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Facilitating Women in Endemic Poverty Regions to Access, Actualize and Sustain Provisions on Empowerment: A Baseline Study

RATNA M SUDARSHAN, RINA BHATTACHARYA, JYOTSNA SIVARAMMAYA AND SHUBH SHARMA

Mapping Women's current levels of awareness of their rights, their participation in decision-making processes and their attitude to patriarchy, the study provides quantitative and qualitative data of the situation on the ground.

BACKGROUND

PRADAN, in coalition with Jagori (a national-level NGO working for women's rights and empowerment), intends to mobilize women from 75,000 families from over 5,000 SHGs with support from the UN Women Fund for Gender Equality. The overall goal of the project is that 'by 2020, rural women from marginalized communities and their collectives, in nine districts in four States of Central India, will be able to raise their voice against violations and access their political and economic rights as mandated under the Central and State Government policies'. The programme seeks to work with a large number of poor rural women, including over two-thirds belonging to the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs), organized into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and solidarity associations. The programme will focus on four states of India beset with endemic poverty to a) enhance and institutionalize the effective economic and political participation of women and b) impact the status of women in the family and the community, including their engagement in local government bodies. These are also the goals enshrined in the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (NPEW) 2001, as also in the 11th Five Year Plan of the Government of India.

With 'empowerment' as the long-term goal, PRADAN proposes to use several strategies. The key among these are: mobilizing women, forming Self-Help Groups, training and building awareness, and providing technical assistance to support livelihood strategies. In the pilot districts, each woman will be supported to develop livelihood options thus enhancing her control over the economic resources; to participate in local governance systems effectively and build gender-sensitive accountability processes; to negotiate intra-family issues that hinder equal access to rights for women and girls, including addressing domestic violence, access rights and entitlements enshrined in various statutes (such as NPEW) and the Constitution.

Intensive engagement will happen with the primary SHGs and their secondary and tertiary associations, to help women enhance their efficacy, develop sustainable livelihoods and increase their well-being and participation. The key outcomes will include enhanced autonomy; respect and influence for women within the family; assured access of women to various neighbourhood, informal/formal local governance, and basic services/programmes run by the government—primary health, education, food security, employment guarantee, etc. The project will distill critical lessons from this grass-roots experience and bring these to bear on policy formulation at the state and national levels. The government partners, including the National Institute for Rural Development, will ensure support to this effort and engage to simplify and strengthen pro-women and pro-poor policies.

BASELINE STUDY: OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

A baseline study was conducted to understand the current levels of awareness and participation by women. This study will be used in tracking the progress of the project, noting the challenges that may arise, and providing both quantitative and qualitative data through which to understand the situation at the start of the project.

The survey was conducted in all nine project districts—Betul, Hoshangabad, Dindori and Balaghat in Madhya Pradesh; Hazaribagh and Koderma in Jharkhand; Karanjia and

The programme will focus on four states of India beset with endemic poverty to a) enhance and institutionalize the effective economic and political participation of women and b) impact the status of women in the family and the community, including their engagement in local government bodies

Rayagada in Odisha; and Purulia in West Bengal. The sample was distributed so as to be spread over the area being covered, that is, remote and accessible locations, in proportion to the number of SHGs (and not the total population of the village).

Data was collected along following dimensions, as intended in the project:

- ♦ Women's political empowerment
- ♦ Women's economic empowerment
- ♦ Women's enhanced understanding of patriarchy and gender discrimination

METHODOLOGY

A stratified, random sample of villages was selected from each of the nine districts. All the women in one SHG in each selected village, or approximately 30–40 SHGs in each district (2–3 per cent of the 75,000 women to be covered by the project, making a total of 1,237 respondents in all), were given a questionnaire to answer. The sample included locations that are both remote and accessible; where PRADAN's presence has been for less than and more than five years, where there are single or multiple activities, where there was varied caste composition, etc. The baseline study was a collaborative effort, with the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) being responsible for the design and analysis, and the PRADAN teams collecting data, which included, in addition to the survey, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), with a smaller sample of women, and interviews with a few duty bearers.

ANALYSIS

Socio-Demographic Profile of the Sample

Information on the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (expected to be representative of the population that PRADAN works with, or the most marginalized groups in the most backward districts), establishes that 89 per cent of the respondents are married and six per cent are widowed; 83 per cent are under 45 years of age; 66 per cent are illiterate; 61 per cent of all the respondents live in nuclear households; and in terms of caste composition, 19 per cent of the sample belong to the Scheduled Caste (SC) category, 37 per cent to Scheduled Tribes (STs), 26 per cent to Other Backward Castes (OBC), one per cent to the Primitive Tribal Group (PTG) and 17 per cent to the General category. Of the households, 78 per cent have *kuccha* walls. Just a little less than 58 per cent of the households depend on hand pumps for potable water and 43 per cent use wells. Barely three per cent use

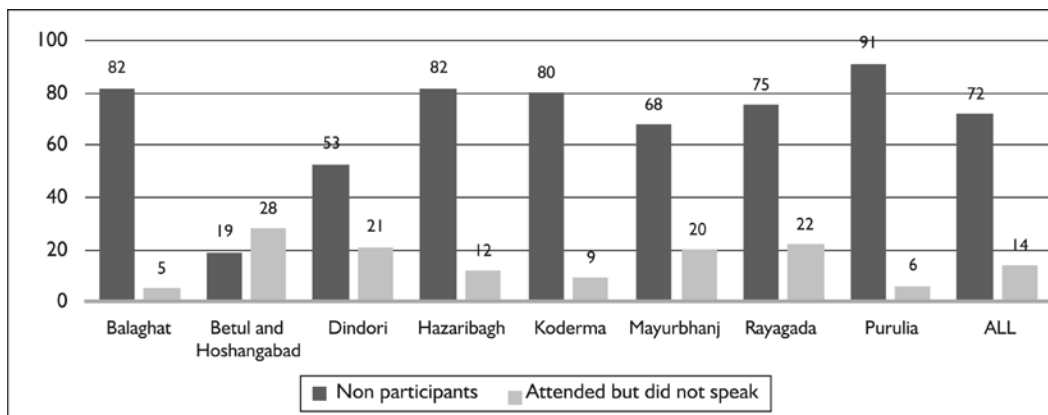
Intensive engagement will happen with the primary SHGs and their secondary and tertiary associations, to help women enhance their efficacy, develop sustainable livelihoods and increase their well-being and participation

taps. As a corollary, over 70 per cent of the households spend more than one hour in fetching water every day.

AWARENESS AND EXERCISE OF POLITICAL RIGHTS

Of the respondents, 86 per cent said that they had voted in the last election and over half said that they had voted for the candidate of their choice. However, 53 per cent of the women were not aware whether any meetings had been held, and 19 per cent of those who were aware, did not attend the *gram sabha*. Of the women surveyed, 72 per cent, thus, did not participate in the *gram sabha* whereas 14 per cent said that they attended the meetings but did not speak during the *sabha*. More worryingly, only 45 per cent of the respondents were of the opinion that women should attend the *gram sabha*. Women were largely unaware of the Constitutional provision for women to be members of *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs).

