaluation by the SHG and the will to fight with the self and to win this time—all made their journey easier and gave them a joy that they had not experienced before.

These voices were quite confident and expressed a desire to cultivate vegetables in the summer. They tried to convince the other SHG members to agree. A large number of women resisted; they spoke about their earlier bad experiences and said that they were afraid of being beaten up by their husbands for taking their own decisions. That day, Sther *didi*, along with other members, visited the houses of those members, who lived in fear of their husbands and talked to the men. John *dada*, husband of Margaret *didi* of the same SHG, replied, “*Paisa pani me dubane ke liye nahi de sakte...aisa kya kar degi ye* (Can’t give money to waste... what is she going to achieve?)”

After some persuasion, he agreed but with a condition that she should make a profit out of the agriculture. The women took up the challenge with a faith in their togetherness. I had asked one member of the SHG what made them take this risk. She replied, “*Kuch to karna hi padega... alag...sabse alag...nahi to ek hi jaisa zindagi jeena padega...parivar ke pet ke liye karna hi padega* (Something has to be done... very different...otherwise we will continue to lead the same life...for the family we have to do this).” It was an initiation...

an initiation to bring a change...a change that had never happened before. The stronger voices of the group managed to convince the reluctant members; they later told me that they had felt a strong force compel them to stand up against all odds.

The transformational wheel of the SHG started to move at a higher velocity. I overheard a few *didis* of the Mahila Mandal murmuring within their group, “*Iss bar to kar ke dikhana hi padega. Sab mil ke karenge to shayad ho jayega* (This time we have to prove something. If we work it together, it will happen).” These words were a source of motivation for me. In fact, I started imagining myself as a co-traveller, with a troop of warriors, prepared to move into the battle of life.

When a series of trainings were given to them, the SHG members were able to reflect on the past experiences and were able to compare them with the present practices. They began to observe the gap between these. They realized why they had failed back then and why it would work now. They were curious and excited when filling the polythene tube with the seeds for the nursery. At the time of transplantation, they handled the plant with

such care as if a mother were handling a child for the first time. I remember the day when Sther *didi* suggested that the SHG purchase fertilizers and pesticides in bulk and store them in one of the *didi*’s houses because it would reduce their drudgery. The whole group accepted it wholeheartedly.

The unity, the enhanced knowledge, the timely monitoring and the evaluation by the SHG and the will to fight with the self and to win this time—all made their journey easier and gave them a joy that they had not experienced before. Disease and pest management were implemented in their fields. They had done this every year and they knew about the quantity but this time they had also successfully managed the preservation of the fertilizers and pesticides. They had the expertise to identify the diseases and the insects in their local language but were unable to save their plants from them. I remember the day when Sther *didi* called me and told me that the red fly had infested their fields and was destroying the fruits. The women organized a quick SHG meeting on the same day. As I arrived there, the women shot so many questions about how to save their fruits from diseases and insects. They

As the cash started flowing into the SHG, I saw the organization and the women transform. They sat with registers and calculators in hand, counting the profits and dividing the money among themselves and also saving some percentage of the earnings for the next cultivation season.

talked to me as a parent, whose child was ill, would talk to a doctor. Their anxiety was visible on their faces.

The SHG *didis* streamlined the process of learning and the flow from one phase to another was not always smooth. They found it difficult to understand the dosage and efficiency of the pesticides and fertilizers. The year before, several plants had died due to stem borer bacteria and also excessive use of pesticides. Soon, the women learned how to handle the quantities. SHG members possessed analytical skills and used them well. As the concepts became clear to them, they became more confident. With the passage of time, the plants started bearing fruits and so did their hard work...the bitter gourd found its place in the local *haats* and, very soon, bicycles carrying baskets full of bitter gourd headed to the block *sabzi mandi* every Tuesday.

I visited the *sabzi mandi* to encourage my ladies and to purchase a few kilogrammes of happiness in the shape of bitter gourd. As the cash started flowing into the SHG, I saw the organization and the women transform. They sat with registers and calculators in hand, counting

the profits and dividing the money among themselves and also saving some percentage of the earnings for the next cultivation season. The SHG members were confident in their decision-making, were good at problem-solving, and had the skill to use new ideas and to learn from experience.

I was happy and content to see that they had actually proved their potential and calibre. Their husbands started seeking their help and suggestions in the financial issues of the household. The other SHGs of the village started taking advice on SHG-related matters. The villagers, who earlier abused the SHG women with filthy words, “*Kuch nahi hoga in aurton se...chali hain kheti karne* (Nothing will happen with these women...And they are headed out to do agriculture)” are now surprised to see the women selling vegetables in the market and giving the men cut-throat competition. Everything seemed to be going as planned.

All these memories flashed in front of my eyes. I stood speechless at the entrance of the SHG meeting room, Sther *didi's* words rang in my ears. I was delighted. The SHG members were willing to be actively

involved in the experience and continue with agriculture in the next season, and this time all by themselves. This is what I had dreamt of...a sustainable agriculture practice by the women.

I reflected upon my own journey in this time and realized that the transformation had not only taken place in the women but also in me. Working with the community had made me realize that our actions affect the others because we do not exist alone in this small world and much of our learning about ourselves comes from our interactions with others. We learn from each other.

Being with women in their time of struggle and understanding their personal problems, the dynamics and the role differentiation between the *didis* and the *dadas* helped me understand them. When I first came to Sundari, I was not the same as I am now...the trust of the members of the SHG boosted my morale and has given me the courage to dream.

I gained technical knowledge about the creepers and the trellis as well as practical experience about planting and, more importantly, I soon realized that I had built a deep connection

Being with them, I have learned how to understand, reflect, conceptualize and finally experiment. Getting involved in the experience has made me a true learner.

with them. My day begins with going to their fields and meeting them. There is an emotional cord that binds us. I laugh with them, cry with them, fight with them, eat with them, dance with them...and, moreover, I learn with them. Being with them, I have learned how to understand, reflect, conceptualize and finally experiment. Getting involved in the experience has made me a true learner. Some of the things that I have learned from them are...the traditional way of using ash as an insect repellent, the proper management of irrigation,

and how to be patient and to keep the enthusiasm alive at all times. Reflection upon my experiences and my engagement with the women of the community has helped me recognize the extent of my growth. This insight has encouraged me to continue my work and to incorporate my learnings from my work with other SHGs.

PRESENT SCENARIO

In this journey of bringing change in the tribal community, I realized

that success cannot be achieved alone. Many times, success in life comes through learning new skills, knowledge, capabilities and attitude, and working with a feeling of togetherness. My learning came from becoming engaged in agricultural work with the women, in order to make them self-sufficient and to enhance their knowledge. The learning cycle that they adopted had not only made them efficient but had also enhanced their decision-making capabilities, their problem-solving skills, their judgment, their capacity



SHG members prepare *pranamrit* (organic manure)

Like a true leader, she has made plans with the remaining SHGs of the hamlet to develop a cluster of vegetables and is also making strategies for market linkages. Empowerment, for women like Sther Bodra, is all about self-awareness, consciousness and confidence.

to shoulder responsibility and, above all, it boosted up their confidence in themselves.

At present, they find themselves more equipped just because of the continuous repetition of the process. Although they have faced some failures in the past few years, their consistency and perseverance has led them to the path of success. In the current scenario, the *didis* can make plans on their own, select the seeds, study the market status and then plan their planting accordingly. Taking up agriculture is not just the initiation of a sustainable culture among them; it has been instrumental in building cohesion amongst them as well as with me. It is a process of liberation from man-made bondage through sustained struggle and resistance.

“Life is different now,” says Sther Bodra, who is 38 years old, and lives with her husband and two daughters. Like the other tribal women, she is quite hard-working, and is optimistic about the future. The practice of agriculture is not new to her. She tells us of how, as a young girl, she used to help her mother sow seeds. I remember, she was the one who initiated the idea of a cumulative nursery and motivated the other members of

the Gulab Baha Mahila Mandal to do something different this summer.

She brought other SHG members into the loop and started this transformational process. She experimented with it on her 10 decimals of land and was extremely happy with the bitter gourd produce. She sold it at the market price of Rs 40 per kg. When I had asked her how she feels now, she replied with a glittering smile on her face, “*Bahut accha lag raha hai... himmat baddha hai...Agle saal teen guna kheti karenge* (I am feeling very good...my confidence has increased...I will do three times as much agriculture next year).”

From the income earned, she purchased a motor pump and paid the school fees for her daughters. She is not just an ordinary woman; she symbolises the strength, the energy and the charismatic power which every woman possesses. Like a true leader, she has made plans with the remaining SHGs of the hamlet to develop a cluster of vegetables and is also making strategies for market linkages. Empowerment, for women like Sther Bodra, is all about self-awareness, consciousness and confidence.

The empowerment of tribal women means creating an environment in which they can make a choice and a decision for social transformation. From where I am standing right now, I am able to see me and my SHG *didis* riding bicycles. As we made the journey, several things changed before our eyes, from deciding to practice agriculture to reflecting on the experiences, choosing the crops and planning to cultivate them on a large scale through the SHG collective and extending it like a chain process. Finally, I want to say that this is all about change...a cycle of change, a reincarnation, a positive reinforcement, a transformation that has given the women of the community a powerful tool, an empowering weapon that they will continue to experience throughout their lifetime.

—
Rashmi Priya is based in Jhinkpani, Jharkhand

COMMUNITY ANIMAL HEALTH WORKERS: Way Beyond Being Just Service Providers

...

Taking the training they receive to a different level of engagement altogether, CAHWs are instrumental in bringing about change at various levels, helping women find their confidence, dignity and recognition, thereby making them a force to reckon with

THEY CALL THEMSELVES ‘Service Providers’ for animals, or Community Animal Health Workers (CAHWs). Their work reflects their diligence. They work for a cause and with purpose, and are engaged at the ground level, from dawn to dusk, in creating awareness about the scientific methods of livestock-rearing. Their involvement, however, goes beyond this work, in ways that have not been taught to them in their training. They have vowed to reach every family in their vicinity. They are determined to touch the life of every woman and motivate her to leading a dignified life. Their efforts indicate that a new era of empowerment has dawned. Their journey is in progress...and a long path is yet to be traversed. They have sprung from the women’s collectives, making their presence felt not only in the SHGs, but also in the hearts of the community where they work.

With a gendered division of work and severe restrictions on their activities, a woman's significant contribution in running a household usually remains unnoticed and unacknowledged

"I may not have the stars of serendipity

I may be living under patriarchal sovereignty

Although my prodigies are always ignored

Still...

The ecstasy... is to create a difference.

And the quest for an Identity.

My striving is not just for a while,

Centuries I have struggled;

It is time to traverse miles..."

EVOLUTION OF THE CAHW CONCEPT

—

Patriarchy plays a significant role when it comes to earning and feeding a family. With a gendered division of work and severe restrictions on their activities, a woman's significant contribution in running a household usually remains unnoticed and unacknowledged. Because women, over the centuries, have been gradually restricted, the income-generating activities that were earlier being conducted by them became the responsibility of men. Women have been relegated to the role of reproduction in the family rather than directly taking part in income-generating activities. This

value was unchallenged until now when women's collectives were introduced and the villages and society have started to unfreeze. These collectives have begun to grow in the form of Self Help Groups (SHGs).

Apart from the micro-finance activities in SHGs, women have also begun to take part in livelihood initiatives such as agriculture and livestock-rearing, and have started earning money of their own. Once the women began to participate in economic activities, the need arose to provide them with adequate technical knowhow and support to sustain their plans and proceedings. These collectives gradually unfolded the latent needs of the women and also became the platform for them to discuss the injustices that they face. During some of the discussions in these forums, the women expressed the need for guidance and support for their new ventures. One of the areas where the need for technical support was felt was in animal health.

PRADAN assessed the situation and decided to train some of the SHG members as service providers for animal health, calling them CAHWs. CAHWs provide technical support to

women farmers in the livestock-rearing activity. Because a CAHW is a member of the SHG and in close contact with the women, she is able to relate to and understand the needs and queries of the village women and help them.

