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प्रदान Pradan
30 years
picture the change | change the picture

Inside

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Remembering Bygone Days

ACHINTYA GHOSH

In looking back, memories bring alive the passion, drive, excitement, joy, total involvement and conviction about development work that each member of PRADAN shared…"We did it anyway!"

INSTITUTION BUILDING

The first time I met Vijay Mahajan, I was in for a rude shock. This was 30 years ago and Vijay was probably 27 years old. I thought he would be a big man with a big belly, probably between 50 and 60 years of age—hence, I was a little wary of meeting him. Nevertheless, when I did meet him, I thought, '*Arre, yeh to ekdum hamare jaisa hai—bindaas* and *ekdum* laid back.' I was relieved.

After our initial contact, he invited me to one of the project locations of ASEEFA, to explore the possibility of my joining there. The purpose of this in Vijay's mind, I think, was to understand the 'development *wallah*' and to gauge the level of his/her excitement to be in the field. In those days, there was a lot of lift irrigation work that was being implemented around Gaya and he wanted me to see that. Therefore, we started from Gaya in an old pick-up van kind of thing, which carried many other things besides us, including PVC pipes, material, etc. Through the journey, I realized that Vijay was not only a manager but also a hands-on worker. He was teaching things, telling people what to do, what not to do, training people on the job and guiding people all at the same time. He performed many roles at the same time, and was not content with being a mere manager.

As we travelled in this pick-up van, we stopped at many places, picking up people and dropping them, creating a lot of hustle bustle. As the van crossed a bridge, he asked me, "Look, Achintya, look at that stream. How can we measure the flow of the stream?" It seemed a very technical question. I looked at him and wondered how I should answer this question. I did not know his background. "Tell me your background, so that I can answer your question accordingly," I said. I thought that if he were a technical person, I would give him a technical answer; and if he were not, I would use a simpler explanation to help him understand.

He answered, "Well, I am a technically trained person." I said, "I do not understand." I thought, *'Arre yaar, yeh aadmi to bara gol gol jawaab de raha hai. Samajh mein nahee aaya.'* I tried again, "So, what have you been trained in? Where and what have you studied? And what is the degree that you have?" He replied, "I am an engineer." I presumed he must be diploma holder or some such. "Are you a diploma holder or a degree holder?" my questioning continued. He said, "I am a degree holder." I said "*Achcha*? From which institute did you get your degree?" He said in a very nonchalant way, "I am from IIT." 'Oh my God!' I thought. He had never mentioned it before this conversation, through our whole ride together or through the entire day. I thought he could have very easily in the very first instance mentioned this and said, "Look, I am just like you, an engineer from IIT." But he did not. I was pleasantly surprised. I thought here was a person who saw no need to brag about the fact he is from a premier institution. I persevered, "So right after IIT, did you join this NGO?" He said, 'Well, no. After IIT, I worked for Philips for a bit and then I went to a management institute.' My next question was: "Which management institute?" He replied, "IIM-A." I again went, 'Oh my God!' in my head. 'Not only was he from IIT but he also went to IIM-A.' And much later—much much later—I learned that not only is he from IIM-A, but he also was a gold medallist from that institute.

I really got a glimpse of what made this person spectacular when we were travelling in the field. We travelled from one irrigation field to another, at noon, under the scorching sun in the month of May. He had no food the entire day; he talked to everyone, providing inputs, and was on his feet the whole time. It was very different from how I thought 'NGO work' would be done. The kind of looseness that is assumed would be there in a voluntary organization was not there. In the morning, we had four *puris* and two *jalebis*; in the evening, we had a cup of a tea. When we returned to where we staying, he treated me to a scrumptious dinner of fish curry and rice.

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Vijay asked me to join the organization. I do not know what he liked about me but I think that after having spent the day in the field, we both started respecting and liking each other.

On a later date, he mentioned, "Achintya, we have started an organization called PRADAN. It is an organization of professionals. We need to work with poor people; we need to help them move forward, to build livelihoods so that they can better their lives. However, in order to do this we need to bring in professionalism, the same kind of professionalism that is there in large corporate companies. We need to bring in an understanding of better management systems in such organizations." I felt inspired and motivated. I wanted to do something to help the plight of the people. He added, "What we need is to look into institution building in a serious way." Of course, institution building! I have knowledge of low-cost construction and building. I would definitely be able to help with that. My mind was flooded immediately with thoughts of construction material, sand and pipes, mortar, etc. I shared this with Vijay. I said smugly, "Boss, I know a lot about low-cost construction." He laughed aloud and said, "No! No! Not that kind of institution, not a building but an institution of people." At that moment, it struck me that I really do not understand Vijay. That moment was amazing

when I look back at it after so many years. Many months, probably years, later, I truly understood what institution building was.

PRADAN today has the largest number of professionals outside the government set-up, working for development.

I understood that we, as Pradanites, need to engage differently with our colleagues, stakeholders and course with our work to attain something meaningful, purposive and large, which will change lives of the disadvantaged in a sustainable way and will continue to draw many more caring and capable souls to work towards this with a missionary zeal. We continue to draw bright minds in doing this path breaking work. PRADAN today has the largest number of professionals outside the government set-up, working for development. What Vijay dreamt, practised and inculcated in PRADAN's early days—we were able to work towards that and make it happen. The same ethos and processes have become the strongest pillars of foundation of PRADAN.

THE SELECTION PROCESS

In those days, and I am talking about 30 years ago, telecommunication was non-existent. We used to write letters, primarily postcards, to each other. One day, Vijay Mahajan wrote to me about a person called Vinod Jain, who went to IRMA. During the IRMA selection process, the selection committee told him that he need not join IRMA; instead, he should work in the grass roots and join an organization like PRADAN. Vinod Jain met Vijay Mahajan. Vijay described Vinod later. He said, "*Yaar*, this boy looks like a *lallu*. I have my doubts whether he can work in the field." Vinod came to Vijay and took a liking to him after a few discussions and sent Vinod to where I was to help him see the field.

One morning, Vinod came to Gaya. It was the rainy season then. Vinod asked me for directions on how to reach the village from the main road. I told him that he needed to get off the jeep on the main road and then walk in. I asked him to walk a 7 km dirt track. It was slushy, slippery and extremely arduous. His clothes got soaked in the slush, he lost his footwear and slipped and fell several times before finally making it to the village. He looked like a ghost covered in filth from head to toe. I made him traverse this 7 km path on his return journey too to the office. When he finally reached office, he looked like some unrecognizable muddy monster. "How was it?" we asked him. Vinod replied, "Oh, great! It was great fun. Of course, it was difficult but I got an opportunity to explore and see so much. I have to admit it was a real learning experience." Vinod was serious. We could see from his face that he did, in fact, have fun, and the challenge and hardship of the visit to the village had not deterred him in any way.

We were pleasantly surprised. This is how our professionals were selected then. Post that episode, Vijay asked Vinod to go to Delhi, to complete the formalities of joining. If not, Vijay informed Vinod that he would be passing through Kanpur and that Vinod should come to the railway station in Kanpur and meet him to complete the formalities. The train would pass through the station at midnight.

The train chugged into the station at two in the morning. Vijay got ready to get down at the station. A colleague from the development fraternity, Loganathan, who was travelling with him, asked him where he was going. Vijay told him that he had to meet someone

at the railway station. Surprised, Dinabandhu, another colleague, said, "What? At this time? Who do you have to meet at this time at the Kanpur railway station?" Vijay replied, "There is an engineer who wants to join PRADAN. I have to meet him. I asked him to come to the railway station so that I could confirm his joining the organization!" Loganathan said, "You must be mad! No one and that too an engineer in his or her right mind will come at this time to the station. You said that he does not even know which compartment or bogey you are travelling in. That means he will have to search the entire train for you. I really do not think he is going to come."

This is how offers were made to professionals then. Total madness. However, that madness had to be matched with a passion and excitement to do something. And have fun while doing something; most importantly, do something with a vision. There was a method in the madness. Vinod, of course, did come; he passed the litmus test with excellence twice. There is really no need to add that post the 'selection process' he continued in PRADAN for 20 odd years or so and carried the responsibility PRADAN building as a member of top leadership group over a decade.

What PRADAN looks for in a person is not only good academic grades but the zeal, enthusiasm and ability to take on the hardship that this profession offers. Head, heart and hands—all three move in symphony. We used to say, "The head touches the sky and the feet touch the ground." This philosophy guides us in the selection and grooming of our co-travellers and makes us a unique organization of development practitioners.

MAINSTREAMING AND COLLABORATION WITH THE GOVERNMENT

I went to meet the Block Development Officer (BDO) of Guruwa block in Gaya for some work. As was typical, I spent the entire day waiting outside but did not get a chance to meet the official. Every time I would remind the peon that I was waiting outside, I was told, "*Sahab ke paas* time *nahi hai.*" I was adamant. I decided that I was not going to leave without meeting him. After all, I had spent the entire day waiting and if I now felt frustrated and left, it would not only be a waste of my day, it would make me appear to lack perseverance. I kept hounding the peon until I saw the *bada sahab* emerge from his room. I had noticed that he was not busy the entire day because he was gossiping and whiling away his time inside the room. I finally offered a cup of tea to the people to get an entry to the BDO's office. He obliged and we started chatting; in this way, I made headway with my work in that office.

When we used to go to government offices initially, we used to crib. I would say, "Why do we need the government?" The officers are so corrupt; they are not going to do anything. Why waste our time?" To this, Vijay would reply, "The government is the largest development body in the country. If we don't collaborate with them, how will we mainstream our efforts? We need to sit across the same table and negotiate with them. After all, they handle the taxpayers' money. Why should we not engage? We must engage with them if we want our efforts to be sustainable." It made sense. From a very early stage, PRADAN has maintained the ideology that puts mainstreaming and collaboration with the

government at the heart of its efforts and work.

Today, PRADAN is the largest and biggest NGO in every aspect to collaborate with the government and other mainstream organisations, often bringing in changes in programmes and policies, making these more appropriate for whom the programmes were intended. We are perhaps the largest in terms of numbers of collaborations, number of stakeholders (departments), places (districts and state), financial volumes and the coverage of families, in the field of rural livelihood programmes.

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Those were the days…lots of excitement about changing the world, doing some unconventional yet purposeful and meaningful work for the country and the people. We did it because we enjoyed doing our work. Our work was intended to bring joy and happiness to the poor in the villages. It was and still is all fun joy, excitement, passion and madness. We did it our own way. Who cares for acknowledgement or a legacy…we did it anyway!

System of Rice Intensification —A Pro-Poor Option for Food Security

Prof. Norman Prof. Uphoff, in an interview with B.C. Barah

Acknowledging that SRI can result in a high payoff for poor and small farmers, that the SRI process of rice production will cost less and that it has many environmental benefits, Norman Uphoff engages in an untiring campaign to promote SRI around the world

Barah: *We are trying to build a detailed database on the area covered under SRI, the total number of farmers who have adopted it and its quantitative impact on India's food security. We are also looking at the role of SRI as an agro-ecological approach in dealing with the hazards of climate change. There has been much discussion about the introduction of SRI in India, with some skeptics still insisting that there is not enough scientific evidence to justify large-scale efforts. Do you consider the limitations on the supporting data to be a serious deficiency? How important is it to have comprehensive and accurate quantitative data on SRI before proceeding?*

Uphoff: The claim that there is 'not sufficient scientific data' to support SRI extension is itself contradicted by data. The Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU) has been evaluating SRI methods since 2000, and while there is variation in results—as there is with any agricultural system—I don't think that there are reservations now at TNAU about spreading knowledge of SRI to Tamil Nadu farmers. See the recent book, *System of Rice Intensification: A Synthesis of Scientific Experiments and Experiences,* edited by Dr. B.J. Pandian and other faculty at TNAU, Coimbatore.