Figure 1: Percentage of Women Not Attending *Gram Sabhas* and of Women Attending but Not Speaking in *Gram Sabhas*



A one-third reservation for women in the *gram panchayats* has been in place since the early 1990s; Jharkhand, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh have enhanced the reservation to 50 per cent and West Bengal has taken the decision to do so after the next elections. However, 58 per cent of the women sampled were unaware that there are reservations for women. Only 9 per cent of the women reported being members of village committees; one-quarter of these said that they attend committee meetings whereas over 70 per cent of the respondents did not know if committees have been formed in their village.

Women were asked if they had experienced/witnessed injustice or were in any way dissatisfied with the government provisions. What were their reactions to these? Of the whole sample, well over 80 per cent did not take any action; less than 10 per cent tried to take some action but did not follow this through.

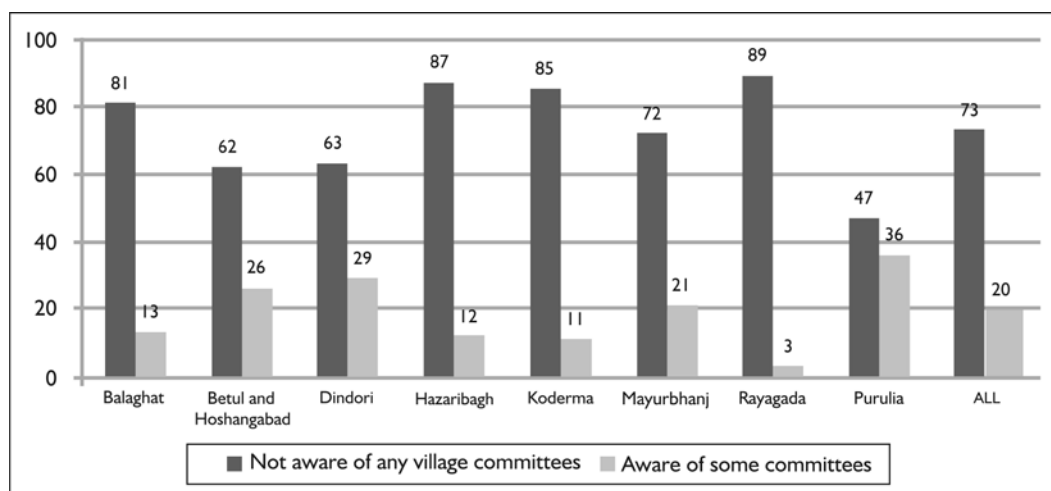
These responses suggest that women are largely unaware of their political rights and, therefore, do not actively participate in village-level governance structures.

These responses suggest that women are largely unaware of their political rights and, therefore, do not actively participate in village-level governance structures. Given the requirement that women be members of village committees, it is more than likely that many women may be shown as members without being aware of it themselves.

According to the women, some of the reasons for their absence in *gram sabha* meetings are that the meetings are male dominated, that their fathers-in-law are present, that such work does not concern them, that they do not know about it and that they are unable to find time from work.

Poor participation in village-level governance institutions is partly due to social norms limiting the women's mobility into public spaces. Perhaps, encouraging the SHGs to enter the arena, as groups, will address this issue. The one exception to this lack of participation

Figure 2: Percentage of Women Aware about Village Committees



is when it comes to voting. Because it is in the interest of all political parties to maximize support, knowledge of voting rights and its exercise amongst the villagers, including women, is high and stands in contrast to other forms of political participation.

The Focus Group Discussions with women SHG members indicate that today most boys and girls complete primary or middle school, after which many children drop out.

As many as 80 per cent of the households reported having children under the age of 14 years. However, only 61 per cent of the households reported children in school. There is no active assessment by the women of the school activities, quality of education, etc. (Under Right to

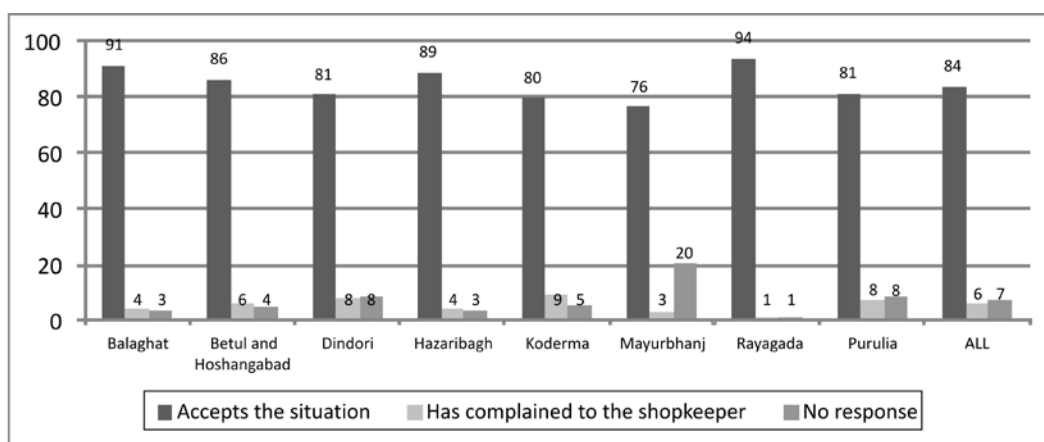
ACCESSING GOVERNMENT SCHEMES

Information was canvassed about the Public Distribution System (PDS), other social security schemes and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programmes (NREGP). As many as 76 per cent of the households reported that they had a ration card. Although there was a high level of dissatisfaction with the PDS, less than 10 per cent voiced this dissatisfaction. Of all the respondents, 52 per cent said that they were unaware of or were not accessing any scheme (including pensions, scholarships) to which any member of the household may be entitled (Figure 3). In the sample districts of Madhya Pradesh and Odisha, one or more of these schemes seem to be reaching less than half of the households; this was even fewer in Jharkhand and West Bengal districts.

Education, an active involvement of parents/ mothers/community is sought, to ensure that all children enroll and fully participate). Among the women who did take action for the improvement of the quality of schooling, a third stated that nothing had changed despite their efforts, and eight per cent said that they did not even get a response. Only seven per cent shared having noticed an improvement in the quality of schooling because of their efforts.

The FGDs with women SHG members indicate that today most boys and girls complete primary or middle school, after which many children drop out. Women said they encourage their children to attend school, unlike their own parents who did not encourage them. However, they do not force their children to attend school.

Figure 3: Responses to Deficiencies in the PDS System (%)



Only 29 per cent people said that they use the *anganwadi* services although 66 per cent of the households reported that they had a pregnant woman or a child under six, who was eligible to use the *anganwadi*. More than half the women (mainly in Odisha) did not respond when asked about why they did not go to the *anganwadi*. The reasons given by those who did respond included lack of awareness about the services provided, poor functioning of *anganwadi* and the long distance from their homes. A little more than a third of the women said that they consult the *anganwadi* in case of an emergency. Of the women, who had tried to draw attention to the problems faced, 11 per cent said that nothing changed despite their efforts, and 5 per cent said that they did not get any response. However 2 per cent thought that *anganwadi* services had improved as a result.