SURVIVAL OF THE CAHW THEORY

—

When the idea of a CAHW was first suggested, the women were enthusiastic and curious; there were many among them who wanted the role. More than 50 women were selected from different villages and they went through the training process to become CAHWs. Once the novelty wore off, however, more than 50 per cent of the women dropped out. Many of the selected members could not continue because their families did not agree to the kind of work they started to do.

The role of an animal health worker required some communication skills, which the women did not have. Therefore, merely training them and providing them with the technical knowhow would not have been enough. In order to examine the reasons for the high dropout rate and the diminishing enthusiasm of the service providers and the dampening energies to continue

The role of an animal health worker required some communication skills, which the women did not have. Therefore, merely training them and providing them with the technical knowhow would not have been enough

their work, some brainstorming was needed. What were the reasons? What had gone wrong? Who were continuing with the work? Why and how were they managing to continue?

Many such questions plagued a development practitioner's mind. We decided to zoom in into the lives of some of the experienced CAHWs. We present below case studies of four CAHWs from two blocks, who kept their diligence high, irrespective of the crests and troughs they continue to navigate in their lives.

JOURNEY OF FOUR CAHWs

CAHWs are operating in Karanjia and Patna blocks with distinct boldness and great confidence. When we zoomed into the personal lives of these confident ladies, some interesting stories came to light. We noticed that the challenges and hurdles they faced were similar to those that had broken their counterparts and had pushed the latter to dropout from the CAHW list. Let us look at the experiences of these four and understand what made them succeed.

Doors were slammed in their faces. Humiliation was heaped upon them by the men of the

villages. When they attended the training, allegations were made about them eloping with other men. These were the difficulties they faced in their initial working days. The male-dominated society in rural Odisha usually feels reluctant and apprehensive if women go out for any kind of work. Women are meant to stay inside the house, and their work and roles are clearly defined. If any woman violates the rules set by men, vulgar adjectives are heaped on her and she becomes the subject of gossip at gatherings and card-playing sessions of the unemployed men.

The traditional belief that women are only meant to be home-makers was about to be challenged and broken in many villages. CAHWs were about to change the norms of their villages and the picture of the livestock industry. Slowly and gradually,

*"I may not have the life of
fraternity
I might be simmering inside
responsibility
But remember
My voice of freedom has not
died yet,
Just that the walk to break the
barriers...
Has not been tried yet!"*

village women got ready to begin a new chapter in their empowerment.

Jasasmita Mahanta is 26 years old. She is married and has a child. She lives with her in-laws. She not only earns money by vaccinating and de-worming animals but is also motivating other women to become involved in livestock activity; in the process, she is evolving as a public speaker.

When she first expressed a desire to study further after her marriage, her in-laws emphatically said no. Today, however, she is a graduate and her in-laws ask her opinion in every decision of the family. She told us her story of how she used to be a very shy, homely and introverted young lady. In 2008, she joined an SHG and became an active member and represented her SHG in a Cluster as a livelihoods leader. She received training in leadership, gender and livelihoods from PRADAN in her village Clusters. Her ability to reflect and her desire to learn and practice new things set her apart from the others. Later, in 2013, the village-level body selected her as a CAHW, she took the training and started doing her work.

Jasasmita, however, did not care what the others were saying. She believed that if she continued to do her part, the villagers would realize their mistake in accusing her of being a characterless woman.

The patriarchal mindset of society tried to stop her work; the men and some women of the village would not accept the services of a woman, who they did not consider to be sound in terms of technical expertise. Jasasmita, however, did not care what the others were saying. She believed that if she continued to do her part, the villagers would realize their mistake in accusing her of being a characterless woman.

In three years, she proved herself to the villagers through her work and continuous effort; today people trust her and call her to vaccinate and de-worm their goats and birds as per the vaccination calendar. She is now the hope for more than 100 families of her village when it comes to disease and treatment of goats and poultry. Jasasmita also explains to the farmers about the diseases and symptoms before vaccinating the livestock. In the process, the farmers not only understand why Jasasmita is taking livestock inventories but also that she is a responsible woman, who actually understands what is important for the livestock.

Apart from her work, she is an active member of her village *pallisabha*. She broke the belief

that women should not go to the *pallisabha*. Similarly, other SHG women are attending the *pallisabha* in her village, Dhatikabeda; this change has happened over time. She is also a tuition teacher, teaching three children in the evening. She manages her household work in which she is supported by her husband. Her work has given her name and fame and a broader perspective on life. Her continuous training and her constant association with people has helped in honing her skills.

Appreciating the role that Jasasmita plays, one SHG member Suru Sardar of village Kadalibadi said, “*Amar Jasa hi darkar chheli kukuda ku tika karba paain....se val kari bujheipare au val ni katha hiye*. (I need only Jasasmita to take care of my livestock inventory...she explains things in such a manner that I understand it and she talks really well).”

*

Jashoda Nayak works with the tribal women of her village. She has significantly improved her income in three years. Even she was buffeted by hurdles and problems. She was also selected by her SHG to become an animal

health worker. This 35-year-old woman convinced her husband to support her in her work. Initially, no one supported her but later on when she became proficient in administering vaccinations and treatment, and the villagers witnessed the significant shift in the small ruminant mortality rate, her husband started supporting her.

Her husband drops her to and from her work of vaccinating animals and birds in nearby villages. She tells us that she enjoys the ride with her husband on his bike. Because of the work Jashoda is doing as a small entrepreneur, she never falls short of money. People come to her home and say, “This is what we owe you for the de-worming/vaccination, take it.”

Jashoda is an active participant in her Cluster; this adds to her personality and today her village knows her as a CAHW and not as Rudra’s wife. She cherishes this identity and talks about it enthusiastically in forums. She is always keen to expand her knowledge and help people rear livestock in a way that reduces losses due to mortality and morbidity, and enhances the income of village women.

Jashoda is an active participant in her Cluster; this adds to her personality and today her village knows her as a CAHW and not as Rudra's wife. She cherishes this identity and talks about it enthusiastically in forums.

The way she shares her knowledge, reveals her interest in imbibing and applying the concepts of the training, leading to her success. It requires courage to practice the learning on the ground; ultimately, it is a person's motivation that helps one persevere until one becomes an expert. Jashoda challenged herself and stood firm in her decision not to quit work because she wanted her daughter to know that her mother was not a loser but a winner. She wanted the villagers to witness a married woman doing something different! "Women too can do..." was what she wanted to prove to the village. Jashoda Nayak's story left me speechless.

*

Kabita Panigrahi is 38 years old. She started her journey as a CAHW in June 2013. Prior to that, Kabita was a home-maker and often felt frustrated because housework was very routine and boring. She wanted to experience something different. She was selected by the village Cluster to become a CAHW. She was excited because she knew she was heading towards a new beginning. When the technical training of integrated livestock rearing ended, she realized that

it was not enough. Kabita wanted to change the picture, and for that one needed conviction and experience. She was thinking not as an entrepreneur but as a leader. She could have easily just done the task, but she visualized a scenario and started working for it.

She decided to go to the nearby Veterinary Department and request the Livestock Inspector (LI) to teach her how to give injections, to show her what first-aid was available and to tell her the details of the typologies of the antibiotics. Initially, the LI tried to dismiss her because she was a woman but Kabita persisted. After a year of her constant visits, he finally agreed to help her. The LI began to take her with him to village camps and she began to be trained by the Veterinary Department itself. She mastered many techniques and, with permission from the Veterinary Department, she began to practice what she had learnt. Being from the upper caste, she faced many difficulties at the family level, but a shortage of money and the small demands of her daughter made her work rigorously.

She faced many difficulties over a period of three years. There

was a time when she did not work for seven months because of family pressure and the deteriorating health condition of her husband. She, however, remained determined to work and rejoined her counterparts. She wanted to have her own identity and build a reputation for herself in the village as a CAHW. She also noticed that some of the CAHWs had started quitting; she, however, maintained her commitment to change the livestock picture even though the payment for services was minimal. She knew that the people would accept her when there was a visible change in their livestock's health. With this core understanding, she continued her work and, slowly, she witnessed a steady rise in demand. People from nearby villages also began to request for her services because Kabita was giving doorstep services to the people.

Today, Kabita is not only earning money and fulfilling her family's and her daughter's needs but has also become a role model for other CAHWs of her block. She is also a trainer and has started working as a block-level resource person and visits the nearby *gram panchayats* and villages to provide training to new CAHWs.

Premalata is happy with her income because she can now help her family in financial matters. Villagers have stopped whistling at her, closed doors have opened up for her. She is recognized today as an Animal Health Worker.

I noticed that when these women, whose passion is livestock-rearing, sit in any gathering, they discuss field-level problems and achievements. They talk about the areas where women are facing problems due to the mortality of animals and what can be done in those areas to prevent disease; they make suggestions to the Federations about the measures that can be taken.

*

“So long as your eyes are on your goal, you don’t see obstacles,” says Premalata Mohanta from Patna block, who has been working for a relatively long time as a CAHW. She has also gone through the same challenges as the women mentioned earlier. She started work in June 2011. She was trained by GALVMED experts and was supported by PRADAN. Various tools and booklets were provided to her and vaccine support was also given initially. Because she had no prior experience, she was afraid of giving vaccinations to goats and poultry.

She told us that her in-laws were completely against her decision because this work demanded minimum two-hour visits to people’s houses in the morning

and in the evening. Her in-laws were very reluctant and opposed it strongly. However, Premalata *did* stand firm in her decision to work. She vowed to reach out to the poorest families of five nearby villages and do her work. She did not stop because her family and relatives disapproved. Although she was subjected to whistles, comments and many de-motivating statements from the villagers, she did not stop working.

Premalata also faced resistance from the people when she tried to convince them to vaccinate and de-worm their livestock. People asked her for her identity card and certification of her work. She simply used to reply, “Tomorrow you are going to call me for sure.” And she would move on to knock at another door to convince the people and repeat the same words she said at the earlier home. This trend went on and she continued to persist; now, she has a flourishing practice with as many as 300 families who rely on her. Premalata is happy with her income because she can now help her family in financial matters. Villagers have stopped whistling at her, and closed doors have opened up for her. She is recognized today as an Animal Health Worker.

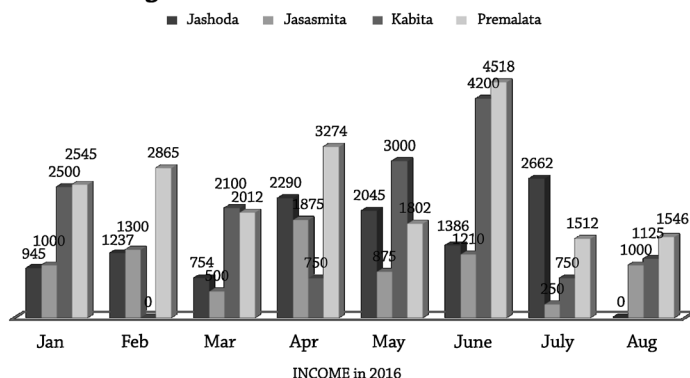
Her struggles and consequent success have made her a role model for the families with whom she is working. She is also an active member of the Baitarani Mahila Sangh and has vowed to strengthen collectives in the area with her motivating words. She visits SHGs to make them functional and lectures on how to earn money through goats and hens. She has a dream she wants to fulfill in 2017. She wants to open a big poultry farm, with a large number of birds and employ a few women to work with her. She has seen many sunrises and many sunsets, and gone through many ups and downs, but her conviction levels have remained high. Her journey is inspiring.