An evaluation by TNAU researchers in 2004, with 100 farmers in the Tambiraparani river basin, through on-farm trials, using standard methods and SRI methods on plots one acre each, side by side, showed farmer income per hectare to be $242 and $519, respectively. This more than a doubling of the net income was achieved with 8 per cent less labour input per hectare and with less water. Also with less incidence of pests. TNAU, therefore, advised the World Bank to make SRI extension a major part of its IAMWARM project, for improving irrigated rice production in the state.

In 2004–06, the World Wide Fund-International Crop Research Institute for the the Semi Arid Tropics (WWF-ICRISAT) dialogue project supported joint research by scientists at the Directorate of Rice Research/Indian Council for Agricultural Research (DRR/ICAR) in Hyderabad, at Acharya NG Ranga Agricultural University (ANGRAU) and at ICRISAT, with on-farm evaluations in 10 districts complemented by on-station studies. Those results also confirmed the productivity gains achievable with SRI management in Andhra Pradesh conditions.

Since then, there have been studies by the ATMA program in Gurdaspur district of Punjab, by agronomists at Shere-e-Kashmir Agricultural University in J&K, at the ICAR Directorate of Water Management in Bhubaneswar, and many other institutions. This has been complemented and confirmed by *pukka* agronomic research in China, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Iraq, Japan and other countries, plus systematic field studies in countries such as Myanmar, Vietnam, Nepal, Iran, and Bhutan.

The more the recommended SRI practices are used—and the better they are used—the better will be the results: higher yield, more water saving, more resistance to pests and diseases, etc.

All of these results are posted on the SRI website (http://sri.ciifad.cornell.edu); so it is hard to explain why some persons keep saying that there is 'not enough scientific evidence' to support SRI. There are now over 250 articles published in journals around the world, about one-third in China, and several hundred reports that should have satisfied reasonable skeptics. Anyone in doubt should consult the Research section of the SRI website: http://sri.ciifad.cornell.edu/research/index.html

There is a broader, somewhat philosophical issue in that SRI is not as easy to evaluate conclusively as other component kinds of agricultural technology like a new variety, an improved machine or an agrochemical. Being a system, with many 'moving parts', rather than a technology, SRI is not something binary: was it used or not? SRI is more a matter of degree than of kind. SRI can be practised more or less fully, and more or less well. We know from factorial trials and from experience that the more the recommended SRI practices are used—and the better they are used—the better will be the results: higher yield, more water saving, more resistance to pests and diseases, etc.

But it can be difficult to say 'how many farmers' used SRI practices in a particular area or in a particular season. How well did they use the practices? In Vietnam, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development reported last October that the number of farmers surpassed one million, having been less than 10,000 four years earlier (*People's Army Newspaper Online,* 18 October 2011). The Ministry notes, however, that only about 20 per cent of these farmers are using all or practically all of the recommended practices, and using them as fully and well as recommended. The other 80 per cent are using SRI ideas and methods to some degree because they have limitations on water control or insufficient labour at certain times of the season.

Does this mean that SRI does not work, or is unsuccessful? The gains in yield, only 10–20 per cent, are not as great as in many other countries. But farmers are taking up the ideas and practices to a growing extent because these reduce farmers' costs of production, require less water, the crops are less susceptible to insect damage and to lodging from typhoons; farmers, thus, get more net income.

That the methods are not yet being fully used means that there is still a lot of scope for Vietnamese farmers to raise their production further, and to have more of the other benefits when and as they use the recommended methods better and more fully. I might note further that some Vietnamese farmers report that when SRI has been practised on a village basis for several years, not just by a few individuals, fishes and frogs return to their irrigation channels. This supplements

household protein and income, and it signals a healthier environment because it was the overuse of agrochemicals that reduced these populations.

Unfortunately, the shifting nature of SRI means that it does not lend itself readily to aggregated numbers. One needs to have many footnotes and qualifications with any single number that represents either the area or the use of SRI.

We have emphasized the use of organic inputs with SRI practice, first to build life in the soil—which is as decisive and determinant a factor in SRI success as any—and second, because it is very liberating for poor farmers to realize that they can get excellent crops, just with their labour and skill, using the available biomass

Barah: *Would your totals include farmers who are using chemical fertilizers?*

Uphoff: We are not purists. We want to see farmers benefiting as much as they are willing and able from SRI opportunities. Many farmers continue to use more chemical fertilizers with other SRI practices than I would like to see, based on very solid factorial trial results. They can't believe that they can get best results with purely organic farming.

In some soils, especially soils that have been 'chemicalized' for many years, affecting the life in the soil, unbalancing it or depressing it, they are right. For the next season, there will be better results with still some use of inorganic fertilizer. Over time, if they can restore and accelerate life in the soil by providing abundant supplies of organic matter, they will find that they can have better and, probably, more cost-effective results by shifting to reliance on compost, vermi-compost, green manure, etc.

How one might achieve top yields with some optimizing combinations of organic and inorganic nutrient sources in SRI production systems is still being explored. SRI is not necessarily an organic production system; I like to say that it is not doctrinally organic but rather pragmatically organic.

We have emphasized the use of organic inputs with SRI practice, first to build life in the soil—which is as decisive and determinant a factor in SRI success as any—and second, because it is very liberating for poor farmers to realize that they can get excellent crops, just with their labour and skill, using the available biomass (straw, weeds, livestock litter, loppings from shrubs and trees, etc.) and not needing to make cash outlays for soil nutrients. The out-of-pocket costs of buying and relying on chemical fertilizer can be quite constraining and even daunting for small farmers.

Should we count farmers, who are using young seedlings, widely spaced, with less (but still some flooding), mechanical weeding (just two, not three or four weedings), and mainly chemical fertilizer as 'practising SRI'? Deciding this can become almost a theological matter, which I don't think is useful.

Barah: *Let's come back to the question of how to evaluate and report the extent of SRI practice. How can we know what constitutes SRI utilization?*

Uphoff: Perhaps we should talk about 'SRI-inspired practice' or 'SRI-influenced farmers' as somewhat inexact categories. The farmers, who have been influenced by SRI training and observations, or whose paddy management has been altered because of this experience, know that they are 'following SRI'. It is gratifying to listen to farmers, who are enthusiastic about and dedicated to what they understand as SRI. There is no question in their minds that the more productive phenotypes of rice that now populate their fields and give them higher

incomes and greater household food security come from the phenomenon of SRI.

There was also no ambiguity about the reality and effects of SRI in Minister Sharad Pawar's mind when he confirmed in Parliament on the 20th of March that a farmer in Nalanda district of Bihar had achieved a world-record-beating yield of 22.4 tonnes per ha of rice, properly measured by state and local officials, with hundreds of people watching the yield evaluation, and confirmed later by ICAR. He had a pretty concrete idea of 'what is SRI', as did the farmer, Hemant Kumar, who got that record yield, and the other farmers in Darveshpura village, four of who got similar super-yields of 19 or 20 tonnes per ha.

So, let me come back to your original question: Does India need extensive, systematic, very precise data before proceeding to take advantage of the production opportunities that SRI knowledge has opened up for Indian farmers, and Indian consumers? Not really, given what is known already about SRI results in India and other countries.

It should be kept in mind that this gives the government some large opportunities for budgetary savings because with SRI management there can be reduction in the huge expenditure on providing subsidized or free electrical power and on chemical fertilizers to support paddy production.

The question as posed is not a very meaningful one in my view. It reflects the conventional thinking of certain scientists, who regard themselves as gatekeepers, or of commercial interests that benefit from keeping the current agricultural-subsidy raj. They would like to put brakes on the spread of SRI for fairly

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transparent reasons. Remember: nobody is proposing that SRI use be imposed on Indian farmers. If farmers find these alternative management practices to be beneficial in their trials, they can—and will—use them on a larger scale, and will continue using them for as long as the methods prove to give them net advantages.

Some encouragement to get SRI methods tried out by farmers is justifiable, for example, giving farmers credit for buying mechanical weeders (still requiring that these be paid for, once the harvest has increased farmer incomes by much more than the weeder price), something like hire-purchase arrangements; or MGNREGA-subsidized labour could get fields levelled for SRI use and planted and weeded the first time around, to show farmers what can be achieved with the alternative practices.

It would be beneficial if state governments and the central government began keeping records of the best SRI use and results. The Provincial Department of Agriculture (PDA) in Sichuan, China, (where yields are already fairly high—7.55 tons per ha, and where SRI use by PDA criteria has expanded from 1,133 ha in 2004 to 301,067 ha in 2010, a total area of over 950,000 ha) has calculated that SRI yields over the seven years have averaged 9.25 tons per ha. The additional paddy production that the PDA attributes to SRI methods adds up to over 1.66 million tonnes of paddy. This would not have been produced if farmers using SRI practices had continued with the practices that other Sichuan farmers use for growing rice.

PDA has calculated that the value of this additional paddy produced was over $300 million. This is income that went into farmers' pockets because there had been little increase in their production costs; possibly the costs

had reduced! This reckoning does not take into account that water use got reduced by 25 per cent when SRI methods were employed. How much was this water worth?

Barah: *Indian official statistics on SRI are almost negligible at present, and there have been no systematic attempts to collect aggregate data on SRI, as there have been in some other countries. The spread of SRI in India during the past decade or so is said to be impressive, but in the absence of standardized documentary evidence, the opponents of SRI find it convenient to keep saying there is no scientific evidence. Reports are dismissed as impressionistic; media reports cannot be considered entirely credible. Ministers, policy formulators and the Parliament are recognizing SRI as an innovation for increasing productivity and reducing the impact of climate change. Do you think that there is a change in the mindset of scientists and the scientific establishment towards SRI?*

The economic reasons, plus the concern for reducing demand for water, for moving to SRI management in most, if not all, parts of the country are already powerful and should be sufficiently persuasive for the government to proceed.

Uphoff: I wish that governments in India would keep such records as in Sichuan province of China. But I don't think the results of such data collection would have any effect on decisions because the resistance is not really based on scientific considerations. Solid data to support at least letting farmers know about and try SRI have been available for a decade now. Indeed, the most conclusive data were published in 2002 by International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the proceedings of an international workshop on water-saving rice production, organized by IRRI and Wageningen University.

The argument that there is 'no scientific evidence' has been misleading because all that the proponents have been asking for is that farmers be informed about SRI, be shown its effects and be assisted in trying the methods out under local conditions with various varieties, thereby letting farmers make their own decisions. Introduction of incentives to get farmers to try out the alternative methods on their own fields is also quite justified when the results and spread of SRI methods in other countries (and now also in many Indian states) are considered.

The economic reasons, plus the concern for reducing demand for water, for moving to SRI management in most, if not all, parts of the country are already powerful and should be sufficiently persuasive for the government to proceed. Nay-sayers and skeptics, who have resisted official support of SRI evaluation and demonstration, have been depriving farmers of substantial income, and have been keeping food off household tables. Moreover, they have been contributing to a waste of water in the agricultural sector, where shortages are increasingly real.

The campaign against SRI resembles in some ways how tobacco companies in the U.S. for many years held back public understanding and acceptance of the link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer by repeatedly insisting there was 'not sufficient scientific evidence' to warrant efforts to curb smoking. Many of thousands of lives were lost unnecessarily as a result.

It is interesting that in science, we penalize and go to great lengths to avoid what are called Type I errors, that is, 'false positives'. But there is unfortunately no corresponding aversion to Type II errors—people are not held accountable for 'false negatives', for rejecting something as false when in fact it is really true, and when it could have beneficial

consequences. Those who obstruct correct conclusions should be as liable to criticism as those who propose conclusions, which later turn out to be incorrect.

