

# newsreach

THE LIVELIHOODS AND DEVELOPMENT BIMONTHLY

SEP\_OCT 2017 • Vol 17 No 5

## When the Ravaging Flood Waters Recede

Finding solutions to counter the devastating effects of receding flood waters

### PROFILE

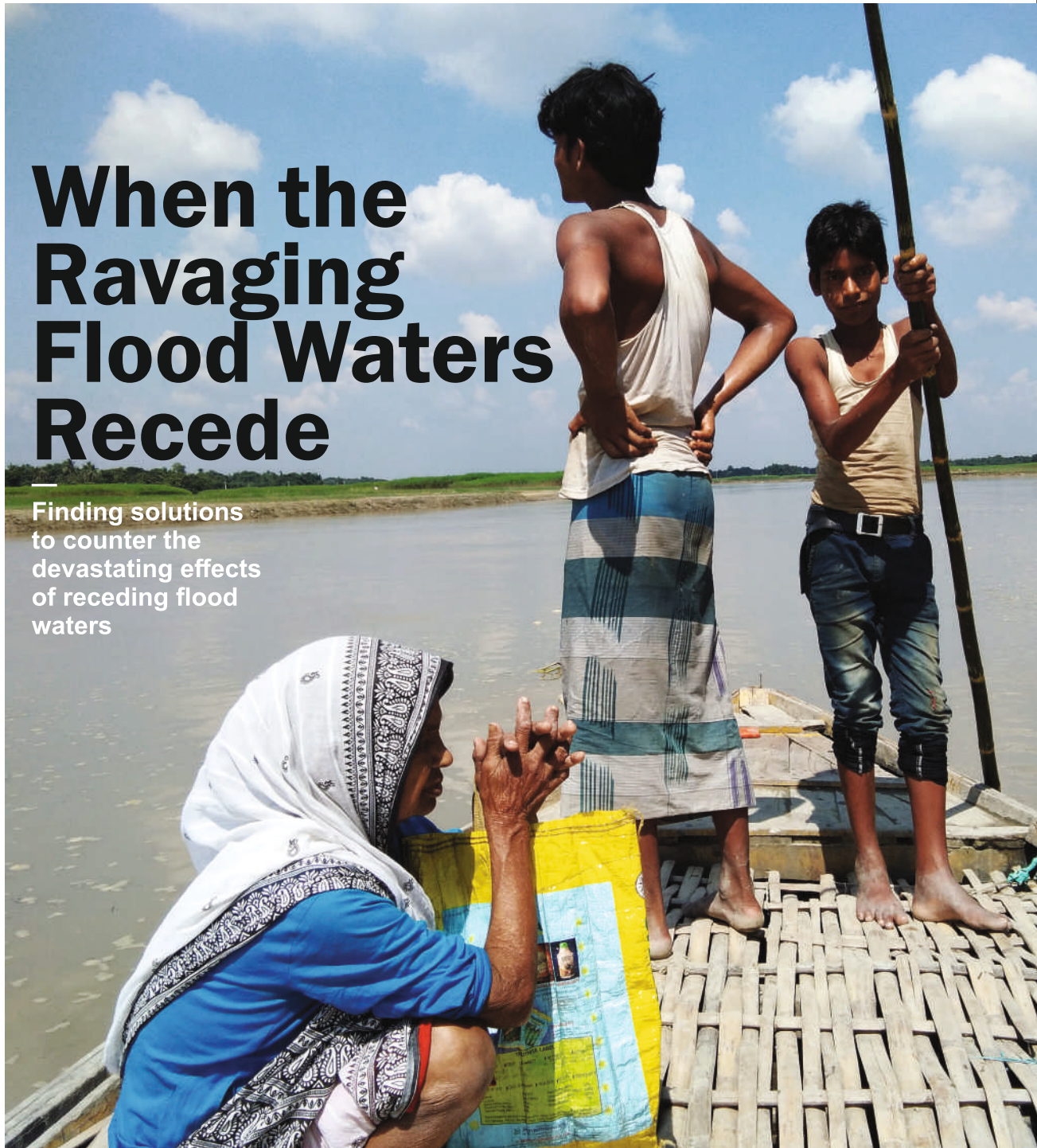
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Maidandih Village: Dignified Mornings

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Shift in Tribal Food Habits: From Sustainable to Non-sustainable



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now supports her in her work.  
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KALPESHKUMAR CHAUHAN AND ASHUTOSH NANDA

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**ASHUTOSH MISHRA**

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# Shift in Tribal Food Habits: From Sustainable to Non-Sustainable

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Giving up on traditional food and blindly having 'development' agendas in agriculture thrust on them has resulted in the tribals losing their wise and time-tested habits and practices, leading to heavy loss in health and economic terms. Today, they are neither here nor there—neither modern, 'developed' and prosperous nor in touch with their own indigenous crop cultivation methods and wholesome food habits

*"There is a great need for the introduction of new values in our society, where bigger is not necessarily better, where slower can be faster, and where less can be more." ~ Gaylord Nelson*

## Abstract

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**T**HIS ARTICLE FOCUSES ON THE factors leading to a drastic shift in the agricultural practices of the indigenous Pahariya and the Santhal tribes of Sundarpahari block, resulting in feeble dietary habits and serious health repercussions. The indigenous Pahariya and Santhal

tribes earlier engaged in traditional agrarian and food gathering processes, which placed healthy and diversified food items on their platter. Now, however, such variation and diversification in their food no longer exist. Whereas I do describe the traditional tribal food habits with their health and nutritional aspects and compare these with newly acquired habits, the major focus of this paper is to look at the possible factors that have led to 'the shift' in the qualitative degradation in food patterns and its impact on the overall health of the two tribes.

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The Santhals are mainly agricultural tribes, with around 95 per cent of the population engaged in agrarian livelihoods. They clear the forests, till the land and produce food on it

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This article takes into account the role that migration has played in this 'shift' and the issue of degradation of the very crucial, traditional tribal practice of *adgadha* (community cattle sheds and the mechanism of collection of fines for errant cattle during sowing time) and its repercussions, the heavy dependence on the Public Distribution System (PDS) and the role of newly-formed Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) in Jharkhand. Besides this, the study examines the role of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) in shaping the nutritional aspirations of the children and the implications of the adoption of new food habits.

## Backdrop

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The Sundarpahari block of Godda district comprises 221 villages, spread over 13 *panchayats*. The block is divided into two, both by its physical characteristics and community-wise. The hill is entirely inhabited by the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) whereas the plains below are where the Santhal tribes live. At around 16,198 people, the PVTG population is 24.74 per cent of the total population, which is the largest in any one block of Santhal

Parganas. People belonging to Scheduled Tribes (ST) comprise 76.58 per cent of the population, Scheduled Castes (SC) 2.13 per cent and the rest of the population belongs to Other Backward Castes (OBC).

As far as other resources are concerned, 60.4 per cent of the total available 32,678 ha of land is cultivable and 10.7 per cent of that is irrigated. The rest of the land is rain-fed. Forest coverage is 42.41 per cent, mainly in and around the tribal dominated villages. Usually, these lands are under cultivation with food crops such as paddy, wheat and maize. Pulses and oil-seeds are cultivated as second crops. Vegetable cultivation is not very popular and is often limited to a small corner of the land around the houses.

Data reveal that the Santhals and the Pahariyas are the two predominant tribes of Sundarpahari. The Pahariyas are the original inhabitants of the area and are settled in the regions of the Rajmahal Hills and the neighbouring region of Santhal Parganas. Racially, linguistically and culturally, they are close to the Birhor tribe. Both the Bihors and the Pahariyas belong to the Austro-Asiatic sub-family of the Austric family of

languages. They are of Dravidian origin like the Mundas, the Oraons and other tribes of the Austro-Asiatic sub-family. Their villages are small, with 20–30 households and a maximum of 50 houses. The housing pattern is very dense and the houses are close to each other and have just a small path in between them. They prefer living an isolated life and avoid interaction with other communities.

The Santhals are mainly agricultural tribes, with around 95 per cent of the population engaged in agrarian livelihoods. They clear the forests, till the land and produce food on it. They are also considered good hunters and, besides this, they own domesticated *goi* (cows), *merom* (goats), *sukri* (pig). The *pushy* (cat) is their favoured pet.

The Santhals live in the plains and their houses are constructed in rows and the villages are relatively spacious and large. Traditionally, the Santhals and the Pahariyas have not been living in peace with each other, partially because of historical differences and partially due to the current economic, educational and cultural dominance of the Santhals. Despite coming from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, they have one

A Pahariya elder reminisces about the good old days when only oil, salt and spices needed to be purchased from the market; the rest of the food requirements were available in the villages. Today, the traditional, ancestral knowledge and skills about the wild have diminished significantly

thing in common, that is, their dependence on natural resources—from food to common itinerants to their religious practices; they borrow heavily from the forests, the mountains and the water bodies nearby. As per a survey, there are as many as 10 types of mushrooms, eight types of aquatic weeds, five types of honey, 20 types of birds, 24 green leafy vegetables, 15 types of fruits, six types of vegetables, six types of legumes, two types of millets, three types of flowers, four tubers and three types of seeds, available in the wild for consumption.

A Pahariya elder reminisces about the good old days when only oil, salt and spices needed to be purchased from the market; the rest of the food requirements were available in the villages.

Today, the traditional, ancestral knowledge and skills about the wild have diminished significantly. The Santhals and the Pahariyas have been forced by circumstances and by societal approval to adopt a newer monoculture system of cultivation that has changed their eating from a relatively healthy and fuller food pattern to an inadequate dietary habit. Today, typical Santhal and Pahariya food habits include large amounts of rice, which is either eaten with watery potato gravy, or with watery pulses with salt and chilly to enhance the taste. Gone are the days when they had a variety of green vegetables on their plate.

Forests and water bodies, as a resource, are known to be sustainable only when a balance is maintained between the demand

and supply, that is, what we take from the nature needs to be given back within a stipulated span of time; otherwise the balance begins to dwindle. Earlier, the forest produce offered a variety of items. This variety has now been reduced to a mere two or three items. The seniors remember eating hearty meals of *dakka* (rice), *dal* (pulses), *jundra dakka* (maize), *jundra pitthe* (maize bread), *kode pitthe* (millet bread), *kode dakka* (millet porridge), *uttu* (veggies) from the forests and fields and *hakku jheel* (fish) from nearby streams, all in one single day. Food yield from the forest would complement the cultivated crop foods. The irony is that now the same seniors have to make do with simple *dakka* and watery *dal uttu*, with barely visible forest veggies on their plate.

Here is a look at their pattern.

**Table 1:** Comparison of the old cropping patterns of Sundarpahari and current use of land

No.	Crop	Conventional Varieties	Current Usage
1	Millet	Finger millets (6–7 varieties)	Sparsely practised
		Kodo millet (4 varieties)	Sparsely practised
		Barnyard millet (3–4 varieties)	Extinct
		Foxtail millet (2 varieties)	Extinct
		Little millet (2 varieties)	Extinct
		Sorghum (1 variety)	Sparsely practised (only Pahariyas tribe)
2	Maize	6–7 varieties	All varieties sown
3	Rice	143 varieties	10 varieties in practice, all of the up-land varieties extinct

The Santhals and the Pahariyas have been forced by circumstances and by societal approval to adopt a newer monoculture system of cultivation that has changed their eating from a relatively healthy and fuller food pattern to an inadequate dietary habit

No.	Crop	Conventional Varieties	Current Usage
4	Pulses	Pigeon-pea (3 varieties)	2 varieties in practice
		Chick-pea or Bengal gram	Sparsely practised
		Lentils	Sparsely practised
		Grass pea, or Khesari	Widely practised
		Green gram	Sparsely practised
		Horse gram	Sparsely practised
		Black gram	Sparsely practised
		Moth bean	Extinct
		Field-pea	Extinct
		Field bean	Sparsely practised (only by the Pahariya tribe)
		Cow-pea	Sparsely practised
		Yard-long bean	Sparsely practised (only by the Pahariya tribe)
		Cluster bean	Sparsely practised (only by the Pahariya tribe)
		Velvet bean	Extinct
		Sword bean	Extinct
5	Oil-seeds	Mustard	Widely practised
		Rape seeds	Status unknown
		Linseed	Sparsely practised
		Sesame	Sparsely practised
		Niger	Sparsely practised
		Rozalle	Status unknown
6	Fibre crops	Sunhemp	Status unknown
		Kenaf	Sparsely practised
		Cotton	Extinct
7	Tubers and roots	10–12 varieties	Sparsely practised
8	Vegetables	Wild leafy vegetables (48 varieties)	Status unknown
		Cultivable leafy vegetables	Sparsely practised
9	Mushrooms	25 wild varieties	Status unknown

Despite so many treasures available in the wild and given the basic forest-dwelling nature of tribals, the change in lifestyle is not sudden like a snap of the fingers. The change has been gradual and has happened over the course of a decade

No.	Crop	Conventional Varieties	Current Usage
10	Fruits and berries	25 + varieties	Status unknown
11	Edible seeds and grains	10–12 varieties	Status unknown
12	Edible flowers	4–5 varieties	Status unknown
13	Edible resins and gums	5 varieties	Status unknown
14	Honey and honey larvae	4–5 varieties	Sparsely practised
15	Tree bark (for tea)	25 varieties	Sparsely practised
16	Rat	12 varieties	Sparsely practised
17	Bamboo shoot	2 varieties	Sparsely practised

### The shift and the probable causes

Let's take a look at the circumstances and the factors that have led to this shift.

Despite so many treasures available in the wild and given the basic forest-dwelling nature of tribals, the change in lifestyle is not sudden like a snap of the fingers. The change has been gradual and has happened over the course of a decade. Several circumstances have led to the change.

- **Seasonal migration and its impact**

Migration for work is one of the new patterns of tribal people. The exodus to the cities after the paddy harvesting and sowing seasons has had a serious impact on the traditional cultivation

patterns of the area. Seasonal migration of youngsters from the area has led them away from year-round cropping and has made them believe that only a small amount of rice is needed for their survival; the rest can easily be obtained from the PDS. Their newly-acquired food habits have made them believe that only large quantities of rice with potato, chilly and salt are required for a healthy diet. The tribals are not careful about their food intake and ignore the traditional varieties, resulting in nutritional deficiencies as well as a decline of indigenous seed varieties. The villagers are unaware how imperative it is to grow these crops to conserve ancient seeds.

Migration has also led to another set of circumstances that has had a detrimental impact on the traditional agrarian system.

First, the practice of releasing their cattle to roam free after the paddy harvesting season is over. Also because rice (their staple food) is easily available from the PDS and they are able to migrate off-season, they do not worry about the rest of agriculture. Even for those who want to cultivate the traditional varieties of rice after having got the seeds from their relatives, cultivation becomes difficult because the entire village and the neighbouring villages have left their cattle loose to graze in the open.

An incident that took place will, perhaps, illustrate this issue better. Bara Sindhri village in Bara Sindhri *panchayat* of Sundarpahari has been known for its pigeon-pea, or *arhar*, and other legumes. The people here have been considered the champions

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PDS was supposedly meant for providing rationed foodgrains to the poor; however, it has had somewhat harmful effects as well. On the one hand, PDS is beneficial for the impoverished people whereas, from another perspective, it has influenced the community's agrarian consciousness negatively

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of legumes cultivation; however, for the last three or four years, there has been a serious decline in the production because the people have no seeds to plant the legumes and the ones available at the local *hatiya* (market) are too expensive to purchase. On being asked about the cause for this, the villagers say that they missed one season of cropping due to low rainfall and they had to consume the seeds meant for sowing the next season.

They were not able to acquire fresh seeds when needed. Some of the villagers thought the hybrid seeds from the block was the culprit for the gap. Gradually, over time, seeds preservation of indigenous varieties took a backseat and, eventually, disappeared from the system. Now, such is the condition that the villagers have to either purchase very expensive pulses from the market or go without eating legumes. Biti Murmu, a resident, remembers the time when they had such high production that guests from outside would be gifted sacks-full of gram and pulses; now, they barely have enough for themselves. The preservation-conservation of indigenous varieties of seeds and their multiplication is dwindling.

The second major change is the diminishing value the young have for tribal law and order. Now that they have experienced a new set of city values, tribal laws seem less significant. One important tribal order prevents setting loose of cattle for grazing and fining the people if it happens. Customarily, an *agadha* is made and those setting their cattle loose on others' crops are penalized and their cattle confiscated for some time and kept within the *agadha*. The people were mindful of this practice and were careful not to set their cattle free. Now this traditional law is no longer abided by; therefore, people cannot grow any crop the harvesting time period of which goes beyond that of paddy, which includes pulses, wheat and some lentils.

Despite all the people having issues with cattle grazing indiscriminately, no action is being taken to prevent the animals from roaming free. Consequently, the villagers suffer from a qualitative decline in their food.