Basic data from these four Animal Health Workers on how much they are earning each month from vaccination and de-worming only (apart from treatment and selling own livestock) show:

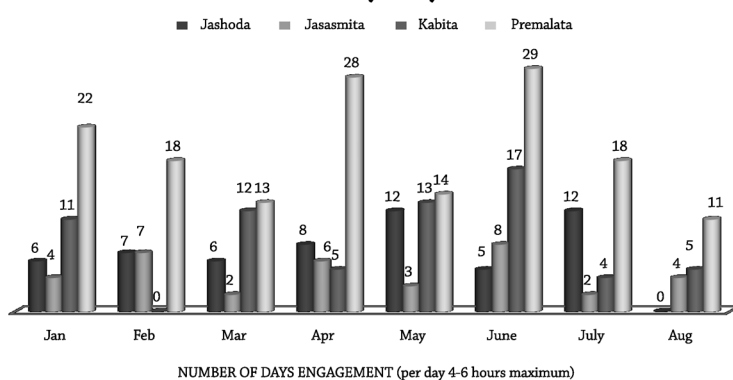
From the above charts it is clear that CAHWs are earning substantially, especially considering the number of days of engagement. The rest of the time they devote to community capacity building, public interaction, attending meetings and events at the village, *gram panchayat* and block levels.

They relate to their Federation and feel proud of it. They tell us that when they say the name of their Federation, people in the villages give them respect and behave politely.

Eight Month's Income Chart of Four CAHWs



Number of Days They Worked



In a nutshell, it can be seen that these four women work very few days as CAHWs, although Premalata is an exception. They get ample time for building relationships with villagers, women and other stakeholders. They derive space from their routine CAHW work, and they use this space and time for their own capacity building and, in the process, emerge as vibrant leaders

as well as role models for their community.

IN SEARCH OF AN IDENTITY

When asked about what the Federation means to them, the CAHWs responded with these statements.

“Our Sampurnna.. Our Swayamsiddha... Our Baitarani

MahilaSangh gave us the identity... we will never ever leave our Federation. We are committed to work for our Federation and we will continue our work as CAHWs. We feel happy. “

“We feel proud when we say we are from the Federation...A Federation of women like us.”

“I have seen the Federation in all its growing stages, I am an old member of it and I feel for it.”

They relate to their Federation and feel proud of it. They tell us that when they say the name of their Federation, people in the villages give them respect and behave politely. Their work gets easier; of course, effort is needed even after a big reference. Still, they agree that the name of the Federation helps them to a great extent.

They have an identity as CAHWs; another identity that they have is that they are members of the Federation. And there is a zest for an identity, which is beyond all these, and that is the spiritual connection they experience when helping other women. Why would a woman help another woman who is vulnerable? What would be their common need to help each other? This question crosses the minds of many newcomers.

Conflicts are necessary for cooperation. A large section of women in society have a conflict with patriarchy, oppression, domestic violence, supremacy of blind beliefs and many more. These problems and conditions are the binding agents that unite the women and help them, gradually, evolve as a Federation.

Someone once said, conflicts are necessary for cooperation. A large section of women in society have a conflict with patriarchy, oppression, domestic violence, supremacy of blind beliefs and many more. These problems and conditions are the binding agents that unite the women and help them, gradually, evolve as a Federation. They have found their common ground.

Although it may not be expressed and articulated clearly, CAHWs relate to all the women of their territory. They say that they

have to reach each and every woman of nearby areas. The zeal to do something for vulnerable women makes them something beyond just CAHWs. They feel happy as they share their success stories enthusiastically, all of them growing together in confidence. There is always a story behind an achievement; beneath every success are stories of transformation. These women, who the community designated as CAHWs, go way beyond their work and share an empathetic connection with the village women, which is rock solid. They

work not just for the money but because this is their passion. They are the change agents whose pathway may have begun with bringing change to the livestock scenario; however, they also look at the dimensions of a woman's life and feel their pain.

CONCLUSION

Women are the most neglected section of the human race. Masculinity has always dominated over femininity and has thus dampened the



On-field vaccination training to CAHWs

These women, who the community designated as CAHWs, go way beyond their work and share an empathetic connection with the village women, which is rock solid. They work not just for the money but because this is their passion.

energies of the women. The male-dominated lens has a clouded vision, and disregards the inner and outer struggles of women. Culture and tradition forced women to manage household affairs whereas men went out to earn money—making them the dominant individuals in the family. Men are not culprits but victims of patriarchy too. This needs to be challenged, and many are doing so in their own distinct ways.

I listen to the stories of the service providers and the difficulties that they have faced and how they have tried to overcome the challenges through their strong motivation and adapted themselves to play the role of guides and counsellors to other women. I realize that the term community service provider has been given by us and we have defined its role. We have given them training, and groomed them technically, according to what we thought was needed.

Many of them have not limited themselves to the task assigned to them or those they have been trained to perform. They have grown beyond this and seem to be traversing their own journey towards excellence—a journey not captured in any format or in our Annual Progress Sheet.

Besides these four women, many other service providers are very passionate and are changing the scenario in agriculture, gender, governance, health and nutrition and other areas. They have the motivation, the energy and the drive to fight the restrictive attitude of society, and they have the courage to face the abuse and, sometimes even stones, thrown at them by the community. This strength may help them in the long run to establish a bigger identity for themselves. If our engagements remain limited to monitoring only their work, there is a great chance of their dropping out because our professional involvement may not touch

“Every woman is a leader—growing and glowing in disguise...”

They are on the way.

Breaking the clods, erasing the dots

Doing something with the clay;

Unfreezing the existing

Designing the master thing

Its the Beginning of their Day.

Way beyond a worker,

Identity deserves to be an inventor.

Secretly may be,

The world is making its way.

their individual lives. Let us engage with them in such a way that we can learn from their life experiences and derive greater lessons that will motivate us to achieve our goals.

—

Soubhagya Ranjan Ratha is based in Jashipur, Odisha

SHIFTING MINDSETS: A Roadmap of Arajū Village Organization

...

Needing a strong collective to enhance their understanding about social and political agendas, to practice a changed culture, the women of Arajū village, through their Village Organization, have collectively overcome the barrier of societal pressure and have understood the real sense of democracy.

IN THE LARGE AND COMPLEX socio-political arena we live in, people often talk about their helplessness. As individuals, they think that they are not capable enough to influence or change the system. They, therefore, choose to remain beneficiaries rather than struggle for their basic rights and entitlements. The daily struggle for livelihood, rigid societal norms and an enormous sense of powerlessness place a three-pronged pressure on the people and they prefer to maintain status quo rather than fight the hard battle against injustice.

This principle has a greater impact on women because they belong to the most vulnerable sections of society. The existence of deprivation in society is more structural than natural; therefore, there is fear coupled with an attitude of disinterest among the people. They lack the will to raise their voice and to participate in governance. The higher

Societal norms, rituals and taboos restrict the marginalized, especially women, from participating in the developmental processes or to raise their voice against injustice

castes dominate the social structures in the rural areas; the state mechanism has only strengthened this by entrusting this privileged section of society to perform the developmental role.

The privileged are bestowed with all the information on the processes for accessing government facilities. They, therefore, occupy local governance systems in large numbers and influence Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in their favour. This has led to a non-equitable distribution of government benefits, out-casting the marginalized sections and depriving the helpless citizens.

Poor governance at the local level creates an environment for bureaucrats to indulge in corruption, with the help of the local elite. For a small incentive, they easily promote exploitation at various levels. Societal norms, rituals and taboos restrict the marginalized, especially women, from participating in the developmental processes or to raise their voice against injustice. They have the least access to resources and knowledge, leading to poor livelihood opportunities. There is no option for the marginalized sections of society, except to request or beg for access

to their rights and entitlements. These people, especially the women, need a strong collective to enhance their understanding about the social and political agendas, to practice a changed culture and build their self-confidence, raise their voice in different forums and believe they are capable of bringing about change.

Realizing that they have the potential to change the situation, the women's collective of Araj village has overcome the barrier of societal pressure and has understood the real sense of democracy. As a co-traveller of this movement, I am sharing my experiences of this journey.

MY INITIAL INTERACTIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY

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During my initial days of engagement in late 2014 when I visited the village and talked with some of the SHG women, they complained to me that they did not get any benefits from being a part of the SHG and asked what I was going to do for them. Upon further discussion, I found that they were irregular members of the organization and contributed very little of their time to SHG meetings. Most of them had no record of their own savings

because they usually sent the money to be deposited through their children. They rarely checked the accounts.

The women had constituted a Watershed Committee to run the Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IWMP), with three members elected from each SHG. When I attended the meetings, I found that the women there were completely dependent on me for their decisions and also expected to be compensated in cash for the time they spent in the meetings.

I began my facilitation by asking them why they were there, what the purpose of Watershed Committee was and what the responsibility of the members was. The import of the questions bounced off them because they just repeated the same thing. "What is our benefit in working for the whole village? We are putting our household work on hold to come here and are getting nothing in return."

After a while, I began looking at it from their point of view and also critically analyzing the reason behind everything. I realized there was an ideological gap between my understanding of the role of an SHG collective and the women's expectations from

Thus, our first focus was to help them realize the power of collective strength and action. For complete involvement of the community and for them to feel the need for collective effort, they needed a concrete, common agenda

it. They considered themselves as beneficiaries, who looked to external agencies to help them develop, without their putting in any effort and time. The collective, for them, was a mere medium to get government subsidies. There was need to talk with each SHG, discuss why they had formed the SHG and rearticulate their expectations of the collective.

THE BEGINNING

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In early 2015, a strengthening and needs-identification exercise was conducted with all the SHGs of Araju. During the training, it became clear that the SHG members had many issues regarding the proper functioning of SHGs, livelihood opportunities, the functioning of PRIs, the lack of government services, and violence against women.

We compiled a list of the issues and shared it with them, to help them realize the commonality of the agenda. However, the SHG members were not confident enough to take action on these issues because they saw themselves as powerless without adequate knowledge about how to handle these problems. Thus, our first focus was to help them

realize the power of collective strength and action. For complete involvement of the community and for them to feel the need for collective effort, they needed a concrete, common agenda.

Issues were raised sporadically in the SHG regarding water scarcity, violence and government services but the women regarded these to be individual problems. The broader village-/panchayat-level picture was missing. Although I had lots of data and analyses to share and discuss with them, my endeavour was to always generate an interest among the women to look into incidents and their effects.

Many times I had to hold my anxiety and curiosity back and just remain as an observer of the situation. This provided immense data for later on discussion and analyses into the successes or failures, and for exploring the need for a bigger collective action.

In one incident, Kalpana Devi of Kamar *tola* was beaten by her brother-in-law over a land dispute. Drunk, he abused the SHG members of Jai Maa Kali Mahila Mandal, who tried to protect her. At that time, her husband was not at home. The women of the SHG were scolded and threatened for raising their

voices. Later, they shared the helplessness they had felt. When this incident was discussed in the SHG of that hamlet, my role was to highlight the feelings of helplessness and to promote conversations that would lead to a positive change rather than to further de-motivation.

For example, I asked them why they felt bad about a woman being beaten. I checked with them the frequency and the extent of such incidents and what possible steps they could take to change the situation. I used our discussion to highlight their strength in terms of numbers, unity and commonality. The women understood the need for collective strength and initiated discussions with other SHGs.

The women of the other SHGs also started discussing the issue and came forward to act. However, because of the absence of a definite forum, it was becoming difficult to communicate information and to take decisions. In a meeting with all the SHGs, a solution for this was discussed and a village-level organization of women was conceived of.

I spoke about the problems and the requirements that had come up during the discussions in the

They started discussing these common issues and found that the so-called individual problems were not just individual problems; they were actually generic problems

SHGs earlier. The women realized that even though they had come there for a single agenda, there were many other issues common to them, which were neglected because they considered themselves powerless.

They started discussing these common issues and found that the so-called individual problems were not just individual problems; they were actually generic problems. They agreed that a village-level organization was required if they were to take action on these common issues. After much discussion, the issues were divided into four broad categories: institution building, livelihood promotion, justice delivery, and ensuring rights and entitlements.