Barah: *In the Round Table on SRI held in Delhi on 13th January 2012, you talked about the role of soil biota—the interaction between plants and the micro-organisms in their environment, and even in the plants themselves—that leads to higher productivity. What are your hypotheses for higher productivity in SRI?*

Uphoff: The two most evident differences we find between rice plants growth with conventional practices (older seedlings, close spacing, continuous flooding and use of synthetic fertilizer) and plants raised in an SRI environment is that the latter have much larger root systems that do not die the way the roots of conventionally grown rice plants do. And the soil around the roots has larger and more active populations of soil organisms. Already in a 2001 thesis done in Madagascar, we found that the populations of a nitrogen-fixing organism (Azospirillum) were much increased by the use of SRI practices, and particularly by the addition of compost to the soil when SRI methods were used. These increases were accompanied by an increase in yield from 3.0 tonnes per ha to 10.35 tonnes per ha—a huge difference. Previous thesis research there had shown that it took almost six times more force per plant to uproot SRI plants, 28 kg for three conventionally-grown plants vs. 53 kg for single SRI plants. This early research by Malagasy University students gave us insights into why SRI phenotypes were more robust and more productive than standard-practice rice.

Research since then, on the association between rice plants and soil microbes, unfortunately not yet on SRI-grown rice plants (but we expect this to be done soon) has shown that beneficial soil microbes, both bacteria and fungi, inhibit the leaves, sheaths and even seeds of rice, and are associated with higher levels of chlorophyll, greater rates of photosynthesis and higher yield. Because these three parameters have been frequently seen to be higher with SRI management, we think that soil microbes are probably contributing to better phenotypes.

That SRI management practices extending to wheat, ragi, sugarcane, and other crops are also eliciting more productive phenotypes reinforces the hypothesis that something about the management methods, creating a particular kind of plant growing environment, is affecting the populations and activity of soil organisms. But this remains to be established. There is some unpublished research from Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI) that has shown SRI management to be associated with both larger populations of micro-organisms, more uptake of micronutrients (surely connected with the larger, deeper, better-functioning root systems), and higher yield.

This is an area where there should be a lot of research done because I think it will have very high payoff. There is even some research done in China showing that when certain soil rhizobacteria migrate up through the roots into the leaves and sheaths, there is up-regulation of the expression of certain genes that produce specific proteins, supporting the process of photosynthesis. And other genes in the roots are up-regulated to produce proteins that confer greater resistance to pathogens. So this is a very interesting area, which I hope Indian and other scientists will investigate further.

Barah: *Norman, I think that you are aware of the recent developments in Bihar, in Darveshpura village in Nalanda district, where a farmer was able to harvest world-record rice*

yield in the last kharif *season. You may also be aware of reports of phenomenal yields of potatoes and mustard grown with adaptations of the rice intensification system. How do you react to this?*

There is huge productive potential available in our present crop varieties if we give them appropriate management, optimizing growing conditions.

Uphoff: Yes, I am aware of these developments. Dr. M.C. Diwakar, director of the Directorate for Rice Development in Patna, has shared with me the official data from the Department of Agriculture in Bihar on Hemant Kumar's record paddy yield of 22.4 tonnes per ha (20.16 tonnes dry weight), and we have written an article, together with Arvind Kumar (Directorate of Rice Research, DRR) and Anil Verma (Professional Assistance for Development Action, PRADAN), which is being published in *Agriculture Today*, giving details on this accomplishment, which bodes very well for agriculture in Bihar and in India. What has been overlooked is that four other farmers in Darveshpura, neighbours of Hemant Kumar, got yields of 19 and 20 tonnes per ha, also tying or breaking the world record in China. I also know about the potato yield in Darveshpura of 72.9 tonnes per ha, another world record, using practices inspired by SRI ideas and experience. And when visiting Bihar and West Bengal last year, I stood next to mustard plants as big as I am (and I am not short!). One official measurement of mustard reached 4.92 tonnes per ha, I understand.

What do these results mean? That there is huge productive potential available in our present crop varieties if we give them appropriate management, optimizing growing conditions. Improved varieties can give high yields—the five farmers in Darveshpura, who got the super-yields, were all using hybrid varieties. Yet, those varieties used on the same soil with conventional management yielded only one-third as much. So management was more important than genes in these cases. We get higher yields from crop varieties bred for maximum yield. However, there is usually some trade-off such as in taste or grain quality, or in resistance to pests and diseases. Consumers usually prefer traditional rice varieties for eating, and certainly for special occasions. The market price may thus be 2 or 3 times higher. So a yield of 6, 8, 10, even 12 tonnes per ha from a preferred local variety can be a more profitable crop for farmers than a hybrid rice that gives top yield.

There is also another implication pertaining to these high yields, especially those clustered in Darveshpura village, and covering both paddy and potatoes, two utterly different crops. I think that this should direct our attention to better study and understanding of, and if possible utilizing, the soil biota—the multiplicity of soil organisms ranging from bacteria and fungi to the indispensable earthworms. The message I draw from these record yields is that we should be directing much more attention to soil biology.

A further implication of these record yields is that we should already start looking beyond the staple crops. If such fine yields can be obtained for paddy and potatoes, and for wheat (PRADAN has reported to me a 12.6 tonne per ha SWI yield recently in Bihar, measured by Department officials), we will not need to devote so much of our land, our labour and, especially, our water to growing staple foods. We can meet basic caloric needs with less of these resources, and the price of these foods in the market can, indeed should, come down. People should be able to feed themselves the basics with less of their income. Farmers should be able to maintain a good income because their yields have gone up and their costs of production have come down

with adaptations of SRI practice.

But this also means that farmers should start thinking about how they can diversify their farming operations, producing more vegetables, pulses and fruits. These can improve both income and, most important, nutrition. We should be producing more quality foods for local rural and for urban consumption. Fortunately, we find that adapted SRI methods can raise the productivity of many other crops, certainly of the pulses and many vegetables. I was very happy to learn—and then to see for myself—some time ago about SBI, the System of Brinjal Intensification! We should begin experimenting with SRI ideas and methods for fruit production, encouraged by the fact that in Jharkhand, the PRADAN field staff have worked with very poor, marginalized, and intelligent tribal farmers to develop what they call SLI, the System of Lac Intensification!

Farmers should start thinking about how they can diversify their farming operations, producing more vegetables, pulses and fruits. These can improve both income and, most important, nutrition.

In Cambodia, small farmers, having increased their paddy yields by 2 to 4 times, from admittedly very low levels, on just 1.66 acres (two-thirds of a hectare), are diversifying their production, very profitably. They take as much as half of their land out of paddy production, being able to produce a surplus of paddy for their family on just about one acre, and they construct a fish pond on the reclaimed paddy land, and plant vegetables, beans, fruit trees, start chicken raising, etc. The average investment cost for converting their farms is about $300.

One farmer, whom I have visited twice and who has a super-diversified farming system on his farm of less than half a hectare (1.20 acres), has been able to increase his net household income by five times, and he now pays two of his five children a salary better than what they would earn in the capital city, to maintain this highly productive system. A manual on this diversification strategy is available at: http://ciifad.cornell.edu/sri/countries/cambodia/cambSidMPREng.pdf Because much of Cambodia has better rainfall and humidity than many areas of India, I cannot say how widely this same strategy could be utilized for smallholders in India. But PRADAN has already started moving in this direction in Eastern India with its '5% solution' of water harvesting through pond construction that supports more secure and diversified farming.

Barah: *What is the quality of SRI work in India?*

Uphoff: Most of the SRI fields that my wife Marguerite and I visited in Tamil Nadu in December 2008 during the 3rd National SRI Symposium hosted by TNAU in Coimbatore were disappointing, some even dismal. Many farmers and extension personnel—with a few exceptions, I should add, not to disparage all the people involved—had mostly done routine demonstrations, going through the motions, getting paid for doing the minimum specified work, without understanding the principles and without the commitment to making them work, with appropriate adaptations for local conditions.

There have been some benefits for farmers just from their reducing the water applications; from having fewer plants per hill, if not just one; from using younger seedlings, if not 10–12 days old; from applying more compost, using mostly chemical fertilizer if compost was inconvenient; and from doing some soil-aerating weeding, even if not a lot. But what is called 'SRI' by many there was what I would predict from a top-down extension effort. This

was different from the more participatory approach usually followed (but not always) by NGOs. It would be hard to say 'how many' farmers are using SRI methods when the methods themselves appear not well understood and not well used. This can come playing by 'the numbers game', concerned more with quantity than quality. It also shows how robust SRI principles are that they can succeed by half and need not be fully utilized to make some improvements in production. Yet, it was disappointing to see mostly mechanistic, not informed or intelligent, use of the alternative methods.

That the efforts of Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (BRLPS) in Bihar is going to be reasonably exemplary for SRI dissemination in India because the state's rural development department has a good philosophy and a good approach, with good leadership.

I understand that the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu has offered a prize of 5 lakh rupees for the best SRI yield in 2012, maybe hoping to match or surpass the record yield in Bihar last year. This could be a tremendously effective way to spread the better use of SRI methods. If farmers, hoping to win the prize, will fully inform themselves about SRI principles and practices, and try to utilize these 'to the max', considering the high prize at stake, I expect that there will be thousands of excellent 'demonstration plots' scattered all over Tamil Nadu. Now that farmers know the basic ideas of SRI, they will be able to see, on their ambitious neighbours' fields, how proper use of the methods can pay off. There would be 'non-formal extension' of great effectiveness and impact, at relatively low cost. A prior investment in making SRI known across the state would be necessary for this 'ratcheting up' of SRI practice. Just offering the prize will not substitute for a widespread extension and publicity effort. I am looking forward, however, to seeing the results of this Tamil Nadu experiment in 'extensive extension', in contrast to intensive extension efforts.

I think that the efforts of Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (BRLPS) in Bihar is going to be reasonably exemplary for SRI dissemination in India because the state's rural development department has a good philosophy and a good approach, with good leadership. It is working with some first-rate NGOs such as PRADAN and Action for Social Advancement (ASA). How I wish that India could clone field workers such as Anil Verma, the PRADAN team leader in Gaya district! I would entrust an SRI programme to him anywhere in India, and I would expect it to take root and flourish.

I should add that I was very impressed with the way that Subir Ghosh has steered the NABARD programme in Jharkhand. He is a resource about to become underutilized because he will retire from NABARD at the end of March. Elsewhere, in India, there have been many very effective efforts by NGOs such as People's Science Institute in Uttarakhand and HP; Sambhava and PRAGATI in Orissa; AME in Karnataka and neighbouring states; PRASARI in West Bengal, working in the Sundarbans; and surely many others that I do not know about. However, there have also been some exemplary government efforts, such as those led by Dr. Baharul Majumdar in Tripura and by Dr. Amrik Singh, deputy director of ATMA, in Gurdaspur district, Punjab.

Barah: *How should we map and assess the numbers and places of farmers adapting and 'using' SRI?*

Uphoff: Rather than focus on total numbers, I would look for the three or four best examples of SRI extension/dissemination/impact in India, and focus on them—what they are

doing, or have done; how they work, with what costs, and what benefits that can be documented and clearly attributed to SRI interventions. I would present them as 'role models' for other states, not to be 'carbon-copied,' but to serve as a source of ideas and inspiration for others.

Over the last ten years, there has grown, in a fully decentralized, rather non-standardized way, a body of knowledge and diversified practice that has nevertheless begun having an impact, for the better, on farmers' lives and on the environment.

