

Ambadahara: A Story of Transformation



Opting out of shift cultivation and work in mines, the lives of the women of Ambadahara village took a turn when they started experimenting with different crops with PRADAN's help. Their success in the fields enhanced their confidence and helped them identify, engage in and solve many other development challenges in their village.

“*MOTE MINE JIBAKU DARKAR PADUNI, Mun chasa karuchi* (I do not need to work in the mines; I am into farming),” said Pabani *didi* emphatically and most of the SHG members from Ambadahara village agreed with her.

Ambadahara is a scenic village with a beautiful landscape. Deep green hills surround the village. Ambadahara falls under Talakaisari *gram panchayat* of Banspal block in Keonjhar district of Odisha. Ambadahara has five hamlets, namely, Gramasahi, Majhisahi, Rugudisahi, Pathiribadi and Jaladihi. The village is 13 km from Keonjhar district headquarter. Both Pathiribadi and Jaladihi hamlets

are far away from the main village. The village has 130 households and a population of 516. Most of the inhabitants are Bhuyans, covering Gramsahi, Majhisahi and Rugudisahi hamlets. Most of the Mundas reside in Pathiribadi hamlet and some in Gramsahi hamlet. Jaladihi is inhabited by the Gouda community.

Like most of the villages in Banspal block, the villagers in Ambadahara practised shifting cultivation with a basket of crops such as paddy, millets and niger in the hilly terrain, mono-crop, broad-casted paddy in the uplands, medium lands and the medium lowlands. They planted maize in the rainy season and mustard in winter in their

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Agriculture, so far, has been at the mercy of the monsoon and practised only in the *kharif* season. The availability of food for the family from agricultural land was for not more than three to five months a year. The nearby forest played a major role in the livelihood of the people, who collected forest fruit, wild mushrooms and firewood and sold them in the *hatias* (local markets) or in the Keonjhar daily market. Another source of income was to work as labour in the nearby limestone and iron ore mines. The women too worked as labour in the fields of the larger farmers during the rainy season for a payment of 3 kg of rice.

Ambadahara village had four SHGs, promoted by the *anganwadi didi* of the village. However, the functioning of the SHGs was a major issue. Although SHGs existed on paper, they had not been functioning for almost a decade. One informal group of women saved money without forming an SHG.

According to the women, most of the men in the village were in the habit of drinking alcohol and

spent almost all the money they earned on it. Physical violence on women after drinking, and fighting with them for money to buy liquor was very common. Women also took on extra work in order to ensure at least one meal for their families. The situation worsened when there was a crop failure. According to one *didi*, there was a crop failure every three years, usually because of poor monsoon.

One of the *didis* shared, “*Mun ta bisa pi maribaku bhabuthili karana kama sahita mada sahiba ta mote bahut kasta laguthila* (One day, I had decided to commit suicide because I could not bear the pain of the workload and the daily harassment; I could not do that because I was worried about who would look after my children).”

The first ray of hope came in the year 2010–11 when Surati and Pitambara Dehury of the village started experimenting with cow-pea cultivation in 20 decimals after they had been on an exposure visit to Kadagada village. Kadagada is well-known for its agriculture progress. Pitambara lived in Kadagada for four years, to learn and support his sister’s family to promote agriculture.

After getting married, Pitambara came back to his own village and, with Surati, started the experiment. He managed to earn Rs 10,000. The major problem he faced was because of bad road connectivity, he had to carry the produce to the market on his head. However, his efforts did not go waste; the next year, influenced by them, seven more farmers started cultivating cow-pea. The farmers, however, did not get a good yield because they had no knowledge of the Package of Practices (POP) that needed to be followed in the process of cultivation.

In 2012, PRADAN approached the village. However, there was huge resistance from the older defunct SHGs because they were fearful that PRADAN would take away the money they had collected and also force them to convert their religion. It was a herculean task to convince the villagers that that was not the case. Through persistent efforts, the PRADAN team managed to build a rapport with the villagers and formed a new SHG named Maa Saraswati, which started meeting regularly. This new SHG shared their experiences with the defunct SHGs of the village. A visit was also planned for the women of the older SHGs to

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a nearby village, where other SHGs had been functioning for three to four years. The women were impressed by what they saw and were influenced by what they heard from the other SHG members. After a few days, convinced by the functioning of Maa Saraswati SHG, one of the defunct SHGs, Maa Karmasakti, was revived. It had been dormant for five years.