As a result, a bigger collective called the Village Organization (VO), came into existence. Four representatives from each SHG would meet regularly to discuss these issues and take action to support the SHGs in solving them.

The values of the collective were discussed critically and thoroughly; the group decided that they would be inclusive, participatory and transparent. During the discussion, the villagers realized that they had

minimal say in their entitlements; they blamed the government mechanism for their problems, without realizing that they had a role to play in resolving these issues through influencing the PRIs and the stakeholders.

There were also some critical areas that needed to be understood such as group processes, local governance, legal rights, social security programmes and advanced agricultural practices. The women needed to be aware so that they could take proper action. The VO, therefore, needs to act in collaboration with the PRI, to resolve these issues.

Coming back to the case of Kalpana Devi, the village women were indignant. They wanted to know how a brother-in-law could beat his younger brother's wife when he was not even allowed to go close to her shadow, especially when her husband was not present at the time. The women shared that there were many cases when a husband beat his wife but for a brother-in-law to do so was unacceptable.

My thoughts about this were, 'Why should a husband be allowed to beat his wife?' As far as I was concerned, beating a person was a violation of human rights. I remained silent, however, because

I saw that a common agenda was bringing the women together. I held myself back thinking that if they were to become organized, I would get many chances to discuss these issues further.

In the very next meeting, they called the family members of Kalpana Devi to the VO meeting. All the facts were examined from all perspectives. After hearing them, the VO members gave strict instructions to her brother-in-law to bear all the costs for her treatment and to give up alcohol consumption. In case he disobeyed this decision of the VO, a heavy fine would be imposed upon him.

Realizing that all the women had united to form this powerful collective, he agreed to pay for the treatment costs of Kalpana Devi and to give up alcohol from that day. This incident also challenged the views of many other villagers, who had been waiting and watching the situation, doubting the women's power to influence. Feeling threatened by the outcome, the husbands of some of the *didis* started forbidding them to attend the meetings. The taste of collective strength, however, was irresistible for the women, who insisted on attending the meetings. This case also helped to abate other such

For the first time, the women of the village created awareness among the voters of the *panchayat* about the importance of selecting a responsive PRI leader and also about the malpractices that exist in the election campaign.

cases of violence in the village and created a fear against open alcohol consumption.

MOVING AHEAD WITH GATHERING KNOWLEDGE

—

A training programme was organized to analyze and reflect on the government and the PRI system, how they functioned, their expenses, the role of the citizens in the proper functioning of the government, etc. This has helped the women understand the government and the institution of the PRI, its functions and functionaries, and the role of the people in the selection of a leader, in governance and in monitoring the actions being taken.

Linking this knowledge to practical applicability and making the community aware about their needs is very necessary to actualize understanding with experience. PRI elections were about to be held at that time. We discussed and planned the participation of women and their institution in the election process. For the first time, the women of the village created awareness among the voters of the *panchayat* about the importance of selecting a responsive PRI leader and also about the malpractices that exist

in the election campaign.

They decided to set a rule that nobody would take money or alcohol from the contestants. They also called for an *aam sabha* to hear from the contestants about their idea of development and to let them know what the villagers expected from the PRI representatives and from the PRI as an institution.

The major demands of the people were that the *gram sabha* be regularized, the *panchayat* office remain open regularly, women participate in forums, drinking water be available, and some other developmental needs. The women discussed who they should select to ensure good governance. Finally, many of the candidates they expected to win were elected.

My role was to be in close contact with the women and to be aware of what was happening; to project the various ways of action to work towards what the community wants to establish; to provide moral support; and to predict consequences. It is necessary for a development professional to establish a consultative relationship with the villagers so that the members of the community are able to gain confidence, knowledge,

awareness of dimensions and, above all, an ability to carry out the functions of the collective in a non-dominating, non-directive and non-confrontational environment.

Immediately after the elections, a *swagat samaroh* was organized, in which the women of the entire *panchayat* invited the elected representatives to congratulate them and to remind them of their promises. The elected members reiterated their commitments and showed their obligation to follow public orders. This boosted the confidence of the women to such a level that, from then on, they overcame their fear of interaction with the PRI representatives. They realized that because they were in a collective, they had a greater say in society and a greater influence over the PRI.

In order to tap all the available opportunities, it is important to be aware of the many needs of the community, to be in sync with the bigger movements, to understand the role of the people in the change process and to build ownership in the changing scenario. Anticipating the community's needs and recognizing the benefit of engagement can help build a sense of importance among villagers, leading to their

In order to tap all the available opportunities, it is important to be aware of the many needs of the community, to be in sync with the bigger movements, to understand the role of the people in the change process and to build ownership in the changing scenario.

increased involvement in the process of governance.

After the PRI elections, the government ran the Yojna Banao Abhiyan (YBA), to prepare a detailed developmental plan for the *panchayat*. Here again, we conducted a training with the VO members to help them understand the components of this Abhiyan and the role of the community in preparing this plan. As a result, the women participated in YBA and also monitored the process. When the women found that in some places the planning team was skipping the *gram sabha* meetings, they sat with the Panchayat Planning Team (PPT) of the YBA and demanded that the proper process be followed.

Hearing that the members of the planning team were bypassing the process due to shortage of time, the women proposed that they would help them in completing the plan. The women submitted the plan following the proper process within the timeline. The collective also started pressurizing PRI representatives to consider the views of the collective on various issues, thus, creating a more inclusive decision-making forum. The women also started participating in the *gram sabha*.

Finding the women's forum helpful and influential, the villagers and the defunct SHG members began to show trust in the institution and to bring their issues to the VO. The VO promptly extended its support to revive SHGs, to resolve the issues. To improve time management and understand various group processes of the VO, a training programme was conducted for the members. This exercise helped them understand their strength and the importance of the process in strengthening their institution. The procedure of the VO meeting was designed as also was norm setting. Select members of the VO, along with some PRI members, were given training on citizenship and government social security schemes, to build knowledge and ownership. This was further linked with the Right to Food (RTF) movement. The status of women and the involvement and participation of women in the development of the village was always an important agenda in the VO meeting.

Women's participation in the *gram sabha* was set as an important agenda for the VO. The VO works as a forum to help the women gain confidence, practice values and experience change so that they can participate in bringing change by engaging with

mainstream systems. The purpose of the VO is not to create a parallel system but to put forward the women's opinion strongly in public forums.

One morning, a member of the SHG found a notice at the *panchayat bhawan* stating that the *gram sabha* was to be conducted that day. She called for an emergency meeting and shared this information with the other members. The women immediately rushed to the *panchayat* office. In that meeting, they were selecting members for a sub-committee. First, the women raised the topic of the lack of communication about the *gram sabha*. Those responsible for it began to blame each other. Finally, the *mukhiya* took responsibility for the non-communication, apologized to the *gram sabha* and also committed to, henceforth, inform everyone. The women also demanded equal seats in the many sub-committees, and the *gram sabha* had to give in to their request. As a result, women came to be placed in crucial roles of monitoring and executing *panchayat* work.

The women also asked the *mukhiya* to present the expenditure details of the

People have recognized the effort and success of the collective; more women have become interested in becoming members of the SHG. Also, the VO decided to increase its strength by linking more and more SHGs under its umbrella.

panchayat, which he agreed to produce in the next meeting. VO members are now aware of what is happening and are following up on the progress of the *panchayat* work. They helped the *panchayat* enlist Indira Awas Yojana for the needy and also prepared the work-plan for 2016–17. They also have fought against the bribes taken by ward members and PDS dealers while giving gas connections and taking PDS registrations. They raised their voice in the *gram sabha* in front of government officials, to make the people honest by refunding the money to the villagers, and have shown the true power of citizens. They are also being selected as mates for MGNREGA work. Recently, they have also been actively engaged in the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP).

The Araj VO has actively participated in the RTF campaign and has taken considerable action to ensure proper PDS service in its *panchayat*. The members discussed PDS issues in the VO several times. They sat with PRI members and PDS dealers and formulated the rules for distribution. Because of continuous fights at the dealers' shops, the villagers did not get proper rations. Also, the dealer

scolded them and threatened to take away their ration card. The same issue was discussed in nearby *panchayats* and the villagers were agitating against it. Knowing the situation, a common meeting was planned with the government officials such as the Marketing Officer (MO), the Sub Divisional Officer (SDO), the Block Development Officer (BDO), the District Grievance Redressal Officer (DGRO) and the State Advisor to the Supreme Court on the RTF Act.

The women participated in that meeting held in mid-2016, to share their problems. Several grievance redressal mechanisms were discussed. This was followed by the *mukhiya* writing a letter to the MO and the SDO, with the complaints of the card holders, stating their issues and demanding immediate action. As a result, one dealer of that *panchayat* was suspended. The other dealers, however, still provided half a kilogram less rice, saying that they were helpless because rice was in short supply.

In November 2016, the women of Araj *panchayat* organized a *gram sabha*, and with the help of the *mukhiya*, issued a complaint letter against the other dealers of the *panchayat*. Not finding any action from the responsibility

bearer, they went to the ration shop and demanded full rations and ensured it in the presence of PRI members. They also met the District Collector and the *panchayat* presented the whole case in writing to the MO and the SDO, demanding the cancellation of dealership. As a result, two more dealers of Araj were suspended. Now, the dealers distribute the allocated rations to the VO members; they are still depriving those who are not in the SHG of the full amount. The VO members plan mass mobilization, through rallies and campaigns, to fight against the corruption in PDS.

People have recognized the effort and success of the collective; more women have become interested in becoming members of the SHG. Also, the VO decided to increase its strength by linking more and more SHGs under its umbrella. The next step is to fulfill the increased demand for knowledge inputs around various themes. The VO has come out with a solution by selecting women resource persons, trained by PRADAN.

They have selected six women to deliver training in 18 SHGs of this village. These resource persons support the women in building an understanding about

Cases of violence against women were being brought to the VO sporadically. Feeling the need to build a broader understanding on the implications of gender discrimination within the community, a workshop was organized on Gender with the VO members.

SHGs around themes such as livelihoods, SHG functioning and social security programmes. The VO is developing a mechanism of task delivery and monitoring for its trainers. It has extended support to other VOs in this *panchayat*, to make them aware and motivate them to participate in development agendas. Meetings and rallies have been held to create awareness among the women of the *panchayat*. As a result, two other VOs of this *panchayat* are now actively participating in the meetings and are challenging the existing system of society. They have also constituted a *panchayat*-level women's collective to be in touch with all the villages of the *panchayat* and the PRI.

Cases of violence against women were being brought to the VO sporadically. Feeling the need to build a broader understanding on the implications of gender discrimination within the community, a workshop was organized on Gender with the VO members. In the workshop, women gained clarity on the differential treatment meted out to the boys and girls, the division of labour and the different forms of violence against women.

To increase solidarity among women, the VO planned a

Mahila Diwas, which included all the SHG members in the nearby *panchayats* as well. The objective was to help women realize their strength, create solidarity and build recognition around the stakeholders. The event was financed, planned and organized by them, with minimal involvement of PRADAN. The event was a great success and achieved its purpose.

The Arajua VO has addressed many cases of violence over time. In late 2016, an incident of violence came to the notice of the VO. Parvati Devi of Mohali *tola* married a man from Gosandih village in West Bengal. Her husband migrated for work and when he was away, her in-laws accused her of not doing any work at home and sent her back to her parents' house. Although many efforts were made by the family to arrive at a compromise, the in-laws sent her back with a different excuse every time.

The case was brought to the VO by the family members of the woman and the SHG of that hamlet. All the facts were documented and attached to a letter from the head of the family requesting the VO to solve this issue. The VO members, then, discussed what could be done and how they should act. They

also talked to the in-laws of Parvati Devi over the phone and called them for a meeting. The in-laws refused and asked the VO members to come to their village. The VO members booked two trekkers and conducted a meeting with the VO members of Gosandih village, along with some *panchayat* representatives.