India is a huge and diverse place. Serious efforts, highly scattered and mostly under-funded, have been made only in the last three to four years that disseminate knowledge and skills for SRI. This cannot be compared in any way with the financial and institutional support that the Green Revolution got 50 years ago. I would not look yet for significant aggregate impacts, except in places like Bihar where the impact of SRI should be evident by this 2012 season, similar to what is happening in Vietnam now, or in the Sichuan and Zhejiang provinces of China. It is better to look for effects in smaller domains, at the state or even district levels.

Barah: *Skeptics/Critics have, first, resisted the evaluation of SRI, writing in 2004 that SRI should not even be evaluated, that this would be a waste of resources. They have objected to its extension, wanting to minimize SRI by saying that there has not been enough evidence of aggregate spread and impact. How do you respond to this?*

Uphoff: This is a Catch-22 situation. Government and donor agencies were first discouraged from evaluating SRI, and then there was objection to spreading SRI knowledge because it had not been evaluated. There were no funds available for the kind of systematic evaluation that we wanted to conduct, so we proceeded as best we could with NGOs, universities, sometimes the private sector and, in some places such as Vietnam, government actors. Over the last ten years, there has grown, in a fully decentralized, rather non-standardized way, a body of knowledge and diversified practice that has nevertheless begun having an impact, for the better, on farmers' lives and on the environment. How much impact? Nobody knows. There have not been resources available for any proper collection of data. But the results are positive 9 times out of 10 and sometimes remarkably positive.

Rather than be overly concerned at this stage with aggregate numbers, my preference has been to work with 'strong points' when and where they emerge, emphasizing quality, critical assessment at local levels, and as much learning and further adaptation and innovation as possible. This is a qualitative approach more than a quantitative one, trying to build from strength to strength, seeking to develop a solid cadre of agricultural specialists, researchers, administrators and most of all, farmers and NGO workers who understand SRI, its methods, its agronomic theory, its philosophy, its farmer-centredness, and who can proceed because they have come to believe, based on observations and results, in the merits and potential of SRI.

If I may speak personally, we need more scientists, who are willing to spend time in the field and who are open to farmer experiences and interests, rather than sticking to their laboratories and bureaucratic territory, trying to satisfy superiors more than to serve the farmers.

Barah: *How would you assess your efforts of advancing SRI in India? Tell us about your journey vis-á-vis SRI from the outset.*

PRADAN's involvement grew, based on its good results across eastern Indian states.

Uphoff: What have I done to advance SRI in India? It occurs to me that I should describe my role principally as that of a 'recruiter'. I have assumed that once good, motivated people are in place, are well informed and are working co-operatively with one another, they can begin to 'move mountains'. I am mindful of Margaret Mead's admonition: "Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world; indeed, that is the only thing that ever has." The SRI-community in India started some time back, in 1998, when Rita Sharma (current member secretary, National Advisory Council; ex-Secretary, Rural Development, and ex-Additional Secretary, Agriculture, Government of India) visited Washington, DC. We met at the World Bank, and as I had been one of her academic advisors during her PhD studies at Cornell University, we were well acquainted. I told her what I knew at that time about SRI and its opportunities, and then when I visited Delhi in September 2000, she organized a seminar on SRI at Krishi Bhawan, the first in India. There was mostly disbelief about what I reported, I recall, even though Rita vouched for my veracity as her former teacher and long-time friend.

Then we added Dr. T. M. Thiyagarajan (TMT), who at the time was a TNAU faculty member and Director of its Soil and Crop Management Studies Center. He had been informed about SRI by Wageningen University when it started a Dutch government-funded project on water-saving rice production. I was an unpaid advisor for this project. TMT started trials in 2000–01, and we met first in China, not India, at a Wageningen workshop held at Nanjing Agricultural University in April 2001. We bonded immediately, and he has been a great stalwart ever since.

I started lobbying PRADAN on SRI, knowing that it is an excellent NGO. My acquaintance with Deep Joshi dates back to the mid-80s and I knew that PRADAN was probably the NGO best positioned to get things going 'at the grass roots'. Its Programme Director, Nivedita Narain, had done a Master's degree in International Development with me at Cornell, so I could approach her first. Then my wife and I talked with Dinabandhu, from PRADAN's team in Purulia district when we were in Delhi in November 2002. Marguerite and I both still remember that meeting at Claridges' Hotel. Bhuban, you got involved with SRI from early on, maybe through Dr. Rita Sharma, also being a former student of mine at Cornell. Dr. Shambu Prasad was an important early recruit to the SRI 'team'. He became interested in SRI when he was at ICRISAT, being involved with a 'history of science' project. He had decided to examine SRI as a contemporary case of science/technology innovation—and he became thoroughly 'infected' by SRI, even getting 'a raging fever' from this very benign and beneficial 'virus'!

PRADAN's involvement grew, based on its good results across eastern Indian states. By good fortune, Alapati Satyanarayana emerged as a champion for SRI in Andhra Pradesh. How he got 'infected' by SRI is a long and wonderful, even entertaining story; but I will not go into it here. Somehow, the NGO Watershed Activities Network and Supported Activities (WASSAN) and its director, Mr. A. Ravindra, got involved as well in 2003 and various people at ANGRAU and NGOs in Andhra Pradesh joined in. Another former student of mine, Dr. Ramasamy Dwarakinath, who had done a PhD in extension education at Cornell in the mid-70s, and who subsequently became Director of Agriculture in Karnataka and then Vice Chancellor of the University of Agricultural Sciences in Bangalore, practically had to begin working with SRI through his

NGO (Agriculture-Man-Ecology Foundation, AMEF) because I was his guru, and he had to take SRI seriously when I asked him to get involved! How did a wonderful colleague like Dr. Amrik Singh get involved with demonstrating SRI in the Punjab? I am not sure; something attracted him to SRI, perhaps the urgency of reducing water requirements for rice production because the Punjab water tables are falling. He became one of our most courageous SRI colleagues, working on behalf of SRI in the mostly-hostile territory of the Punjab. How did we get Anuradha Saha and her husband Vijay Bharti involved in Jammu? I do not know. Many people have come into SRI community, all by their own ways.

How Dr. Biksham Gujja, then a senior advisor for the WWF, working concurrently in Switzerland and Hyderabad, got involved in SRI is a special story, quite wonderful. He learned about it while visiting his home village and seeing an old farmer whom he knew well from his childhood proudly using the new methods. Without his courage and the financial support that he could mobilize from WWF, SRI would have moved much more slowly in India. He and Satyanarayana did a great job in getting ANGRAU, DRR and ICRISAT into a joint research project to evaluate SRI. This got Dr. O.P. Rupela involved with SRI. As a soil biologist, he had a natural affinity for this work. I do not know how Dr. Mahender Kumar at DRR became an early ally, the only ICAR scientist with enough boldness to join in the SRI effort, for which I am deeply grateful. Having three strong research institutions like ANGRAU, DRR and ICRISAT work together on SRI was a great step forward. Then getting Amod Thakur to join the SRI fold, based on his own, completely independent evaluations at the Water Management Centre in Bhubaneswar, is another wonderful story. His personal courage matches his scientific capability, both marvelous.

And I remember how Debashish Sen and Ravi Chopra from People's Science Institute came into the SRI community subsequently and effectively. I was in Delhi on a personal visit, to attend a wedding, and spoke on SRI at the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), thanks to some help from Himanshu Thakkur, who had 'signed on' for the SRI campaign, given his interest in water saving. And so it goes. The innovations and efforts in the Himalayan region for SRI, then SWI, and SMI, and SBGI, etc., were a great advance for agro-ecological methods in India.

These are stream-of-consciousness reflections as I try to reconstruct in my mind how SRI was introduced and established in India. How Baharul Majumdar got involved is a separate and wonderful story. And how Biswanath Sinha was able to mobilize SRI funding from the Sri Dorabji Tata Trust (SDTT) is another hugely important 'chapter' in the SRI story in India. Gopalakrishnan, a former student of mine and Joint Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office, was also very helpful at a few junctures, playing a small but very useful role. The SRI story in India could be the stuff of several novel-like volumes, and it would all be true!

I have kept a log of the presentations that I have made in various countries since I got started on the SRI 'circuit' in 1997, with a presentation made to the Indonesian rice research establishment, arranged by Dr. Achmed Fagi, a former director of Indonesia's equivalent of DRR-Hyderabad. So far, I have made presentations on SRI in 40 countries, sharing what I and the others know about it as broadly as possible. But my pace is slowing down. Others, as hoped, are taking up the task and expanding the scope of our efforts. To some extent, my efforts have shifted to trying to get the SRI knowledge and experience into print, so that it is more widely accessible. Happily,

there are now many publications that are listed on the SRI website that have contributed to SRI literature (over 250) from all over the world. Our SRI-Rice staff have just posted a listing of 84 Chinese scientific publications on SRI, most in Chinese (unfortunately for us), which shows how the ideas and issues of this technique have been taken up in that country.

Barah: *How is SRI progressing in India in your opinion? What do you see as the road ahead?*

Uphoff: I think SRI is proceeding quite well now, based mainly, although not yet inexorably, upon its demonstrated productivity and other benefits. This momentum is due, in large part, to the multi-faceted progression of SRI in many parts of India, which is due, in turn, to the efforts of the member of the National Consortium on SRI plus many other colleagues, who have been drawn into, and who have drawn sustenance from, our 'web' of ideas, ideals and friendship. This refers to the 'trinity' of factors conducive to social change that I came to know and value from my decade of involvement in Sri Lanka, introducing participatory irrigation management in the Gal Oya system. If I had not had that intense and mind-altering experience, unlearning much of what I had learned in my previous academic studies, I could not have comprehended the SRI opportunity as well and could not have worked as effectively with dozens, then hundreds and now thousands of colleagues around the world on this phenomenon.

In 2006, after visiting Haveri district in Karnataka and seeing how the farmers there, working with The Green Foundation led by Dr. Vanaja Ramprasad in Bangalore, were doing their own version of SRI with *ragi*—and after getting pictures from Binju Abraham, PRADAN staff member in Jharkhand, who worked with farmers to develop what was called 'SFMI' (System of Finger Millet Intensification), I began to think and hope that maybe SRI ideas would not only change the way in which the rice sector works but could also lead to major changes in the way that much of the agricultural sector operates—to a paradigm shift that would supersede the assumptions and doctrines of the Green Revolution, going from 'modern agriculture' to what I would call 'post-modern agriculture'.

This momentum is due, in large part, to the multi-faceted progression of SRI in many parts of India, which is due, in turn, to the efforts of the member of the National Consortium on SRI plus many other colleagues, who have been drawn into, and who have drawn sustenance from, our 'web' of ideas, ideals and friendship.

Shambu Prasad coaxed me to speak about this idea a workshop at the Centre for World Solidarity (CWS) in Hyderabad. And I elaborated on these ideas for a Hugh Bunting Memorial Lecture at the University of Reading in June 2007. Since then, I have gotten more and more confidence in these formulations.

Events just keep moving along, and the evidence that we can, and should, make major changes in our paradigm for agriculture, 're-biologizing agriculture,' to speak broadly, is becoming stronger. I trust that these changes will be of broad benefit to the world's farmers, consumers and the environment. You and Rita, who both know me as a teacher at Cornell, are used to my being so bold, and Shambu shares my penchant for grand formulations. So, I trust that you are not scandalized by such ambitious thoughts. These answers are perhaps not the kind that you were expecting, but I have just shared my thoughts.

Barah: *Thank you, Prof. Norman Uphoff.*

Norman T. Uphoff is Professor, Government and International Agriculture, at Cornell University in the USA, and a former Director of the Cornell International Institute for Food, Agriculture and Development (CIIFAD). Currently, he is also Director of the Cornell Institute for Public Affairs (CIPA), which manages Cornell's MPA program. He has worked for decades in Africa and all parts of Asia on participatory development, and particularly on improving irrigation and other natural resource management. He has been the most visible ambassador for SRI for the past 15 years at a global level. He has visited India on the SRI mission on many occasions since 2000 and has interacted with a large number of farmers, practitioners, researchers and policy managers.