#### • **Agrarian consequences of PDS and ICDS**

PDS was supposedly meant for providing rationed foodgrains to the poor; however, it has had somewhat harmful effects as

well. On the one hand, PDS is beneficial for the impoverished people whereas, from another perspective, it has influenced the community's agrarian consciousness negatively.

Before the arrival of PDS, the focus of the farmers was on growing many indigenous varieties of grain and pulses for consumption and trade, and on the conservation of traditional seeds. Optimum utilization of land would take place and crops such as paddy, maize, pulses, wheat, sorghum, lentils, cow-pea, pigeon-pea, and chilly would be grown round the year. Also, the polished rice, consumed now, has severe nutritional deficiencies because the top layer of the rice is eroded by milling and polishing. The community, in addition, has become heavily dependent on PDS-based cereals and is neglecting the cultivation of traditional grains.

Similarly, ICDS, while being a boon for children, needs to be looked at from the agricultural lens. When seen from that perspective, it presents a different scenario. From childhood, the children are being conditioned into a particular dietary habit—a habit that is not in tune with their agri-social upbringing. Once the children acquire this new

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## Food that used to be available from the forests is growing scarce due to rampant exploitation of the forests and the sharp rise in population

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taste, they yearn for the same food and, eventually, it reflects in their future livelihoods as well.

### • Dwindling natural resources

Food that used to be available from the forests is growing scarce due to rampant exploitation of the forests and the sharp rise in population. After hunting was banned, except for the relaxation during the *Sohrai porb* (the biggest Santhal festival) and the *Magha parb* (the biggest Pahariya festival), the people's means of getting nutritious food from animal products has ended. Traditional water-bodies have also become silted and due to lack of any external help in de-silting, the water retained is for a very short span of time. Hence, fishing, which once used to be in abundance, is limited to a short duration. The new water-bodies being constructed through MGNREGA are poorly made, mainly because of the deep-rooted corruption in the system, resulting in poor quality of work.

### • Influence of the elite and globalization

The influence of the outsiders (non-tribals) has been visible in the lifestyle of the tribal population—be it the socio-economic, cultural or in the dietary habits. The influential

non-tribals, who themselves are influenced by the cities, have a great impact on the purchasing habits of tribal people. In the weekly *hatiyas*, whatever comes sells like hot cakes.

The habit of eating rice is actually an acquired one, copied from the outsiders. The original staple of the locals was the *jundraa dakka* and *daa mandi* (water rice), which the Pahariya and the Santhal relished. These healthy tribal dishes are now considered inferior and are often looked down upon by their non-tribal counterparts. Rice and pulses are the food of the elite, and has been integrated in the tribal food habits. The quality of rice preferred by the 'civilized' is the white shining polished one, which the indigenous people have now emulated, shunning their home-harvested, very nutritious, brown rice.

Around ten years ago, the *ada* (leafy vegetables) from the forests used to be high in demand and the villagers would get up early in the morning to gather them; if someone happened to be late, they would not find any *ada*. Ironically, the situation has changed now. In the words of Gangamuni Soren from Chandana village, "*Haan, dada, ab to saag*

*sab bada ho jata hai, fir bhi koi jungle mein abb todne nahin jaata hai. Pehle to koi der se pahunchta tha to saag milta hi nahin tha. Ab kewal garib didi sab hi jungle saag lene jaati hain* (Brother, nowadays leafy veggies grow big and the people do not go to the forests to pick them. Earlier, if someone was late in going to the area, they would not find any. Moreover, now only the poor women go to the forest to get leafy vegetables)."

While the *dikhu* (non-tribal) eat copious amount of rice, pulses and vegetables, the Santhals and the Pahariyas have adopted rice, a bit of pulses, potato curry and great amounts of salt into their lifestyle. The mainly carbohydrate and the extremely low vitamin diet has led to further degradation of their already deteriorating health due to brain malaria (*plasmodium falciparum*) and other seasonal diseases. Coming to the influence of globalization and modernization in the area, the modern High Yielding Variety (HYV) grain has been vigorously promoted (and still continues to be) for the last five to six years in the local seed markets. The high yield, being the initial USP of these varieties, attracted the community and they enthusiastically adopted

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No effort has been made by the block to preserve traditional food crops or to probe the declining interest in traditional food-growing habits. No market has been created for the traditional Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP), especially edibles

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the seeds; over the years, the continual practice has led to the discontinuation of local varieties and, in some cases, to their extinction. Although now, many people have shown a willingness to cultivate the conventional varieties, the extinction of some of the indigenous seeds has left the hapless peasants in the lurch.

#### • **State agriculture policy**

The state has its own developmental objectives to fulfill and the decisions are taken not from the grass-roots level up but flows from top to bottom. Whatever seems to be working in the outside world is seemingly good for this area is the state's policy. Over a decade, the state has been intensively pursuing its agenda of monocropping of paddy and maize varieties. The only seeds available for distribution are the input-intensive HYV paddy and maize (that too when the sowing season passes by). Even the other varieties, that they wish to push into the area, are procured from relatively rich states with different agro-climatic zones. In 2014, for example, they procured pulses and seeds from Punjab and wanted the farmers to cultivate them. However, due to corrupt agricultural practices, most of the seeds landed in the open

market and whatever was left was consumed by the community.

No effort has been made by the block to preserve traditional food crops or to probe the declining interest in traditional food-growing habits. No market has been created for the traditional Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP), especially edibles. Neither have any steps been taken to market the indigenous varieties of grains, which would probably have big markets outside.

#### **The aftermath**

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The consequences of the degradation in the quality of the eating habits of Pahariya and Santhal households have been disastrous. The most-affected domain has been that of health. If one happens to visit a typical Pahariya and Santhal tribal village, all one sees are their shriveled and emaciated bodies, with yellowish eyes and stained teeth. The changes in their lifestyle has led to increasingly high fatigue rate and poor immunity levels. All this is due to the poor proportion of vitamins, minerals and proteins in their diet. Besides the seasonal one-time diet of *jondra dakra* all the

365 days (almost), a heavy meal of *dakka*, *bloom* (salt) and *dal* or potato curry is not sufficient to meet the nutritive requirements of the people. Eventually, immunity decreases and people have to go to the area doctors, usually quacks, inviting significant monetary loss also.

On an average, the biggest leakage in the annual income expenditure cycle of a tribal family is due to diseases, largely arising from the poor quality (and often quantity) of food. Sundarpahari has become a haven for quacks and other modern medicinal practitioners. There is rampant use of antibiotics and medical equipment, all at the cost of the poor and hapless tribals.

The women, as usual, are the most deprived. As the local varieties diminished and disappeared from the mother's platter, the nutrition levels of the food of the women declined; yet their infants continue to draw milk from them, during lactation. The babies get their supply of milk but the mother is severely deprived of essential nutrients. One might argue that 'ready-to-eat meals' are supplied in the *aanganwadis* however, the facts tell a different story. The irregular supply from *aanganwadis*, and

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Varieties, in tune with the topography, have gradually been abandoned. People, somehow, even if they want to cultivate them, will not be able to do so because the varieties are extinct now

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the non-palatable taste of those meals eventually lead the mother to manage with whatever is available, the consequences of which we have discussed above.

Another noticeable effect amongst the tribals is their shifting agrarian habits from the rich and diverse multi-cropping to the intense mono-cropping. Many rich indigenous varieties of paddy, maize, millets and other traditional varieties have been lost in the process. Varieties, in tune with the topography, have gradually been abandoned. People, somehow, even if they want to cultivate them, will not be able to do so because the varieties are extinct now. A very popular and drought-resistant variety of up-land paddy (*tandi dhaan*), which some farmers are

keen to sow, is no longer sown in these areas.

Indigenous breeds have been replaced by the very popular high yielding and other seemingly 'white varieties' of paddy and the story is the same for other crops as well. The loss is to such an extent that the people have to look to others (market, state or development agencies in that area) for seeds. Many times, a particular crop has been skipped in an entire village because of the non-availability of the seeds in that area.

Moreover, because PDS is corrupt and inefficient, the quantity provided is inadequate; PDS, which was supposed to be a salvation agent and a boon, is actually fast becoming a bane.

## Conclusion

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Ever since the tribal people became connected to the outer world, they have been exposed to many steps in development that is proving to be negative. Whereas from an outsider's perspective, everything is good and development is in progress because of the visible changes in lifestyles of the tribal population, the repercussions that one sees from a different perspective are stark and disastrous. Maybe the relevant stakeholders need to switch lenses to see the real picture and, thus, intervene accordingly.

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References are available on request at [newsreach@pradan.net](mailto:newsreach@pradan.net)

# Women in Villages: Stories from the Field

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Creating awareness, through collectivization, about prevailing patriarchal-hierarchical structures and about women normalizing beliefs that define their existence as 'inferior' and confine them to being mother, daughter, wife, or domestic labourer is a slow albeit rewarding journey

*"One is not born a woman but rather becomes a woman."* ~ Simone de Beauvoir

## Introduction

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**T**HE ABOVE QUOTE SUGGESTS that what we are today is not a result of our birth but what we become as we interact with the world around us. Social customs, beliefs and traditions, however, create a distinction between a boy and a girl, resulting in inequality and leading to the victimization of women.

Over time, women have come to be considered the 'inferior' gender, and social norms have led to their oppression. The patriarchal-hierarchical structures

that have emerged define a woman's existence only as a mother, a daughter, a wife, and a domestic labourer.

When working in one of the villages of Boarijore in Jharkhand, I observed the day-to-day lives of the people and noticed how oppressed women are in our society. For example, despite a woman being the head of her household after the demise of her husband, she struggles to have the same hold in the community that her husband had. Even if the woman is literate, society will still see her as a caretaker only. The multitude of tasks she performs through the day go unrecognized.

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## Although the Santhali culture prides itself in giving enough freedom for women to choose and decide who they wish to marry, in reality women are still oppressed

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A woman's work is never-ending. She cleans, cooks, takes care of the children, looks after the cows and the goats, collects firewood, works in the fields, sells vegetables in the *hatiya* (local market), collects dry leaves to cover the roof, builds a *chulha* (stove) with mud, mops the whole house with cow-dung during festivals and is responsible for keeping intact her social relations in the village!

Here are a few of the stories of some women of Boarijore, their experience of gender discrimination and how this discrimination manifests in their day-to-day lives.

In Rani Dih village of Boarijore block, Mai Bitti is one of the youngest wives of Ramlal Murmu, the carpenter. She met him three years ago in her village and says that she was attracted to him and eventually started loving the man. According to her, Ramlal approached her and asked for her hand in marriage. In the Santhali culture, women often join their husband's household before marriage; in today's parlance, we call this a live-in relationship. Although the Santhali culture prides itself in giving enough freedom for women to choose and decide who they wish to marry, in reality women are still oppressed.

Mai Bitti moved into her husband's house; upon arriving there, she met the two other wives of Ramlal. Although she had been unaware of their existence, she says she wasn't really shocked because she had grown up seeing men bring home more than one wife in her own village as well. She continued to live with her husband and his two other wives, her husband's two brothers and their wives and their children. Her husband had three children from his other wives. It was a family with 22 members, including her.

When narrating her story, Mai Bitti accepts that initially she was in love with her husband and, therefore, ignored the feeling of insecurity, which has now become stronger. She gave birth to a son last year; nevertheless, the feeling of insecurity persists. She has a sense of being betrayed; being the youngest, she is sometimes ignored by the other wives and left out of decision-making. She says that she has accepted the other wives of her husband and believes that they have also accepted her and they all try their very best to live in harmony. She says that she has accepted the fact that it is the duty of the woman to serve her husband and, like her, the other women

have accepted this reality and the inequalities in society.

She says philosophically, "My mother taught me to always be loyal to my husband; she never told me, however, that my husband, too, will be loyal to me."

For all its openness, this culture is still a part of the bigger patriarchal world.

Another story from the same village is that of Mary Kisku, who stayed with her parents and was a single mother. She was married to a man 18 years ago. Four years after their marriage, her husband was caught by the police on a murder charge and has been spending time in prison for the last 13 years. Her husband had gone out to drink with his friends; a fight ensued, resulting in him accidentally killing a man and being sentenced to life imprisonment. Her life, since then, has been a constant struggle; her in-laws stopped supporting her. Although her husband owns quite a large piece of land, she has no right over it at present. Her two sons have grown up now, but cannot find jobs and she finds it hard to make money every day. Moreover, even though she has a right over 25 per cent of the land in her maternal household, she is being denied it.

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She lives with her three brothers and their wives and they do not treat her well. She does most of the household chores, yet she is the last to eat at the end of the day

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She lives with her three brothers and their wives and they do not treat her well. She does most of the household chores, yet she is the last to eat at the end of the day. Initially, her brothers helped her sons to study; after a few years, however, they stopped providing money. Since then, she has been doing some agricultural labour every year to save some money. She waits for the day when her husband will be released from prison because she believes that a woman is nothing without her husband.

She says, “A husband is a woman’s prized jewel. If you lose him, you have no status in the society.”

The next story is Dhunia Murmu’s (name changed) from Dhankunda village. Her husband is from her own village, one that she grew up in. When she was in Standard IX, she was approached by a boy with a proposal of marriage. She says that, at first, she was very confused whether she should say yes or no because she was aware that her brothers would never agree to her marrying a man who belonged to an economically weaker background and had a lower title.

Although the Santhals claim there is no caste differentiation as in among the Hindus, they

do differentiate on the basis of the title or the clan to which one belongs. Because the boy persisted in wooing her, she eventually agreed to be with him and slowly fell in love with him. Initially, she hid this fact from her family and met her lover in secret. However, it wasn’t long before her brothers found out the truth.

She was beaten for making this mistake and they tried to arrange her marriage elsewhere in some far away village. She told her brothers that she did not want to revolt against them and would agree to whatever they dictated and would marry whoever they found fit for her. But her lover pursued her once again and threatened to kill himself if she did not marry him. This created a very difficult situation for her: No one was asking her what she wanted. Everybody was trying to make her do what they thought was good for her.

Her lover contacted her brothers and threatened that he would create a bad name for their sister if they didn’t marry her to him. In fear of loss of their reputation, they agreed to the marriage. She went home with her lover but her struggles weren’t over. She was not accepted by her mother-in-law and thus her story goes

on, even after seven years now. She lives in the same house as her mother-in-law whereas her husband works in the city and visits once a month. She has two children; she says her days go by in taking care of them and in doing household chores.

She says, “All seems normal now. They seem to have got used to my presence; my mother-in-law has built herself a different kitchen long back, saying she doesn’t what to eat with us. It is as it is. It works.”

The everyday life of women in the village is not very different from what I have seen in the cities. The context differs, the realities are the same. Women are expected to be the caretakers of their homes and they are the nurturers of the children. Even though mainstream education has taken over our minds, we haven’t learned to appreciate the existence of women as workers of hard labour.

At the mention of the word ‘farmer’, everybody imagines a man carrying a hoe or someone with a big moustache. If you mention a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a company, everybody imagines a man with a serious expression and sophisticated clothing. It is difficult for us to

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## The worst part is that the women themselves have normalized such oppression and have accepted it as a part of their day-to-day life

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think of rural women as farmers or, in fact, any woman as a lead player or a worker of hard labour.

These patriarchal thoughts are now manifested in our habits and we unknowingly behave in a discriminatory manner. The worst part is that the women themselves have normalized such oppression and have accepted it as a part of their day-to-day life.

It has been about a year since I heard these women narrate their stories and very little has changed. Mai Bitti, the woman whose husband has multiple wives, has accepted her fate and is trying to settle down with her everyday life. She cooks food along with her husband's other wives, goes and works in the fields and also takes care of her son. She says she doesn't feel lonely when her husband leaves home for the city for work because there are other women in the house to give her company. So it seems to me that she is seeing the bright side of her life.

Mary Kisku, whose husband went to jail, is waiting for his release; in the meantime, she is trying to work as agricultural labourer in the fields in order to earn money for her son's education after matriculation. She walks 5 km from her village to the nearby coal

mine and carries back coal on her head. She uses some of it at home for cooking and sells as much as she can in the village to earn some more money.

Dhunia Murmu, however, seems to have turned her life around for the better. She has joined the collective in her village and also leads it. Because she is educated, she is able to help the other women in her collective with their personal issues. She is now the President of the village organization and her brothers have started respecting her. She visits her mother with her head held high today.

My experiences and my journey with these women have also strengthened my own fight against the discrimination of women in our society. My engagement in the field in the past year of my apprenticeship has strengthened my belief that women are the most oppressed section in our society and we need to work towards triggering a change in this patriarchal system.

In Boarjore block, I have seen the harsh reality of the oppression of women. I have also got, however, an exposure and insight into ways to fight this oppression. I was introduced to the idea of collectives and have begun

to understand what motivates women to form collectives and the factors that bind them.