After a long discussion, they came to the conclusion that the in-laws of Parvati Devi needed to keep her with them and to take care of her otherwise legal action would be taken against them. The VO members prepared a written bond stating all these terms and had it signed by both the parties. But after two months Parvati Devi again fell ill and her parents took her back. Now, the VO has advised the family to go for legal action and is ready to support them in the case.

In another case, a 10-year-old girl of Thakur *tola* was accused of stealing Rs 5000 from her uncle's house. The mother of the girl was a single woman and was a member of the Saraswati Mahila Mandal. The case was brought to the VO, which enquired into the matter. After a long discussion, the truth was revealed. Somebody had put a dead chicken into the well of the man and he thought that this 10-year-old girl was the

One of the main objectives of the VO is to extend itself to include as many marginalized women as it can. Recently, the members had conversations with the Muslim community, in a bid to bring Muslim women into the SHG fold.

culprit. Finding no proof, but wanting her punished, he accused her of stealing money from his house. After the truth came to light, the VO members forced the uncle to apologize and beg for forgiveness as well as contribute Rs 10,000 for her marriage, as a compensation for defaming her.

Many more cases are being raised

at the VO's and are being tactfully resolved by the women of Araju.

One of the main objectives of the VO is to extend itself to include as many marginalized women as it can. Recently, the members had conversations with the Muslim community, in a bid to bring Muslim women into the SHG fold. This is a challenge because taking an interest in the affairs of

the community and women going outside of their homes are seen as going against the Islamic culture.

“This is only the beginning and there is a long way to go!” With this motto, this VO is unstoppable.

Tulasi Pradhan is based in Jainamore, Jharkhand



SHG members make *rangoli* as part of Women's Day celebrations.

THE UNSUNG Story of Janki Devi

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Struggling to survive in extremely challenging circumstances, and finding hope, meaning and purpose in the SHG, Janki Devi becomes pivotal in helping the women of her village to gain confidence in their worth and capabilities

"I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and, behold, service was joy." Rabindranath Tagore

HELLO, EVERYONE! Some of you may know me and many of you may not; so I will take this opportunity to introduce someone, who is very close to me, and in the process, I will also introduce myself.

I am a huge, mountainous banyan tree with large, aerial roots. I have seen many years and many seasons in my Karma village. Each day is very different from the previous day. I have seen dawn breaking out in the sky accompanied by smoke from the chullhas filling the air. The rich and heavy morning air mingles with the smog and I watch this

interplay from my vantage point in the centre of the village and feel a sense of joy. Young birds wake up early from their perches in my branches and fly to new heights to give wing to new accomplishments but baby birds wake up lazily, yawning and waiting for the food their mother and father are already on their way to get. People and animals gather under my shade to talk before starting their day. Through the day I feel happy because children come to play and elders come to rest beneath me. I am very happy to hear them sharing their joys, sorrows, successes and failures. Their discussions and their offerings of trust and support to each other have made me very empathetic to humans.

In olden times, families were very dependent upon rain and, therefore, only *kharif* agriculture was practised. Farmers grew maize, millet and paddy; however, the amount grown was not sufficient to feed the families.

Some 180 years ago, five Ghatwar families came and settled in the village. In those days, rain would bring new hope and prosperity to the inaccessible forest of Karma, and quench the thirst of humans and animals. Mother Earth would blossom with various flowers and fruits, assuaging the hunger of all creatures. Summer would be the toughest time when some of the creatures would starve to death.

In 1951, a big dam was constructed by the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC), and it submerged the north-east and the west side of my village. I was sad to see the plight of the people when they were asked to leave the land they had lived on for a century or more. They were neither given any compensation nor did they have any right to draw water from the reservoir or to cultivate on the lands around it. It was big setback for all the people. Families had to build new houses and prepare fresh land for agriculture, mainly on the southern side of the village. Meanwhile, in some of the nearby villages, Prajapatis and Muslims cleared up pastures for agriculture and settled in the village in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the 1970s, one Thakur family was brought to the village to help people shave their moustaches,

beards and hair. Six Bhuiyan and one Harijan family were brought to the village in 1994–95 by the SHG women during the Bhudan movement and one Adivasi family came from Ranchi in the 1990s to work in DVC. My village is divided into three hamlets. The west side is known as Sahpur, the north side as Khaira and the south side is Karma. The original Ghatwar families are located in all the hamlets but the Bhuiyans and the Harijans are located in Sahpur and the Thakurs are located in Karma hamlet only.

In olden times, families were very dependent upon rain and, therefore, only *kharif* agriculture was practised. Farmers grew maize, millet and paddy; however, the amount grown was not sufficient to feed the families. The villagers used to look for support from each other; and because the whole village had the same story, the farmers used to go to the *mahajans* (moneylenders). The *mahajans* were usually *baniyas* and belonged to an economically prosperous class. The *mahajans* lived in the Kariyatpur area, about 8 km from my village.

The villagers would borrow grain and seed from the *mahajan*; in return, the *mahajan* would take double the amount at the time of harvest. If the crop failed, the

farmers would have to give him four times the amount the next season. It was very sad to see how the *mahajans* behaved with my villagers. They had no mercy and they used to exploit the farmers and almost everyone in the village was in their debt. On the other hand, DVC was another gouger. The farmers were not allowed to cultivate crops near the submerged area and were also denied water for agricultural purposes. DVC also eyed the farmers' lands, which it was slowly capturing by planting trees and developing the fields. The farmers had no option other than working in the DVC fields. I could see that the villagers were very frustrated and felt hopeless with the existing life cycle; but Karma village had a different *karma* (destiny) and its *karma* was about to change. The change was going to be brought about by a very special, high-spirited woman, the kind I had never seen before.

In the 1980s, a 14-year-old girl from the north got married into our village. Her name was Janki. She was a short and dark complexioned woman. Just like any other woman in our village, she came wearing a red sari, her face covered in a veil down till her chest. Over time, I noticed that there was youthfulness and

The *mahajan* would take away her family's hard-earned crop and they would barely get food once a day. After a few years of her marriage, I remember a time when, for four consecutive days, her family did not get anything to eat.

restlessness in her eyes and it seemed as if they wanted to say something. Unlike her eyes, she was a very reserved woman. She would smile at everyone, winning their hearts. Women began to gather around her household to see her, compliment her and comment on her eyes, smile and nature. She was the fourth and youngest daughter-in-law in the family.

Janki came from a relatively more prosperous household, but her own *karma* (destiny) had something different in store for her. The *mahajan* would take away her family's hard-earned crop and they would barely get food once a day. After a few years of her marriage, I remember a time when, for four consecutive days, her family did not get anything to eat. The family decided to cook *munga* (wild) leaf and eat it, but Janki could not digest it and she vomited all day. There was no money to take her to the doctor, thus she was left to her destiny. The situation was similar for the whole village.

Later, in the evening, her mother-in-law went to several houses and borrowed some rice and prepared food for her. After that incident, I saw perseverance in Janki's eyes. She was determined to change her destiny. She approached her

sisters-in-law and told them a plan. The plan was not to give any of the crops to the moneylender and instead use the grains to prepare liquor. But none of them agreed. They were worried about the retaliation from the *mahajans*. They had seen how the *mahajans* used to force the farmers and get their dues and if the *mahajan* were to stop giving them rations, they would definitely starve to death.

Janki did not lose hope and she started preparing liquor by taking *mahua* flowers from the *mahajan*. Slowly and steadily, her sisters-in-law also started getting confidence. They also started preparing liquor. Once their confidence grew, they started preparing it on a large scale. In around 1984, her family situation improved but not completely. They were still very much dependent on the *mahajans*. Janki told her sisters-in-law, "If we want to really change our situation, we must act and we should not give any single grain to the *mahajan*."

Her sisters-in-law trusted Janki, but they did not know how to take this action and were not sure what the consequences would be. But her mother-in-law was completely against her idea because she was the one who used to bring the ration for the

family from the *mahajan* and she knew what it could lead to. Janki told her mother-in-law to let her deal with the issue. In the next season when the *mahajan* came to take away the ripened crop, Janki refused to give it to him. She told them "You have not given me the ration and, therefore, I will not give you the crop. You should ask from that person to whom you have given the grains." The *mahajan* threatened her mother-in-law that he would make her pay for this action.

Janki was pressurised by her mother-in-law to pay the debt but she refused. Her sisters-in-law morally supported her on the issue. In the years to come, the *mahajan* started to put pressure on the family and refused to give any rations or any credit to them. The *mahajan* pursued this matter for a couple of years but later, he let it go after some settlement. Janki was very happy with what she had achieved. She knew that from then on, the cultivated crops would be theirs.

In around 1986, I was very happy to know that my village would soon welcome a new guest because Janki was pregnant. Unfortunately, this news was accompanied by the sad news of her husband's death. The whole village was in shock and in

There were significant positive results of collectivization. Families dependent on the *mahajans*, for their bare minimum needs, found that their dependency on the moneylenders began to decline.

mourning. I cried, and with me, so did everyone in the village. Janki was in such deep pain that she lost consciousness. The villagers and her family members gave her the much-needed support. The coming months were more difficult for her because her body did not permit her to do hard work; despite this, she had to work. There was had no food at home.

Even after putting in hard work, she was barely able to manage to eat once a day. Soon a baby boy was born. Her mother-in-law celebrated as if her own son has reborn. I was happy too. But I sensed that Janki's sisters-in-law were very jealous of her. They wanted her to leave the household and give her child to them. She stayed for a few days in the village and she found that no one supported her in the family. She did not want to leave; she had to take care of her child, therefore, she decided to go to her mother's place with the conviction that she would come back again.

She made frequent visits to my village but did not stay long. She was given a small room in the household. Her house was not very far from the reservoir, at a distance of barely some 30 to 40 ft. And, as time progressed, the moisture from the reservoir

seeped into her room and affected the wall; she knew she needed to find a new place before the wall fell. She wanted to construct a house but she did not have any land. Therefore, she approached Bhattu Singh, her maternal grandfather. Bhattu Singh was very aware of her plight and he agreed to give her a piece of land. By the time her room wall fell, she had constructed her own house and had come back to live in my village with her six-year-old child.

Around 1993, Jui Gupta, a PRADAN professional, came to my village. She spoke about a savings and credit activity in women's groups. Initially, I thought that she must be a crook and so did most of the village women. They did not believe her; nevertheless, they gave her a chance. A group was formed. Janki heard about the group but was skeptical.

After a few months, Janki started to understand the functioning of the group. She also got a chance to meet Jui and was very impressed with the idea of an SHG. Slowly, we all began to trust the group. Unlike the others, however, Janki did not remain confined to her group only. She believed in the process and was confident that the SHG could free her villagers from debt. That

vision compelled her to mobilize and educate many women in the group.

She, along with Mohini Devi and Bhuneswari Devi, would go to many places to attend meetings and they would come back and educate the other members of the group. Mohini Devi was another firebrand leader in the village. She could defeat any politician in a discussion and no one in the area had the courage to debate with her. Bhuneswari Devi was very dedicated and a soft-spoken woman. Together, these three women were a very good combination in the village. They attempted to collectivize the women in the village. In spite of their efforts, however, some families were still left out of the group because they did not trust the idea.

There were significant positive results of collectivization. Families dependent on *mahajans*, for their bare minimum needs, found that their dependency on the moneylenders began to decline.

In 1995, like Janki, 45 households in the village were very dependent upon DVC for their livelihood. Janki along with Mohini and Bhuneswari *didis* were aware about DVC's intention

That day, my village witnessed a different Janki and Mohini. They were bold, precise, aggressive and upfront. No other villager had had the courage to speak in this language to the police, like Janki and Mohini had. Janki gained respect in everyone's hearts.

of acquiring land in the village because they were part of the larger network constituted to deal with the issue of re-habilitation and resettlement. One day, a meeting was held underneath my branches. I heard the villagers discussing how DVC had already captured 100 acres of our land and was now eyeing another 35 acres. If all the village land were to be taken by them, where would our animals would go? Where would we get wood for fuel? And where would we do cultivate crops, etc.? Such questions worried the villagers.