Dr. B. C. Barah is NABARD Chair Professor, Indian Agricultural Research Institute, New Delhi.

Bastar—At the Crossroads

PRADYUT BHATTACHARJEE

Intervening in any community with the intention of helping tribals is a delicate, sensitive and continuous process of preserving life-enriching traditional practices while introducing 'modern' development activities

Baldev Mandavi, a quintessential *Koya,* is a happy young man today. After all, he is returning to Pandupara to attend the *pendul* (marriage) of his beloved friend, Mahadev. He has been toiling hard in the stone quarries of Tirupati for three long months. These months have been difficult for him—away from home, away from his folks, cut off from his roots. His dreams of making it big, a quest for good things in life—a bike, a mobile, a stable income— by starting a business had proven to be an El Dorado. He was duped of his savings; three acres of his lowlands had to be mortgaged; and migration for six months a year to the stone quarries in Andhra Pradesh was the only way to pay off his debts.

One comes across many such Baldevs in Bastar where, for tribals, the notion of development is synonymous with a 'modern' lifestyle and material wealth. After spending the last three-and-a-half years working in the Darbha block of Bastar and many interactions and conversations with the people, I find that Bastar seems to be at the crossroads today, with tribal communities trying hard to preserve their identity and, at the same time, keeping pace with the changes taking place around them. It is a continuous struggle and a lot is at stake.

Ever since the colonial times, Bastar, with its bounty of forest resources (timber, non-timber forest produce), mineral wealth and cheap labour has been seen as a source of revenue. Nandini Sunder in her book, *Subalterns and Sovereigns,* An Anthiopological History of Bastar (2006) says,"In a place like Bastar, there are further continuities between the colonial and the post-colonial regimes in that the individuals who are doing the 'developing' continue to see themselves as more 'advanced' than the natives being 'developed', and have retained the language of a civilizing mission." This idea of development also emanates from a feeling of superiority of the state representatives/outsiders over the natives and a sense of self imposed responsibility of bringing the natives into the mainstream.

Bastar seems to be at the crossroads today, with tribal communities trying hard to preserve their identity and, at the same time, keeping pace with the changes taking place around them.

The often-used stereotypes such as 'the Adivasis are always drunk; 'they have no sense of responsibility; 'they have no thoughts for the future; and 'assimilating with the civilized world is the only way out for them', dent the self image of the indigenous communities. This attitude of superiority influences and coerces the tribal people to adopt urban ways. The influence of right wing groups has accelerated the process of abandoning their traditional beliefs—not because these are irrelevant for them but because these are made to seem 'primitive' or not 'modern'. Eating beef or pork, which was so much an integral part of their culinary tradition, is now seen as taboo. Cherchera, the Dhurwa dance, is rarely practised because the youth is more interested in the Ramayan Mandali, etc. The celebration of Ganesh puja, Diwali, etc., have taken centre stage and festivals related to nature and agriculture such as Diyari, Bija Pandung, and Amoosh are slowly but steadily losing their significance. The night-long community feasting on *mahua/landa* in *sal donas* and the *endanat* dance and *pata pari* have been replaced with video shows. The playing of pipes by the Maharaa community in marriages is a rarity nowadays, giving way to band parties. Even the *Mandais*, the annual congregation of the village *debis/debs* (local deities), now have an external influence in the form of sponsorship, organized gambling, etc.

Forced migration to places such as Raipur, Hyderabad, Nizamabad and Bangalore due to the unavailability of year-round livelihoods, has also resulted in exposure to new lifestyles that subsequently influence the milieu back home. Many young men from the villages in Darbha such as Chindbahar, Lendra and Kamanar find it difficult to practice cultivation after a stint or two in the saw mills of Andhra. It would be extreme to say that the youth of Bastar are alienated from their lands and their primary occupation, but a degree of ennui has set in, mainly because of the non-remunerative agriculture and the availability of various other market-driven livelihood opportunities.

The government's education policy of using Hindi as a medium of instruction has also resulted in some sort of a cultural alienation of the people from their roots. The teachers, or *gurujis*, as they are called are mostly from outside Bastar, with no knowledge of Halbi, Dhurwa or Koya-matha. They teach the students in Hindi and eulogize the need for fluency in Hindi as the language understood by the outside world and professionally rewarding. In the process, tribal dialects and languages are looked down upon. Dhurwa is now an endangered language. Very few children of Chitapur, Gudra, or Dodrepal now converse in Dhurwa. I haven't come across a single Muriya person who knows his language. Increasingly, the children are being given Hindu names and using traditional names such as Mase, Kumma and Somaru (which were names they could relate to), is seen as anachronistic. Cultural identity—and language as a clear proxy for that—assumes great importance when a culture is perceived as subordinate. Koya people are typecast by outsiders—the Dhakars (who are mostly migrants from UP and control the economy of the villages) and the government officials (mostly from the Chhatisgarh plains, Andhra Pradesh or Maharashtra origin)—as bereft of intelligence and typified by their ferocity.

The dependence on *Sirha, Gunia* and *Veddes*, the traditional faith healers has waned, particularly in places near Jagdalpur or other block towns. They are slowly being replaced by the modern health care system, however basic and bureaucratic it may be. In the process, however, the traditional knowledge of medicinal herbs and plants is being lost, rather than enriched. Traditional knowledge and the cultural fabric of society are not seen as a resource but as regressive and archaic.

Over the last decade or so, in the name of scientific agriculture, there has been unbridled use of hybrid seeds (medicines, and fertilizer have followed suit), particularly of maize and these are threatening the fragile biodiversity of Bastar.

The traditional knowledge of the Bastar tribes regarding the forests, the cosmos, the health practices, agriculture, food preservation, water conservation and agricultural practices have all slowly been eroded. There's no denying the fact that not all tribal/traditional knowledge is rational or scientific and sometimes needs to be challenged. But the colonial attitude of superiority of the urban culture and the clamour for adopting a modern lifestyle has led to blind aping rather than conscious and participatory decision-making.

Over the last decade or so, in the name of scientific agriculture, there has been unbridled use of hybrid seeds (medicines and fertilizer have followed suit), particularly of maize and these are threatening the fragile biodiversity of Bastar. Traditional crops such as millets, pulses, paddy, oilseeds and their varieties (particularly, of paddy) are portrayed as unproductive and economically unviable. There has possibly been no systematic work in Bastar to promote crops such as mandiya, kodo and kutki. However, everyone talks about how Bastar's identity is linked with these. Even if these are promoted, paradoxically, it would be to cater to the urban masses rather than for the indigenous people.

Development practitioners, like me, have for long argued, "By first improving livelihoods, health and education levels, other intangibles will follow." For the large tribal population, which has chronically been food and nutrition insecure, talk about preserving biodiversity, traditional crops, traditional knowledge and culture may sound patronizing and hypocritical. However, at the rate tribal knowledge, culture and languages are fading, it will it be too late to let these wait for development of livelihoods, health and education.

My dilemma is: Who decides what development means for the tribals living in the villages of Darbha? Why should the state, the financial power centres or the development practitioners decide on their behalf what is good for them? Aren't we also donning the role of self-styled emancipators? At the same time, I cannot think of the tribals as some museum artifacts clinging on to the last vestiges of redundant rituals and beliefs. Neither am I proposing that tribal people should be insulated from the market forces that would hamper their growth. But I am not sure how the processes of assimilation, transformation and metamorphosis can be made fair and participatory. The debate of tradition versus modernity has to be deliberated by the tribals and not by us 'outsiders' and the choice of adopting 'modern' practices as well as propagating traditional knowledge and culture has to be with the people of the region themselves. Change is inevitable. How then can I help my communities to be the prime actor in the process of change?

FEMININE FORCE: Rural Champions of Change

PAMELA PHILIPOSE

Experiencing the power of togetherness and community, close to 5,600 women from 129 villages in the Lamta and Paraswada blocks of Balaghat district, displayed their confidence, organizing ability and enthusiasm at the annual meet of the Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh by taking decisions and making choices about their livelihoods and their families

They flowed like a river down the road. Women holding banners marched in line as far as the eye could see. The morning air reverberated with a slogan that had first been heard in Mumbai's streets in the 1980s: *"Hum Bharat ke nari hain. Phool nahi, chingari hain!* (We are women of India. Not flowers, but flames)."

They poured into a tented venue, pitched on fallow rice fields just outside the village of Lamta in Madhya Pradesh's Balaghat district, which lies on the border that the state shares with Maharashtra. The bags they carried and the babies sleeping on some of their shoulders indicated that they had come a long way. "*Awaaz do, hum ek hai* (Raise your voices, we are one)," shouted somebody. "We are one, we are one," the marchers responded. They entered the tents to the sounds of drum beats while women standing on a decorated stage sang songs and smiled their welcome. Tired they may have been, but the energizing effect of being part of a crowd of over 5,000 women like themselves was unmistakable.

The Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh, to which they all belong, is creating quite a stir in the forested hills of Balaghat.

The celebratory event was organized largely by the women themselves. Numbering 5,600, they are members of 437 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) from 129 villages in the Lamta and Paraswada blocks of Balaghat district. The event was like a general body meeting of the federation that they had formed and had named 'Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh' (Women's confederation of women power). Its annual audit was made public during the event. Although most members were extremely poor, together they had successfully opened 314 bank accounts in various villages in 2011–12, extended credit of around Rs 2.32 crores, redeemed loans worth Rs 1.84 crores and made savings of Rs 67.17 lakhs.

Balance sheets, however, are just a small part of this story. Certainly, when the SHGs were first formed, the emphasis was on buttressing personal income and exploring livelihood options. The journey since has, however, been a continuous process of learning. Recalls Sahana Mishra of PRADAN, a civil society organization, that began working to form SHGs from January 2008, under the government's Tejeswani project, "It was a struggle to form SHGs because these villages are located in semi-isolated areas and the populations are mixed, comprising tribals—the Gonds make up a large chunk; others, like the Baigas, are classified as 'primitive'—as well as people belonging to Other Backward Classes (OBCs)."

Thus, the otherwise faceless, powerless women, who call themselves didis, or sisters, built up their collective strength, which they then leveraged.

During PRADAN's early interactions, personal experiences were shared. "Domestic violence emerged as a huge problem. Women were beaten if the food was not cooked right, if they left home without permission, if they were 'disrespectful'," remarks Mishra. Abandonment was common; she adds, "Dowry, never a tribal practice, has become normal, usual, and routine."

Dr Vasu Chhatriy, Block Medical Officer, Lamta, agrees with this assessment, "Alcoholism is rampant here. Attitudes to daughters are distressing—the idea is to marry off the girl as soon as possible so that parental responsibilities end."

In order to address these issues, PRADAN began an intervention in early 2011, in partnership with the Delhi-based women's resource centre—Jagori, with support from the UN Women. It aimed at getting women to speak out against violence; understand and assert their rights; and access political and economic opportunities meant for them under various government policies and programmes. "As a result of the training programmes, we got women to speak up. Whereas there are instances of men preventing them from attending such meetings, what's interesting is that sometimes the men realized that the women needed to come out more," reveals Mishra.

The process of expansion has been an organic one. As women in SHGs, they realized they had to go beyond personal needs if only to secure their entitlements. So in 2010, they set up village development committees (VDCs). Later, five or six of these committees came together as a cluster. At present, there are 21 such clusters—these form the base of the Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh and the women members work separately in Lamta and Paraswada blocks.