Women contribute directly (as paid and unpaid workers) and indirectly (through their management of children and home maintenance work) to supporting the needs of the household.

all the areas covered by the programme, engaging both men and women. Animal husbandry, mainly goats, is primarily the responsibility of the women, as is the gathering of minor forest produce (mohline/mullein leaves, *mahua* fruit and flowers, and *tendu* leaves. Bamboo is important in Balaghat).

Both men and women engage in wage labour of various kinds, depending on availability—for example, in brick-making. Spinning tasar is another common activity. Migration, mainly of men, between Diwali and Holi, is prevalent.

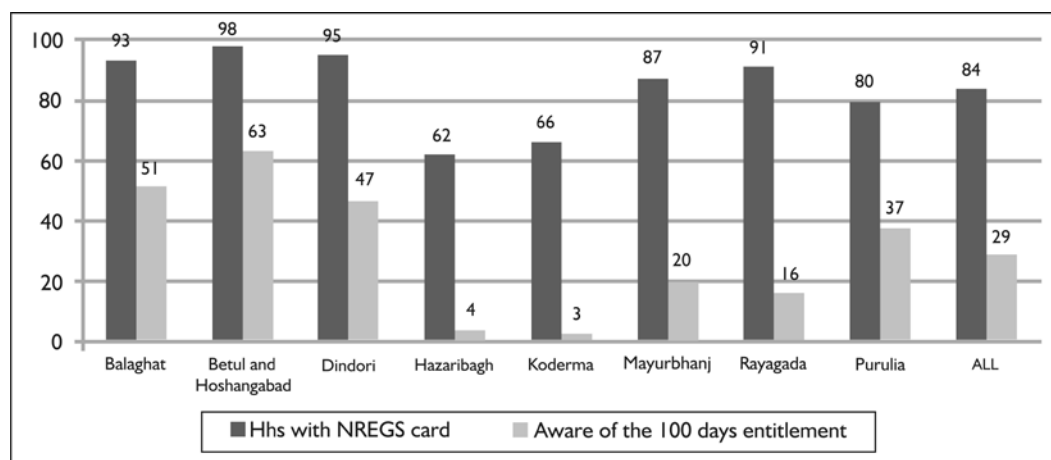
Women contribute directly (as paid and unpaid workers) and indirectly (through their management of children and home maintenance work) to supporting the needs of the household. The questions on economic empowerment have tried to assess how well women understand the importance of their work and the level of control they have over household expenditure.

ECONOMIC RIGHTS

Respondents derive their income from a variety of sources that further varies by season. Rain-fed agriculture is practised in

As many as 84 per cent of the households have an NREGS card but only 29 per cent are aware that there is an entitlement to 100

Figure 4: Households (HHs) with awareness of basic facts about NREGS (%)



days of work in the year. Among the districts sampled, the highest level of awareness is seen in the district of Madhya Pradesh, whereas the women in Odisha and Jharkhand were the least aware about the access to NREGA. Answers to a follow-up question suggest that only a small percentage (less than 15 per cent) are aware of some details of the programme and the gaps in implementation; again, this is higher in Madhya Pradesh. Women from the ST and SC groups seem to be more aware about their entitlement under the NREGS than women from the OBC groups. These higher levels of awareness about the NREGS entitlement among the women belonging to the ST and SC could also be because of a greater need for such employment.

The mobilization of women into SHGs is a first step in PRADAN's efforts to empower women; all the respondents are linked to SHGs. The data confirm that only a few women, less than a fifth, are not active members of SHGs. However, 35 per cent of the women from all areas see SHGs as a mechanism for meeting credit needs only.

Women were asked about the work they did, the time they spent on these activities, how important they thought their work was to the household economy, and so on. Based on the responses, just over half the respondents recognized the value of their paid/income earning work to the household. A significant percentage of the women are engaged in farming, which is followed by NREGS work, horticulture and the collection of forest produce. Next, the women were asked about their reproductive/home maintenance work, including fuel and water collection, care of the sick, of children and the elderly, and maintenance and repair of the house. More women (53 per cent) recognize the value of their care/reproductive work. It seems that the challenge is not the lack of awareness about its

value, but not knowing how to negotiate the sharing of the work burdens more equitably within the household. One should keep in mind here that these are subsistence economies and there may be an overlap between what is understood as 'productive' and 'reproductive' work. For example, looking after livestock is considered by some women as productive work and by others as reproductive work.

Most reported spending eight hours a day in economic activities, and almost 50 per cent reported 10–15 hours on reproductive/care work.

According to the survey data, almost 50 per cent of the women across districts spend 10–15 hours on reproductive work. In Madhya Pradesh, this percentage is much greater, with most women spending 10–15 hours doing reproductive work in the districts of Betul and Hoshangabad. Another significant proportion of women reported that they spend more than 15 hours on reproductive activities. When asked for their thoughts on how they thought the well-being of their family could change, only a few women suggested setting up a new economic activity and sharing the work between all members of the household. Less than half of the women think that reproductive responsibilities can be shared by men; however, this percentage is greater in Madhya Pradesh. The women, who think that men can share reproductive work, said that men could help with water collection, fuel collection, cleaning, cooking, etc.

The survey sought to find out about the assets owned by the household and whether the woman had any in her name. Did she take decisions about the sale or purchase of assets? Overall, 31 per cent of the women said that they had some assets (like livestock, jewellery) in their own name. However, 40 per cent said they had no control over this. As many as 35

per cent claimed that they had no assets in their own name and had no control over the household assets. Less than 10 per cent of the women said that they had no assets in their name, but did have some control. The extent to which women have a ownership of assets and control over it is shown in Figure 5.

Overall, 28 per cent of the women respondents said that they had no control over household expenditure. Only 7 per cent take all the decisions on their own (whereas one might expect that the latter group comprises possibly widows or women without any adult males in the household, crosstabs show that all these women are married). Widowed women or women whose husbands are mostly away, according to the survey data, are most able to take expenditure decisions on their own.

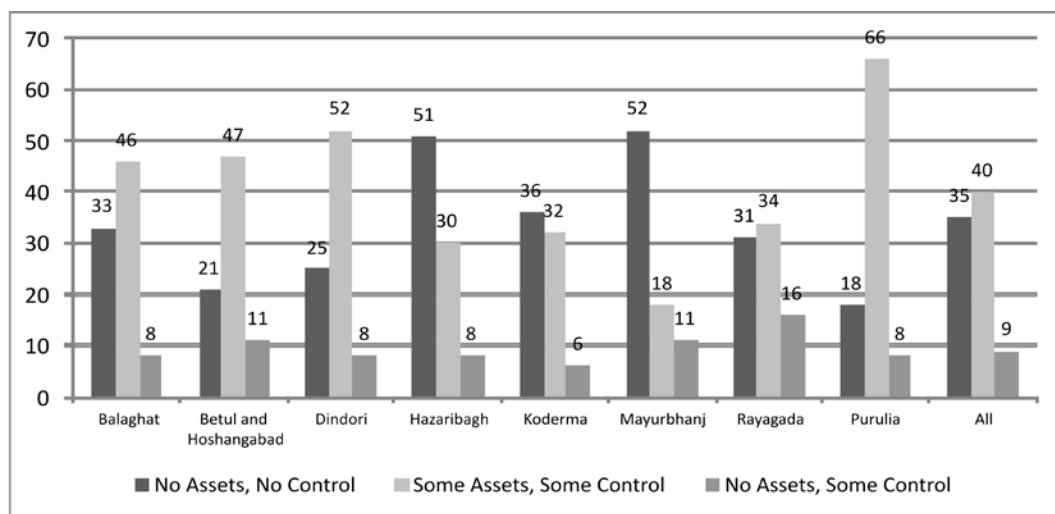
Over half the women expressed awareness of the importance of their productive and reproductive work to the household; however, this was not accompanied by an ability to question the gender division of and gender discrimination in labour, to influence expenditure decisions or have control over

household assets. However, some women do have certain concrete ideas on how their economic situation can change. A discussion with the women around these ideas could be a good action point when planning livelihood interventions.