Janki and Mohini led the discussion. Only a few people said we should fight for our rights. Most of the people were reluctant, and feared that if we protest against DVC, our source of livelihood would go away. The majority of them feared that they would lose everything. The next day, under the leadership of Mohini Devi and Janki Devi, around 15 women went to the DVC plantation site and knocked down the planted trees. The DVC staff immediately reached the scene and called their bosses.

The officials came with the police force and started to threaten the villagers. They reminded the people that this was no longer their land. "Your parents have

sold it to DVC and, therefore, you cannot claim your rights here. These lands belong to DVC and it is for DVC to decide what is to be done on the land." The police threatened the villagers that they would be put behind bars.

Mohini Devi, who was at the incident site, challenged them, "This is our land and you cannot take anyone from here. If I shout, 56 *maouja* (village) women will come and they will not let you go." By that time, Janki Devi with the other villagers reached there and they all stood by Mohini Devi. They stood together in support of each other.

Meanwhile, Janki Devi also gave a very strong speech and reminded everyone that this land belonged to the villagers. The police and the other staff panicked and lowered their tone. They said, "We have a duty to perform; you people should approach the higher authorities to resolve this issue." The police left. That day, my village witnessed a different Janki and Mohini. They were bold, precise, aggressive and upfront. No other villager had had the courage to speak in this language to the police, like Janki and Mohini had. Janki gained respect in everyone's hearts. After discussions with her fellow villagers and Jui, Janki decided

to meet with the higher officials of DVC.

Janki, with around 20 villagers, went to meet the officials, who said, "The land does not belong to you. Your fathers gave the land to DVC." The villagers had no records to show the officials. Some of them came back very low spirited and almost gave up hope. Janki and some of her fellow villagers, however, had something else in mind and they decided not to let it go.

Together, they decided not to allow DVC to do any further plantation in their village. They also decided to cultivate near the submerged area and to use the water of DVC reservoir for agricultural purposes. In the group meeting, they discussed with Jui how best to use the water for cultivation. Jui helped them to get a lift-irrigation machine, provided by DVC under their Social Integration Programme. With Janki's initiative the machine was set up in the village.

All things were set; for the first time, the farmers were ready to cultivate crops in summer. When the time came, however, only three farmers were ready; most of them backed out because they were worried about the cost

In my village, there was no school; therefore, most of the people were illiterate. Janki started the discussion with the villagers about using the building to teach children. Nearly all the villagers raised their concerns about the fact that they had no teacher. The village people had questions and Janki had the answers.

of diesel, the grazing issue, the technology, whether DVC would destroy their crops, etc. In spite of this, Janki convinced three farmers to cultivate summer crops. Meanwhile, she also learnt various agriculture technologies. She demonstrated vegetable cultivation to them and it turned out to be a big success.

The villagers were also concerned about the maintenance and diesel cost of the lift-irrigation machine. The next season, four more farmers were prepared to take the risk. That year too, the villagers harvested a good winter tomato crop and sold it in the local market. However, the lift irrigation operational cost was very high; they stopped using the machine and it became non-functional. The success of the cultivation, however, gave farmers some hope. Slowly, more of my villagers started cultivating the winter tomato crop and Janki Devi helped them. It attracted everyone's attention and Janki's leadership was a much-discussed topic in the village.

In 1998, DVC under the Social Integration Programme made a Samudayik Bhawan, and we, for the first time, saw a concrete building in our village. Initially, the villagers used the space for

meetings; soon Janki started discussing how they could use this space differently. In my village, there was no school; therefore, most of the people were illiterate. Janki started the discussion with the villagers about using the building to teach children. Nearly all the villagers raised their concerns about the fact that they had no teacher. The village people had questions and Janki had the answers.

She discussed the situation with Mahendra, a Bhuiyan boy, who had completed his schooling from Kariyatpur and had recently settled in the village. Mahendra was also not sure what to say about the new proposal. He knew that if he were to go back to work in Kariyatpur or Barhi, he would surely get a job and earn something. He was not sure about the teaching. He voiced his concerns to Janki, who organized various meetings, but the people did not understand. She persuaded the villagers to make a monetary contribution to pay Mahendra. Thus, the first generation of school-going children started in our village.

Till 2001–02, the school was run and operated by the community. Later, the state government acknowledged the contribution

and took the teacher under its fold. Mahendra, thus, became the para-teacher in Karma village.

In 2003, the SHG meetings became irregular; many members were illiterate and a group accountant, who came from a far-off village stopped coming. Most of the members used to complain about not being able to do any work because there was no accountant. Janki persuaded Mahendra to write the books of accounts for the SHG. After some struggle, he did it. However, the group remained irregular because the members were not confident, the accountant was not able to give support regularly and also because it did not get any support from PRADAN. Janki, at this time, made many home visits, discussed the advantages of the SHG, motivated members and organized meetings to restart the group.

In 2010, when our village was about to witness the first Panchayati Raj Election, I heard men and women discussing who should be our ward member, *mukhiya*, etc. For the ward member, they were almost sure who it should be. They went to meet Janki and asked her to represent them. She agreed and became the unanimously selected

Today, women farmers such as Baleswari Devi, Jaswa Devi, Geeta Devi and others earn an additional Rs 75,000 to Rs 1 lakh through tomato cultivation and the *machan* system of agriculture.

ward member of Karma ward. She became the representative of her Ward in the *panchayat*.

At regular intervals, Janki used to take part in the *panchayat karyakarini* meetings and whatever new information she received, she shared it in the village. Once, she became aware that if pensioners did not get the pension, they could apply for it through the *panchayat*. She told everyone in the Ward and helped eligible candidates to complete the documents, submit them and have them sanctioned by the *panchayat*. Today, because of her initiative, except for three, almost all the eligible candidates are receiving pension.

Somewhere, in June 2010, I was a little shocked to see that Janki had decided to grow a tomato crop in the rainy season because of PRADAN's influence. In my lifetime, I had not seen anybody doing so. I was almost certain that she and the PRADAN people had gone insane. In the following days, she influenced more women to do so and, thankfully, all of them did not agree. Only four, including her, started doing so. When the plants were transplanted in the field, they looked good in shape and size; at the time of flowering and

fruiting, however, the plants looked weak. I was sure that tomato could not be planted in the rainy season.

I was in for another shock when the next year, even after the previous season's failure, she convinced 14 farmers to grow rainy season tomato. In the coming days, I saw Janki was more prepared. She visited the field regularly and was aware about the various interventions required. She consulted the women farmers regularly and influenced them to put stakes, spray insecticide and fungicide, etc. Jaswa Devi, who cultivated tomato that year, earned Rs 25,000 by selling the produce and Sakhiya Devi from the nearby village earned Rs 30,000.

It was an overwhelming situation for all and Janki's efforts paid good results for women farmers. In the years to come, Janki intensified her engagements around collective quality seed, insecticide and fungicide purchasing. She also influenced women farmers to grow creepers in the rainy season, using the *machan* system. She convinced them to participate in collective nursery-raising so that quality plants could be raised. She ensured the timely application

of tomato staking and the application of insecticides and fungicide—interventions that helped women farmers get a good crop. Today, women farmers such as Baleswari Devi, Jaswa Devi, Geeta Devi and others earn an additional Rs 75,000 to Rs 1 lakh through tomato cultivation and the *machan* system of agriculture.

Almost every family is impressed with Janki's initiatives. They now consult and take advice from her whenever required. She has contributed in myriad ways to improve the condition of the village; if I were to start narrating those stories, it would take many days. Janki mustered the values and hopes of her fellow villagers. Today, trust, mutual support and collective action have become the bywords. My village is witnessing a different culture.

Shailendra Singh is based in Telaiya, Jharkhand

SHASHANK DEORA

DHURMARAS: A Crucible of Conflicts

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Struggling to gain recognition and access to their rights as a community living at the fringes of the forests and off the forest produce, the villagers of Dhurmaras attempt to make the best out of the situation they are in, hoping the government will address their issues and see them as contributors to society

CHAITI, KUPALI AND A FEW other women from Dhurmaras walk some 3 to 4 km in the forest to Kakalgur village to purchase bamboo mats woven by the local weavers. These women collect bamboo culms from the forest close to their homes, make thin slices out of them and dry them in the sun, to use for stitching leaf cups. They sell these things in weekly markets, locally called *haats*. The women are ecstatic about their ability to engage in this trade; they have even taken a bank loan to support their enterprise and have been able to repay their loan installments on time without much difficulty.

During the festive season, in the first quarter of 2016, they started a small shop in their homes, to sell their products. The men of Dhurmaras are engaged in labour work, mostly within the village—repairing roads, doing work with the forest department or working as MGNREGA labourers, along with the women from the hamlet.

Amidst all this came the first rain, marking the start of the agricultural season. It brought the delicious Boda mushroom, sprouting within the dense Sal (*Shorea robusta*) forests; a handful of these mushrooms can fetch something in the range of Rs 40 and 80; most of the village women are in the forest collecting these. Within the next few days,

For the women of the village, this is the most important time of the year. It is an opportunity to earn a few hundred rupees more from the non-timber forest produce (NTFP) by harvesting and selling these items in the markets nearby.

fresh edible bamboo shoots will begin sprouting, as will another species of mushrooms, locally called *chhati*.

For the women of the village, this is the most important time of the year. It is an opportunity to earn a few hundred rupees more from the non-timber forest produce (NTFP) by harvesting and selling these items in the markets nearby.

Dhurmaras is a hamlet in Kotamsar village, Darbha block, Bastar district. It borders the Kanger Valley National Park, separated only by the flowing Kanger stream. With some 40 households in the hamlet and all of them, but one, belonging to the Dhurwa tribe, the hamlet derives its name from the name of the tribe. Dhurmaras is some 5 km from National Highway (NH) 30, connecting Jagdalpur to Hyderabad. However, owing to poor roads, no transport is available to the villagers except on Saturdays, the day of the weekly market in the Neganar village.

On most days, therefore, the women walk to and from the market, a distance of 10 km. Weekly markets in the villages of Tokapal, Darbha and Neganar, where they sell their produce, are another 10 to 15 km beyond their

10 km walk. Once they leave their homes early in the morning to go to the market, they do not return before sunset. Nothing, however, deters these women from going around their usual business.

ABOUT THE DHURWA TRIBE

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Dhurwas are one among the several officially recorded tribes inhabiting Bastar in Chhattisgarh. There is lack of clarity over the origin of the Dhurwa tribe. Nandini Sundar, Professor of Sociology at the Delhi School of Economics, Delhi University, has conducted several studies on the people from Bastar. In one of her books on the anthropological study of Bastar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar (1854–2006)*, she speculates that Dhurwas (Parjas in the past) were probably a mixture of different tribes, all speaking different languages; they were the original citizens of the Nagvanshi kingdom in Bastar. After losing to the Kakatiyan rulers—the last ruling dynasty of Bastar—they fled to the area they live in currently (Sundar, 2014). A majority of the Dhurwa settlements are in the southeastern part of Bastar district and the adjoining regions of Sukma district, in part

extending to the neighbouring state of Odisha (Grigson, 1991). The Dhurwas speak a Dravidian language, known by the name of the tribe—Dhurwa. It is known, however, by very few and has no written script available. The language is fast disappearing.

Dhurwa settlements are usually either inside or adjacent to a forest area. And this proximity to the forest area, when compared to other tribes of Bastar, makes these forests an integral part of Dhurwa lives, as is evident from the choice of their traditional attire—hand-woven garments made of *raily kosa* silk, an eco-race of silkworm, endemic to Bastar, feeding on the Sal tree leaves in the wild. Their close affinity and association with the forest have made the Dhurwas expert bamboo weavers; they make beautiful bamboo mats, baskets, hats and fish-catching boxes, among other things.