I understand that the reasons for women coming together are varied although primarily to save money and for economic security, for the greater good or development of their village and for leisure. I also noticed that very few women would ever say that this space was for them. Their main thought was that the money would help their household and that, in turn, would help them. These selfless answers made me aware of the extent to which the oppression has been normalized by women.

My next step, therefore, was to help these women recognise that they are being oppressed and to motivate them to slowly start questioning these discriminatory factors. I started engaging with some of the newly-formed SHGs by initially trying to build mutual support through games and activities, and then holding discussions on the various problems they faced in their village. It was becoming clear that the women did not even question some of the oppression such as not being allowed to leave their houses, not being allowed to ask how their husbands spend money, working and toiling all

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It is first important that I, as a woman, should feel strong. It is I who should learn to speak for myself and then only can my strength become a root for my collective

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day thinking this is what they exist for, not being allowed to study and being groomed since childhood only for the ultimate purpose of getting married.

Soon, by showing thought-provoking photographs or documentaries and conducting discussions on gender issues, the women have been stimulated to start questioning some of the discriminatory norms they have followed blindly thus far. They have begun to question why they cannot move out of their households or why they are not free to spend money. When the women began to notice the restrictions placed upon them by patriarchy, I too was motivated to keep working on gender issues and engaging with these women further.

Once, in order to help a group realize its collective strength I

conducted a visioning exercise called *Sapno ka Ped* (The Tree of Dreams). We discussed what was the most important ingredient, or the root, we needed to have a strong and productive tree. One of the women said, “It is first important that I, as a woman, should feel strong. It is I who should learn to speak for myself and then only can my strength become a root for my collective.”

I felt overwhelmed that day. Working with these women has been a learning journey about the importance of both—the lives of individual women and their coming together as a collective. I have been a part of many interesting conversations such as the issue of early marriage, how women have felt forced at many junctures of their lives, domestic violence, why only women should be the nurturers or caretakers of children and households, and

why women are oppressed. These discussions will stay with me always.

The stories shared in this article reiterate the fact that women are silenced and discriminated against in many ways. Gender discrimination stops women from asking for their rights; for years, women have been made to believe that the oppression against them is because they are weaker. As women, we have to realize our collective strength. Hence it seems important that, we, who are discriminated against, start realizing our strength, refuse to remain silent and question the oppression and discrimination so that we help minimize it and work towards creating an equal world.

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*Shataakshi Verma is based in Mahagama, Jharkhand*

# MAIDANDIH VILLAGE: Dignified Mornings

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Recognizing that having a toilet within the premises of the house would most contribute to creating a dignified way of life, the women of Maidandih village collectively set about constructing these despite challenges and setbacks

It was regular for me to visit Maidandih village in Basmata *panchayat* of Katoria block to attend village-level meetings. At the end of one such *gram panchayat*-level Federation meetings, the women sat down to share their dreams. Most of the women talked of having a house where they could stay and live a comfortable and dignified life. Gradually, the women started discussing what they meant by a dignified life. The answers varied from woman to woman; slowly, however, a new dimension was added when they began to talk about the importance of having a toilet within the premises of the house. Having drinking water facilities in their home was also listed under the purview of what it meant to lead a dignified life although some women were hesitant to include this as one of the dimensions. Some of them considered staying healthy themselves, and helping others stay healthy came under the definition of a dignified life.

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## Women in rural India, as in most parts of the world, often suffer from lack of privacy and harassment, and have to walk long distances to find a suitable place for defecation, in the absence of toilet facilities

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One of the women spoke of how hard it was for them to go to the toilet during the day. The intake of less water and waiting for each other to complete their household chores so that they could go together for security reasons were some of the problems voiced by everyone. They talked about the several health problems which arose due to the above habits. After a few hours, the group came to a common understanding wherein everyone concluded that one of the most important requirement for a dignified life was to have toilet facilities.

About 30 million persons in rural areas suffer from sanitation-related diseases. Five of the ten top killer diseases of children aged one to four in rural areas are related to water and sanitation. About 0.6-0.7 million children die of diarrhoea annually. Typhoid, dysentery, gastroenteritis, jaundice and malaria claim the lives of over a fifth of the children aged one to four in rural areas. The economic cost of man-days lost due to such diseases is estimated at Rs 1200 crores annually.

Rural sanitation figures prominently in the National Agenda for Governance. At present, the extent of sanitation coverage in India is around 16

per cent of all rural households. This figure is one of the lowest in the world, at par with countries like Nigeria and Afghanistan and possibly lower than Bangladesh. The absence of safe sanitation contributes significantly to the poor quality of life as reflected by well-accepted indicators such as infant mortality and morbidity rates.

India, one of the most densely populated sub-continent in the world, has the lowest sanitation coverage. In 1991, only about a tenth of the Indian rural population of about 627 million reported access to latrines (Census of India, 1991). By 2001, sanitation coverage in rural India had increased to about 36 per cent with 22 per cent in rural areas. As per the report of the Multiple Indicator Survey (MICS 2000), overall, toilets are used in 37 per cent of the households (19 per cent rural); 35 per cent (18 per cent rural) of the households have an improved sanitation facility (flush toilet connected to sewage, pour flush toilet, pit toilet, improved pit toilet or simple pit).

The poor, both in the rural as well as urban areas, bear a disproportionate burden of either non-availability of water or the water being of poor quality when

available. They often supplement public sources of water with supplies obtained at high prices from other sources. Women bear the physical burden of fetching water. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of water contamination. The burden of disease and the lost livelihood opportunities have tremendous adverse effects on the lives of the people in India, in general, and on the poor people living in the rural areas, in particular.

An additional concern, in the context of the above, relates to the differential burden the current situation places on women. Women in rural India, as in most parts of the world, often suffer from lack of privacy and harassment, and have to walk long distances to find a suitable place for defecation, in the absence of toilet facilities.

According to the NSSO's 54th round survey, members of households that did not have any latrine facility, that is, those using open areas as latrines, are known to wait till early morning or the night before venturing out in the open, causing health problems such as urinary tract infections.

In the next block-level Federation (Jagriti Mahila

SBM (Gramin) seeks to eliminate open defecation in rural areas by 2019 through improving access to sanitation. It also seeks to generate awareness and motivate communities to adopt sustainable sanitation practices, and to encourage the use of appropriate technologies for sanitation

**Table 1:** Percentage of Households without Latrines

State	Rural	Urban
Bihar	89.4	45.3

Source: NSSO Report No. 449

Sangh, Banka) meeting, two of the representatives got an opportunity to meet a representative of an NGO called NEEDS. NEEDS is the agency responsible for technical help and the implementation of the Lohiya Swachha Bihar Abhiyan (LSBA) at the district level. The representative of NEEDS shared the details of the LSBA programme. LSBA comes under the central scheme of Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM).

SBM, launched in October 2014, comprises two sub-missions — SBM (Gramin), to be implemented in rural areas, and SBM (Urban), to be implemented in urban areas. SBM (Gramin) seeks to eliminate open defecation in rural areas by 2019 through improving access to sanitation. It also seeks to generate awareness and motivate communities to adopt sustainable sanitation practices, and to encourage the use of appropriate technologies for sanitation. The Government of Bihar is committed to providing access to safe water and sanitation facilities. The Mission Swachh

Bihar lays emphasis on ‘collective behaviour change’ to adopt safe sanitation practices. The behaviour change is triggered through the community-led total sanitation (CLTS) approach adopted by the state. NEEDS is the agency responsible for implementing the scheme at the district and block levels. The NGO heard about Jagriti Mahila Sangh Federation in the block and is willing to engage with it in the mobilization process, to implement the scheme.

A block-level orientation was organized on 24 August 2016, headed by the Block Development Officer (BDO), a member from NEEDS, a representative from PRADAN, Federation representatives and PRI representatives—the mukhiya, the block pramukh and others. During the orientation, the approach and methodology of how the government plans to pay for the construction of individual household latrines (IHHLs) and how the entire village could work towards a people-led collective behaviour change intervention was outlined in detail.

The Federation representatives summarised the discussions that took place during the previous meeting of their Federation. Hearing this, the newly-selected PRI member voiced his apprehensions about the programme and about the funding, and spoke about the gap between the percentages of households willing and unwilling to contribute money. He believed that people would not be interested in such development (the construction of toilets) in their areas.

Another challenge in such an approach was that he thought individual households would possibly opt for toilet facilities but it was hard to get it through CLTS, in which the participation of each and every villager would be required. Finally, he concluded that his previous experience convinced him that the task would be impossible. While leaving, he commented, “*Sarkaar khane ke liye toh kuchh de nahi raha, pehle log khayenge tabhi naa sochalya jayenge*” (The government doesn’t give us any food to eat; first we have to eat in order to use the toilets).” The enthusiasm of some of the Federation representatives dimmed when they heard the PRI representative. A plan was made to conduct such

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## Resistance from the men-folk was mainly to the idea of investing money. The women were keen about the idea because they would be the main beneficiaries

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meetings in each *panchayat* of Katoria block.

A *panchayat*-level meeting was arranged on 3 September 2016 as decided in the block-level orientation meeting. A *panchayat*-level Coordination Committee was formed, the members of which were the Grameen Aawas Sahayak, the Rozgar Sewak, the Mukhiya, a school teacher and JMS Federation representatives, Chandrika *didi* and Saavitri *didi*. A meeting was scheduled to plan the roll out of the scheme.

No further meetings took place on the scheduled dates. The Federation representatives were present at the venue but the meeting was postponed again and again because of lack of attendance. Slowly, it seemed that no one was interested in the meeting. Further, in the *panchayat*-level Federation meetings, which were regular events of the Jagriti Mahila Sangh, both the Federation representatives shared the idea with SHG members of the Basmata *panchayat*. Both the representatives were convinced that it was a good idea to construct toilets and to benefit from the scheme shared during the block-level orientation.

Many SHG members were resistant to the idea because they thought that if the construction of a toilet in each household of the village was a prerequisite to enjoy the benefits of the entitlement, it would not be possible.

Chandrika *didi* recalled the discussion about the definition of a dignified life. Other members who were convinced said that this was an opportunity through which they could claim the entitlements as well as have a better life. Saavitri *didi* said, “*Sab mili ke karate to kahe na hotte* (If we come together, why would we not be able to do it)?”

Hearing this everyone said, “*Kari parbo, hoye jate* (We will be able to do it).”

The SHG members planned to meet to discuss the issue. After two or three meetings of the SHG(s) at the village level, all the women were convinced and were on board, considering it a golden opportunity. The next meeting was organized by the women at the village level, in which each and every member of the households was present. I also participated in the meeting. The women shared the idea about the LSBY scheme and explained how

the entire village could claim the entitlement; the requirement was just that the village should unite and think about each other and their neighbourhood.

One of the *dadas* responded, “*Kaise hotto, koi ameer chhe toh uh toh paisa lagai letto par koi bahut gareeb toh aukra se nai hotto* (Some are rich so they can contribute, but what about those who don’t have enough to contribute)?” Hearing this, another *dada* said, “*Kii jarurat hai ghar mein sochalaya ke, koi dikkat nai chho* (What’s the need of a toilet near the household? There is no problem).”

Resistance from the men-folk was mainly to the idea of investing money. The women were keen about the idea because they would be the main beneficiaries. I listened to the entire conversation till then.

I asked them, “*Dada, kab se aap log kamane bahar jate hain*, (Since when have you all been migrating for work)?”

The answer was, “For the last 20 years.”

I asked them why they did so.

The answer was, “To earn money and for better living conditions for the family.”

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Having their own individual latrines was a dream. Slowly, the determination of the women and their convincing arguments for making toilets in their village resulted in the other members willingness to be part of the scheme

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“And why did you dream of a better life?” I asked.

The women who had been all for the idea, so far, had lost their confidence and enthusiasm due to the resistance of the men folk. Hearing my questioning, they regained their voice.

Saavitri *didi* asked them, “*Tora sab ke achha jeevan khatir ghar me sochaalya jaruri nai lagey chho* (Don’t you feel that having toilets in our homes is one important component of a better life)?”

That statement boosted the other women’s confidence. All the women began talking, first in whispers and then in loud voices, about how hard it was for them to wait for dawn or dusk to answer the call of nature, resulting in humiliation and stomach ailments. Having their own individual latrines was a dream. Slowly, the determination of the women and their convincing arguments for making toilets in their village resulted in the other member’s willingness to be part of the scheme.

Chandrika *didi* requested me to help them liaison with the member of NEEDS so that the women could understand the technical aspects of the entitlement. With the active

participation of all, a village-level meeting was organized on 6 December 2016, where the members of the SHG, a representative of NEEDS (Tribhuwanji), a few men and ward representatives from the villages were present. A detailed orientation was held on the technical part of the construction, the management of the work and the monitoring system. A control register was also a part of it, which would contain household details such as the Baseline number, BPL/APL number, bank account number and the current status (progress).

Their understanding helped them to categorize the contribution into: 1. Capital requirement of about Rs 12,000 for the construction of a toilet for each individual household latrine. 2. Total cost of (25 x 12,000 = 3 lakhs) for the village.

According to the NSSO survey, the contributions were categorized into four categories: 1. Money and labour 2. Money only 3. Labour only and 4. Neither money nor labour

Next, the villagers broadly defined the activities involved. These were:

1. Pit digging

2. Structure building

3. Pipe fitting of tap

The villagers were sure about the availability of labour because they readily agreed to help each other in pit digging and the construction of the structure, but the major challenge was the Rs 3 lakh capital for the entire village. A village-level meeting was arranged, wherein the agenda was to discuss how to arrange for the money. After a long discussion, the villagers identified the various sources of funds that they could tap into.

1. Contribution from each household member. But everyone did not agree to this because the daily earnings of most villagers were an average of Rs 200 each day and the contribution was not possible.

2. By private arrangement, that is, by asking for credit from local vendors and having the PRI representative to act as guarantor, giving the vendor assurance that as soon as the villagers get the money sanctioned from the government, they would return the money.

Labour was locally available in the village so the lead was taken by a few men, who formed

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## The women, as the driving force behind the initiative, formed a committee, the responsibility of which was to identify vendors for supplying material for construction

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a committee to oversee the construction. Pit digging would be done individually by each family, with the help of each member of the family.

Everyone agreed to the second option. The women, as the driving force behind the initiative, formed a committee, the responsibility of which was to identify vendors for supplying material for construction (sand, cement, brick, asbestos, toilet fittings). A group was formed, in which two Federation representatives, Chandrika *didi* and Saavitri *didi*, took the lead, supported by other women.

When the women talked to the vendors for the material, the vendors' response was, "*Apne gaon ke kisi bhi Ward Sadasya, Mukhiya se kahne bolo, ham samaan de denge, aur ye sab kam ke liye gaon ke mard ko kaho* (Ask any member such as the Ward Member or the Mukhiya to act as guarantor. I will give the material but you ask a male member of your village to do these activities). *Tum auraton ka bharosa kya* (There's no trusting you women)."

The women smiled each time and did not lose hope. They would say, "*Himmat nai harbo, koi naa koi toh hum auraton par bharosa kartoh* (Let us not lose hope.

Surely we will be able to convince some vendor who will trust us women)."

During my visits, I helped them to reflect over all the tasks which, at first, had seemed impossible for them but because of their active participation and confidence had been made possible. Talking and sharing about the Mahadhiveshan, there would be a smile on the women's faces. It was as if they were saying, "*Hum sab akela ney chho dada dekhlo ney peechlaa saal kitta didi raho, jarurat partoh toh sabke madad lebbho, sab jaetee toh de dukaandaar maantoh naa* (We are not alone, if required we will ask all the women to help us to assure the vendors)."

Finally, one vendor was willing to trust them but wanted a PRI representative such as a Ward Member, a Mukhiya or any prestigious person such as the BDO as a guarantor. The women went to the Ward Member because they had already seen that the Mukhiya had many apprehensions about the scheme. The Ward Member heard the women and then asked them, "*Kitna ka samaan hai?*" Chandrika *didi* replied, "*3 lakh ka.*"

He then asked, "*Kaise lautaoge itna paisa* (How will you return the money)?"

Chandrika *didi* said, "*Jab sauchalaya ban jayega toh hum BDO ko bulayenge aur phir wo paisa milne par lauta kar denge* (When the toilets are constructed, we will tell the BDO. We will give you the money we get from him and clear your debt)."

The Ward Member said, "*Tum aurat sab ke kahe se gaon mein BDO aeto, kabhiyo nai aeto tor gaon, jao sab apne ghar* (You believe that the BDO will listen to you women and come to the village? He will not come. Go back to your homes)."

The entire group took it as challenge and went directly to the BDO to ask him to tell the vendor to give the material. The BDO provided assurance to sanction the scheme if the people were to focus on collective outcomes but he did not want to act as guarantor. Once again, the women went to the vendor saying that, "*Koi guarantee nahi de rahal chho par hum sab gaon ke log mil ke paisa lauta deboh* (No one is ready to give a guarantee, but trust us, we villagers together will return the money)."