One year after forming the SHG, members participated in crop planning. To promote the cultivation of vegetables in the *khari* season, tomato seeds were distributed to 24 SHG members for the first-time. The SHG members were given demonstrations on how to raise a bed for a tomato nursery. The women then raised the tomato nursery as per the POP. Surprisingly, once the seedlings were mature and ready for transplantation, none of the women wanted to transplant them in their fields. After all this effort, the women did not want to carry forward the activity.

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losses. One of the members said, “*Ama bhuyan jati re loka mane phasal dekhiki pangan kari debe jete bhala gacha hei thile bi sakalu ku jhaunli ki mari jiba* (In our Bhuyan community, they can do black magic on healthy plants, which then die by the next morning).”

After a day of discussion, the SHG members were somehow able to convince the women to continue cultivation, on the condition that if there was crop loss, they could stop and need not cultivate tomatoes the next year. Seedlings were distributed among the SHG members, with another agreement that they would follow the POP and manage their crops, as per instruction. The SHG members underwent trainings on the processes of transplantation, stacking, and disease and pest management of the crop. They also received training on System of Rice Intensification (SRI) for enhancing the production of paddy. The women started both SRI and tomato cultivation simultaneously in their fields. For further assistance and hand-holding support, Pitambara was identified as the Community Service Provider (CSP) for the village. With this regular monitoring and follow-up, along with field verification both

by the CSP and the PRADAN professional on a weekly basis, the SHG members were able to overcome their superstitions. Their crops were a big success.

After this success, the SHG members mobilized other women of the village to form one more SHG named Maa Bhagabati. The three SHGs formed a village-level Cluster. Meanwhile, the success impacted the village, both at the social and economic levels. The women farmers realized an average income of Rs 12,000 from the cultivation within a period of three months, in comparison to the labour work that they used to do in the mines, from which they would earn around Rs 7000. Moreover, labour work was very uncertain and much more strenuous than cultivation.

In 2015, all the SHG members became eagerly involved in *khari* planning. Of 54 families, 30 families individually planned tomato and cow-pea crops, with an increased crop coverage area. All the three SHGs were involved in the planning process. A village-level training was conducted by a PRADAN professional and the CSP on input procurement, purchasing seeds of quality, nursery bed raising, and plant protection and management. The

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SHG meetings saw the women having discussions about the crops, PoP and the status of each member of their SHGs. They would take forward their requirements to the Cluster meetings, in which the members would analyze the combined needs of different SHGs and, accordingly, take necessary action. They requested PRADAN to conduct appropriate trainings, and sought the support of the CSP in hand-holding farmers. In 2015, the average crop area per family was 0.84 decimals and the average income was Rs 20,000.

In the same year, the Agriculture Department held demonstrations of paddy and maize line transplantation. Almost all the SHG members decided to take up the planting of an improved variety of maize and paddy, along with their cow-pea and tomato cultivation. The eagerness of the women created an excitement in the Agriculture Department, and other line departments also came to hear about the success of the demonstration. The line departments sent their representatives to the village for more information and created more schemes for the beneficiaries.

PRADAN also played an important role in institution

mapping in the Cluster, to make the women aware about the various departments and their roles, and helped members link up with different departments. The women were also trained in organic farming, which helped them to go for vermi-compost. The Horticulture Department provided individual vermi-sheds and worms, with a deposit of Rs 600, and 12 SHG members were linked with the Horticulture Department for the vermi-compost scheme, which was again a success in that village. They started using vermi-compost in their fields as manure and also sold it. This again strengthened the confidence of the departments in the women.

In return, the department conducted a village-level training on the PoP for paddy and maize and again for the crops in the *rabi* season. The Agriculture Department also provided *urad dal* seeds for demonstration purposes. The villagers also sought technical and input support such as medicines and fertilizers from the department. For any kind of information and technical support, the department approached the Cluster directly. It also informed them of their new schemes in the Cluster forum, which became the

interface between the village and the Agriculture Department.

Now, the women have enhanced knowledge and the necessary skills in agriculture through the many trainings in agriculture on topics such as the dosage of fertilizers, Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and Integrated Disease Management (IDM), nutrient management, organic application, etc. In the *kharif* season of 2017, a seed mela was organized and all the members participated in the event. They discussed the different types of seeds, production and management, and some members shared their experiences about agriculture and livestock and the processes they had followed. They also shared the economic benefits they had reaped, motivating other members to become involved in agriculture. The event was fruitful when the four Munda families (who till then had not shown any interest in any intervention) started line transplantation and took the support of the other SHG members. The women were happy to have included the so-far excluded Munda families.

Regular meetings and interactions with each other and the many training programmes

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not only led to an increased confidence of the women about enhancing their livelihoods, but also led to an increased consciousness about improving their own well-being. The first step they took after forming a Cluster was to take action on the issue that bothered most of them—alcohol consumption by the men and the consequent violence against the women.