Thus, the otherwise faceless, powerless women, who call themselves *didis*, or sisters, built up their collective strength, which they then leveraged. Last November, for instance, 220 *didis* from various clusters met to discuss the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) threadbare, after which many *gram samitis* were able to pressurize the authorities into giving 10 to 25 days of work to women in their villages. Similarly, since alcohol-fuelled domestic violence was ubiquitous, women in villages such as Bhamodi, Aamoli and Kochovada were able to successfully stop the brewing and sale of liquor in their neighbourhoods. Their slogan: "*Sharab nahi, pani chahiye/thekka nahi, kuan chahiye* (We need not liquor but water/not pubs but wells)."

Agriculture continues to be the biggest source of employment and because many men have migrated, farming responsibilities increasingly

fall on women. They now actively seek information on better cultivation methods, including the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), a technique for paddy cultivation, and organic ways to grow vegetables that can be sold in the market. The *didis* seem to have realized that innovation is the key to change and have even set up a theatre group to write skits based on personal experiences. These efforts were showcased during the annual day event and reflected a sophisticated understanding of issues. Plays were developed by women who had, just a short while ago, silently borne reversals and discriminations.

There is something significant happening here and local politicians, always sensitive to new forces, are already trying to get these strong *didis* on their side. At the annual day, representatives from both, the Bhartiya Janata Party, the ruling party in Madhya Pradesh, and the Congress, which rules at the Centre, turned up and spoke the language of 'women's empowerment'.

It has been just four years since the first SHGs were set up; today there are stirrings in the forested hills of Balaghat. Will they touch lives beyond the SHGs and villages? Difficult to say, but one thing is certain: life will never be the same again for these women.

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A Group is Born—The First Meeting

ARUNDHATI

Twenty women, twenty lives and twenty stories—together they begin the journey of transforming their own lives and building new stories and dimensions for themselves

My first visit to Dokrichua was on a crisp monsoon day a few months ago. The sky was dark with clouds and yet the sun's golden rays were shining through, flirting lazily with a playful and gentle drizzle. Dokrichua is a small, neatly organized hamlet, with about 50 houses, made of flat slabs of stone, neatly packed with mud and smeared with red earth.

That day the hamlet wore a deserted look. The woven bamboo doors of the houses seemed to tell me, "They left for the *khet* side, with four *jangaams* (the indigenous bottles made of dried bottle gourds) of *pej* (rice porridge). They will return in the evening."

Dokrichua was different from the other hamlets I had visited so far. The land in other hamlets in Bastar is lush green, with two-feet-high maize crops. In Dokrichua, there was very little maize. Instead, paddy crop was favoured by the people. Was it because of smaller landholdings? Or was it because of greater food insecurity? Or was it just different food habits? With all these questions and thoughts in my mind, I rode away from the village, planning to re-visit at a later time.

I next visited Dokrichua seven months later. The people of the village had heard about and were acquainted with the concept of women's Self Help Groups (SHGs). They were eager to form their own group, and I was going to help them do so.

"Come closer, *didis*, let's sit in a circle!" I said, my hands demonstrating a circle. A couple of them blushed and looked at each other. One of them was trying to look serious but seemed to be trying hard to suppress her giggles. "*Egga vaa da* (Come here)," said Maahse *didi, "Gorla ne uddakim* (sit in a circle)." The women, sitting on their haunches across the courtyard, moved slightly. They shifted their body weight to their feet and duck-walked their way into the circle. A cash box, a lock and key, a cash-book and passbooks had been placed in the centre of the circle that they formed.

"How long you are taking! Come fast, come fast!" Maahse *didi* scolded a woman who came in late. The women immediately made space for the newcomer to sit. "I had gone to get the coconut! That is why I took time to come!" she responded. She kept the coconut at the centre of the circle, with the books and box. Another woman took out a printed polythene cover from under her saree *palla* and kept it in the centre. The polythene had white fragrant flowers called hazari. She also had brought some *agarbattis* and a matchbox, which she placed with the coconut and the flowers. Her eyes crinkled and her cheeks filled out as she smiled happily and re-joined the circle.

"My name is Arundathi," I introduced myself, "and I work with an organization called PRADAN." I felt the curiosity in their eyes as they focussed on me. "PRADAN," whispered a couple of women in awe. "Arunbati," said another.

"Eh, *didi,* Arun Mati is it?" asked a woman from across the circle. "No, *didi*…Arun Dhati", I said and smiled. She repeated it after me. Arun...Dhati. She comes from a faraway land, with a name so different—her gaze and smile seemed to suggest. One woman said, "You visited the *samhoohs* at Mangalpur also, no *didi*? I have heard." I nodded and grinned. Then I asked, "What are your names? Will you introduce yourselves?"

There was a sudden and slight gush of energy in the group. Even the woman, who had earlier put on a serious face to hide her giggle, broke into a grin. 'Where should we start? Who will speak first?' seemed to be the buzz around the group. One of the women looked at everyone, with a mischievous sparkle in her eye, while another covered her mouth and smiled to herself. A couple of women pointed to each other and suggested that the other start. "My name is Maahse. I'm Somaru's mother," Maahse *didi* said, making a start. "Somaru is the person who will write and maintain accounts for us." A stern and authoritative woman, Maahse *didi* was the only one in the group who spoke Halbi, the language of Bastar, fluently. In a village that predominantly conversed in Koya-matha, a tribal language spoken by the Marias, Halbi was a language that was considered 'more learned' and maybe 'more civilized' too. Maahse *didi* was tall and broad shouldered. Both her children attended school and were well-versed in Hindi—which in a typical Koya village like Dokrichua was a rarity, a matter of pride. So far, it seemed that Maahse *didi* was the louder and more assertive one amongst the group.

There was a sudden and slight gush of energy in the group. Even the woman, who had earlier put on a serious face to hide her giggle, broke into a grin.

Boda, Sukri, Aite, Pando…seated successively after Maahse *didi*, the women introduced themselves. No prefix, no suffix. No daughter, son, parent or spouse accompanied their introduction. It was only their names.

Boda wore a fingertip-sized maroon *godmala (bindi)*. She was the one who had come in late, the one who had gone on a coconut-hunt. It seemed as if she had put in some extra effort to dress up for the occasion of the first *samhooh* meeting. Her hair was neatly combed and tied into a bun at the right side of her head. Her face looked freshly powdered and her saree was bright yellow and relatively new. Boda had bright eyes, determined and sharp. She seemed very observant, eager and keen. 'You may have come from the *shahar*, but we in Dokrichua are no less smart. We are pretty smart too,' her glance seemed to communicate to me.

The woman sitting beside Pando suddenly got up and joined the circle farther away. There was a quick discussion in Koya-matha that I couldn't grasp and the round of introductions continued. "But why did she go away and sit elsewhere in the circle?" I asked, curious. "Oh, that's because her name is Pando too, and she was sitting next to a woman whose name was also Pando. So she moved away to avoid repetition," explained Boda *didi* in a single, long breath.

After the round of introductions, Boda *didi* suggested that there be a *pooja* to inaugurate the beginning of the *samhooh* meeting. Many others nodded in approval. Palo *didi*, quickly got up, went out and brought in a wet, just washed rock—the size of a fist. They placed it next to their box and the books, the flowers and the *agarbattis*. This rock was to serve as God for the occasion.

By this time, a number of other women, men and children had gathered around the group, all very intrigued, wondering what the women were up to. Among the observers was a young girl of around 10. Her name was Savita. She wore a navy-blue tunic (the ones that are given annually to young school girls as a part of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) and carried her younger brother on her hip. Savita's mouth was slightly ajar as she keenly observed the group. She may have wondered what the books and box were for—maybe this was a school for the older women. Perhaps they are all going to learn to read and write!

Her younger brother, Nagesh, sat on her hip, his legs embracing her waist, his plump cheeks streaked with dried tears. His curly golden brown hair was dusty and had grains of sand in it. His nose was stuffy and blocked, so his mouth was also open like his sister's. At that moment, they both looked so alike. His big dark eyes were focussed on the group and the clean washed stone that Palo *didi* had just brought in.

But if they were in school, why were they not sitting in rows? Why were they sitting in a circle? Where is their building? Savita's mind may have been trying to find the answers. Maybe she thought I was a teacher. She noticed that I was watching her and gave me a wide and shy grin. I smiled back and she became very embarrassed and covered her face with her hand. Still shy, she turned and ran away to hide. Nagesh, unhappy with the sudden movement and the literal turn of events, broke out into a fresh bout of tears.

Meanwhile, amidst the group there was a buzz. Who was going to do the *pooja*? "Go call Somaru! He can do the *pooja* for us," Maahse *didi* told someone in the crowd. "*Didimann* (womenfolk), why don't you do the *pooja*? After all, it is your *samhooh*," I suggested. The idea seemed to appeal to the women. There were some raised eyebrows, some frowns and some excitement. "How can we do it? It is the *dadamann* (menfolk) who always do the *pooja*!" Maahse *didi* exclaimed. "*Arre*, so what? This is our *samhooh, na*? We're not sacrificing a pig or a chicken or a goat or anything! Just a simple *pooja* with coconut and some *aggarbattis*," said Aite *didi;* to which Boda *didi* and a couple of others nodded vigorously. "You tell us, *didi*, what should we do?" Maahse *didi* asked, feeling outnumbered and trying to seek support from the Madam who had come from outside. All the women looked at me, expectantly, waiting for me to solve this issue for them. "I don't know, *didi.* It would be best for the group to decide," I said, throwing the ball right back into their court.

"*Arre*, let us just do the *pooja, na*! And let us do it quickly and move ahead," the short and petite Sukri *didi* said. Her voice was sharp and sweet.

It was a girl's voice…coming out of a woman's mouth. She was probably just 19 or 20, but bore the responsibilities of an entire household on her lean shoulders. She had three children, a girl and two boys—the youngest of who had accompanied her to the meeting. The little fellow, who was peacefully suckling on her breast, suddenly awoke at his mother's assertive voice. Mouth still sucking at her nipple, he turned towards the group with some effort. Seemingly reprimanding the group for disturbing him, he gave one look around and turned right back to sleep in the comfort of her bosom.

I asked each of the women to take a passbook and come up and give it to Somaru when her name was called out so that he could make the entry of the transaction she had made with the group. I asked the women to declare the amount of money they were saving for the day loudly and place the money at the centre of the circle.

Aite *didi* came forward, took some of the white flowers from the printed plastic cover and put some on the rock-god, on the books and on the box. She washed the coconut with some water and with a smash across the floor, broke the coconut exactly into two. The coconut water was drained empty on the rock-god while she muttered some prayers under her breath. She sprinkled some coconut water on the books and the box as well. "Oye, Oye, Oye! Don't wet the books!" a few of the women cried out loud.

The rest of the group members, then went one-by one to the centre of the circle, to offer flowers to their newly obtained books and box. Pando *didi* lit the *agarbatti* beside the rock-god whereas Aite *didi* cut the coconut into smaller and almost equal pieces. "We'll distribute the *prashaad* and then start with the meeting. Okay, *didi*?" asked an enthused Aite *didi*, quite excited by the fact that she had done the inaugural *pooja* for her *samhooh*. Everyone paid their respects to the rock-god and returned to their positions in the circle. Aite *didi* and Pando *didi* distributed the *prashaad*. While Aite *didi* distributed the coconut pieces, Pando *didi* moved around the circle, fixing white flowers onto the ears of everyone seated. The remaining coconut pieces were given to the people, who were gathered around the group to observe. The group was now ready to start.

"*Didi,* last week we decided to name our *samhooh* Hazari Pungar!" said Sukri *didi*. "That is why these flowers were brought here today. In Koya-matha, we call this flower Hazari Pungar!" she explained. 'Hazari Pungar Mahila Swah Sahayata Samhooh' wrote Somaru wrote on the first page of the register. Following this, the names of the 20 women were written.