SOCIAL AND LEGAL EMPOWERMENT

Social norms constraining women's mobility are found to be strongly present, with around 10 per cent of the women reporting that they cannot leave the house or farm; 40 per cent can move about within the village with permission; and 20 per cent can move about within the village without needing to take permission to do so. In the FGDs, women reported that their mobility in a group has gone up. Women were asked about their health over the last year, whether they had taken any treatment and who decided the nature of the treatment. As many as 70 per cent of the women reported that they had health problems in the last year and 61 per cent of them had sought treatment. Of these, 32 per cent of the respondents reported that the treatment was discontinued before full recovery. This could be for various

Figure 5: Women's Ownership and control of assets (%)



reasons—poverty, cost of treatment, difficulty in accessing medical care, inconvenient for self or family, social views on that particular problem, etc. Few women ignored ill-health completely, although there were some in this category and their constraints need to be identified. Half the women that did not seek any treatment during illness, when asked why not, did not respond. Women who did respond shared that this was because of their discomfort in talking about their illness,

the financial constraints and the poor health infrastructure and treatment quality.

Fifteen questions (as seen in Table 1) were posed to the women to assess their attitude to patriarchy. The answers suggest that women are willing to acknowledge that girls as well as boys should go to school and study, that the household chores be shared by men and women, that women have the right of control over their own earnings—

Table 1: Attitude to Patriarchy Questionnaire

No.	Questions	Percentage Saying Yes
1	Do you believe that women should not go for outside employment, as far as possible?	64
2	Do you think that it is shameful for a man to do work such as sweeping the floor or washing vessels?	61
3	Even under conditions of severe financial stress, do you think that there are some jobs that a woman may take up, but a man should not?	59
4	Do you believe that girls should be brought up to be submissive and modest (not answering back, obedient) but boys need not?	58
5	Do you think that women should always obey men in the family?	82
6	If you were to have only one child, would you rather have a son?	72
7	Do you think that a man loses respect in the community if his wife or daughter moves about freely outside the home?	69
8	Do you think that a woman or girl, who goes out alone after dark, is herself to be blamed if she gets molested?	67
9	Do you think that a girl or woman, who moves about freely outside the house, is most likely to be a characterless woman?	61
10	Do you think a man has the right to beat his wife, but a woman does not?	72
11	Do you think that a woman should hand over her earnings to her husband?	55
12	Do you think men should be paid more than women for the same type of work?	50
13	Do you think that a woman should eat only after her husband has eaten, if he has not gone out of the village?	77
14	Do you think that it is more important for boys to go to school than girls?	45
15	Do you think a menstruating woman should not be allowed to go into the kitchen?	73

even though meekness is seen as a virtue for girls. However, on more fundamental issues around power and sexuality, the respondents were reluctant to change the existing balance of power. Thus, a dominant majority agree that menstruating women are 'impure', men must eat first, have the right to demand obedience and the right to beat their wives. A significant proportion of women do think that a man doing household chores is shameful and this proportion is greater than that of women who do not consider it shameful in Dindori, Hazaribagh, Mayurbhanj, Rayagada and Purulia. In the opinion of more than half the women (excluding in Koderma and Mayurbhanj), even under conditions of financial stress, there are some jobs that men should not take up but women should. This percentage is exceptionally large in Hazaribagh and Rayagada.

A considerable number of women believe that girls need to be brought up to be submissive and modest, but the boys need not; and their proportion is even greater in the districts of Hazaribagh, Purulia, Mayurbhanj and Rayagada.

Whereas the above responses suggest that women's understanding of patriarchy and gender discrimination is low, it is also possible to see that, on some aspects, they are more resistant to change than on others.

The FGDs offer a mixed picture, in that, despite evidence of persisting gender biases, there is also an indication of change, including that which has been encouraged by SHG-level discussions.

As per the responses, the main reason for early marriage is to avoid situations where a

As per the responses, the main reason for early marriage is to avoid situations where a girl gets involved with a boy and this does not immediately lead to marriage, or would mean an 'undesirable' liaison.

girl gets involved with a boy and this does not immediately lead to marriage, or would mean an 'undesirable' liaison. The vicious cycle of low age at marriage (reportedly 15–16 years on an average for girls), low social and economic status of women within marriage, habits of alcoholism, high incidence of violence but low reporting are reported from

all areas. For example, a police officer from the Koderma district said, "The incidence of crimes against women has increased in both blocks—from 15 to 29 cases—but complaints filed by women themselves have not increased. Most such cases are brought to the police not by the women, but by their male relatives." The latter point suggests that only where 'family honour' is involved is information given to the police.

The following responses suggest that little has changed in terms of standing up to violence—as was also observed in the survey responses above. "Yes, one can hear the quarrels and violence. People hesitate to intervene because when it is a quarrel between husband and wife, they may fight today and make up tomorrow, and both will turn against those who tried to intervene."; "Even if I am beaten badly, I would always prefer my husband's house"; "If I make a mistake, why should my husband not beat me?" Many women also said that they do not act against the violence they face for the benefit of their children. Women accept violence against themselves as a social norm/tradition instead of questioning it as an act of injustice or a violation of their rights.

There is some hope that the interventions started through the SHGs will help to change these views. One respondent suggests, "With the formation of SHGs, the *didis* are more aware of their rights and are more empowered...so a woman has started

retaliating when her husband beats her." But there is still a reluctance to intervene usually: "We cannot say anything to those who are not in the *mahila mandal*. They will scream at us and ask us not to interfere in their personal matters. But if a woman is in the *mahila mandal*, we can try to help her by raising our voice against the violence." Interestingly, when there is violence against some women, their sons started to protest.

There is some hope that the interventions started through the SHGs will help to change these views; one respondent suggests, "With the formation of SHGs, the women are more aware of their rights and are more empowered...so one woman has started retaliating when her husband beats her."