In the Cluster meetings, the women came to the conclusion that they needed to discuss the issue with the men. They called for a village-level meeting. They confronted the men and were opposed. Thereafter, the women decided not to prepare *hadia* (locally brewed alcohol) in their own homes and restricted the seller from selling it. They also discussed with their partners about and asked them to quit drinking *hadia*. Again and again, the movement against *hadia* consumption started from the Cluster to the SHG and from the SHG to their homes. The women faced many challenges in their attempts to influence the men.

The women also sought the help of religious teachers and requested them to discuss it with the men. The religious leaders came to the village and spread the

message through their teachings. This worked and the men made a commitment to quit alcohol. It took more than eight months of struggle for the women; finally, however, they got their way. This also had an impact on their family life and the physical abuse decreased to a large extent.

Their success boosted the women's energy and confidence. A vision-building exercise was carried out with SHG members, followed by a session on norm-setting for the Cluster. The Cluster decided to meet every month. Within a period of two to three months of engagement, the women identified many pertinent issues of the village such as the need for electricity, road connectivity, drinking water availability, etc. The women prioritized road connectivity and drinking water as the major difficulties that they were facing.

The possible solutions were discussed in the presence of the PRADAN professional. They also discussed who to approach in the block and the district for their problems. They prioritized and made action plans. As per the plan, the Cluster members invited the men to a village-level meeting and shared these issues and the strategies they had thought

of. They also asked the men to participate in their plan for the betterment of their village. The villagers decided to meet the District Collector (DC) and the Block Development Officer (BDO) because they knew that they were the people with the authority to solve their problems. They wrote an application to the DC, highlighting the issues of poor road connectivity and non-availability of drinking water.

After that, all the SHGs members with some of the villagers met the DC and handed over the written application. The DC discussed the issues the women had highlighted with them. He called the concerned officials and discussed the need to have a proper action plan for the village, to solve these issues. He also suggested that the SHG members write an application to the Odisha Mining Corporation (OMC) for drinking water facility because the village came under the OMC's mining area.

The villagers were very happy on meeting the DC. The SHG members approached the OMC about the drinking water scarcity. After a month, the villagers again visited DC to know the status. The women requested the DC to look after the issues because

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they are facing many problems; they insisted that work start immediately. They declared that they would come to his office again and again until their problems were solved.

They met the DC and the OMC twice for their issues. Through the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), the funds for building a road were sanctioned and one tube well for drinking water was installed in their village. Another tube well was sanctioned by the OMC. Within a period of three months, road construction was started and two more tube wells were installed in their village. This was a big achievement for the SHG members and they realized that if they worked together, they could definitely influence the system to improve the conditions in their village.

Next, the Cluster members approached the *sarpanch* and the *panchayat samiti* members for the construction of an *anganwadi* in their village. They also met the block Chairperson for the same. To their pleasant surprise, there was a scheme of the Government of Odisha where the blocks had to

plan for *anganwadi* construction projects in different villages. This was already in the planning of the block and so, with very little effort, the construction of the *anganwadi* centre was sanctioned for the village.

The Cluster also organized a village-level meeting to discuss children's education. There were some families that were not sending their children to school. The Cluster members sensitized the parents and encouraged them to send their children to school. There was a positive response at their insistence. There were, however, three families that still did not send their children to high school after the completion of their primary education. Some SHG members helped the parents admit the children to the nearby Ashram school for higher education. The Cluster also approached the block for the construction of two more rooms in the primary school.

Now, Ambahadara village is connected by a *pucca* road; it has four tube wells, and an *anganwadi* centre. Electricity for the village has been sanctioned and the work is in progress. One SHG

member proudly says, "*Mote bahut khushi laguchi ki ama gaon ete agaku badhichi aau ame ete kama kari parichu boli sanman madhya miluchhi* (I am very happy that our village has progressed so much and because we have done so much, we get respect from the people)."

The women in Ambahadara have realized the potential of working together. Because of their efforts, Ambahadara has now become the model village for the other adjacent villages such as Talakaisari and Anjar. The village and the villagers have become the knowledge hub for the adjacent villages. They are extending and sharing their knowledge and experience with the others. The women are happy to support other villagers and give them advice on how to actively engage with different departments, the block officials, and their own *gram sabha*, to influence and access various services. The story of the transformation of Ambahadara goes on. The villagers continue to explore, learn and venture into new areas.

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Subhashree Priyadarshini is based in Jhinkpani, Jharkhand