I explained the relevance and significance of the cash-book and the passbook to the group. I asked each of the women to take a passbook and come up and give it to Somaru when her name was called out so that he could make the entry of the transaction she had made with the group. I asked the women to declare the amount of money they were saving for the day loudly and place the money at the centre of the circle. Some women nodded; others just observed quietly.

"Budri!" Somaru called out. "*Bees*," Budri said, giving him her passbook and placing two ten rupee notes in the centre of the circle. "Sukri! *Bees*. Jhimo! *Bees*. Paiko! *Bees*."

Paike, a member of the group, looked around inquisitively as each woman's name was called out and the money was placed in the centre of the circle. She peered at me from across the circle. She seemed to be apprehensive

and maybe mistrusting. 'What if…?' seemed to be on her mind. When her name was called out, she was startled. She gave Somaru her passbook and said, "*Bees.*" Pando *didi* asked, *"Arre,* where's the money? Keep the money in the centre." Paike looked anxiously towards Pando. Pando *didi* understood her anxiety. "It's okay; we're all in this together!" she said, "Don't worry." Paike *didi* took out a 20-rupee note that she had safely tucked away in her blouse and kept it in the centre with the other notes. As the process of recording the savings progressed and just about when Somaru seemed to have got the hang of the cashbook and passbook entries, there was a disruption.

With everyone having deposited their savings, the meeting was drawing to an end. Entries were made in individual passbooks and recorded in the cash book as well.

"Ayyyyyyyyeee! What are you all doing here?" We heard a deep drunken voice from behind the compound. It was Budru, Bade *didi's* husband. Having consumed a little too much *mond* (liquor distilled from the Mahua fruit), he had set out to look for his wife and find some more money to drink. He came staggering over towards the courtyard and started swearing at the gathering."So much money!" he exclaimed. "Give me ten rupees. Please. Ten only," he said. Bade *didi* seemed embarrassed and angry at her husband's bad behaviour. She was a small-built woman, with strong arms. Arms that had become strong as a consequence of lifting so many heavy pots of water, carrying large bundles of firewood on her head and walking for miles and miles from the forest to her home. Bade *didi* had seemed timid and quiet in the meeting, smiling only when something was really funny and speaking only when absolutely required.

Seething with anger, yet outwardly calm, Bade *didi* got up and quickly walked towards Budru *dada*, away from the group. She held his hand and led him behind the compound. *"Aye,* mad woman! Give me ten rupees, I say!" He was yelling at her when there was a sudden THABB THABB THABB sound. I heard yelps of pain escape the drunken Budru *dada's* lips. "Now go home, I'll see you there," she said and returned to her group and sat down, waiting for the meeting to resume as though nothing had happened. The group continued with the meeting in a very matter-of-fact manner.

With everyone having deposited their savings, the meeting was drawing to an end. Entries were made in individual passbooks and recorded in the cash book as well. "Count how much money you have saved today, *didi*," I said. Maahse didi came forward to count the money. Her dark, clean and wrinkled hands, which had so much experience in collecting *harra* (a forest produce) and *mahua,* locating and pulling out weeds from their roots during the wet monsoons, making *sal* leaf *donas* (cups and plates) at tremendous speed, cooking a tasty fulfilling meal for 30 people at once—suddenly seemed so young and clumsy when counting money. She was finding it difficult to hold all the notes together, let alone count it. *"Le,* Somaru. You count it for us," she said holding out the notes to him. "*Na na, didi.* No *dada* or outsider will help you in counting your money. You have to do it yourself," I explained the norm of only the women of the group having the authority to touch and count their notes and money to them. "It is also an opportunity to learn…" I tried explaining to a frowning Maahse *didi.*

"Okay. Come, let's do it together," said Bode *didi.* Budri *didi* too came forward. Bode *didi*

took half of the notes from Maahse *didi's* hand and started counting it loudly. '*Ondu, Rend, Moond, Naalu…*' (One, two, three, four…) and every time she came across a 20, 50 or 100-rupee note, she would hand it over to Budri *didi*.

Twenty pairs of eyes were focussed on the counting. I could even observe some of the women lip-syncing with the counting… Each woman had saved Rs 20 that day. Some had given 20-rupee notes whereas others had given two notes of ten rupees. A couple of the women had given 50-rupee notes and one gave Rs 100. Each note was different from the others even if they were of the same denomination. Each note smelled different from the other, each had different stains, had passed different hands, travelled different places and had different stories to tell. Together, it came up to Rs 400 that day. Saved and counted together—one of the many things that marked the beginning of the journey of this group.

"Total 400?" exclaimed a thrilled Maahse *didi*. She had done it! With the help of her other two group members, she had successfully counted the savings of the day! "Yes, 400 is correct" replied Somaru. She had achieved it. The trio had achieved it. The group had achieved it.

The box was locked, the lock was tugged at and tested…it was given to Budri *didi*, the first person on the list of names; the key was given to Sukri. "Come again next week, *didi*?" Aite didi invited me. "I will," I said.

After a round of fond farewells, I kick-started my bike and started on the return journey. It was then that it dawned on me: Twenty women from Dokrichua—20 women, with 20 different lives and 20 different stories—had formed a group today. A group through which each of their lives would be transformed and through which they would build new stories and dimensions for themselves. A group was formed…and the story of the group would be built by each of the women who had been a part of it. That day was the first meeting of the group…

A Day in Darbha

SHAILENDER SINGH

Travelling from village to village in one day, enjoying the sunshine and the rain, mingling with the village folk, and sharing their joys and sorrows brings many questions about their lives to the surface

It was a beautiful morning as I made my way to Kamanar village through splendid roads winding through fabulous trees bearing attractive red flowers. The rising sun and the early morning breeze energized me and I wanted my ride to last forever. Before I knew it, I had reached my destination and I wondered whether I had reached early because of the speed of my bike or because of the overwhelmingly beautiful panorama that had put me into a trance.

Still deep in thought, I heard Sumani *didi* greeting me, "*Johar, dada*." I responded saying, "*Johar, didi*." She invited me to her house where everyone had assembled to celebrate Diyari (a post-harvest festival). I parked my bike and followed her to her home, which had a thatched roof. As I entered, I saw Gangadei, Boda, Dasmati, Gagri, Rambati, Jayati, Lakhman, Guneswar and others, drinking *landa* (rice beer). I was greeted enthusiastically by everyone.

Sumani *didi* brought a *doni* (sal leaf bowl) to serve *landa* for me; I was hesitant at first to accept the drink but because she insisted with so much love and affection I have it, I decided not to resist.

After some time, Boda *didi* said apprehensively, "The government is planning to set up a CRPF camp in our village and we are not happy about it." Everybody nodded in affirmation. I tried to understand what their reservations were and why they did not want the security forces in their village. Rambati explained, "When a camp was set up in Dornapal earlier, there were many incidents of women being raped, molested and looted, and we fear that these things may possibly occur here as well." Jayati said, "If it were to happen, there is nothing we would be able to do. They have guns and can even kill us; going out in the early morning or late at night will become difficult for us." The villagers' concern made me fearful of what would happen if what they said were to come true.

I thought about the other women I knew—Fhulo and Chani from Dhurwaras village, who had lost six and eight children, respectively, within a few days of delivery. It is shocking how high the infant mortality rate is.

In April 2010, 76 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel were killed by the PLGA (People Liberated Guerrilla Army) in Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh. The government had launched its operation 'Green Hunt' then. Subsequently, the CRPF, the Indian Tibet Border Force (ITBP), the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (COBRA) were asked to set up camps in the southern part of Chhattisgarh, to eliminate extremist groups. According to statistics, every time such camps have been set up, there has been some civil unrest and the villagers have suffered because of the conflict.

Mayaram, the *sarpanch's* husband from Kamanar *panchayat*, joined us and was happy to see me drinking *landa*. He said, "*Payaka* (Outsiders) don't have our drinks; I am happy to see you drinking with us. You seem to be one of us." He too expressed his apprehensions about the forces. "I am not at all happy that the CRPF is setting up a camp here. We have already sent in a written request to the block *tahsildar,* the block officers (Chief Executive Officer), the police and the collector, but no one is listening to us. They say that the government has given us so much and now it is time to co-operate with it. Whoever protests will face the consequences. At the same time, we are also getting threats from the Naxal *dada log* (people). If we allow the government to set up camp on our land, we will have to face the consequences." The villagers were in a very difficult situation. Either way, they were being threatened.

A short while later, I remembered that I had SHG meetings to attend in Dilmili village. I rode there through the Kanger reserve forest area—a beautiful teak forest, butterflies in the air, monkeys screeching from the roadside and rain that had begun to fall. I had not expected the rain; therefore, I was not carrying a raincoat. With the drinks that I had, and the rain falling on my spectacles, it was difficult to see the road. All through the beautiful drive, my mind was on the discussion about the security forces. In the haze of the *landa*, the rain and the slippery muddy road and a preoccupied mind, I don't know how I fell. I got up, cleaned my muddy hands with rain water, found that I had some scratches that bled a little, but luckily I was not hurt much.

By the time I reached the Chepdapara hamlet, the rain had stopped and the afternoon sun was shining bright; my clothes were still drenched though. I reached the venue of the meeting but saw no one there. I checked in some of the houses nezarby but found no one. I saw Ayati *didi*, who told me that everyone was at Mase *didi's* home because her 12-day-old child had died in the morning.

I went to Mase *didi's* home and found her sitting in a circle with the other women of the village. They made place for me to sit with them in the circle. I asked Mase *didi* what had happened. Though I had spoken to her in halbi, a dialect of the Bastar region, she replied in koya-matha (a dialect of the Gond tribe), which I barely understood. Mahangi *didi* translated for me and explained that her son had not been drinking milk since the day he was born and had died this morning. When I asked them whether they had been to the hospital, their response was, "*Devi* (Goddess) would have become angry; so we took him to the *vedde* (local healer) instead."

During the conversation, I learned that this was the third child that she had lost. I did not know how to express my grief to her. I thought about the other women I knew—Fhulo and Chani from Dhurwaras village, who had lost six and eight children, respectively, within a few days of delivery. It is shocking how high the infant mortality rate is.

There is no labour work available in the village. I looked around at the dry and rocky land that did not have much soil depth to it. There wasn't even drinking water available close by, the nearest source being three kilometres away.

I left the Chepdapara hamlet and made my way to the Burkunkonta hamlet of Dilmili village, thinking that the women of Darbha look old for their age. This may be because of poor nutrition or because they get married too early. Their food comprises mostly rice, which gives them the starch to do their daily work but not much other nutrition. As a development professional, it may not be enough if I only cared about the livelihood aspects of their lives. There are various issues related to pre- and post-natal health that need to be addressed. There is need to focus on developing community understanding on the nutritional aspects of food and to link these with the agricultural choices the villagers make. The Foundation for Revitalizing Local Health Tradition (FRLHT) is working in this area; it may be a good idea to work on local health traditions. FRLHT is a Bangalore-based organization that has been validating various medicinal plant herbs and supporting the *vaidya* (local healer) through the health development organization. Building a local health system may yield better results than designing or building a system that the people are unable to relate to.

The road to the Burkunkonta hamlet was almost non-existent. Fortunately, I reached without mishap. I found the hamlet practically deserted and wondered where everyone was. Because I was late by about two hours, I thought the people must have left from the meeting place. I searched their houses and found most of them locked. I was about to give up when I met Hidama *dada.*

I asked him where everyone was and he explained that they had gone to Andhra Pradesh to work because there was no way to earn money in the village after the agricultural season is over. There is no labour work available in the village. I looked around at the dry and rocky land that did not have much soil depth to it. There wasn't even drinking water available close by, the nearest source being three kilometres away. I asked Hidama why he hadn't gone. He thought for a while and then explained, "I have been there before. The working conditions are very tough with 12-hour long work days. Working in quarries, saw mills and cement factories is not very good for health. I have seen some people dying. I decided to stay here and sell the tamarind fruit that I have and thus meet my daily needs."