Violence against women may result in rape and other forms of sexual harassment, physical abuse and other atrocities by family members particularly drunk husbands, dowry demands, body and property offences, violence during pregnancy or in case of the birth of a girl child, violence in case there is a second wife and desertion by the spouse. This information was given by the Station Head Officers (SHOs) in the police department. Violence against women is a regular and common phenomenon. According to the police, the reasons for harassment are poverty, dissatisfaction with the woman's cooking, bigamy among tribals and the absence of elders in nuclear households, who could intervene. According to women, alcohol consumption is the main reason behind domestic violence against women. However, women only approach the police, and the *anganwadis* in some cases, when matters get out of hand and the atrocities become brutal. Most of the women think that smaller issues are not worth hurting the prestige of the family. There has been no rise or decline in the number of such complaints of injustice against women over the last two to three years. An SHO talked about the *janta darbars* that are organized, in which women and villagers can raise such issues of violence and receive

counselling. In such cases, the police, after registering the FIR, try to address smaller offences through mediation or a mutual compromise. The more serious cases are taken to court. The difficulties that the police face in dealing with these cases are that women file complaints only in extreme situations. Also, women constables or doctors do not agree to work in remote areas, which is a huge setback when working on cases of violence against women. A suggestion

from the police in dealing with such cases is that women should take these up such issues with the Paramarsh Kendra of the Gram Raksha Samiti. However, according to the women, taking such cases to the police or the *panchayat* does not help and is not worth the (high) risk of being sent back to their parents by the in-laws. The police warn the offender, take a bribe and let him go, which does not change the man's ways for more than a few months.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the baseline study, the following conclusions and recommendations may be noted:

1. On the profile of the respondents:
 - Make a greater effort to include older and single women, during the formation of the SHGs.
 - Rely less on the written media and more on the audio visual aids for the information campaigns, given the low literacy rates.

- Explore the need for child care, keeping in mind the caring responsibilities of nuclear households vs. extended family households.
 - Explore whether the quality of water is impacting the health of the people, since only three per cent of the respondents receive treated water through the pipeline.
 - Factor in the time spent on fetching water into any development planning.
 - Strengthen the availability and access to clean drinking water before any other livelihood intervention.
2. On political empowerment:
- Encourage women to see themselves as potential candidates for election because as voters, they appear to be active and aware.
 - Facilitate increased participation of women in village-level governance. Because poor participation is partly due to social norms limiting women's mobility in public spaces, encouraging SHGs to enter this arena as groups may be a way of addressing this.
 - Give women information about village committees and motivate them not to let their names be used without their active participation. PRADAN's SHGs could be used as a forum to educate the women about their rights.
 - Provide women with basic information on PRIs and motivate them to participate actively.
3. On accessing entitlements:
- Simple and practical steps can be taken by PRADAN and its partners,
- to ensure that women have the information about government schemes and programmes, and then motivate them to claim their rights. Overall, there appears to be very low outreach of these for many reasons. The baseline data analyzed at the district level will help to identify whether it is lack of required documentation, lack of knowledge, or lack of response from the authorities that is behind the weak utilization.
- Make an effort to increase the usage of and improve the quality of health services. Given the high malnutrition, infant mortality rate (IMR) and maternal mortality rate (MMR), and that the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is the single point access to health and nutrition services and information in most rural areas, it is important to focus on this aspect.
4. On economic empowerment:
- Focus on ensuring that women are aware of their entitlements under the NREGS, as well as covering the 'last mile' in access to the scheme as 84 per cent of the households do have a job card.
 - Expand the understanding of an SHG from being just a savings and credit organization to a women's group, dealing with a range of practical and strategic concerns.
 - Arrange for gender training/awareness building among women, to strengthen their ability to attempt a more equitable distribution of work burdens within the household.

- Help reduce some work burdens through sharing with others or creating new forms of support such as group-based childcare to give the women some relief from the long hours of work they are already engaged in, so that they can focus on the livelihood diversification efforts.
 - Understand whether prevalent social norms give women control over the assets they own or whether actual practice is different because almost a third of the women do own assets in their name.
 - Generate a discussion around how the women's economic situation can change their social standing. Over half the women expressed awareness of the importance of their productive and reproductive work to the household but this was not accompanied by an ability to question the gender division and gender discrimination in labour, and to influence the expenditure decisions or control over household assets. However, some women do have certain concrete ideas on how to bring about this change. This could be a good action point for the livelihood interventions planned.
5. On social empowerment:
- Encourage mobility in a group; this may be good strategy, given the constraints on individual mobility.
 - Make an effort to understand which health concerns are most likely to be overlooked, to encourage the prevention of illness and encourage groups to assist individual women in seeking help as needed
 - The FGDs offer a mixed picture, in that, despite evidence of persisting gender biases, there is also indication of change, including that which has been encouraged by SHG level discussions.
 - Enable the women to challenge patriarchy. Over a short period of three years, it may be more realistic to support role models, women leaders and group efforts, as part of a process, the end result of which is indeed a change away from patriarchal norms.

The article is an excerpt of the Baseline Study conducted by Institute of Social Studies Trust, New Delhi in 2011-12, which is part of the Gender and Equality project supported by UN Women

Kesla Women Enter the Political Sphere: Grow as Citizens

SIBIN C. VARGHESE

Representing themselves in panchayats, where they had faced humiliation and disrespect earlier, women have fought unitedly against the system and gradually gaining the respect and recognition of men who are beginning to acknowledge that women have equal rights of citizenship.

“When we speak, we are afraid that our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.” This was the realization of the women in Kesla, Madhya Pradesh, based on their experience of getting actively engaged in the wider social and political spheres. Earlier, women were only engaged in domestic chores and were least concerned with what happened in the world outside. There has been a drastic shift, however, in their mindsets; and its impact is heartening to see.

This is the third year of the Gender Equality Programme (GEP) in Kesla. This programme was designed to empower women on the socio-economic as well as political fronts. When the programme was first introduced and before outlining the engagement methodology, a baseline study was conducted to get an idea of the actual situation. The baseline survey provided us with statistics that have helped us devise strategies relevant to the context of Kesla.

During the survey, it was clearly visible that the community was knowledgeable about the significance of savings and credit, and the various livelihood interventions (namely, agriculture, poultry, and sericulture) that have helped families strengthen their financial stability and meet the demand of food sufficiency. However, in terms of strengthening the position of women in the family, these interventions had not had the impact expected even though the delivery apparatus used had placed the women at centre-stage.

Decision-making, the control over assets, and the buying and selling patterns of produce remained with the men of the family, who were, by and large, authoritative and dominating. There was a resigned acceptance within the community about gender-based discrimination. The women were not concerned about inequalities; they accepted the societal law and did not question its practice or its origins. They just continued to live subjugated lives.

There were some women, who recognized the discrimination but were reluctant to violate practices they considered the 'law of nature'. Even though it seemed unpleasant to us outsiders, it was part of their daily routine. Interestingly, the community was very conscious about its rights and entitlements, and also understood how the governance structure operates in the region. Whereas the women were knowledgeable and aware about the operating structures, their presence and influence was significantly low.

The women believed they should limit themselves to the affairs of the home and that matters outside the home would be taken care of for them, even though, it was clear, there was nobody to look after them on that front—neither the elected representatives, the duty bearers nor the family spearhead, the male, looked after the interests of the women.