The vendor agreed but only after adding a new clause that he would lend the money for one month. After one month, he would charge an interest at the rate of 10 per

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The villagers helped each other, and within the stipulated time-frame, they were able to complete the construction. The vendor himself visited the village and was astonished at the unity of the village

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cent. The women returned and arranged a village-level meeting and shared what the vendor had said. Resistance from a few of the men began. They were not ready to take the risk. One *dada* said, “*Ki hottoh agar ek mahina mein kaam pura nahi hotto, hum sab karz se lad jaabo* (What will happen if the work is not completed in one month? And, if the money is not sanctioned, we all will be burdened with the debt).”

Everyone said that the making of 25 individual household latrines within the deadline was a high

risk activity. Taking a loan at such a high rate would make them indebted. The unity of the village was at stake once again. Some of the families were not ready to bear the risk. However, 14 families were convinced about the idea.

The Federation members once again called a meeting at the village level, trying to convince the families to take a risk. Finally, all of them agreed. They broke down the activity into different components along with a deadline. The targets were set.

Each household was to complete pit digging within four days. After the pit digging activity, two of the families decided not to participate any further. According to them it was waste of labour days where the entire family was engaged in such an activity. As all the members were in the SHG, the Federation helped to create pressure upon them at the village level. A group of masons contributed their labour to complete the activity. Technical training by the NEEDS representative, Sandeepji, helped



**SHG members monitoring the work in progress in the village**

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## The Federation representatives took the lead by inviting the BDO. He visited the village on the scheduled date and sanctioned the payment of the entitlement. The entire village was beaming with positive energy

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these labourers to understand how to lay the pipe fittings.

The villagers helped each other, and within the stipulated time-frame, they were able to complete the construction. The vendor himself visited the village and was astonished at the unity of the village. The Federation representatives were busy collecting all the documents from each family for the sanction of the scheme within a deadline.

When collecting the documents, the Federation leader realized that there were some hurdles. They required the ration cards, with ration card numbers, which were easily available but the Above the Poverty Line (APL)/ Below the Poverty Line (BPL) list was not available for all. A village-level meeting was arranged, asking people's help to get the list. The men began to grumble saying, "*Itna aasan nai hoye chhe sarkar se paisa lewe mai* (It is not so easy to get the money from the government)."

All the women shouted in chorus, "*Itna ho gael chhe toh woho hoyeiyae jaete* (If so much has been

possible, we will be able to do that also)." Seeing the confidence, Pradeepji (an important person in the *panchayat*) readily agreed to arrange the list.

The list was arranged and the ground-level preparation of collecting all the documents was done by Federation representative. Only four days were left and about seven individual household latrines were still left to be constructed. The heartbeats of all the villagers were increasing but, the spirit of 'unity is strength' was reflected in the efforts of the villagers. Each and everyone extended help to complete the construction within the deadline. I was impressed and inspired by the unity of the village and the words of the PRI member, who said, "The saying that all people are interested in their own well-being rather than of their neighbourhood seems completely false in this village."

The village set a live example of successfully completing a task within a deadline. The Federation representatives took the lead by inviting the BDO. He visited the

village on the scheduled date and sanctioned the payment of the entitlement. The entire village was beaming with positive energy. The villagers received the money in their account as per the deadline. The women returned the loan to the vendor within the time limit of one month. The vendor said, "*Maine nahi socha tha ki ek mahine ke andar ho payega* (I never thought that you would be able to complete the work in one month)."

The women of Maidandih gave a message to the surrounding villages, 'Where there is a will, there is a way'. The villagers readily extended themselves, setting an example for the other villages such as Banarerth, Barnpur and Rangiya to replicate the entire process.

Smiles were seen on their faces as each member shared their struggles, ups and downs, their anxiety, curiosity and sense of achievement in creating 'dignified mornings for Maidandih'.

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Vimal Kumar Yadav is based in Katoria, Bihar

# Menstruation: Social Conditioning and Barriers

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Taboos, superstitions, lack of awareness, lack of infrastructure, shame and embarrassment about menstruation are barriers to the confidence, self-esteem and dignity of girls and women, affecting their well-being and health as a consequence

“AT THE AGE OF 13, I ATTAINED MENARCHE, AND WAS totally unaware about it. I was shocked to see the blood and was too fearful to share about it with anyone in the home. I cried and kept myself isolated. For four to five days, I just used to change the blood-stained underwear. Even my neighbour didn't say anything except for informing me about my soiled skirt when she saw it, and I was clueless about what to do with it. Then, the next month I came to know that I needed to use cloth during this period when, somehow, I dared to share it with my mother. I felt very ashamed and bad about myself.”

I was very disturbed by this story. I cannot forget the innocence in her voice and her moist eyes when Anusuiya Jain said these words, holding her two-year-old daughter in her arms. I was horrified by the way we (family, society) behave and act when the subject of menstruation

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## Rural areas face a challenge when it comes to human health and well-being. And of all the sections of society, women are the most vulnerable and their health needs, by and large, remain unaddressed

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comes up. As if it is something to be ashamed of.

This was one of my first interactions with women on the sensitive subject of menstruation. I wanted to know how the women in these remote rural areas dealt with menarche (the first menstrual cycle). The questions to which I wanted answers were: What did the *didis* think about menstruation? How did they feel about themselves during their periods? What experiences had they had? What situations have they faced? Where and with whom do they usually share their problems regarding menstruation? Or do they even share?

Being a woman, fortunately the subject was not new or strange for me and I was used to talking about it openly. However, I did find that speaking about it in the areas that we were working in was more intense and, somehow, disheartening. Hearing Anusuiya's painful story, I realized that something was missing in society.

According to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members

of the human family is the foundation of freedom and justice. We talk about equality and fairness and, yet, we keep behind a veil the natural phenomenon of shedding blood. This secrecy violates the dignity and respect of women and hurts their identity, self-worth and self-esteem. And here, in these villages, it was an inherent part of the journey of every girl and woman who menstruates. For the *didis*, who we work with, it was all about tradition and spirituality, but there are many more dimensions to the superstitions around menstruation. Reflecting upon it, I understand it as the politics of social construction and a game of power relations that is being disseminated through the process of socialization.

Rural areas face a challenge when it comes to human health and well-being. And of all the sections of society, women are the most vulnerable and their health needs, by and large, remain unaddressed. According to the National Family Health Survey 2015-16 (NFHS-4), the nutritional status of women is very low. As high as 37.9 per cent of the rural women have a Body Mass Index (BMI) that is below normal and 67.7 per cent of the rural women, between the ages of 15 and 49 years, are anaemic.

Specific to girls and women in rural India, menstrual management is a problem. Adolescent girls are usually considered as a vulnerable group, particularly in India, where the girl child is still neglected in most parts of the rural and tribal areas of the country (Pandit S. 2014). Menstruation is a normal physiological process; in India, however, it is considered dirty, leading to the isolation of the menstruating girls and restrictions being imposed upon them by the family and the community. These practices have reinforced a negative attitude towards menstruation in girls.

A study found that there was very little awareness about menstruation among girls when they first experience it. Social inhibition prevents any open discussion of the subject, even with immediate family or with women. Owing to this secrecy, adolescent girls do not have access to the right kind of information, especially in rural and tribal communities. The topic of menstruation is shrouded under a heavy veil of taboos. For centuries, communities across the world have associated menstruation with all things dark and evil. Menstrual blood is considered impure and

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Although they are equal contributors in work, women's identity as farmers, decision-makers, etc., is largely non-existent because agriculture is deeply steeped in patriarchal norms

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menstruating women are often forbidden from entering places of worship, kitchens and even farmlands due to a fear of them 'polluting' these spaces whereas it is scientifically proven that menstruation is a perfectly normal, healthy, biological function.

### Menstruation: What is it all about?

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Menstruation is an inevitable, natural, beautiful, and sometimes painful process of experiencing womanhood, and it begins with the onset of adolescence. Adolescence, as a period, can be defined as the transition from childhood to adulthood, and is characterized by major biological changes such as physical growth, sexual maturation and psycho-social development; it is considered a milestone of puberty. Menarche is the most important event in the lives of adolescent girls and marks the beginning of a woman's menstrual and reproductive life; because of this, it requires specific and special attention. Menarche is an onset of a regular cycle in which girls usually have their first vaginal bleeding. Menarche occurs somewhere between the ages of 9 and 15 and continues until the early 50s (Mehra S., 1995). Menstrual periods usually

occur once a month and last for several days every time. A missed menstrual period is frequently the first sign that pregnancy has occurred. As a woman ages and the hormone levels in her body slowly begin to decrease, the menstrual cycle eventually ends (menopause).

### Why am I writing about it?

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Village Study is an important part of a one-year programme of apprenticeship in PRADAN. On the agenda is an opportunity to observe, explore and learn about the communities which we will be working with. For my Village Study in Rajpur, a village in Masulpani *panchayat* of Narharpur, Chhattisgarh, I stayed with the family of one of our SHG members, Sulochna *didi*. I enjoyed the beauty of the place, the love and acceptance from the family and the community, and the richness of their culture. However, some of the social and political issues, I observed, disturbed me.

A usual day in the life of a woman in Rajpur starts with the first crow of the cock before sunrise and her tasks continue until the end of the day. Tribal women are responsible for managing household chores and child

care, collecting wood and water, and taking care of the family, in addition to the farm and forest-based activities. Their contribution to agriculture includes crop-weeding, manuring and harvesting; they are the lead players in all post-harvest and storage operations and hold knowledge of seed storage and preservation. Although they are equal contributors in work, women's identity as farmers, decision-makers, etc., is largely non-existent because agriculture is deeply steeped in patriarchal norms. I found that a woman goes through several physical and psychological stresses and, yet, her contribution to society remains unaccounted for. I was very shocked to see cases of polygamy; this not only increases the vulnerability of the women in a family but also causes extreme mental harassment.

The burden of their daily chores inside and outside of the home, combined with inadequate nutritious food, proper sanitation facilities, food and care during pregnancy, and the gendered behaviour towards women, exposes them to the hazards of anaemia, low BMI, muscular deformities, malnourishment and other health and hygiene issues. The life of a rural, tribal woman is sheer drudgery. As an

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In our society, gender stereotypes have been constructed, structured and perpetuated. Sharing about periods with the family or anyone else may damage the image of a 'good girl'; plus, the image of the family gets attached to the image of the girl in the larger society

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extension of these issues, poor girls and women bear tremendous hardships in managing the basic and natural biological function of menstruation.

I decided to go deeper into the subject and conduct a study when one day I met Priyanka Saroj, a 20 year-old girl. She shared the menstrual problem that she was facing. She said that she had an itching and burning sensation in the genitalia during her periods. I noticed that she had wounds in her feet. When I inquired further about the disease, she said that she had visited the Community Health Centre of Narharpur and found that the reason behind the entire suffering was her menstrual problem. Additionally, she mentioned that her weight was declining rapidly and her health was deteriorating. She told me that she was unaware about menstrual hygiene practices such as avoiding having a bath in the village pond during periods, not reusing cloth used earlier for menstruation, or drying the cloth in the sun.

The dissemination of this information is usually done by the *anganwadi* workers, who talk to the women who visit the *anganwadi* during pregnancy or for immunization; the information often remains

unshared with the other women of the family or the community. Priyanka was, moreover, very hesitant and shy about sharing the information she did. She said, "*Didi ye baat gaon me kisi ko mat batana warna wo mujhe acha nai samjhenge* (Please don't share this with anyone in the village, they will not think good about me)." In our society, gender stereotypes have been constructed, structured and perpetuated. Sharing about periods with the family or anyone else may damage the image of a 'good girl'; plus, the image of the family gets attached to the image of the girl in the larger society.

According to a report by the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC), in the world's second-most populous country, with nearly 355 million menstruating women, 23 per cent of adolescent girls drop out of school after their first period. Only 12 per cent of the women in our country use sanitary pads and as many as 10 per cent of the girls in India believe that menstruation is a disease. A study of 478 girls in Rohtak found that more than 75 per cent of these women were forbidden from worship, 45 per cent were not allowed in the kitchen and nearly a quarter had dietary restrictions. The report also states that the researchers in the Menstrual

Hygiene Management Lab of the Nirmal Bharat Yatra listened to the girls' reports of not being allowed to cook or eat pickles or pray with the rest of the family. Menstruation, therefore, becomes a signal for the society to restrict, control and monitor a woman, hampering her personal, educational and professional growth.

### Rajpur Gaon

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Rajpur is one of the five villages of Masulpani *panchayat*, and has a hamlet called Bharripara, 2 km from the village. According to the 2011 Census, Rajpur has a population of 403 people. There are about 81 houses in the village. A majority of the villagers are *adivasi* (ST), comprising Gond tribes. There are six women SHGs promoted for financial inclusion, collective action, sensitization and empowerment.

Rajpur village has a government middle school (Class 1 to 8) and two *anganwadis* as part of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), one in the village and the other in its hamlet. There is a high school in Masulpani. Both the *anganwadis* cater to 29 children and help combat malnutrition. A *phoolwari* centre is run by the state government,

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## Menstruation, therefore, becomes a signal for the society to restrict, control and monitor a woman, hampering her personal, educational and professional growth

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to cater to women and children, providing nutritious food to feeding mothers, pregnant women, and children in the age group of six months to three years. According to the *anganwadi* data, there are 23 adolescent girls in the village. There are three ASHA workers, whose responsibility it is to mobilize, educate and motivate the community on healthcare.

The study was conducted in 2016 and used a community-led interactive approach. Primary information was also collected from key informants such as ASHA workers, *anganwadis*, the Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) and school teachers about the social and cultural practices, the barriers to hygiene and how behavior and attitude towards menstruation could be changed. Thereafter, a Focussed Group Discussion (FGD) was planned, with the women and girls combined, to raise the topic of menstruation. Adolescents were filled with enthusiasm because this was the first time that they were going to talk about this forbidden topic.

The FGDs were conducted with 8 to 15 people, selected on the basis of age groups. The topics were related to awareness about menstruation, hygiene, the

practices and the restrictions during menstruation, sources of information regarding menstruation, and the history of any menstrual abnormality. Checklists of open-ended questions were prepared for discussion and notes were taken to record perceptions, feelings and experiences. This was followed by a two-way discussion to educate girls about the normal physiology of menstruation, the importance of maintaining hygiene and other safe hygienic practices during menstruation.

Individual interviews were carried out simultaneously with the FGDs, in order to get more insights into individual interests and issues. It helped to cross-check the patterns found in individuals that were then validated by the whole group. Girls who had attained menarche were eligible and participated in the study. Others who had not yet attained menarche were not included although there were interactions with them too to identify their awareness before menarche. Women who attained menopause were not included. A verbal consent was obtained from the girls before administering the interview schedule.

Special characteristics of the respondents were studied,

including the age group, education level, caste category, marital status, and age of marriage. A majority (66 per cent) of the respondents of the study belonged to the ST category whereas 33.96 per cent are OBCs. Included in the study were 15 girls in the age group of 11–21 years, 21 women in the age group of 22–31 years and 17 women in the age group of 32–50.

Based on the educational background, the respondents were classified into six categories. Illiterates made up the lowest percentage (7.55 per cent). Of the total respondents, 9.43 per cent had an education level of below primary and the third category was primary education at 9.43 per cent. The largest percentage, 21 per cent was of women who had completed their middle school-level education. Also, 33.96 per cent of the women had secondary school education and above.

The study revealed that the girls were forced to drop their education to support their family in household chores (getting trapped in the vicious web of societal gender roles), which denies her the right to education and choice. Often, the girls were married at an early age. As per the responses of 53 *didis*, 34 were married and 29.41

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Only 17 of the 53 respondents were in the normal weight range; the rest were underweight. Women who were underweight had more menstrual problems compared to women with normal weight

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per cent of them were married before the marriageable age. Marriage was largely driven by patriarchal values as well as to control a woman's sexuality. Not only did this hamper girls' future—health, mental stability, growth and opportunities in life ahead—it also stripped away the greatest years of their childhood, adolescence and dreams.

Early marriage and unplanned pregnancies were found to be detrimental to the health and nutritional status of women and children. Added to these health adversities were other gendered values and poverty. Families could not afford fish or egg more than twice or thrice a month; so they had either vegetables or *daal* in their meal. They were also unaware of what a nutritious diet might include. Their diet, usually, included the staple food—rice.

The role of the women was to feed the others in the family first and then eat the remaining food, which may or may not be sufficient for them. Parvati *didi* said, “*Didi, man ke abbad kaam hothe didi, ghar badi ke kaam, laika man ke kaam, khet khar, bazaar ke kaam, ek pal ke fursat nai have didi man ke* (Women are overburdened with workload in house, child care, agricultural and field work and the market work. They don't have time to relax).”