I asked him whether he had heard of how in Dodrepal village they are working under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). MGNREGA is a government scheme whereby a family from the village panchayat can ask for a minimum hundred days of work and the *panchayat* has to provide it to them or it has to provide allowances instead. He said he was not sure what it was; he had heard that some women had applied for some planned work in the *gram sabha* and had got some projects sanctioned and the *panchayat* was implementing these and the SHGs were monitoring them. I then asked him whether he would be willing to

Women participating in an SHG meeting, taking decisions for themselves and working towards meeting there aspirations.

make a similar plan for his village. He said that he would be and we agreed to draw up plans as soon as the villagers were back.

I thought about how much there was to do with the villagers and if we could create awareness about MGNREGA, we could help stop this forced migration. This was only the beginning of my work here; my reach was low at present; hopefully, it would grow as time passed.

I reached Aayatu para of Dilmili village as the sun was setting behind the mountains. I stayed there for a while to enjoy the view. The Lal Pungar group had already assembled for the meeting when I entered the village. They sat in a circle and began the proceedings with a song in *koya-matha*. It was a touching song about the difficulties faced by an individual, and inviting the villagers to work in groups for mutual learning and achieving common goals. The song ended and everyone was blessed with a red *pungar* flower, to be put behind their ear.

I was given the cash book to record the cash transactions made during the evening meeting. The meeting began with marking the attendance, amidst much giggling and laughing because it was still a new process for them. The villagers knew how to count up to 20. So they counted their money and made bundles of 20; they often forgot or made mistakes, and had to begin all over again. Finally, they consolidated the cash and closed the box and gave the key to Balmati and the box to Sukari.

They then shared with me that they had started receiving the widow and old age pension for which they had submitted the form to the *gram sabha.* It was a dream come true, they said. They also, like the women of Dodrepal, wanted to plan their land development through MGNREGA and submit a proposal to the *gram sabha.* It would help them get daily work, which was not available in their village. I explained to them that if every family from the hamlet and even the nearby hamlets were to form a SHG, it would become easy for the

panchayat to process the application. They agreed to work on organizing themselves and form SHGs and make the plans for their hamlets. It was overwhelming to see the village women beginning to take decisions for themselves and work towards meeting their aspirations.

It was already dark by the time I left for Tokapal, our office and my room. In just one day, I had travelled across Darbha, and seen its beautiful landscape in its full glory from sunrise to sunset, through sunshine to rain. I had seen and heard and felt so much, it seemed much longer than just a day.

At the end of the day, my mind was seething with questions. What was democracy and whom did it favour? Where was the security from the extremists or even from the government security forces for the people, if the people were so afraid of both? What can we do to help infants survive? How could we stop the migration in search of work and help people find livelihoods in their own villages? I was physically exhausted but mentally charged up with all the possibilities of what I could contribute through my role in the development framework. My last thought at night was, 'I have so many roads to travel before I sleep.'

Form in the Tribals of Bastar—Contextualizing Our Understanding

NANDINI KOTTARAM

Several assumptions about the 'backwardness' of rural and tribal communities have to be discarded if engagement with these communities is to be meaningful and one that honours many of their traditions and customs; in the process of development and modernization, no community must lose its richness of culture, lifestyle and values

We were going to become post-graduates, with an MA in Social Work, in a few months and our campus recruitment and placement week was approaching. The Career Guidance and Placement Cell had circulated the schedule of the organizations that were coming for campus recruitment. It was a Sunday; we were lazily discussing our career prospects in the corridor of our hostel. We had different ideas about careers; there were some who were very clear about the organizations they wanted to join, a few who wanted to study further, some who wanted to work in a particular region ("I want to get placed wherever my boyfriend gets placed!") and some others who wanted good money! There were others, like me, who were not sure what they wanted. I had done some field work in the area of disability, palliative care, waste management, women's empowerment, health, adoption and community development. I was sure I didn't want to take up research or academics. I did not enjoy working in institutional settings either. It seemed my options were to work with the community, that is, community based work. The next questions were, "Where? Urban slums, rural areas or tribal areas?"

Our placement brochure hardly had four or five community based organizations. I was confused as to how to go about choosing. Meanwhile, something my room-mate Raisa had said gave me an idea. During her rural practicum assignment, a development professional had told her, "If each of you could keep aside a minimum of three years of your career life for rural India, you will be making a fair contribution." I looked for NGOs that worked in rural areas and found 'Search', 'Gadchiroli', 'Samaj Pragati Sahayog' and so on. PRADAN also happened to be one of the organizations I had shortlisted.

I took up a rural placement in PRADAN and was placed in Bastar, Chhattisgarh. I knew very little about Bastar. All I had heard from people was that it was 'the den of Maoists', it had a good mix of 'tribal heritage', 'it was known for its metal work', 'it was remote' and that 'there were many human rights issues associated with it'.

I reached Bastar. I did not see any of that, at least not at first. What I noticed was the bio-diversity, the flora, fauna and the beautiful landscapes, the isolated village hamlets and the innocent, enthusiastic villagers. Something about this community resembled my past. The women's traditional hairstyle and traditional necklace resembled the hairstyles and accessories of the *antarjanams* (Brahmin women) of Kerala. Such similarities helped me feel connected to this new place!

THE EXCHANGE OF SURPRISES

During the initial days of my apprenticeship period (which is known as the 'learning by doing' phase) in PRADAN, I lived with the communities of Bastar during my 'Village Stay' and 'Village Study'. The 'Village Stay' is an opportunity for PRADAN freshers to get a first-hand experience of rural living and 'Village Study' is an assignment in which the apprentice stays in a village and does a detailed study of it, with special focus on any one or two aspects. In my initial days of living with the community, we had many surprises for each other. They thought that the precautionary items I carried such as medicines, wet wipes, roll-on deodorant, Swiss knife and thermos flask were very fancy. They couldn't understand why I would carry medicines without being ill and why I would need something like a Swiss knife or a thermos flask; I found it difficult to explain why because I myself was unsure as to why I had carried all that!

I lived in Tulsi's house in Kotwarpara hamlet of Theeratgarh for the Village Stay. She had never heard of air conditioning; she couldn't believe that the temperature of a room could be modified with an electronic system. Neither could the villagers understand that people suffering from some diseases had to restrict their sugar and salt intake. These were very funny facts to the villagers. Once, Tulsi and her friend Gita asked me, "*Didi*, is it true that in the cities there are diseases that restrict one from eating sugar or salt?" I was amazed at their question.

There were surprises awaiting me too. I could relate to their life and lifestyle because of some of the childhood stories that I had heard. Much of my childhood was spent with my great grandparents and grand parents who would fondly narrate mythological and folk stories to me, especially that of Krishna. I was also trained in dance from a very early age—Krishna grazing cattle in the forest, a hunter using a bow and arrow, the *gopikas* carrying pots of water and so on were part of what I had learned in dance. But neither the stories nor the dances prepared me for how difficult and hard these activities were in real life. During my stay in the village, I saw all these being performed in actuality. For me, witnessing these was 'a fantasy being realized'.

My constant interaction with the people here led me to learn, unlearn and relearn many things in life. My experiences with them have made me critically reflect on the assumptions I held about rural and tribal communities. I have now started understanding things through direct interaction and experience; this helps me in developing perspectives about the community and myself, especially in the context of work. For instance, when conducting a livelihoods-based survey, Somaru *dada* told me that he had given four *poylis* (a measure of volume) of rice to five women for six days of work and that he purchased things from the bazaar in exchange for rice. I was totally confused by his measurements and wanted him to quantify these in terms of money. I thought, 'How ignorant is this man! He doesn't even know how to give details in a manner that can be understood!' I had him convert everything into financial terms so that I could finally appraise his economic status. Later, I realized that I was

the one who had a conceptual limitation. I could understand the value in economic terms only whereas Somaru could conceptualize the value in terms of money, food, labour, time, season or demand. He could convert his measures from one to the other and make sense of them, which I couldn't. Education trains us in a particular way and we fail to adapt to any other way, however logical or practical it may be. Similarly, I have wondered how a *sirha's* (traditional healer) spiritual performance leads to the physical well-being of the people and how such undernourished women are able to do such physically exerting work, which I am unable to do. Many a time, I have wondered how much science is being challenged by these villagers. I find my own perspective about things changing.

Today, I am able to understand and reason about the prevalence of child labour and child marriage. We insist on sending children to school, to ultimately prepare them for a life and career; similarly, in the community's context, they prefer to engage them in work because their nature of work requires early engagement and, of course, for various other socio-economic reasons. A girl who doesn't start practising to carry water pots by 10 years of age may not be able to able to perform efficiently as a home-maker. They need to get into marriage and family life at a very early age because the life-span of the people in this community is much less than ours in the urban areas. The elderly in these communities are people ranging from 50 to 60 years. If we take a look at the voter id card of the oldest looking people, we might be surprised to find that they are just 54 or 57!

My experiences here have taught me how important it is to contextualize my understanding. Many a time, we—the urban educated class—try to influence and change the rural and tribal people with the notion that we are the developed lot and we need to develop them to reach our standards. We seldom think that we have so much to learn from them. During our primary education, we learn concepts such food chains and the water cycle; despite that, we often break these links for our convenience. This essentially means that we are incapable of applying our learnings into practice. We insulate our land with concrete, insulate organic waste in plastics and end up living a highly expensive and fashionable organic life in an inorganic way! On the other hand, the rural and the tribal communities have no such concepts fed to them through classroom lessons; yet, they value and apply all these concepts in their lifestyles. The most striking of such features is their symbiotic relationship with nature, whether with plants, animals, land resources or water resources.

I do have some concerns about the community with which I am engaging. I am afraid that in the process of development and modernization, the community will lose its richness of culture, lifestyle and values. In our team meetings, we often have never-ending debates as to how organic/inorganic our interventions in the community are. I feel very good about the fact that such discussions happen in our team. However, who will monitor the dangerous influences on the community such as that of religious groups, which take them away from their root culture in the name of identity? How does the idea of development or modernization favour the tribals? My personal dilemma is: 'Will I have a role in all these? If so, what will it be? How long will it take me to work on it?' And finally, 'How long will I be able to perceive this role?'

My thoughts do not end here; neither do my concerns or dilemmas. I wish to continue my journey, coming up with newer learning, dilemmas, concerns and solutions, to keep my life and work more and more exciting!

I understood that we, Pradanites, need to engage differently with our colleagues, stakeholders and off course with our work to attain something meaningful, purposive and large, which will change lives of disadvantaged in a sustainable way and will continue to draw many more caring and capable souls to work towards this with a missionary zeal. We continue to draw bright minds in doing this path breaking work. Pradan today has the largest number of professionals outside the government set-up, working for development.

PRADAN

Pradan is a voluntary organization registered in Delhi under the Societies Registration Act. Pradan works through small teams of professionals in selected villages across eight states. The focus of Pradan's work is to promote and strengthen livelihoods for the rural poor. It involves organizing the poor, enhancing their capabilities, introducing ways to improve their income and linking them to banks, markets and other economic services. The professionals work directly with the poor, using their knowledge and skills to help remove poverty. News*R*each, Pradan's monthly journal is a forum for sharing the thoughts and experiences of these professionals working in remote and far-flung areas in the field. News*R*each helps them to reach out and connect with each other, the development fraternity and the outside world.

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