On various fronts, for example, the right to vote, the right to demand participation in local governance structures and the access to PDS, they were either driven by force or subdued because of social milieus. The women believed they should limit themselves to the affairs of the home and that matters outside the home would be taken care of for them, even though, it was clear, there was nobody to look after them on that front—neither the elected representatives, the duty bearers nor the family spearhead, the man, looked after the interests of the women. The situation of the men was that they were responsible for fulfilling the needs of the family but they also faced constraints such as the lack of knowledge, skills, confidence and the lack of recognition outside the family.

Women, it was evident, had unity and, thanks to their long association with SHGs, were in the habit of deliberation and consensus making. This existing scenario helped us to come to the conclusion that it was important for women to learn about their rights of citizenship and to project themselves as active agents on the political map. Otherwise, governance was

monopolized by a few influential people within the society and it was left to them to decide the fate of the whole community.

These reflections helped us underline the problem statement and, accordingly, we envisaged the engagement methodology—to work on uplifting the social and political identity of women in society. We realized that the women would have to prove their mettle at the family level as well as in societal affairs. We would need to help them develop an identity as agents of change in the socio-political sphere.

We went with the belief that if women were capable of thinking for the betterment of their family, they could also think the same for the village and society. It was decided to conduct a Family-based Well-being Planning (FBWP) exercise with each of the SHG members covered under the GEP. In the FBWP process, the facilitator asked each of the participants within an SHG to share their issues, difficulties and challenges that they want to bring to immediate attention and want action to be taken upon. The process was facilitated in an environment in which women were given an assurance that what they shared would be strictly confidential. The women could share anything with the process facilitator, without involving the rest of the group.

It wasn't easy. Would the women feel safe expressing themselves? As soon as the process was initiated within the SHGs, however, these concerns were cast aside. When doing FBWP in the first year, it was found that a majority of demands put forth by women could be actualized through the village *panchayat*. The demands were for ration cards, housing, a

common sitting place (*chaupal*), road connectivity, pension, drinking water facility, etc., which were directly/indirectly associated with the *panchayat*. The demands needed to be placed before the *gram sabha*. The issues affecting the lives and livelihoods of the women at the family level and also the issues related to women's identity, self-respect and recognition were very few in the first year.

Evidently, we needed to engage in capacitating women on their rights and entitlements by helping them place their demands before the *panchayat* in an assertive manner. This was challenging not only because women were less aware about the operating procedure of the *gram sabha* and the *gram panchayat* but also because the women's presence at the *gram sabha* was defying the social construct.

But we knew that some tough stand would need to be taken to promote women's participation in the *gram sabha*. We decided to work on three fronts, that is, generating awareness, enhancing participation and providing the necessary support to actualize the demands. Together, these would be the motivating factors that would lead the way forward.

For awareness creation, we decided to carry out specific training programmes for women on the functioning of the *gram sabha* and inform them about the schemes under which their demands could be accessed. These demands were identified through the FBWP. Initially, the trainings concentrated on building an understanding about the *gram sabha*, its utility and its significance to deal with village-level issues and to meet the demands that were floated such as the requirements of roads, a *chaupal*, a hand pump and the follow-

Evidently, we needed to engage in capacitating women on their rights and entitlements by helping them place their demands before the panchayat in an assertive manner.

up on the Indira Awaas Yojana. The next step was to ensure maximum participation in the *gram sabha* and to uphold the spirit of unity when floating the demands.

The biggest challenge was when the women attended a *gram sabha* for the first time. They

tried to understand its procedure. They realized that earlier they used to blindly sign the *gram sabha* register when it was circulated within the villages, to complete the quorum. They also realized that there were crucial decisions that were taken, which they had assented to by signing. The women, therefore, began to ask the *panchayat* to share with them the agenda before asking them to sign. This was not taken well by the 'ever-so-knowlegeable' *panchayat* and the influential personalities. In many *panchayats*, the demands of the women were rejected on the grounds that if the women wanted to participate in the *gram sabha*, they would have to attend it as per the liking of the *panchayat* and that no demands would be tolerated.

Many women stopped confronting the men and accepted the situation. There were some villages, however, where the women started walking out of the meetings without signing the meeting register by saying that they would not accept the decision because it has not taken into account their views or that the *panchayat* had not incorporated their agenda.

The men thought that this was a temporary whim and that the women would again start following the norms as they had done earlier. But this time their assumption was wrong. The women began to discuss the challenges in their Clusters and Federations and were constantly guided by the knowledgeable Community Service Providers (CSPs) from the Narmada Mahila Sangh (NMS).

They also called upon women from other villages to join hands with them, especially those, who after an initial show of courage, had given in, calling it their fate. The CSPs continued to engage with the village women, to guide them in a meaningful manner. In many a *panchayat*, the CSPs accompanied the women to the meetings, to give them confidence when interacting with *panchayat* officials.

The sharing of struggles, attempts and small successes at different forums such as SHGs, Clusters and Federations was encouraged regularly. Initially, there were mixed stories. There were some women who came back victorious saying that they had heard the entire proceedings and had also submitted their individual demands whereas there were others who said that they had been treated badly, abused and that they felt ashamed when they went to the *gram sabha*.

There were also many *panchayats* where women were asked to sit behind the male members, who sat in a circle around the entire floor. Such *panchayats* were identified; and it was decided that CSPs, along with the community women, would meet the *panchayat* officials and register the women's discomfort. Once the women received the backing of the CSPs, they gathered enough courage to protest strongly and also warned the *panchayat* that if they didn't change their attitude towards women, they would have to pay price for it.

The CSPs confronted the *panchayat* members on the basis of laws and Acts. The *panchayats* were given a strong message that the women are aware of the guidelines and norms. This had a great impact. The members of the *panchayat*

The women began to discuss the challenges in their Clusters and Federations and were constantly guided by the knowledgeable Community Service Providers (CSPs) from the Narmada Mahila Sangh (NMS).

now know very well that the Federation women are well-versed with the proceedings of the *gram sabha* and their rights.

The SHG women were then made aware of the various schemes available to them, their eligibility criteria and how to track the progress of their demands made to the *gram sabha*. The training of SHG representatives

and CSPs on local governance and the various schemes has helped in this direction. Earlier, when the women and the CSPs tried to place their demands in the *gram sabha*, they felt inadequate because of their lack of knowledge of the different Acts and policies. PRADAN as well as other external resource organizations have regularly informed and trained the CSPs on issues of local governance, the various schemes available and the processes to help women access their rights and entitlements.

Gradually, there has been a turnaround, in terms of confidence and the level of knowledge and competency within the CSPs. Literature and resource material have been collected from various sources and provided to the CSPs, to help enhance their knowledge and skills. A Leadership Camp was also organized, in which the women representatives were taught about the *Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act*, various schemes and the processes, to be able to make effective presentations at different forums. These SHG representatives have acted as a catalyst at the village level, with the CSPs facilitating their action.

In the first year, a large-scale promotion activity was carried out about the *gram sabha*, through pre- and post-*gram sabha* training programmes. The women were trained in application-writing, made aware of various schemes and the importance of collecting

a written receipt against the submitted application. Training programmes were carried out at the SHG level, and then for the village as a unit, in order to reach more people. Along with this, one member from each of the SHGs was trained on local governance. This person was called the 'SHG representative'.