Underweight and malnourished women face several problems related to menstruation. The weight and height of all the respondents were recorded and the BMI was calculated for each of them in order to get a picture of malnutrition in Rajpur. The absence of periods and infertility are usually associated with both high and low BMIs. A low BMI often stops menstruation. A normal BMI falls between 18.5 and 24.9. Having a high or low BMI may cause women to experience an absence of menstruation, irregular menstruation and painful menstruation. Only 17 of the 53 respondents were in the normal weight range; the rest were underweight. Women who were underweight had more menstrual problems compared to women with normal weight. Of 37 women who had a menstrual disorder, 29 were underweight whereas only eight were of normal weight.

### **Menstrual Patterns and Current Menstrual Practices among Girls and Women**

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Adolescence—the period of transition from childhood to adulthood—is characterized by major biological changes and is a significant milestone

of puberty. Menarche marks the beginning of a woman's menstrual and reproductive life, and requires specific and special attention. Because menstruation is considered dirty and something to be hidden, girls have little awareness about it and are afraid to talk about it. The maximum number of women (30.19 per cent) attained menarche at the age of 12 and 26.42 per cent of the respondents attained it at the age of 14 years, with the mean age of menarche being 13 years, approximately. Four of the women had delayed menarche (primary amenorrhea) at the age of 16 or 17. However, they were totally unaware that it could be a menstrual problem.

In the villages, anaemia among women is very common, mainly due to the deficiency of vitamins and iron in their food intake. One of the reasons for poor nutrition is the shift from the traditional food habits to modern agriculture, and the other is the prevalent gendered norms existing in society such as the girls or women eating last in the family and eating leftovers that may or may not be sufficient.

A 37 year-old lady says, “*Didi, jab tak ghar ke bhaiya man or siyaan man nai kha letis tab tak hum man nai kha sakthan, hum man phele*

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## A large proportion of the girls used and re-used old cloth; this practice has been linked to microbial growth; the women in the study had symptoms indicative of infection

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*kha lebo to bane nai laghi* (It will not look good if we eat before the elders and the men in the family, even if we are hungry).” In Rajpur, 28 per cent of the women had less than a three-day duration of menstrual cycle and 36 per cent of the respondents had three days due to low haemoglobin count. It was also found that 15.09 per cent of the respondents reported long menstrual periods of more than six days, which may also possibly indicate cases of menstrual problems.

The study covered detailed aspects of menstrual practices among girls and women of different age groups. Only 18.87 per cent of the menstruating women used commercial sanitary pads during their period; they fell in the age category of 11–21 and 22–31 years. Some women (20.75 per cent) used both sanitary pads and cloth; they used cloth at home and pads in the workplace or school. A majority (56.6 per cent) used old cotton cloth and discarded the cloth after re-using it at least for 3–4 months; these fell in the age category of 22–31 and 32–50 years. Of 43 respondents, who used cloth as menstrual material, the majority (72.09 per cent) washed the soiled cloth in cold water and 46.51 per cent dried the cloth in sunlight whereas

37.20 per cent dried the cloth pieces in sunlight but covered it with a saree and 16.28 per cent dried it in the shade or at some secret place like in a corner in the house. Of the women who fell in the age category of ages 22–31, half covered their menstrual cloth pieces while drying them in the open, mainly due to the shame attached to it by society.

A large proportion of the girls used and re-used old cloth; this practice has been linked to microbial growth; the women in the study had symptoms indicative of infection. FGDs revealed that women in the age groups of 11–21 and 22–31 years dry the washed clothes away from the eyes of the male members of the family to avoid embarrassment whereas women in the age group of 32–50 years hide their cloth, to protect their family from black magic. Due to several similar notions, women hesitate to talk about hygiene practices and even conversations between mothers and daughters are have these social barriers.

According to the study, used cloth and pads were mainly disposed of by burning or burying or, in some cases, by throwing it away in public spaces. Almost 43.4 per cent of the respondents washed the soiled absorbent and then

buried it, 41.50 per cent of them burned the absorbent and about 15 per cent of the women either threw the absorbent cloth in open spaces such as fields and ponds, or flushed them in the toilets.

Of the 43 women using old cloth, around 79 per cent used coloured cloth so that the stains would not be visible to others and it could be used repeatedly. However, according to the ASHA workers and *anganwadi* workers, white or light coloured cloth must be used as menstrual cloth so that any abnormalities in the blood are visible and noticed immediately. During their period, approximately 75 per cent of the women took a bath at the bore well, well, or hand pump, which is an appropriate practice as mentioned by *Mithanin* or the *anganwadi* workers. These findings were further supported by the FGDs.

To maintain hygiene and cleanliness, the soiled cloth needs to be changed at least thrice a day. However, the reality is that 18.87 per cent of the women change the soiled cloth or pad only once a day, 56.6 per cent of them twice a day, 30.18 per cent of the women change it thrice or more than thrice a day. The women are helpless and unable to change the soiled cloth or sanitary

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## Lack of awareness gives rise to various myths and misconceptions, which the community members then perpetuate, leading to further isolation of girls during and around menstruation

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pad frequently or as required, considering the circumstances. Women working in the fields have no suitable place to change and wash the cloth just like schoolgirls who cannot change in schools. Lack of infrastructure and social stigma are the big constraining factors. In addition, when women and girls change the menstrual cloth, they do not clean their external genitalia (the frequency of cleaning is less than two times a day); in fact, only 17 per cent clean their genitalia when changing the soiled cloth. Absenteeism when menstruating, therefore, is common, hampering academic performance.

### Menstrual Disorders

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Many of the participants (69.81 per cent) have some problem related to menstrual cycles. Dysmenorrhea prevails among 54.71 per cent of the girls and premenstrual syndrome prevails among 75.47 per cent of the participants. Fifteen (28 per cent) participants have menstrual period for less than three days, whereas the bleeding for eight (15 per cent) subjects lasted for more than six days. About 17 per cent of them had irregular cycles whereas the rest had regular menstruation.

Of the 40 girls or women suffering from premenstrual syndrome, pain in the abdomen (39.62 per cent) was found to be the most frequent complaint, followed by headaches (30.62 per cent), pain in the legs and knees (37.74 per cent), irritation (22.64 per cent) whereas 15.09 per cent and 9.43 per cent reported experiencing loss in appetite and food cravings, respectively, during their menstruation cycle.

In addition, 14 respondents reported the problem of rashes or itching or burning sensation; 50 per cent of these fell in the age category of 22–31 years. In FGDs too, both women and girls complained of rashes and itching. The possible reasons could be the quality of the material used, wearing wet and soiled cloth for too long, or because they were unable to wash frequently during the menstrual cycle. Unfortunately, although girls and women face many menstrual problems, these remained unrecognized and neglected due to lack of awareness about most of them.

### Socio-cultural and Economic Barriers

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In the present study, only 34

per cent of the girls or women knew about menstruation or menarche before its onset. Also, from the FGDs, it was clear that awareness about menarche was poor. Around two-thirds of the participants were not aware about menarche before its onset. This usually leads to psychological stress like shock, fear or anxiety at the time of the initial periods. The rest of the girls had just heard from or seen other women menstruating but did not have enough information to manage their menstrual flow. The dissemination of information about menarche is not an important agenda for the *anganwadi*, ASHA workers, government programmes or any of the stakeholders, leading to inadequate or incorrect knowledge and a low level of awareness, especially among mothers. The lack of awareness gives rise to various myths and misconceptions, which the community members then perpetuate, leading to further isolation of girls during and around menstruation.

Mothers, sisters or friends are the initial sources of information about menstruation. About 39.62 per cent of the girls were scared at the time of their first menstrual cycle, 32.08 per cent

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## Rarely had anyone learned about menstruation from school. According to conversations with school teachers, there are chapters on menstruation in science books, but they remain untaught to students

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were anxious, 13.20 per cent were shocked, and 11.32 per cent were frustrated and disgusted due to lack of proper information whereas 18.87 per cent of the girls considered it normal.

Rarely had anyone learned about menstruation from school. According to conversations with school teachers, there are chapters on menstruation in science books, but they remain untaught to students. Ms Netam, a teacher in a Rajpur School, said, “Students and teachers become very conscious whenever the topic of reproduction and the biological process of menstruation are discussed in class; often, science subjects are taught by male teachers, who usually skip the topic.”

Social and cultural restrictions during menstruation are common. All the girls and women, we learned, were restricted from visiting places of worship, and touching religious items or even praying. All of them were restricted from cooking and doing household work, as well as touching community hand pumps. Around 28 per cent of the respondents reported sleeping separately or staying in isolation during menstruation. Also, 62.26 per cent and 18.87 per cent of the girls were not allowed to bathe

in community ponds and were not allowed to visit agricultural fields, respectively, which have a religious significance for the community as a whole.

Approximately, 68 per cent of the respondents were aware of the use of sanitary pads during menstruation. Yet, 37.7 per cent of the girls or women only knew about personal cleanliness practices during periods. Only 15 respondents out of 53 were aware about the nutritional food chart (Tiranga food), only 15 had any understanding about the menstrual cycle such as the source of the menstrual blood, its importance in relation to pregnancy, and about menstruation as a normal process. A mere 20.7 per cent knew that long periods, missed periods or light periods were menstrual problems and that it was essential to consult a doctor.

Of 37 women, who had various complaints around their periods, approximately 30 per cent visited and consulted doctors whereas the rest resisted going or didn't see it as a 'problem'.

Only 10 women use sanitary pads whereas 11 use both old cloth and disposable pads. To

map the socio-cultural barriers to menstrual health, the reasons for not using sanitary pads were further explored. Of the remaining respondents, 17 were not using pads due to lack of information regarding them, 15 were unable to afford sanitary pads, and 9 were unwilling to use such products due to personal preferences or attached myths or misconceptions to such products.

In total, 14 participants reported poor accessibility or unavailability of proper disposal infrastructure, or both, as the restraining factors. One woman expressed her hesitation in buying sanitary pads for fear of what the shopkeeper would think of her when she asked for it.

School absenteeism is prevalent among schoolgirls during menstruation. Of 53 respondents, 36 attained menarche during their schooling whereas the rest dropped out before that. This study captures the menstrual experiences and management issues of girls and women of all age groups during their schooling.

The study revealed that of 36 girls, 42 per cent missed school during their menstruation, that is, usually three days. As many as, 17 per cent of the girls skipped

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Due to social barriers, the topic of menstruation is rarely discussed with, or taught to men until they get married. But what are a man's perceptions about the women experiencing bleeding every month?

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school on the first day of the cycle and the rest attended school during menstruation but only a few changed their soiled cloth in school.

Of the 15 girls that missed school or of the 13 girls that were not able to change in school, 17 said there were no water facilities in the school; 15 said they felt shy or uncomfortable to change

in school; 13 girls mentioned that they do not carry pads or cloths to school for fear of the boys peeking into their bags; 12 girls reported that there were no toilets in the school; 10 girls said there was no place to dispose of the soiled cloth; five of them missed school because of menstrual pain and weakness whereas two complained that the toilets were of poor quality and

unusable for changing.

Jaimila, a class IX student, said, *"Didi period ke time school me bahut muskhil hota hai ki kahin daag na lag jaye; dhyan se uthna baithna padhta hai jiske karan padhai me dhyan bhi nai de pate* (It is very difficult in school during the periods; we are afraid that our dress may get stained. We have to be very careful while we sit or



**Focused group discussion with adolescent girls**

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## Discriminatory and gendered social norms, deep-rooted in collective beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of society perpetuate the myth that women are inferior

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stand, and because of this, we cannot focus on studies).”

Her friend Dumeshwari adds, “*School me hum kapda leke bhi nai jate, ki kahi koi ladka dekh na le or mazak na udhaye* (We do not take cloth to school to change because some boys may see it and make fun of us).” Their words took me to my schooldays when it was a nightmare for every girl to get up with a large red stain on her skirt. Every time a girl got a stain, she would start searching for a way to hide the stain as if it is something very bad.

### What does a man say about it?

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“*Masik ke bare me laika mann jaan ke ka kari* (Boys have nothing to do with periods).”

“*Ye goth la purush ke samne nai ho saki* (We cannot talk about this in front of men),” say the women.

Due to social barriers, the topic of menstruation is rarely discussed with, or taught to men until they get married. But what are a man’s perceptions about the women experiencing bleeding every month?

Rajesh Kunjam said, “I don’t think of periods as bad or evil, neither have I ever mocked

it. Also, I do help my wife in household chores or in fetching water at that time of the month because she is not allowed to touch the community well during her periods. In case we break the social rules and norms, we will be expelled from the *samaj* and excluded from all community benefits.” Talking about the restrictions, he continued, “We are just carrying forward the tradition.” According to him, the other men in the village, especially the elders, believe that these traditions must be followed otherwise it will bring ill luck for everyone.

### Conclusion

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Looking at the bigger picture, almost all the issues revolve around stigmatization of menstruation, which is a result of gender inequality or socially constructed gender norms, which further perpetuate gendered behaviour. Discriminatory and gendered social norms, deep-rooted in collective beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of society perpetuate the myth that women are inferior. And evidence shows that these norms become stricter when adolescent girls reach puberty and menarche; there are then increased

restrictions on their mobility and actions. These gender norms are often maintained and enforced by the community and the key influencers such as the mother, who again influences the girl’s behaviour, in the short as well as the long term.

As a result of this stigmatization, the topics of menarche and menstruation are not discussed openly—this is, in turn, linked to misconceptions and practices and, hence, contributes to gender inequality. Women, especially adolescent girls, are regularly and adversely affected by the social stigma and taboos surrounding menstruation. Emotional stress such as depression, anxiety, worry or fear can further affect their menstrual cycle. And the stress has its grounds in a sense of embarrassment, resulting in, for instance, girls missing their school due to the fear of staining their clothes.

The feeling of shame and embarrassment every month hurts the confidence, self-esteem and the dignity of girls and women. It restricts them from managing menstruation, a biological phenomenon, naturally. All these factors affect their well-being and health. Following norms and not challenging them

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There is critical need for a space between girls and their close ones, where they can share their feelings, concerns, experiences and have open and frank discussions, without being embarrassed and ashamed about the subject

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contributes to the acceptance of systematic gender discrimination.

The prevailing social norms lead to an absence of dialogue between girls and their care-providers (the mother or any other person) about the changes during puberty and the physiology of the menstrual cycle. Conversation on the subject is limited to the passing down of the rules and prohibitions, to be followed strictly during menstruation.

Following all the restrictions and knowing how the community views menstruation, the mothers believe that this is not a topic to be discussed in detail with their daughters prior to menarche; the girls, on the other hand, believe that the others expect them to be silent about menstruation and, thus, hesitate to seek clarifications about their bodily changes and periods. In this scenario, the silenced become the executors of the function of social institutions, and consider themselves responsible for the fulfillment of the roles designed by the institution. This leads to lack of information or awareness

and makes the natural biological process of menstruation difficult to manage.

So, there is critical need for a space between girls and their close ones, where they can share their feelings, concerns, experiences and have open and frank discussions, without being embarrassed and ashamed about the subject. Communication about the subject will, then, contribute to breaking the taboos and minimizing its negative consequences.

**What we cannot talk about, we cannot change!**

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**Way Forward**

PRADAN has a vision of a 'just and equitable' society. The oppressed and vulnerable sections must be helped to break free from their past by developing an alternative vision of their future. The way forward will be to make women and girls envisage a respectful, dignified and healthy life for themselves, realizing their self-worth, which they have

lost somewhere in the midst of the systemic gender oppression. SHGs and Village Organizations (VOs) can be the space and act as change agents, whereby women can understand and deliberate upon the whole idea of gendered behaviour around the natural phenomenon of menstruation.

We need to encourage and sensitize girls and women to challenge societal norms and to help draw them out of traditional beliefs and norms through awareness and capacity-building. Both young girls and boys must be educated about the changes in puberty, the facts of menstruation, the physiological implications, and about the significance of menstruation and proper hygienic practices. It is essential to motivate and build understanding amongst health workers and ensure that they focus more on the practical aspects of managing menstruation, including biological and physiological changes.

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*Mohini Saha is based in Narharpur, Chhattisgarh*

# JULEKHA BIBI'S JOURNEY AS A LEADER FOR CHANGE

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Working with SHG women on various issues faced by the community transforms the shy and soft-spoken Julekha Bibi into a vocal and active spokesperson, displaying hitherto untapped capabilities for tackling the day-to-day problems villagers face

**I** FIRST MET JULEKHA BIBI WHEN I WAS promoting the SHG '786 Jeevika' in Thari Noniyatari village in Chakai block, Bihar. She was very shy and appeared to be a typical rural woman, wearing a light red flower-printed saree, her head covered with one end of it, the *aanchal*. She had a good physique, medium height, a fair complexion and her wide eyes that were lined with *kajal*. When I asked her what her name was, she gave a shy smile and a dimple appeared on her cheek. She replied in a soft voice, "*Mera naam Julekha Bibi hai* (My name is Julekha Bibi)."