Dhurmaras is no different from any other Dhurwa settlement. The hamlet of Dhurmaras is at least as old as Kotamsar village—its inhabitants recount—and the people have been dependent on forest produce for their livelihood for as long as they can remember. Recently, however, some incidents have occurred that have hampered their livelihoods to

Although these raids are being conducted with the sole objective of seizing only bamboo shoots, in an effort to prevent over-exploitation of forests, other bamboo products including bamboo mats are being confiscated as well.

such an extent that the women are worried about repaying their loans.

Because the area falls inside the Kanger Valley National Park, the forest department is doing everything possible to discourage the commercial harvesting of bamboo shoots from the forest. It conducts regular raids and seizes all the bamboo shoots. Although these raids are being conducted with the sole objective of seizing only bamboo shoots, in an effort to prevent over-exploitation of forests, other bamboo products including bamboo mats are being confiscated as well.

During the monsoon of 2016, on more than a few occasions when the people of Dhurmaras have been caught in possession of bamboo products, all their produce has been seized. Aarawati from Dhurmaras sadly recollects her pain from one such occasion when she and a few other women from their hamlet were asked by the forest guard to get off their transport vehicle, and her bag full of bamboo shoots and bamboo culms worth more than Rs 300—a week of her labour—were taken away. She had to walk to the market site with her headload of paddy because the vehicle too was confiscated.

Women usually set up stalls in the local markets; women also belong to the lowest economic strata—not owning any household assets traditionally. Therefore, anything affecting their small enterprises is certain to push them down further. Chaiti expresses her helplessness saying, “They take our mats in the village, on the roads, at the checking posts, and in the weekly *haats*; we are afraid that we will not be able to repay our bank loans.”

The landholding of all the other hamlets and villages of Kotamsar *gram panchayat* falls under the jurisdiction of either the forest department or the revenue department; ironically, however, Dhurmaras, belongs to neither, and has suffered because of this. People living in Dhurmaras for more than 20 years now are yet to receive titles for their landholdings. A government school bearing the name of Dhurmaras exists in the vicinity but nobody in the hamlet has been able to get a *patta* (title) to the land they cultivate. This has deprived the people of any individual land development work on their lands under MGNREGA, essential to earn a decent living from agriculture in this place.

The process of legitimizing this hamlet’s landholdings has been underway for several years now. After Kotamsar became a revenue *gram panchayat* last year, followed by the visit of the District Collector and the *tahsildar* earlier this year and then the formation of a separate *gram sabha* to accord its approval, carving out a separate revenue village out of the area under Dhurmaras hamlet seems to be on the priority list of the district administration.

Efforts are also on to construct a road connecting Dhurmaras to NH30 under Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana. Probably, life will become easier once all this is done. Nevertheless, all this should not be an excuse to deprive the poor villagers of their most promising livelihood option in today’s context.

I wonder what I should do with all the knowledge I have about this situation. As a human being and as a development professional, should I side with any one section? Would standing with the women of Dhurmaras be the right choice or should I support the administrative measures being taken to ensure forest conservation? Dhurmaras is not the only hamlet and Kotamsar is

Perhaps, the solution may lie in a different line altogether—working with the people for the promotion of commercial agricultural crops, or the promotion of livestock-rearing as a livelihoods option.

not the only village going through such an ordeal. As per the Census 2011, there are nine forest villages in Darbha and there are many more villages, dependent on the forest produce for their economic needs, making this compromise.

BUILDING A FUTURE

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Taking sides will not help these villagers get out of their misery; I am hopeful, however, that a concerted effort will help the situation. Or, perhaps, the solution may lie in a different line altogether—working with the people for the promotion of commercial agricultural crops, or the promotion of livestock-rearing as a livelihoods option.

PRADAN has been working in Dhurmaras for close to two years now, having organized the women here into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and introduced

the concept of regular savings and credit among them. PRADAN has tried to work with the village community by addressing their concerns through these livelihood options.

Being close to the forest, the agricultural lands in Dhurmaras have not suffered much soil erosion and, therefore, agriculture is a good livelihood option here. PRADAN has promoted scientific agriculture practices in the hamlet; however, the inaccessibility of this place during the monsoons has not allowed for much success. Again, with the forest nearby, there is enough feed available for livestock-rearing and that could be a livelihood option. PRADAN is now planning to promote livestock-rearing, starting with training the locals on vaccination.

PRADAN has also been working with a Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT) in Darbha block since

2014, to help the government improve implementation of MGNREGA. People from the different hamlets of Kotamsar *gram panchayat* prepared hamlet-level plans for the works to be taken up under MGNREGA. Although no individual works could be taken up in Dhurmaras, owing to the lack of official land titles, the local-level planning has increased the villagers' ownership of the process, and gradually its benefits are going to extend to all the hamlets of Kotamsar. There still seems to be a long way to go before any significant difference is made in the lives of these people. Until then, the people of Dhurmaras and many other villages in Darbha are out there in the forest, doing what they know best, and their conflict continues.

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Shashank Deora is based in Tokapal, Chhattisgarh

SAYANI BHATTACHARYA AND BIPIN KUMAR

GEETA MARKAM: An Epitome of Courage

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Embracing her disability and accepting it as a part of her life, Geeta *didi* has shown exemplary courage and determination in tackling issues that women face, and has been especially active in seeing that justice is meted out to women of her community

“SAARI LADKIYAN KHO-KHO KHELT THI, *par mein chup chap baithi rehti thi* (All the girls used to play kho-kho and all I could do was to sit and stare),” reminisces Geeta Markam, saddened by her childhood memories. She could not contribute to the household income through agriculture or labour. “*Sab paise kamane ke liye matti feinkne jatey they aur mein bas ghar ka kaam hi kar pati thi* (Everyone used to go for daily labour work and all I would do was the household work).” She became used to the daily taunts of her relatives. “*Mein to sab ke liye bojh thi* (I was a liability for everyone).”

Life was never smooth for Geeta Markam of Mohgaon village, Balaghat district, Madhya Pradesh. She was struck by polio when she was three. Although she underwent treatment at the local hospital, she became differently-abled. Her right leg was affected. Her family sold two acres of land for her treatment. Geeta stays with her mother, father, brother and sister-in-law.

Because she was relatively more educated than the other women of that village, the SHG members asked her to join the group as the *khaata lekhak* (accountant) of the group.

She was good in studies and was enrolled in the local school. She was trained to walk with a bamboo stick as support, at the age of five. In spite of scoring first division marks in all her subjects, she had stop studies after the 9th standard. Higher education required both monetary and physical investment, and she lacked both of them. Several superstitions of her family and relatives, regarding her physical condition, also prevented her from studying further.

Geeta's first stint with the SHG (Self Help Group) came when she was staying at her maternal uncle's home. At that time, an SHG had been formed in the village, under the SGSY programme. Because she was relatively more educated than the other women of that village, the SHG members asked her to join the group as the *khaata lekhak* (accountant) of the group. During this period, she fell ill with malaria, typhoid and jaundice, back-to-back, and the doctors also suspected that she may have tuberculosis. She had trouble with her eyes and had to wear spectacles. She stayed away from home for three months due to her health and had to quit the SHG.

The SHG had been functioning for 11 months, and it dissolved

when she left. After recovering, she came back from her maternal uncle's home. This time, she was approached by the women around her home as well as the Community Support Person (CSP), to join their SHG. The women wanted her to be a part of the SHG because she was good at writing accounts and in communicating with others. Initially, she was nervous because of her last experience of illness during her stint with the SHG. With the persuasion and encouragement of the women of her hamlet and the CSPs, however, she agreed to join. Soon she was encouraging other women to form more SHGs. She remembers forming two SHGs in her village and getting Rs 240 per month for writing their accounts.

She recalls the initial questions posed to her by the CSP, which gave her an incentive to organize the women into collectives. "*Panchayat mein gaye ho? 100 din ka kaam hua hai?* (Have you been to a panchayat? Do you get to work for 100 days)?"

She had no idea and said, "*Nahin, bhaiya, hamaare gaon me aisa to nahi hota* (No, brother, that doesn't happen in our village)."

He suggested forming a Village Level Committee (VLC) for

women to discuss issues such as these because the number of SHGs increased from one to three. They formed a village-level group. They started to have discussions in their meetings on the issues of the village. "*VLC mein charcha karke, hummein himmat aa gai thi* (We became more confident after these discussions in the VLC). In one meeting, the issue of semi-constructed Upswasthya Kendra (Sub-Health Centre – SHC) was raised and the group decided to call the sarpanch to the next meeting to talk about this issue.

The *sarpanch* came to the next VLC but the members were hesitant about asking him anything. Geeta *didi*, too, was trembling. Finally, she said, "*Baddo jee* (respected Sir) *upswasthya kendra kyon nahi ban raha hai* (Why is the SHC not getting constructed)?" *Baddo jee* is how an elderly uncle is addressed. The *sarpanch* was her distant relative.

The *sarpanch* was furious that the women were interrogating him, and said that he had already tried but could not do anything. He told the women angrily to remain within their limits and asked them what they could do, being women.

Geeta didi tasted success for the first time...going to the district office with a village issue, engaging with the official and getting the job done !

Geeta *didi* did not like the response; however, because the *sarpanch* was her relative, she did not feel confident about confronting him. The women discussed among themselves what they could do to take the issue forward. Once again, the women approached the *sarpanch* and asked for the name of the contractor who was to build the Upswasthya Kendra. The *sarpanch* refused to give them the name.

This time, Geeta didi found her lost courage and looked angrily at the *sarpanch* and told him, “*Hamko dhamki diye to kyon diye, ki auratein kya kar sakti hain* (Why did you threaten us and ask us what women could do)?” The women contributed Rs 20 each, hired a tractor and went to the block headquarters. Geeta *didi* said, “The officials got irritated and asked us to go back to our village. But he also told us that the construction would restart in 3–4 days. A few days later, the ANM (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife) and one man from the hospital came to Sunita Bai’s house and started abusing her, asking her why the women had gone to complain against them.”

The women were undeterred; they decided to discuss the issue in the Cluster meeting (women’s collectives of four to five villages).

In the Cluster meeting, three villages came together to place before the Collector and the district officials the issue of the Upswasthya Kendra, which affected all of them. They also took the *sarpanch* with them. The *sarpanch* tried to hide from the district officials. Initially, Geeta *didi* was hesitant and fearful about putting forward the matter of her village, but the other women were confident about her, and insisted that she speak up. She described the problem to the Chief Medical Health Officer (CMHO).

The CMHO asked the *sarpanch* about the problem and the details of the contractor. He made a phone call to the contractor and ordered him to start the work immediately. The work began in few days and the Upswasthya Kendra was complete. Geeta *didi* tasted success for the first time... going to the district office with a village issue, engaging with the official and getting the job done!

Being a member of an SHG and undergoing various trainings is what she considers the major turning point of her life. She was very hesitant but had the support of the women and of PRADAN. Other women from the group used to say to Geeta *didi*, “*Hum nahi bol paate hain par tum bolo,*

ham tumhare saath hain (We don’t know what to speak, but at least you can speak, and all of us are with you).”

Geeta *didi* says, “*Baki didi ka bharosha tha* (I had the trust of the other women with me).” She also mentioned that the person from PRADAN kept encouraging and motivating her, which helped her move forward, “*Tum log kab tak darke rahoge* (How long will you stay in fear)?”

Geeta *didi* went through several exposure visits and trainings besides the participating in the regular meetings and discussion forums in and around the villages. She was chosen as the representative of the village-level committee and went to Paraswada to the Federation meeting each month. The members said that she was good at communicating and had lesser work-load so she should be the village representative.

As the village representative, she attended a five-day leadership camp in Kesla (Hoshangabad District, Madhya Pradesh), where she met leaders from the Narmada Mahila Sangh (NMS). She heard many stories of collective efforts, wherein women worked in a united manner to solve issues of their family,

The training was based on the experience of the participants and the situation of women and the discrimination they faced in the family and in society. It was here that she began questioning the inequality and discrimination that the women were subjected to in society.

village and the *panchayat*. She went through a training module that focussed on rights and entitlements, mobility mapping and games, all of which helped her develop an understanding of how women's collectives could function.

