

VI

Santhal Pargana Development Cluster (SPDC)



Banka and Jamui districts in Bihar and Godda and Dumka districts in Jharkhand together form Santhal Pargana Development Cluster. The region has about 40 percent tribal and Dalit population, with Santhal being the predominant tribe. Santhals are distinct in their beliefs, social customs and rich culture that has given rise to a separate tribal identity. This cluster has an intermingled cultural landscape. The hills are inhabited by Mal or Sauria Paharias and the areas bordering the hills are usually occupied by Santhals and Ghatwals. More than 60 percent of the population in the DC directly depends on agriculture and allied activities to earn their livelihood. However, for Santhals and Ghatwals, mostly living in the remote areas, agriculture is fragile with abysmally low productivity. For most part of the year, nearly 32 percent of the total population migrates in search of daily wage jobs. The women's literacy rates are as low as 49 percent, and more than 50 percent of the households live below poverty line.

OVERVIEW OF PRADAN'S OPERATIONS IN SPDC

Particulars	DC Total	PRADAN Outreach
Districts	8	4
Population	10.8 million	593,585
Percent of Rural Population	88	100
Percent of ST and SC Population	40	56
Households	1.99 million	118,717

Particulars	Scale
Number of SHGs	9,526
Number of VOs	621
Households covered under Livelihoods	67,869
PRADAN teams	7

Themes	Community Collectives
Health and Nutrition	806 SHGs
Education	47 VOs
WASH	1,641 Households
Gender and Governance	3,494 SHGs

PRADAN initiated work in Santhal Pargana in the year 1987. This is one of our first direct intervention areas. We have done significant work here under institution building, livelihood enhancement in agriculture, allied sector, enterprise development and forest-based livelihoods. This DC has successfully pioneered scientific Tasar sericulture as a livelihood option for the village women. Of late, the DC has invested significantly in gender, nutrition, WASH and governance issues.

Breaking the Barriers:

Addressing Gender Inequality

Over the last three years, women collectives in SPDC have made considerable progress in addressing issues of domestic violence, maternal mortality, child marriage, social taboos on menstruation, and health and nutrition status of women. Further, significant efforts have been made in establishing women as farmers by empowering them with the rights of decision making, control on income and expenditure, ownership of assets, participation in public forums and leisure period for themselves.

In the whole process, women federations have played a major role. The ideas were discussed at the federation level and the whole program was rolled out under the supervision of federation leaders. PRADAN trained the federation leaders on gender perspective.

Further, gender was made a core theme of the cluster and annual federation get-togethers. Skits were prepared and songs were composed to highlight gender issues, and enhance women's perspective on gender. Federations also organized Mahila Kisan Mela (Women Farmers' Fair) and registered women as farmers with the block administration. In some areas, the collectives unanimously nominated women in Gram Panchayat elections. They have routinely raised voice against the flawed public service delivery system. They have formed forums like Mahila Adhikar Manch (Platform for Women's Rights) and Nari Sahayata Kendra (Women Help Centre) to resolve cases of gender-based violence and discrimination.

Will Kajol and Preeti Ever Go To School?

She was very clear. She did not see a point of sending her two young daughters to school. She had never been to school. Her eldest two daughters had never sat in a class. Why should there be an exception?

She combed Umid's hair and tucked his shirt. She kept looking at her son (youngest of all her children) longingly as he ran to join his friend who was waiting impatiently outside the bamboo fencing surrounding their hut. They were going to the nearby mission school. Her two younger daughters kept staring at their mother. They were already nine years and ten years old and would perhaps never go to school in their lives.

Meena Murmu of the Gharchappa village in Banka district of Bihar was a mother of five children. This Santhal tribal family was, in many ways, a microcosm of other families in this area. Grindingly poor with small landholding leading to high food security, their survival depended on many external factors: timely rain, Public Distribution System, labor work, usurer and forest. A girl child was only an added burden to the household. The elder daughters were married even before they were 18 years old.

When she joined the SHG, Meena had only one motive. The SHG would be a source of easy loan for her. The family's dependency on the money-lender, who charged exorbitant interest rates, would lessen. Fast forward two years and Meena has completely stopped taking loans from him. Other momentous changes have also taken place in her life. Agriculture intervention by PRADAN in the village now ensures food security throughout the year for many families. Talk on gender equality and equality of opportunity in SHG and VO meetings has also significantly altered Meena's views on inequality and domestic violence. Yet she was still unsure if it was worth sending her daughters to even a government school in the village.

One evening, as she was weeding her farm, there was a commotion at a distance. Children were all running towards the large Mahua tree in the middle of the village. A group of women from the women's federation, the larger umbrella of SHGs which Meena was a part of, was performing a skit, "Roshni Ki Kahani" (The Story of Roshni). It portrayed the injustice that Roshni was subjected to and how her life changed when elements of gender sensitivity and equality were introduced. Meena was stunned. It was her story. It was also the story of her daughters. After the skit, she silently went back to the farm and continued working.



Photo: Rajendra Mahato

In the next SHG meeting, Meena took a loan of INR 2,000 (US\$31). The next day she went to the same mission school where her son Umid studies.

“Bhai jaldi, Bhai Jaldi” (Quick brother, quick) cry out the girls in unison. Kajol and Preeti eagerly wait for Umid as he finishes his food. As all three of them run to the same school, Meena looks on. There is never a wrong time to do the right thing, she thinks.

Kajol and Preeti never miss their classes. Umid has also started helping in household chores. The baby steps of change being driven by the SHGs in these remote pockets of Bihar may someday bring about significant societal transformation.

GENDER JUSTICE ACROSS PRADAN LOCATIONS

Our gender integration efforts have evolved to gender mainstreaming across geographies and themes. At the core of our development perspective, gender integration has now moved to community action through capacity building at both staff and community level. This year our focus was the primary group and thematic integration of gender.

The number of internal resource pool from PRADAN has now increased to 57, each team comprising of one. The total trainee days spent on gender integration crossed more than 100,000. A total of 6,957 SHGs are discussing and/or taking actions around issues of caste/class/gender discrimination.

As a result, there is increased access to entitlements by women, the improved leadership of women in public spaces, access to public services and

participation in governance processes. Further, primary groups were seen discussing or taking action around alcoholism, domestic violence, dowry, child marriage and education of girl child. Federations are also building capacities of more than 100 women as Paralegals within the community to address cases of violence.

In addition, significant progress is made in women's access and control of resources, assets, financial services like Kisan Credit Card and linkages with national forums like Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (Forum for Women Farmers' Rights). The initiation of Agriculture Production Clusters to connect women producers to the market through a common platform also picked considerable pace across teams and geographies.