That day, about 15 SHG members discussed the concept of collectivization. Four of them, however, were silent; Julekha Bibi was one of them. At the end of the meeting, I asked the silent members why they had not participated in the discussion. Julekha replied with a light voice and a little smile, "*Didi ji, jo aap mahila ko sangathan me shaamil hone ka baat kar rahe ho hum use samjhane ka kosish kar rahe hain* (Sister, I am trying to understand what you are saying about recruiting women for the collective)."

I asked her what she had understood of the whole discussion. She was silent for some time and then

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Somehow, I had formed a different opinion of Julekha because of my experience with her when I met her first. I was apprehensive that she would not be able to express herself in the Federation, or carry out her responsibilities as a Federation member

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spoke with a soft voice, “*Main abhi pura nahi samjhi, kyonki is tarah ka baat-cheet hamare puri zindagi mein pahli baar suni hun, aur jo samjhi hu use bol bhi nahi paungi* (I didn’t understand the whole discussion because I’m hearing such things for the first time in my life, and whatever I have understood, I will not be able to repeat it).”

Eight groups were formed in that village in 20 days. One month later, I went to the village for the selection of a representative to the Block Level Federation (BLF), Jeevan Marshal Mahila Sangh (JMMS), Chakai. In that meeting, members from seven SHGs were present. Since there was no Gram Panchayat Level Federation (GPLF), we discussed the role of the GPLF and the block-level Federation. I proposed that the villagers select a representative from their *panchayat*, who would represent them in the Federation. The group suggested Julekha Bibi’s name.

Somehow, I had formed a different opinion of Julekha because of my experience with her when I met her first. I was apprehensive that she would not be able to express herself in the Federation, or carry out her responsibilities as a Federation

member. And although I had shared all the criteria required of a BLF representative and the roles and responsibilities that she would be required to fulfil, the group had still suggested her name.

I reiterated the requirements of the work involved and prompted the group to take some time to rethink their decision because this was a big responsibility and the person would have to represent the entire *panchayat*. The group, however, was convinced that Julekha Bibi would be their representative. They told me that they had observed her and that whenever there was a problem in her in-laws’ family, she resolved it well. Ultimately, I agreed with the group’s decision. Yet, I was not sure that she was a suitable representative.

In October 2016, Julekha Bibi attended her first BLF meeting in Chakai. The meeting focussed on the origin and the journey of JMMS because there were new representatives from four *panchayats*. The older members spoke about JMMS and its vision to the new members. I noticed that Julekha Bibi was listening intently to the discussion. I asked the new members whether they

understood the discussions and whether they had any idea about how a Federation could play a role in bringing about change in society.

Julekha Bibi promptly replied, “*Haan didi thora sa samjhe hai, thora nahi samajh aa raha hai, dheere meeting me shamil hone se aur jyada samajh badhega. Samajh to badhana parega tabhi to hamare gaon mein badlav ho sakta hai* (Yes, didi, I understood some of the discussion, but not all. Gradually, by attending regular meetings, I’ll start understanding more. We must increase our understanding; only then can change take place in our village).” I was relieved with her response and although she was a shy speaker, the spark in her eyes showed how wrong I had been to judge her.

She soon took charge. After her first BLF meeting, she organized a village-level meeting, calling all SHG members, informing them about JMMS and sharing with everyone the discussion that had taken place in the BLF meeting. After a few days, the SHG members of the 786 Jeevika went for an exposure visit to an SHG in another *panchayat* to understand its functioning. There, she interacted with the older SHG members and understood

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Her husband started obstructing her. He would not allow her to step outside the house or attend any meeting or training programme. Julekha Bibi, however, would not sit back in her home

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how a group functions smoothly, what group norms are and how the group is stronger than the individual. She became more and more involved in group functioning, discussing with her fellow members what they could do as a group.

The next BLF saw a different Julekha Bibi. Now she was not merely listening to the others, she had begun to express herself and was actively engaged in the discussions and listened to the other representatives and the work that they were doing. It seemed that she had suddenly found a new meaning in her life.

Julekha was no longer confined to her SHG. She gradually began to step out of the house to promote the SHG and discuss the issues of the people. Meanwhile, she also started to identify various problems in her village. When she went to a group in another village, she motivated the members and talked to them about the power they have when they work together. She spoke of the various examples shared by other representatives of JMMS.

Once, in an SHG meeting, the members brought up the subject of the PDS dealer not giving them the full ration. Julekha Bibi said, “Dealer agar hami me se koi

*didhi ke kam ration deto tab hum sab koi ek ho ke aawaz uthaiwa* (If the dealer gives less grain to any one of us, we have to raise our voice collectively).” The women decided that they would not sit silent and if the dealer didn’t give the required ration; they would talk to him. As usual, the dealer distributed fewer grains than stipulated. This came to light and the women, led by Julekha Bibi, decided to take action against the dealer.

Julekha Bibi confronted the dealer, “*Bhaiya, ei ab nai chalto, ab hamni ke pura ration de, nai tha hum sab mahila ekatha ho ke tohar birodh kar debo*” (This will not work anymore. You have to distribute the full quantity of ration, otherwise all of us will protest against you).” The dealer did not expect such resistance from the women. The collective power of the women made the dealer give full ration to all the people from that day onwards. Julekha Bibi and the women were very happy with the action. They had been able to put to the test the power that their collective could generate.

Often as the value and status of a human being rises, many attempt to pull them down. Something like that happened with Julekha Bibi also. Some people in the

village had spread rumours about Julekha Bibi. They told her husband that she had become shameless and that she roamed around the villages.

From here starts the story of her struggle against her husband. Her husband started obstructing her. He would not allow her to step outside the house or attend any meeting or training programme. Julekha Bibi, however, would not sit back in her home. One day, without telling her husband, she went to Chakai to participate in a BLF meeting. It was already dark by the time she returned home and she was quite tense. When she reached home, her husband slapped her hard. She was prepared for that. She told him, “*Chahe aap mujhe ghar se nikal do, lekin main group nahi chhodungi. Mein apne maiyke mein bhi jaa kar samuh chalaungi aur gao samaj me jo bhrashtachaar hai use samuh se kam karungi*” (Even if you throw me out of the house, I will not leave the group. Even if I stay with my parents, I will run a group and work to get rid of the corruption in the society through the group).”

The group also tried to convince her husband, “*Use gaon samaj ka kaam karne se mat rok. Woh akeli nahi hai. Hum sab uske saath hai. Tum bhi uska saath do.*” (Do not

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## The Federation members talked to him and to the other villagers. They also invited him to attend some meetings as an observer so that he could see what happens in the meetings

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stop her from doing the work of the society. She is not alone. We all are supporting her. You also help her)." Although not fully convinced, he reluctantly let Julekha Bibi attend the meetings. Once, she had to attend a three-day residential training on vision-building, which was held out of Chakai. She took permission from her husband to attend the meeting and made arrangements at her home in her absence. When she came back from the training, her husband was furious and hit her head with a stone. She was badly injured. Her husband suspected her. He said that Julekha went to the training wearing a red *saree* but when she returned, she was wearing a yellow *saree*. He said "*Mujhe ispe shak hai, agar training din mein hoti hai to ye raat mein kya karti hai* (I suspect her. If the training takes place during the day, then what does she do at night?)"

Julekha was taken aback by her husband's statement. She did not know how to convince him. She decided to take help from BLF members. She called the Federation leaders to her village for a meeting to decide what could be done with her husband. Her husband couldn't believe that Julekha would have so many supporters from different parts of the block to back her up. He

became nervous seeing so many women from other *panchayats*. The Federation members talked to him and to the other villagers. They also invited him to attend some meetings as an observer so that he could see what happens in the meetings.

He agreed. "Whenever there is a meeting, I will take part for a few days and will come to understand the work that Julekha does." Things settled down in Julekha's life. Her husband accompanied her to a few meetings and tried to understand the work of the Federation and the SHG. The relationship between the two improved. Julekha, however, makes it a point to do her daily household chores before she attends the SHG meeting or the Federation meeting. She works with her husband and her two sons in the agriculture season. Her husband is a rickshaw puller and, in the lean period, he works as a labour in construction work. She has four children, the elder daughter is married, her two sons are 19 and 17 years old, and her younger daughter is 10 and is in school.

In December 2016, The Village Organization (VO) in Julekha's village held a promotional event. The VO is a village-level women's collective, comprising eight

to twenty SHGs. It deals with village-level issues on rights and entitlements. There is a space for discussion and taking action on issues such as gender, corruption, etc. Since the formation of the Kamalphool VO, the women hold meetings once a month. They identify village-level issues and prepare an action plan for Kamalphool VO.

The major issues that emerged were access to clean drinking water, lack of water harvesting structures for irrigation, irregular distribution and inaccurate amounts of ration being distributed, lack of quality education in school, irregularity in starting *anganwadis*, and open defecation. Julekha Bibi was selected as the Chairperson of the VO. She said, "*Yeh hamare liye pahla mauka hai jisme hamne gram aster ke samaysayayo ko pahchana aur uspar kaam kar rahe hain; isse pahle to humlog sirf gharelu samasyayo par hi baat karte the* (For the first time, we are discussing issues of the village. Earlier, we only used to talk about household issues)."

She further shared that their VO had identified many issues but she had suggested that they should deal with the issues one by one. The group agreed with her suggestion and decided to

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## In the VO meeting, the disparity in the distribution of *poshahaar* (nutrition supplements) for pregnant women and lactating women was referred to

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prioritize the issues. After the discussion, Julekha expressed, “*Hamni sab ke aisan kaam kare ke pahle koi anubhav nai hai, iyhe khatir hamar bichar yi hai ki hamni sab ke pahle wo muddha leke chahi, je mahila se sidha jural hai, o mudda anganwadi hai jai mahila se sidha jural hai* (We do not have prior experience of working on such issues, so I think we should do work that is directly related to women. I think that is *anganwadi*, which directly affects women’s lives).”

The members of the VO thought over Julekha’s suggestion and all agreed that *anganwadi* was the place where most of them were directly involved for nutrition and pre-schooling their children. They made an action plan on how to intervene in the *anganwadi*. The group selected Julekha as a leading person to deal with the problem. From the very next day, Julekha got started with the task.

First, she went to the *anganwadi* centre with some of the fellow didis to check if it was open or not. The *anganwadi* was open and she counted the number of children present. Only eight kids were present and she talked with the *Sevika* regarding the low attendance. The irritated *Sevika* replied, “*Bacche nahi aate hain to*

*hum kya kare, aur tum ye puchane wali kaun hoti ho. Apne kaam se kaam rakho* (What can I do if the children don’t come; and who are you to ask all this? Mind your own business).”

Julekha told her that she was the Chairperson of the VO and tried to explain to the *Sevika* about the VO and its role. The *Sevika*, however, was very impolite and said, “*Tum jo koi bhi ho, mujhe pharak nahi padta* (I don’t care who you are; it makes no difference to me).”

Julekha replied, “*Tum mano ya na mano lekin hum logo ne jo jimewari li hai use pura karenge* (You may accept it or not, but we will fulfil the responsibility that we have taken).” Saying this, she walked out of the *anganwadi* with the other members.

After two days, Julekha again went to the *anganwadi* with some women. That day, the *anganwadi* was not open. Julekha asked the *Sevika* the reason. The *Sevika* didn’t like the probing and told Julekha that she was not accountable to her and wouldn’t reply to her questions. Julekha told her, “*Agar hamare sawaal ka jawab nahi dogi to hum block mein shikayat karenge* (If you don’t answer our questions, we

will complain about you in the Block).”

The *Sevika* didn’t bother to answer. Instead she said, “*Jahan bhi jana hai jao, mujhe koi pharak nahi padta* (Go wherever you want to go, it doesn’t make any difference to me).”

Julekha then asked a member to bring a plain paper and to call the other VO members too. Within half an hour almost all the VO members had assembled at the *anganwadi*. Julekha updated them regarding the intervention and told them to write an application to the Block Development Officer (BDO) complaining about the *Sevika*. An application was written and all the members started to sign it. The *Sevika* became petrified, seeing all the members’ signatures on the application. She asked Julekha not to submit the application and that she would open the *anganwadi* every day.

In the VO meeting, the disparity in the distribution of *poshahaar* (nutrition supplements) for pregnant women and lactating women was referred to. The *Sevika* distributed only 1 kg of rice and 250 gm of pulses per person, and would do this once in four months whereas the

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Once I joined the group, and the members trusted me and elected me as the representative of the Block Federation, I thought that I should honour their trust in me

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allocation was for 2 kg of rice and half a kilogramme of pulses per person per month. The SHG women took steps to distribute the *poshahaar* on time just as they did to keep the *anganwadi* open regularly. It is all running very smoothly now.

Julekha also goes to other *panchayats* and attends their VO meetings with other Federation members. She went to the Ghutway *panchayat* and explained the usefulness and benefits of a group and a VO. Her group members support her developmental thought and take advice from her before taking any decision. She says that, “There are schools and *anganwadis* in Ghutway *panchayat* that are

not running properly. We, as a collective, are going to work to make these institutions run properly. This will be possible only when all of us fight together for this.”

Julekha Bibi has now become popular in her village and the women are very proud of her. When I asked Julekha Bibi, “How come you do such courageous work? When I first saw you, you could barely speak and were very shy. What has happened that you have changed so much in this time?”

Julekha smiled and looked into my eyes and said, “You are correct about me. I would not talk and was shy in nature. But

once I joined the group, and the members trusted me and elected me as the representative of the Block Federation, I thought that I should honour their trust in me. I attended meetings, interacted with many other women, overcame my fear and slowly started expressing myself in the meetings. More changes happened when I became a Federation member and met members from other places. The exposure through trainings also helped me. Being guided by experienced members of the Federation and your facilitation have also helped me to work for my village and my *panchayat*.”

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*Salbi Kumari is based in Chakai, Bihar*

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**TRISHAGNEE BORUAH AND ANUP DAS**

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# When the Ravaging Flood Waters Recede

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Hearing about floods and actually experiencing the death and destruction it wreaks are totally different; the PRADAN team realizes this as it struggles to find solutions to counter the devastating effects that the receding waters leave behind for the villagers

**A**S INDIA TURNED 70 ON 15 August 2017, the people of Araria district had little to celebrate. Araria has Nepal in the north, Kishanganj in the east and Supoul in the south-west. Kosi, Suwara, Kali, Koli, Panar are the major rivers that flow through this district besides a few small rivers. Three days earlier, heavy rain pounded the area that adjoins Nepal. The rain intensified over the next two days. By the evening of 13 August, the Bihar government's disaster management department had categorized Araria district as "entirely affected by floods", alongside

adjoining Purnea and Kishanganj districts. On 13th and 14th of August, Araria and the whole northeast Bihar experienced the most devastating floods of the decade, killing at least 514 people and affecting 1.72 crore people across the state, according to the state's disaster management department. Over 8.5 lakh people have lost their homes, with Araria district alone accounting for almost 2.2 lakh homeless people. In Araria, 9 blocks entirely and 149 *panchayats* were flood-affected. Whereas these figures convey the scale of the disaster, they do not reveal the extent to which the floods upturned people's lives and the fact that its repercussions will be felt for months to come.

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## As water rushed into houses and farms across villages and towns in Araria, people fled for their lives, most unable to carry anything with them

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PRADAN is currently working in 3 blocks; this includes 20 *panchayats*.

It was a nightmare. The water rose so quickly that nobody got the time to gather their belongings or prepare for the exigency; everyone ran to the highway for safety. As water rushed into houses and farms across villages and towns in Araria, people fled for their lives, most unable to carry anything with them. They spent days on elevated highways and along railway tracks, often with nothing to eat, even as the rain continued till the third week of August.

Our team took shelter in a nearby hotel because our houses were under water. For four days, we could not come back to our homes or the office. We could only conjecture how badly our homes and office were affected. There was no mobile network and we had no way of connecting with the women we work with in the villages. The entire road was damaged and all means of connectivity lost. In the villages, flood waters uprooted and swept away ancient trees, sometimes carrying them kilometers downstream. Bridges and roads were washed away as embankments of canals caved in. A video showing a woman and

two children on a bridge across Bakra river being swept away and drowning became viral on social media and in the news. The video was so disturbing it increased our fears and stress more than ever. The collapse of the bridge destroyed communication completely because it was the only mode by which we reached those villages. We felt helpless and consumed by fear.