SHG representatives were selected by the group from the SHG, during the FBWP sessions. The aim was to have a knowledgeable person at each of the SHGs to catalyze the action within the group. The representatives were trained on various issues that would be dealt with in the *gram sabha*, for example, the application filing process and its follow-up process. SHG representatives were also groomed on leadership skills because they were supposed to anchor the processes at the SHG level.

Initially, when approaching the *gram sabha* or when taking the grievances to the district and block officials, the women were hesitant. The trained SHG and village representatives then acted as leaders, giving confidence to the women. This helped in registering voices which were not heard earlier. Also, these representatives acted as a bridge between the SHG/Village and the Federation, passing on information at appropriate times, and tracking the action over issues raised during the FBWP and in the *gram sabha*, block and district administration. Many motivational meetings were organized in villages, to raise the awareness that raising one's voice was an action in itself. This is better than meekly watching the happenings and cursing the poor pace of development and action.

Each and every attempt and all small/big milestones have been shared in Federation and Cluster meetings, the CSP experience-sharing

The women were trained in application writing, made aware of various schemes and the importance of collecting a written receipt against the submitted application.

meetings and in the Leadership Camp, and the response has been great. All these factors helped in speeding up the results of the efforts. People from other villages want to be included in the fold of NMS so that they can also make their presence felt in the socio-political space in their

respective villages. This is a clear indication that the women of the Kesla region are setting an example for others to follow.

Through constant engagement, the women in Kesla have gradually started representing themselves in the *panchayats*, in which they had faced humiliation and disrespect to begin with, and which had hampered their momentum in the initial year. There were other villages where the women upheld the spirit of unity and fought against the system and have gradually begun to get respect and recognition. Men are becoming aware that women have equal rights of citizenship. In many of the villages, the demands made by the women have begun to get actualized, and this information spread across the territory through Federations and Clusters. Once the women gained confidence, they have not looked back; instead, they are asserting themselves and their rights more and more.

In many villages, after seeing the women as a threat to the system at first, the *panchayat* representatives have begun to look at women's participation as a promising change. They have managed to establish an environment of trust, which has resulted in increased participation, with the active involvement of women in the *gram sabha*. They also witnessed growth in the number of demands getting actualized over the year. The demands were of two kinds—individual-centric (pension, BPL card, farm bund, well) as well as community-centric (*chaupal*, roads, *anganwadi*, hand pump,

an effective PDS). These demands look very ordinary; however, each of these demands, though seemingly small, impacted the lives of women significantly.

After three years, there are more than 4,000 women attending *gram sabha* meetings quite regularly and another 2,000 women attending at least one of the *gram sabha* meetings in a year. The result is that their demands are getting actualized through the *panchayats*. In some *panchayats*, all the demands raised by the women in the last three years have been registered, and action has been taken on them. In other villages, almost all the demands generated through the FBWP, which were related to the *gram sabha*, have been addressed and acted upon. This is the reason why the momentum has been rising; and as the news spreads, it is breaking women's shackles in adjoining villages as well.

The women now increasingly participate in and influence the local governance structure. They visit the block and district offices regularly and do not hesitate to voice their concerns before the officials and duty bearers. In the past two years, more than 2,000 women have attended block-and district-level hearings, called *Jan Sunvai*, and have voiced their grievances that have remained unsettled at the village and the *panchayat* levels.

Motivated by the healthy relationship established between the village women and the *panchayats* over the years, PRADAN began participating in the planning process in 2012 in a number of villages where the community wanted to create infrastructure, build assets, and undertake land- and water-related works under MGNREGA. A meeting was conducted with a few *panchayat* representatives and village women, in which it was agreed that the planning of works in the village should be done by the villagers themselves because they are

the best judges to decide what they require. The villagers would work with the *panchayat* in getting the plans sanctioned.

Once this was decided, the planning took place in two of the villages of a development block, and the plan (after being sanctioned by the *gram sabha*) was submitted to the block and district administration for approval. During the interaction, the women also realized the challenges that the *panchayats* face in their operational area because of which many times the *panchayat* finds it difficult to move on with the plan that the villagers want to carry out. There were pressures from the administration, lack of trust between the community and the *panchayat*, issues with the rural banking system, insufficient human resources, etc. Many *panchayat* representatives now seek the support of the women, inviting them to accompany them to put pressure on the administrative officials, to ensure that the demands of the community get actualized.

In the meantime, new MGNREGA guidelines were introduced, in which it was emphasized that to mitigate the issues related to delayed payment, the payment for labour would be deposited in the bank accounts of the beneficiaries directly through the Electronic Fund Management System (EFMS). Under these new guidelines, labour groups will be formed of the landholding and landless families in the villages. A batch size will be about 50 job card holders per group.

The groups have the power to select a 'mate', who will be responsible for all the correspondence and field work. The groups will be able to demand work from him/her. Also, he/she will act as the interface between the group and the *panchayat*. The groups also decided to plan the SoP (Shelf of Project) for the next two years through community participation. Information has been passed to the villagers

about these happenings, and in many villages, women have decided to form groups of their own and select a mate for their groups.

There were some hurdles because the *panchayats* were not aware of the new guidelines and norms. They hesitated to come with the people. In many *panchayats*, when women went to submit the application to form their own MGNREGA group and to appoint a woman as a mate, many people tried to frighten them by saying that a mate has to transact with people at the village and block levels several times in a month and it would not be an easy job for women. The women leaders present had been trained in the new guidelines; they confronted the *panchayat* by saying that they would support the mate and that the guidelines do not ask women to transact away from the *panchayat*. They also confronted the *panchayat* telling them not to misguide the women or they would complain to the block and district officials.

Groups have since been formed in almost all the villages. There are all-women groups and they have a mate of their liking. SoP preparations have begun and the Madhya Pradesh MGNREGA cell has decided to train their *Rojgar Sahayak* on 'effective community based planning' and SoP preparation methods. In Kesla and Sohagpur blocks of Hoshangabad district, and partially in the blocks of Betul district, PRADAN has aligned with the MGNREGA cell and the district officials in demonstrating the planning exercise with community participation.

The planning under MGNREGA and the SoP-creation activity are golden opportunities for villagers to collaborate with the government and help in the village-level planning process

When carrying out this exercise, what was most appealing was the fact that the village community (especially women), participated in this process effectively and willingly.

and for building the capacities of the *Rojgar Sahayaks*, directly responsible for carrying out the decentralized planning process in the villages. However, so far, they do not have the required skills and knowledge.

In August 2013, a training programme was conducted by PRADAN for the *Rojgar Sahayaks* of Hoshangabad block on the effective ways of decentralizing the planning process, whereby individual demands and needs will be articulated by the village community and the *Rojgar Sahayaks* will explain the MGNREGA guidelines and the nature of works undertaken under this scheme so that the community can relate to them easily. The aim was to develop an SoP, based on the demands of the community and with their participation. Similar training programmes were then carried out by the government in the other blocks of Betul district.

The decentralized planning process was carried out effectively in 14 villages in Hoshangabad and Betul districts this year, in which the village women and their family members, along with the *panchayat* representatives, detailed the list of activities to be carried out on individual lands as well as on common land. The SoP has been prepared, and after the *gram sabha* consent, it has been sent for approval and budgeting at the district level.