She visited the NMS Federation office in Kesla. It inspired her when she saw that the women were running the office. She understood the structure of collectives from them. It was a new world for her where women were talking about their issues and working to resolve them. She participated in a three-day long Gender training by Shanti Amma (Gender trainer) and many questions started hovering in her mind. The training was based on the experience of the participants and the situation of women and the discrimination they faced in the family and in society. It was here that she began questioning the inequality and discrimination that the women were subjected to in society.

In one incident, an SHG member, Kaushal *didi*, who was regularly beaten by her husband and even had a scar on her neck from one such beating, couldn't take it anymore and she hit her husband back and ran away to another village for fear of repercussions.

No one knew where she had gone. One of the women informed Geeta *didi* that Kaushal *didi* had slapped her husband and she was missing for the last 15 days.

The next day Geeta *didi* went to the Federation meeting and talked to the women of Bhamodi village (Kaushal *didi*'s maternal home) about the incident and found that Kaushal had not gone back there. Her father came to the village that same night. He, along with the police constable, went to meet his son-in-law but he abused them. The father filed a complaint in the police station later about his missing daughter and the husband was put behind bars.

There had been no search for her, so far. After the police complaint, everyone began searching for her. Kaushal *didi* was found in Pratappur at one of her relative's homes. After this, her in-laws called for a *jati panchayat* meeting in the village to penalise Kaushal *didi* because she had slapped her husband. Geeta *didi* suggested to Kaushal *didi*'s father that he should attend the meeting with people from his village and fight for Kaushal *didi*. Geeta *didi* mobilized the women from Mohgaon to attend the meeting and speak up for Kaushal. At the *jati panchayat*, Kaushal *didi* was charged with *bakra roti* because

she had hit her husband (*bakra roti* is a penalty, in which the accused has to feed mutton to the whole village).

In the meeting, Geeta *didi* argued, "*Bhaiya to didi ko hamesha marta hai, tab kuch nahi kartey koi; ek bar didi ne bhaiya ko mar diya to bakra roti loge. Ye kahan ka niyam hai, kaun se bhagwan ne likha hai* (When her husband hits her every day, then nobody does anything. Didi hit her husband once and you are penalising her with bakra roti. What is this law, which God has written this?)"

There was silence in the entire village. Then, the other women supported Geeta *didi* saying, "*Kaahe ka roti? Jab bhaiya marta hai to roti deta hai? Kitaa sahegi? Bhagwan to bana ke nahi laya hai ye niyam ki iska roti lena hai* (What bakra roti? When the husband beats his wife, does he get penalised? God has not made the law that only a woman needs to be penalised)."

Some of the men also started supporting the women. But the in-laws of Kaushal *didi* were saying that they will not take her back in their house. The women's collective then pressurised them for compensation of half an acre of land and Rs 1,000 per month for Kaushal *didi* if she were to live

Geeta *didi* created awareness among the members of the Tadarth Samiti, who then began to look into the functioning of the Gram Arogya Kendra.

on her own. The father-in-law came out in support of Kaushal *didi* and said that she is a good person and that she would live with them. An agreement letter was drafted for her living with her husband in safety and with a provision of half an acre of land and Rs 1,000 per month, in case she lives alone. One copy of that letter is still kept with the VLC.

Owing to her passion to fight for the cause of women, Geeta was selected and given several responsibilities as Sangathansathi, Swasthasathi and Adhikaarsathi. She went through the training on rights of citizens—the Right to Equality, Free Speech, National Food Security Act (NFSA), Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), Public Distribution System (PDS) and the Right to Information (RTI)—as ensured by the Constitution. She also underwent a National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) workshop, in which she learned about the structure and provisions of health-care services and she became engaged in preparing a citizens' report.

She did a survey, based on a questionnaire, prepared when the team was involved in writing the citizens' report about the health system. She took interviews, raised questions about the

irregularity in health services and the respective institutions. The interview and survey raised the awareness of the participants, which led to an improvement in the services of the ANM, *Anganwadi Karyakarta* and the *Aasha Karyakarta*. Geeta *didi* now creates awareness among women about their rights and entitlements, and the various government schemes and provisions.

As a Swasthasathi, she influenced the functioning of the Gram Arogya Kendra (Village Health Centre) and the Tadarth Samiti (a village-level monitoring body around health services) in her village. She enquired about the Tadarth Samiti and its functions at the *gram sabha*. She came to know that there were many women who were members of SHGs and the Tadarth Samiti, including the *adhyaksh* of the Tadarth Samiti, who were ignorant about the functions of the Samiti and the amount invested by the government for the health and sanitation services.

Geeta *didi* created awareness among the members of the Tadarth Samiti, who then began to look into the functioning of the Gram Arogya Kendra. Along with a few other women, Geeta *didi*

went to the Anganwadi Kendra and enquired about the medical services and the opening and closing times. Although it existed, the people had no knowledge of it, and the *Aasha Karyakarta* was not conducting the Gram Arogya Kendra in the best way. After the discussion, the *Aasha Karyakarta* agreed to stay two hours per day at the Arogya Kendra.

Geeta *didi* is also an active member of the ADV (Anti Domestic Violence) theatre group. This group was formed to engage the community in a discussion around domestic violence and the Anti Domestic Violence Act, 2005. She participated in a seven-day workshop before being associated with the ADV theatre group. She talked about how the participants formed the human stairway and touched the roof during the workshop. It was a collective exercise and she was at the base with her stick.

At the time of the formation of the group, there were sessions where members shared their life experiences of violence and cried. She says, "*Hum logon ne ro ro ke group banaya hai* (We have formed the group by weeping our heart out)." The group performs plays in villages and during the performance it engages the audience in discussions on the

Looking at the stance of the women, the *panch* asked for forgiveness and the women let him go on the condition that he would stop making liquor and would not abuse women.

situation of women and the violence against them. Geeta *didi* engages in dialogue with the audience, questions the norms of society and beautifully exposes it to the people.

It was not easy for her to talk about this issue in public. She trembled during the early performances, especially during the dialogue. But with practice, she is able to master the art of performing in front of a full audience. So far, she has performed more than 100 plays, including two in the State capital, Bhopal, and one in Mandla district in Madhya Pradesh. She was actively involved in the fair election campaign during the *panchayat* elections. She, along with the whole theatre group, was involved in creating awareness, through their plays, about the fair mechanism of an election, the role and importance of women leaders, and having space for women in the *gram sabha*.

Once, the issue of *nashabandi* (banning alcohol) was raised in the village and the women from the SHG participated in this. One *panch* from the village, who was involved in preparing the *mahua* alcohol, abused Kashan *didi* and tried to beat her. Geeta *didi* and Kashan *didi* went to the police station and reported the incident

that same evening. By the next morning, the *panch* knew about the police involvement. He also complained against Kashan *didi*. The police did not take any action against the *panch*. Geeta *didi* called up the police station and asked what they were doing against the complaint they had made. She warned the person on the phone, “*Tum paisa se ladoge to ham ijjat se ladenge, tumne paisa leke daba diya case ko, to ham aage badhte hai, agar aapki beti hoti to aap kya karte* (You will fight with money and we will fight for our respect. You have taken money and settled the case. We will take it further. Had she been your daughter, then what would have you done)?”

Within an hour, the police came. They suggested arriving at a compromise. The women demanded that the *panch* be put behind bars. Geeta *didi* said angrily, “*Hum report lagaye hai tamasha nahi kiye hai* (we have filed a complaint not created a drama).”

One policeman commented that Geeta *didi* walks with a stick and she is stubborn. Geeta *didi* replied back, “*Mein lathh le ke chalti hu par pahar par chadh jati hun* (I walk with the stick but can climb the mountain).” Looking at the stance of the women, the *panch* asked

for forgiveness and the women let him go on the condition that he would stop making liquor and would not abuse women.

There are many other instances when Geeta *didi* has shown courage and has brought positive change. Each time she faced her anxiety and fear, she has grown stronger. Now, she is an epitome of living the values of equality and freedom. She went through loads of challenging situations and has worked hard to overcome them. She proudly says, “*Ek samay tha jab sarpanch aata tha to main dar jati thi, baat nahi karti thi, aur ek din sachiv mera pair pakad kar maafi maang raha tha ki mai MGNREGA payment ki shikayat collector ko na karu, wo payment karva dega* (There was a time when I used to be so afraid of the PRI members that I wouldn’t be able to speak; and today the *panchayat* sachiv begs pardon by falling at my feet pleading that I mustn’t complain to the Collector and that he will get the payments cleared).”

She is overawed when she realizes the change that time has brought in her.

Geeta *didi* says that her village women supported her at every step and stood beside her. Once, she became the target of

Her journey, so far, has revolved around fighting for justice, as a citizen and as a woman. She has gathered enough confidence to fight in her family for equal rights in property among the two sisters and one brother, which has led to some bitter relations with her brother.

a conspiracy when she raised several issues in front of the District Collector during one of his visits to Mohgaon. She made complaints related to corruption in the PDS, the postmaster who delayed pension payments, and some of the PRI members. She was considered a disturbing element in the village and one who incited other women as well.

Some powerful person in her *panchayat* decided to send several men around to her house to threaten her during the local festival, *mandai mela*, when she was all alone. All her family members and most of the neighbours had gone to the *mela*. They abused her verbally and wanted to harm her physically. All she could do at that time was to lock herself up in her room. They kept banging on the door and shouted for an hour and, finally, left. There was no one in the village to come to her rescue. When the women in the village got to know about the incident, a VLC meeting was convened. The persons involved in the incident were dragged out of their houses and they begged pardon in front of the women and Geeta *didi*.

Her journey, so far, has revolved around fighting for justice, as a citizen and as a woman. She has gathered enough confidence to

fight in her family for equal rights in property among the two sisters and one brother, which has led to some bitter relations with her brother. "*Bohot kuch sikhne ko mila* (I have learned a lot)." But this has not been an easy journey for her. Several persons opposed her, "*Mard jaisa bolti hai aur gaon ke muddo ko lekar auraton ko bhadkaati hai* (She talks as if she is a man and incites the women on village issues)." She is used to such comments and taunts. But she has not given up. She has always stood up for justice and fought back as a strong and courageous woman.

Geeta *didi* embraced her body as it is, accepted it as a part of her life and did not let it dissuade her. She has not only been an active member of the SHG but has also been instrumental in taking forward improved agricultural practices by learning new techniques. She cultivated paddy through the SRI method and did vermi-compost and vegetable farming. Seeing her success, many other women have also adopted the improved practices.

She got married a year ago, and is happy that she is able to cultivate the concept of equality in her small family. "*Main mahine mein chaar bar meeting jaati hun*

aur shaadi ke baad bhi jaaungi (I attend a meeting four times a month and will continue to do so after my marriage)," was the first thing she said when she met her husband for the first time. After her marriage, she moved to Basi village, which also comes under the purview of the Federation. She formed a new SHG in her village, introduced organic agricultural skills such as organic pest management, and explained the importance of raised bed nursery to her neighbours. She is appreciated a lot for her skills when the villagers saw that the plant disease vanished by just spraying cow urine. She and her husband run a small general store and plan to invest more money in it. She wishes to develop the same collective strength in her new village as she had done in her own village. She started organizing the women, reaching out to the Aasha for family health issues; she says, "*Is gaon mein bahut kuchh karna hoga* (There is much that needs to be done in this village)."

Sayani Bhattacharya and Bipin Kumar are based in Paraswada, Madhya Pradesh

SHG members of Arajū village
creating awareness about women's
participation in the *gram sabha* (pg 22)



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

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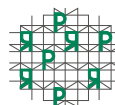
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Aranya Biswas from
Petarbar team, Jharkhand,
with members of women's
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