A few days later, we managed to reach some of the villages by crossing different flooded streams, muddy passages and damaged roads. It took almost 6 hours to reach these villages. The roads were full of people taking shelter under torn plastic tents. We were relieved to see some of the women we work with. In Rahariya village, Fatima *didi* spoke about her experience of the floods and how they had starved for two days, how they survived and saved their families. Madni *didi*, aged 50, said that she saw her all the grain and her savings going into the water and she could not do anything, “*Mera sabhi kuch dub gaya mere aankho ke samne* (Everything sank in front of my eyes)” she said with grief. The water had entered the villages so suddenly that all the grain and utensils were washed away; the water damaged their

entire stock of grain that would have sustained the households over the coming year. Bimla *didi* shared if the level of water had risen by even one more inch, her whole family might have drowned. “*Do bacho ko kandhe me le lie, soche dubenge to pehle hum hi dube* (I carried my two children on my shoulders, if anyone has to get drowned then it would be me first).” Her voice was shaking, “*Do din sirf do packet biscuit khake rahe* (For two days, we just survived on two packets of biscuits).” She added agitatedly, “*Bhukha rehne ke siwa hum logon ke paas koi upai nahi tha* (We had no option but to stay hungry).” Rekha *didi* added, “*Baad ka pani ko hi piye didi, dur tak pine ka pani nahi tha* (We drank the flood waters *didi*; there was no drinking water available for miles).” Some drank flood waters or contaminated water from small hand pumps in the upper levels because all other drinking water supply resources were submerged. Some drank rain water. It was unimaginable how hundreds of people spent days and nights on the roof-tops of schools or *pucca* houses. Thus they survived the devastation. An SHG member from Rampur suffered for days. She was eight months pregnant and was not able to even sit for a minute because of over-crowding. She could not stop

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Many people went on to *pucca* houses in the village where food for more than 200 people at the time of crisis was arranged by the house owners, in a demonstration of what true humanity is all about

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her tears when asked how she was. They spent the night in the rain and wind. Some got stuck in their houses. Some shared how they joined their beds and spent two nights on it without food and water. One villager recalled that they staved off their hunger by eating biscuits and puffed rice. At such a time, we assumed that the villagers' prime need would be food; however, to our surprise, it included a long list. When my colleague Santosh asked Masliuddin from Gamharia village about her immediate issues. "*Do din bhuke rehna pada, par uske baad sukha naasta kha pa rahe hai, masla to roshni ka hai, bijli to gul hai aur tel bhi nahi hai dhibri jalane ko* (After two days of staying hungry, we have dry food; the main problem, however, is that there is no electricity, and there is no oil to light the lamp)." After the sun set, the windy darkness descended on them. That was frightening; people could not sleep for fear of snakes and reptiles. The lack of firewood made them more vulnerable.

Moreover, they said, "*Insaan to apna gujara kar le raha hai, par maal mavesi ke liye to kuch bhi nahi bacha, bahut samsya hai, kya khilaye unko* (We humans can still survive but what do we do for our animals? It's a big problem, what

will we feed them)?" Some could not save their livestock. Sama *did*i shared how the water washed away her cow, a goat, 4 chickens, and almost all her household belongings. It was similar for all the other women, and even worse for some.

When Sangeeta *did*i returned home after the waters receded, she found that everything in her house, barring a couple of trunks and the bed had been swept away. The flood waters had taken everything that could pass through broken walls and doorways. All the *kuchcha* houses were damaged, some completely and some partially. Sakeba *did*i, an SHG woman from Pecchaili village, had gone to the adjacent village to see her sister, leaving behind her three children at home. As the water rose, she turned back to go to her home. She almost got drowned in the rising flood waters; luckily some people nearby rescued her. She rushed to her home and saw her children crying on the bed. The mud walls of her home collapsed. When recounting her experience, she got goose bumps, "*Didi agar us din kuch ho jata baccho ko, to pata nahi hum kya karte?* (I don't what I would have done if something had happened to my children that day)."

In another incident, three men of a family and their two kids were stuck on a tree in Pecchaili village for almost 20 hours. They had gone to bring a gas cylinder from the market; while returning, the rising water level stopped them from reaching home. A family in Rampur took shelter in their auto and saved their lives. Many others went up to temple's roof.

An SHG member from the same village said, "*Humne apne pure pariwar ko kaha ki koi bhi kahi nahi jayega, jo koi gaya to uske chinta me hum maare jayenge, hum sab hath pakad ke road pe khade ho gaye.* (I told our family that nobody will go anywhere because if someone goes we will die of worry; so, we all stood on the road holding each other's hands)." She was convinced that we can fight with anything if we are together and courageous enough. Many people went on to *pucca* houses in the village where food for more than 200 people at the time of crisis was arranged by the house owners, in a demonstration of what true humanity is all about.

Not all people, however, were blessed and for some their suffering would be lifelong. A 25-year-old SHG woman from Balua village lost her life partner and is now alone with two kids, both under the age of six. She

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The roads were packed with over-loaded autos, causing huge traffic jams and minor accidents. Those who had migrated from their homes were returning, tense and terrified of seeing their own places destroyed

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and her family had shifted to safe place early enough; however, her husband went back to their home to save their important papers, including their Aadhaar Card. She went in search of him when he did not come back for three hours. She felt something brush against her in the fast flowing water. She shouted loudly and people came to her help and raised that thing with the help of a bamboo. She fainted to see the body wearing a black-and-white checked shirt. It was her husband. She lost the only earning member of her family. She has been crying since then, and our colleague Tarannum has no clue what should be done besides consoling her.

Another mother bore the pain of seeing her young adult son's dead body, which she kept at her place for two days because there was no place to bury it and no firewood for cremation. There are many untold stories of severe pain; for the government, however, it was just a number of casualties.

The situation was grim. People had no money and puffed rice cost Rs 80 per kg, a packet of biscuit that cost Rs 10 was available for Rs 30, and there was no vegetables available. The roads were packed with over-loaded autos, causing huge

traffic jams and minor accidents. Those who had migrated from their homes were returning, tense and terrified of seeing their own places destroyed. The migrants got to know of the latest condition by the media; however, they could not connect to any of their family; this frightened them more and many pushed themselves to walk miles and miles and to swim through many streams after which they reached their beloved ones. Those who returned felt relieved to see their people alive but there were people, who could not make it to Araria for different reasons. The condition of those families was worse than ever. A woman whose son, daughter-in-law, daughter and son-in-law, working outside the state was crying. Her house was completely washed away and her old husband was suffering from fever. She managed to keep her husband in a half-wet bed at the roadside but had no money and food for both of them. She cried a lot and she was unable to share her pain.

Migration and agriculture are two major sources of income in Araria. Those who migrated returned to find their fields severely damaged by the speed and the depth of the flood waters. The floods destroyed the standing crops. Afsana *did*i, an SHG member from Suksaina

village, said, "*Aisa laga ki ye badh ke pani me acid bhi tha, mera pura khet jal sa gaya hai.* (It seems the flood waters also had acid in it; my whole field looks as if it has been burnt)." Landless people who lived on shared cropping were more vulnerable. An old farmer said, "*Bhaiya jitna nuksaan hua hai kheti me, isse accha hum hi khatam ho jate* (There is so much damage of crops, it would have been better if we had died)." The other standing crop, jute, a commercial crop was entirely affected by the floods, which completely broke the backbone of agriculture. A villager from Bagdehra village said, "*Hum log dus saal piche chale gaye hai* (We have moved ten years back)."

The government initiated relief measures albeit late. However, some villages could not be reached. It also arranged air relief, distributing packets of dry eatables in many areas. 'Survival of the fittest' was in evidence when we saw people fighting over for a packet of food. One or two families collected the packets of food that were thrown to them, and they were not willing to share it with the needy. Many organizations from all over the country came forward but still many needy were not benefited because the demand was high; lakhs of people were starving.

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## Displacement, loss of property and disruption to business and social affairs is causing continuing stress. For some people the psychological impacts will be long-lasting

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We went to the market yard in Araria town where the packaging of dry eatables was going on. The yard inside was full of dry packets. Many villagers were waiting outside the yard for their turn to get packets. They had tractors on which they were supposed to take the packets to their own villages. Most of them had been waiting there for two days. We thought that the food packets would reach the vulnerable but that did not happen as was told to us by many villagers.

The print media claimed the success of another initiative called 'Community Kitchen'. In this, the ward members of all the *panchayats* were ordered to arrange cooked food for their people till the families began cooking for themselves. A ward member, Ravindar, said, "*Sarkar ne hume keh diya khana khilao, humare zila me har ek ward me lagbhag 1000 se zyada voter hai, hume 10,000 rupay milne hai, aap bataiye kitne din main khila paunga unhe* (The government had ordered us to feed the families; we have 1000 families in each ward of our district and we were given only Rs 10,000. Tell us for how many days could we feed them)?" We saw that at many places only 4-5 children had food from the

community kitchen. Seeing this, we felt annoyed and disturbed and tried to come up with solutions to help the community.

The floods resulted in long-term trauma for the affected families. They, especially the children, have been deeply impacted by the loss of their loved ones. Displacement, loss of property and disruption to business and social affairs are causing continuing stress. For some people the psychological impact will be long-lasting.

A week after the floods, we discussed about the immediate problems and long-term issues in a team meeting. We decided the first priority was to be with the villagers and to support the community emotionally. We discussed how to engage with the community. Health was increasingly deteriorating within the community. Farhana didi said "*Hum baadh ki vajah se apni swasthya meeting ke liye nahi baith paye jo 12 tareek ko honi thi* (We were not able to have our health meeting, scheduled on the 12th of this month due to the floods)." The women in Rahariya would meet every 15 days to discuss health issues such as BMI, nutrition and hygiene. Everyone in Rahariya was suffering from different diseases; the flood waters were toxic and resulted in

itching and in inflammation of their bodies. "*Hum logon ka abhi sabse jaroori swasthya hai* (For us, health is the most important issue now)," Shehnaz didi said and Madni didi added, "*Hum logon ka abhi sabhi ka bukhar nahi to pet ka bimari ho raha hai* (Each one of us is either suffering from fever or having stomach problems)."

All the staff of the health department in Araria was on field, distributing lime and bleaching powder. They provided halogen tablets to purify the drinking water and organized health camps. They wanted to reach more and more villages as ordered by the District Health Officer. However, in our area, they were missing; so we went to the respective Public Health Centres (PHCs) at the block level. The block-level officials said they had limited stock and could organize health camps for roadside villages. Our villages were in the interior; therefore, we decided to make the community aware of the steps the health department was taking. We discussed with the community about after the effects of flood on health. People realized that water-borne diseases had begun to spread in their areas. We had the community access PHCs, with the help of their *panchayat* representative.

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The government declared that a flood relief compensation of Rs 6000 per household be given. This amount will be channelized through PRI members, yet again opening up the scope for corruption

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We held discussions with the PHCs again and spoke to them about the condition of the interior villages. They supported us and decided to organize a health camp in Rahariya village. Women in Rahariya joined hands to arrange health camps in area. On 26 September 2017, the first camp was organized in the village with the help of the SHG women, who took the lead and set up the venue at Rahariya High School and spread the news of health camp. Almost 200 members attended the camp and got medical treatment. The PHC also distributed bleaching powder, lime and halogen tablets to SHG members. It appreciated the idea of such camps and we planned to organize such camps in different villages. The block manager of Care India, an NGO working in health in Araria, also attended the event. He counselled the pregnant women. Together, we planned to work on hygiene, nutrition and women's health for upcoming health meetings in Rahariya.

Although the department had distributed lime and halogen to the Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM), it was impossible for her to take it to the village. She said that if the PRI members helped her, it would be possible for her to distribute these essential items.

Our colleague Rounak and the *mukhiya*, a ward member and the ANM of Pakri *panchayat* went to the PHC and discussed how together we could ensure the distribution of such material in the villages. The *mukhiya* took responsibility for the distribution, with the ANM, the ward members and the PHC committing to ensure stock availability.

In the meanwhile, in every village, the one thing in common was that even 10 days after the floods, families were struggling for fuel. Ghotni didi from Sherlanga village pulled our colleague, Santosh, to her kitchen and said with tears in her eyes, "*Bhaiya, jalawan pura gila ho gaya hai, aur phukte phukte aankh phul jaata hai* (All the fuelwood is wet, and I get tired of blowing on it to keep the fire alive)." The other SHG members present there said, "*Jiske ghar gas hai, wahi achhe se khana paka raha hai* (Only those who use gas (liquid petroleum gas) stoves in their homes can cook food)." The need for gas connections came up and brought up many stories of the challenges they face and the corruption in the village. The community members further voiced the many difficulties they encounter, including their ignorance of processes, documentation and

dealing with gas agencies and corruption.

We met with the different officials at the nodal points for execution of the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojna. We gave the community information about the system and processes. Because the community had identified it as its foremost need, members took interest and prepared themselves by understanding the processes involved. Many SHG women shared that it gave them hope that, collectively, they could take steps to eradicate corruption from the area. However, it was just a first tiny step, and corruption is whirlpool.

VO members wanted the huge loss to be compensated for. The government declared that a flood relief compensation of Rs 6000 per household be given. This amount will be channelized through PRI members, yet again opening up the scope for corruption. The villagers said that the *mukhiya* asks them to pay Rs 500–2000 first, and then they will get Rs 6000. People succumb to this demand because they know the complexities of power that the *mukhiya* wields. Often, therefore, they too become part of the web of corruption. For now, people are rebelling and

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Emotionally, physically, economically, the people were greatly affected. They need to rebuild their houses. They need to invest for the upcoming agriculture season; they had lost all their savings, be it in form of grains or money

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identify it as a very burning issue in this time of crisis. “*Hum mere adhikar ka paisa apko kyun denge* (Why would I give the money which is due to me)?” Soni *didi* agitatedly told the *upmukhiya* of Gerki *panchayat*. The SHG women held lengthy discussions on this and took an oath not to become part of corruption, this time collectively.

Unfortunately, the amount suggested will not compensate the huge losses the villagers suffered. Several members of the area are daily and seasonal wage laborers and have been unemployed for a month. They have very little savings in the bank and have not able to withdraw even that much because all the banks in the area were waterlogged and were closed for weeks. “*Humlog bar bar bank jake wapas aa rahe hai* (We have been to the bank many times and return empty-handed),” Bijiya *didi* said very angrily “*Abhi jarorat ke samay koi paisa nahi* (Now, in the time of crisis, we don’t have any money);” she wanted to withdraw the money her son had sent for her from Delhi from the bank.

Two weeks passed; the villages still reeked of rotting grain. The villagers tried to dry their grain on the roads, in the hope of saving some of it. Emotionally, physically, economically, the people were greatly affected. They need to rebuild their houses. They need to invest for the upcoming agriculture season; they had lost all their savings, be it in form of grains or money. Their monetary demands have increased and most of the SHGs are planning to get credit from their respective banks. We are helping them complete the processes.

We now have an experience of how it is to be in the midst of the floods, which is very different from hearing about floods from a distance. The strength of the community to survive such crises is wonderful to see. The rapid action within the community post-floods and the efforts to normalize the situation, collectively or individually, makes this area different—how people helped each other, gave food, shelter and support to each other; how they managed to construct *chachri* (bamboo bridges), which

helped provide relief in interior areas.

We had an ‘aha’ moment when an SHG woman came with a paper and pen and asked us to write the poem, *Sune sune ge bahin hamar*. This is a motivational poem for women collectives, which she had heard in the last training by PRADAN that she attended. She believed that it would give the women the strength to deal with the current situation. It was time to celebrate that we are alive, said Farhana *didi*. If we are alive, we can build everything again, she added. They have started to re-build their houses. The community is getting back to their daily routine. A *didi* innocently asked us, “*Bhaiya aapke desh me badh se tabahi hua* (Have floods ever destroyed the area you live in)?” For them, floods are natural, casual, usual and happens in all the places of the Earth. Floods have become a part of their lives. This was the most destructive flood ever; yet, somehow, it strengthened the bond between the villages.

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Trishagnee Boruah and Anup Das are based in Araria, Bihar

# MGNREGA: Rights and Entitlements

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Making work such as the construction of toilets under MGNREGA conditional upon meeting the Swachh Bharat Mission targets puts villagers in difficulties till the SHG women become aware of their rights and entitlements, which they then proceed to collectively ask for, winning the admiration of the officials

**B**EING A DEVELOPING COUNTRY, India has been experiencing issues of unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, poor economy, poor infrastructure, etc., and being a welfare state, many policy efforts have been put forward for rural development and for the nation as a whole. As unemployment has a direct link with economic poverty and severely affects the livelihood of people, it impacts all the needs of the people—food, clothes, shelter and access to safe drinking water and hygienic facilities.

Unemployment and poverty are inter-connected with each other. To address these two issues,

the government has been making many efforts through various schemes and programme initiatives since 1972; over a period of time, eight schemes were launched. Recognizing the need to ensure employment guarantee, the government enacted the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) on 7 September 2005. Later, in 2009, NREGA was renamed MGNREGA. This was aimed at strengthening the rural physical and natural assets at the individual and the community level, ensuring democracy, creating a demand-driven environment and focussing on sustainable livelihoods.

MGNREGA is the most important social legislation in Indian history because it ensures the rights

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## Although the programme is well-structured, the implementation of the programme on the ground still struggles

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to rural people to secure their livelihood. It guarantees 100 days of employment and strengthens the livelihood assets at an individual and community level. Employment security brings financial stability, reducing the risk of hunger and distress migration. It strengthens the natural and physical assets at an individual and the community level, by permitting works on land development, water conservation, etc. At the same time, it gives an opportunity to the people to take up livelihood activities such as fishery and poultry through a convergence approach. MGNREGA is being appreciated across the world for its uniqueness. It provides not only employment and durable assets, but also strengthens Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), thereby helping these to discharge their responsibilities.

Although the programme is well-structured, the implementation of the programme on the ground still struggles. This is because of the low capacity of the local implementing organizations—both, the District Administration and the *gram panchayats* (GPs)—caused by poor accountability, absence of performance appraisal, lack of motivation, absence of a system of incentives

and penalties, poor working conditions, shortage of staff and their absenteeism, and large-scale leakages due to corruption.

At the receiving end, the poor are disempowered, and are not included in the decision-making processes. During our engagement with the community, we have experienced that the issues in governance, political interests and lack of capacity-building of MGNREGA functionaries, GPs and the people remain unnoticed or unaddressed to a great extent. Below are the observations, data and experiences which present the situation of the state, MGNREGA functionaries, PRIs, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the struggle of the people of Narharpur.

### Whose MGNREGA and Whose Priority?

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The *gram sabha* is the foundation of governance that ensures individual and community participation and development. MGNREGA has permissible works, which the *gram sabhas* prioritize and finalize, but only specific works that the state/state officials want get sanctioned. For instance, recently Individual

Household Latrines (IHHL) have been sanctioned and many of the community demands around water conservation and land development have been bypassed. In 22 GPs of Narharpur, toilets are the target of the GPs; informally, it was communicated to the GPs and the people that MGNREGA work would not get sanctioned or opened until the Swachh Bharat Mission's (SBM's) target is not achieved in the village.

The data of Narharpur block of Chhattisgarh also shows that the construction of toilets increased to 3,057 toilets in 2016–17 from 47 toilets in 2013–14 (<http://www.nrega.nic.in/>). Some farm ponds also were sanctioned; however, the overall natural resource management works have been reduced drastically, from 73.21 per cent in 2013–14 to 36.78 per cent in 2016–17 (<http://www.nrega.nic.in/>).

Natural resources have a significant importance in the lives of the community because people are mainly engaged in rain-fed agriculture while experiencing huge water scarcity. Some of the statements that we came across and heard from the community were, “*Hum man la toh dabri aur samtali chahiye, magar panchayat*

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## The workers' awareness and exposure to financial systems is low. The accessibility to the institutions is also difficult for the villagers

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*main mana karthe, aur bolis jab tak shochalay nahi khatam hui godi ke kam suru nahi hui* (We want MGNREGA work in land-levelling and farm ponds, but the panchayat is saying that we can't get the work until the SBM target is achieved)."

The voice of the community is not heard and is suppressed by various means. The villagers were told by the Sarpanch and the panchayat Secretary (forcibly with power) that, "*Jab tak shochalay ke kam pura nahi hua, tab tak chaurghala nehi milegi* (Until the IHHL targets are achieved in the GP, no one will get ration through the Public Distribution System, PDS)."

Imagine how much pressure the villagers have to face, just to complete IHHLs. The risk associated with demanding other works or talking about MGNREGA work is great. The authoritarian behaviour of the blocks that demand that the GP ensure people achieve SBM targets before they are allowed to get MGNREGA work creates an opinion that MGNREGA is not a demand-driven programme but a government-driven programme, run from top to bottom as a relief programme.

Delays in payments, not getting the work within the demand period, frequent changes in MGNREGA, target pressure by top bodies via the GP to the people and the sanctioning of the work, all make the people's lives more vulnerable during the cycle of unemployment and also affects the people's faith in the programme/government. Systemic flaws such as account freezing, mode of payment, Aadhar card linkage and transfer of funds make the situation worse. For example, the villagers do not have information about how and from where they will receive their payment. Frequent changes in the service area approaches of the banks, institutions (bank, post office, biometric account) and the mode of payment make the process complex for MGNREGA workers.

The workers' awareness and exposure to financial systems is low. The accessibility to the institutions is also difficult for the villagers. Observations show that there are several issues in tracking Fund Transfer Order/Electronic Fund Management System (FTO/EFMS) for the post office and the biometric payment system. In the biometric system, an individual cannot trace or access

his/her payment after working under MGNREGA. Another issue is that the biometric payment process is highly complex and there are many partners to ensure service delivery in villages. The blocks transfer the funds to the nodal bank; the nodal bank then transfers the amount to the bank; the bank transfers the amount to the third party (Manipal Bank); and, finally, the third party delivers the amount to the village.

Similarly, in the case of the post office, the funds flow from the block to the nodal bank, to the district post office and then to the block post office and finally to the GP. People visit the post office a minimum of three to four times a month to receive payment, pending due to the non-availability of funds (as the GP-level post offices do not keep more than Rs 50,000 in a day), documentation errors (multiple FTO numbers, amount and accounts of beneficiaries) and non-availability of staff.

The issue here is that MGNREGA functionaries do not consult the *gram sabha* or the PRI about which payment system the GP wants, or what is convenient for the people. The orders and decisions are

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The execution of the plans was weak; therefore the intensity of the MGNREGA programme has decreased to a great extent and this has caused dissatisfaction among the people because they are left with unmet needs, despite their continuous involvement in the programme

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always communicated from the district to the block and finally to the villagers through the Gram Rozgar Sahayak (GRS). The villagers' accessibility, convenience and the GP's concern remain unrecognized.

Digitization is helpful in checking corruption; however, what happens if the villagers/workers are unable to get their money in time or get it where they can not have easy access to it. Sometimes, according to the records, it is evident that 100 per cent payment has been made through the E-FMS from the block to the beneficiaries. In reality, however, what percentage of the funds have been released to the beneficiary's account in one month is still a question. Not more than 20 to 30 per cent of the workers get their money in one month. The transfer of wages to the accounts of beneficiaries takes a minimum of three to four months because it gets transferred from the government to the banks and then to the beneficiaries. The system has clear mandates and rules regarding penalties on officials for delayed payments, but this seldom is exercised.

The Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) initiated The Integrated Participatory

Planning Exercise-1 (IPPE-1), with the focus on decentralized planning, creating assets through MGNREGA, identifying vulnerable sections of society and providing employment based on the villagers' needs and priorities. The programme was very intensive in nature and was effectively implemented although with certain drawbacks. The major drawbacks at that time were scarcity of trained person power, lack of proper training and planning at the grass-roots level, plan prioritization and follow-up to prepare the labour budget. With the involvement of CSOs, village plans were made and submitted, but the execution started very slowly (sanctioning prioritized plans vs. powerful persons works in the *panchayat*).

Without monitoring and addressing the systemic flaws of IPPE-I, MoRD with the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) brought about IPPE-II and Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) into effect in the subsequent year, which had similar drawbacks. Again, in IPPE-II, plans were made in a decentralized manner by focusing on the socio-economic caste census (SECC) data. Both the programmes (IPPE II and GPDP) focussed on holistic development by integrating all departmental

schemes, including Indira Awas, Old Age Pension, Skill Development, and Irrigation.

Because the execution of the plans was weak, the intensity of the MGNREGA programme has been decreased to a great extent and this has caused dissatisfaction among the people because they are left with unmet needs, despite their continuous involvement in the programme. Inconsistency in approach, payment flaws and top-down target-setting mechanisms have made this programme less effective.

This can be seen in the overall progress of the programme. For instance, in Narharpur block, the overall number of households that worked in MGNREGA has come down by 17 per cent in 2016–17 from 2013–14 (<http://www.nrega.nic.in/>). Similarly, the total labour working in the block has reduced by 29 per cent in 2016–17 from 2013–14 (<http://www.nrega.nic.in/>). So, the question that arises here is where have these 29 per cent of the workers gone for employment? Although it is one of the best programmes that promises poverty reduction and economic stability, its crux is accessibility, ownership and governance, which, at the moment, is weak.

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## So, in a way, the panchayat, MGNREGA functionaries and the villagers are all helpless and not at all self-governed

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### Struggles of the GP, MGNREGA functionaries and the people

Over a period of 11 years, MGNREGA has undergone many changes that include a convergence approach, digitizing data and financial transactions, and the involvement of CSOs to improve the effectiveness at the grass-roots level. A few efforts have been seen on the ground, however, to strengthen the local bodies and create awareness in the community about their rights and entitlements. GP members were unaware about MGNREGA as a right. And even if the GP members know, they are unsure about the work to be given to the people because the work is sanctioned at the district or the block level and the GP has no stake in this process. The capacity-building of GP functionaries regarding MGNREGA is found to be totally missing. In the last 10 years, not a single training has been organized for the Gram Rozgar Sahayaks, mates or the workers by the block/state. There is no training regarding the technical aspects of earthwork, watershed approach and measurement details in Narharpur block.

During interactions with the engineers and MGNREGA staff,

we found that none of them had ever gone through technical training, although the technical manual, and Information, Education and Communication (IEC) is available on the website. Many of the engineers are also from different backgrounds and merely have knowledge of earthen work. The villagers, as well as the PRIs, consider MGNREGA as a burden to implement and a system that is unable to meet the demands of the community.

PRI members said, “*Sir, kaise karbe, humu maan la toh upar se Collector mahodaya ka adesh hawe ki agar humar gaon ODF nahi hui to haman la jo vikas bar paisa milat hai wo ruk sakthe.* (What to do sir? We are instructed by the Collector to make our village Open Defecation Free (ODF) and if we don’t do that within the given time, all development projects funds may get frozen).”

So, in a way, the *panchayat*, MGNREGA functionaries and the villagers are all helpless and not at all self-governed. At the work-site also, one doesn’t see the availability of any medi-kit, proper implements, facility for taking care of small children, etc., all of which are mandatory under MGNREGA. On asking the stakeholders about the

non-availability of the required infrastructure and facilities at the work-site, the response was that it was because of non-availability of funds, the pressure of managing contingencies and the pressures on PRIs.

PRI members, GRS and Mates say that they understand MGNREGA, their power vis-à-vis the Act and their responsibilities, but are unable to exercise them due to the targets from blocks/districts and, therefore, they think that they have very little stake in MGNREGA. The autonomy of the PRIs, MGNREGA functionaries and the people’s right to access their entitlements are seen to be at risk because of the operational issues, lack of awareness and lack of capacity-building of PRIs and the people and the shifting targets set by the state. Not only this, the transfer of officials also greatly hampers the execution of work. With each changing official, the priorities change and the ongoing process is affected. Because of all this, people are losing their faith in the GPs and the *gram sabhas* and also in MGNREGA. After observing from close quarters and analysing the situation, we say that MGNREGA is more largely controlled and governed by the block/state rather than the people.

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December 2016 was the starting of the unemployment period for more than 80 per cent of the inhabitants of Batbani village of Narharpur block because almost all the villagers were through with rain-fed agriculture

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### **Batbani Village**

December 2016 was the starting of the unemployment period for more than 80 per cent of the inhabitants of Batbani village of Narharpur block because almost all the villagers were through with rain-fed agriculture. The people cultivate paddy and other crops such as millets and pulses in the *kharif* season/monsoon only because they do not have other water sources. In the month of December, they are always left with no employment options. Getting work under MGNREGA helps them reduce their economic vulnerability and also strengthens individual and community assets.

In mid-December, people needed work and they approached the Mate for MGNREGA work. The Mate took the names and other details from them to submit the demand application. Nothing happened. The whole month went by without work. When people enquired about it, the Mates, the Sachiv and the Sarpanch of the GP told them that they had received communication (informally) from the block not to open up MGNREGA work till SBM targets were achieved in the villages. The unemployment situation went on

till mid-January 2017. Villagers frequently say, “NREGA main kam karega toh MAREGA (If you work in NREGA you will die).”

### **Ray of Hope**

During this time, a MGNREGA awareness meeting was conducted at the village level by PRADAN. Women’s collectives were made aware about their rights and entitlements under MGNREGA and they were also familiarized with the process of getting work under MGNREGA. The villagers needed work, but they had never discussed their needs and MGNREGA issues collectively. PRADAN’s Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT) began discussing the issues in the village and generated awareness among the women’s collectives as well as other villagers regarding their rights and entitlements under MGNREGA.

These discussions helped the women’s collectives to take charge of their issues and flag them in larger forums. As mentioned above, the people didn’t receive MGNREGA work despite their demand to the Mate; however, being aware about their rights and entitlements under MGNREGA, the women

conducted meetings at the village level, filled the demand applications and went from door to door for the same.

Since the GP didn’t give them work and told them that they cannot give work until the block officials permit, the leaders of the women’s collectives went directly to the block/Janpad to submit their application. They met the Technical Assistant (TA), submitted the demand application and asked for a receipt of submission. Instead of giving the receipt, the TA tried to convince them that there was no work sanctioned except for a farm pond and added that the land-levelling work was also sanctioned, but because of the SBM-ODF target, they were not allowed to start MGNREGA work till the SBM target were achieved.

The women were firm and asked for the receipt. The TA didn’t accept the application and asked them to submit it to the Programme Officer (PO). The leaders of the women’s collective met the PO-MGNREGA and shared about their journey, starting from preparing the social map, the seasonal map and the patch selection, to the approval of the files and plans at the *gram sabha*.

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Seeing the confidence of the leaders, the PO was astonished. He appreciated their efforts. Although the PO too did not accept the demand form, he asked the TA to accept the application and to give the women the receipt

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Seeing the confidence of the leaders, the PO was astonished. He appreciated their efforts. Although the PO too did not accept the demand form, he asked the TA to accept the application and to give the women the receipt. Both of them seemed helpless. The TA hesitantly accepted the application and signed it. The PO asked the TA to open up MGNREGA work in Batbani village.

Immediately, the next day, a *gram sabha* was organized by the GP, based on instructions from

MGNREGA functionaries of the block to open up MGNREGA works. The farm ponds and some land-levelling works were sanctioned for the village in February 2017 and with the efforts of the women's collectives, work was sanctioned and the people of Batbani had work.

#### **Conclusion and Way forward**

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MGNREGA, the biggest livelihood security programme, has many flaws/gaps in implementation.

The gaps exist mainly at two levels. One is at the policy/administrative level and the second is at the grass-roots level. Grass-roots problems include lack of awareness about the scheme, poor understanding and realization of the constitutional provisions of the Act, the capacity of the PRI as well as the ground staff (GRS, Mates, Panchayat Secretary, Technical Assistant, engineers) for village-level participatory planning, plan prioritization and sanctioning in the *gram sabha* and the



**SHG members doing resource mapping in Batbani village**

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In all CFT villages, Rozgar Diwas was organized on a regular basis and discussions were held with the people about their issues. The people were guided to access their rights

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willingness of the people to fight for their rights and entitlements.

These issues need to be addressed to make MGNREGA effective.

PRADAN, as the CFT, had conducted basic watershed principle trainings in the block for all the engineers and the GRS. Technical training of all Mates and the GRS was also conducted in the block around the basic unit of measurements in earthwork, the constitutional provisions of MGNREGA and micro-planning exercises using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools.

In all CFT villages, Rozgar Diwas was organized on a regular basis and discussions were held with the people about their issues. The people were guided to access their rights. Similarly, orienting the banking staff, the post office

staff and other line departments around the people's needs and problems was also done in the block through the CFT.

CFT's engagement through the Rozgar Diwas, community meetings and discussions and capacity-building of the SHGs and its associated tiers made the community aware about their rights and entitlements. Being aware about these, the people have started accessing their rights and entitlements under MGNREGA in the CFT GPs like the people did in Batbani, despite the existing issues. The capacity-building initiatives of the GP and MGNREGA functionaries helped them to understand the principles of MGNREGA, improved their knowledge of the technical aspects and the processes through

which they can now perform their duty accountably.

However, the real challenge lies with the political/administrative will and that is a complex and challenging problem. This significantly impacts the working of MGNREGA functionaries and the GP and also affects people's lives because they do not get timely and prioritized work. We believe that the people have the potential and the capacity to challenge and restructure the system, and we just need to facilitate and trigger their issues/concerns like PRADAN did at Batbani as well as in the 22 GPs of Narharpur.

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*Kalpeshkumar Chauhan is based in Tokapal, Chhattisgarh, and Ashutosh Nanda is based in Narharpur, Chhattisgarh*

Medical camp in Rahariya  
after floods, Araria  
district, Bihar (p 47)



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

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

*Newsreach* is published by the National Resource Centre for Livelihoods, housed in PRADAN.

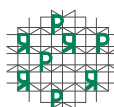
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Shataakshi Verma  
discusses gender  
issues with a family  
in Mahagama,  
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