When carrying out this exercise, what was most appealing was the fact that the village community (especially women), participated in this process effectively and willingly. They were reasonably good with options-generation and evaluation. They generated the options best suited for the family and the village-level infrastructure creation under MGNREGA, even though they needed more knowledge about

MGNREGA and further training on the nature of work under MGNREGA, the demand-driven nature of MGNREGA, and the provisions related to payments and work prioritization. Through the planning until the *gram sabha* approval, the village women stood firm about their plans and put it forward with ownership. This has given the *panchayats* the confidence to place their demands before the block and district officials.

The members understood that voting is their individual right and that women, this time around, need not cast their vote under pressure or influence. They need to make their own decisions based on their own discrimination, after evaluating the promises that the different parties make

decisions based on their own discrimination, after evaluating the promises that the different parties make and giving it some conscious thought.

It is not only the effort that the women have put in over the years or their success which are acting as a source of energy, but the realization, wisdom and knowledge that the women have gained in this period that is an indication of their empowered state. The confidence with

which the women engage with the *panchayats* and the local administration is a welcome sign. They are treated with respect by the *panchayat* representatives.

As the Assembly elections were approaching, the NMS women were prepared to incorporate the agendas related to women's equity, village development as well as steps to reduce the instances of Violence against Women (VAW) within the society in the election manifesto of different political parties. After the all-Federation meeting held in Bhopal on 24 September 2013, in which women from various PRADAN-promoted Federations got together to prepare a list of their agenda. The NMS members then visited the party offices of two major parties (the Congress and the BJP) in Betul district. Both the parties welcomed such a move from the women and have promised to incorporate the demands in their manifesto.

Women now recognize that it will not serve their cause if they behave as mere spectators. They also realize that they have to continue to convert challenges into opportunities. These women have disproved the myth that women are only good caretakers of the home and lack the competency to participate in the social decision-making. With this, they are beginning to feel like citizens.

A simultaneous process was adopted by the NMS, to orient its members about the demands that they raised before the parties. The members understood that voting is their individual right and that women, this time around, need not cast their vote under pressure or influence. They need to make their own

The emerging leadership pool (of village representatives, Cluster representatives, the CSPs/CRPs) are now aggressively engaged in their roles. Many of them have a visionary approach. This is an opportunity for NMS to build upon their skills and knowledge so that there can be a considerable number of Service Providers within the community, with the competency to tackle persisting challenges.

Theatre of the Oppressed: A Step towards a Conscious Society

SUDARSHAN THAKUR

Using the powerful medium of theatre, PRADAN has been able to stimulate a re-thinking on age-old limiting beliefs and traditions, and is bringing about change in the behaviour and attitudes of the villagers on issues related to their women and empowerment.

"I enjoyed playing the role of a man in the forum; it gave me a sense of power," says Anita Devi, with a spark in her eyes. She is a troupe member of one of the three operational theatre groups in Hazaribagh. She admits that being involved in theatre has been inspirational for her because she has become more outgoing and is able to face others without any hesitation. She is not the only one. There are 30 other women, who feel the same, and see themselves as significant contributors in the process of social change.

"What contributed to this changed self-view?" Coming out of their comfort zones and experiencing the freedom to express themselves has contributed immensely to this change, which they are now trying to inculcate in others, by having 'forums' at various places. They believe that things will change when people stop being resigned to situations, break their 'culture of silence' and engage in a dialogue process for mass social change.

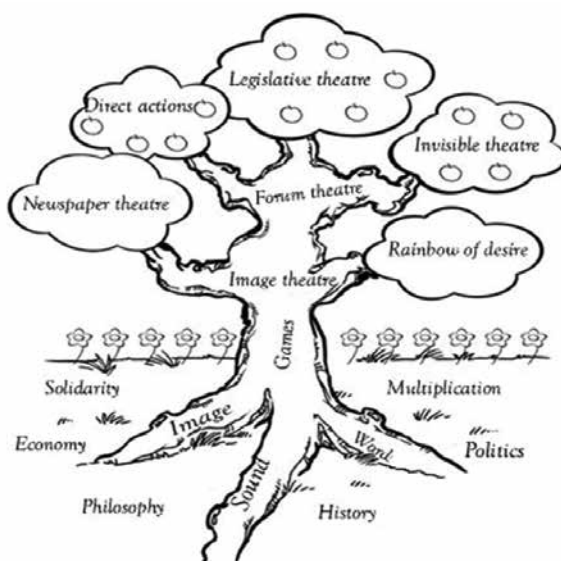
Here, it is relevant to explain the concept of 'Theatre of the Oppressed', which is derived from the philosophy of 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'. In 1968, educator and theorist Paulo Freire, in his book *Pedagogia do Oprimido*, proposed a *pedagogy* depicting a new relationship between the teacher, the student and society. This was translated by Myra Ramos into English as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970. In the book, Freire calls traditional pedagogy the 'banking model' because it treats the student as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge; in contrast, he advocates a pedagogy that treats the learner as the co-creator of knowledge. Freire explores how oppression has been justified and how it is perpetuated mutually by the 'oppressor' and the 'oppressed' and, during the process, how the balance of power remains relatively stable.

Freire admits that the powerless in society can be frightened of freedom. He writes, "Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an idea located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes a myth. It is, rather, the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion." He points out that freedom is the result of praxis-informed action—when a balance between theory and practice is achieved. He recommends dialogue as a device to free the oppressed, through the use of co-operation, unity and cultural synthesis, in contrast to anti-dialogue, which uses conquest, manipulation and cultural invasion. Freire suggests that populist dialogue is necessary to revolution; that impeding dialogue dehumanizes and supports the status quo.

Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal developed a theatrical form called 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. First elaborated in the 1960s, initially in Brazil, and later on in Europe,

the Theatre of the Oppressed is a series of theatrical analyses and critiques, developed in the 1950s. During the development of the Theatre of the Oppressed, Boal worked with many populations and tried many techniques and eventually different theatrical styles came to the fore, each using a different process to achieve a different result. Boal, in his philosophy, looks at the structure of the Theatre of the Oppressed as a 'Tree' with ethical roots that develop into direct and tangible actions. The roots of the tree are represented by the cultural synthesis and discourses in history and philosophy as well as economics and politics. The bottom of the tree has elements such as images, sounds and words, which form the aesthetics of the Theatre of the Oppressed *modus operandi*. The trunk is made up of the main techniques such as 'image theatre' and 'forum theatre' whereas the branches represent variations on these methods, viz., 'newspaper theatre', 'direct actions', 'legislative theatre', 'invisible theatre' and 'rainbow of desire'.

Tree of the Theatre of the Oppressed



In all these theatre forms, games and exercises form an integral part. These help to inspire the people to take the character of a partaker rather than remaining just an onlooker. Forum theatre came into being in Peru, in the 1970s, as part of a literacy programme, which is now one of the most effective means to reach out to people. Theatre of the Oppressed, like any other form, is principally based on the idea of dialogue and interaction between the audience and the performer. It is a means of igniting a process of social and political change whereby the audience becomes active, such that as 'spect-actors' they explore, analyze and transform the reality in which they are living. This theatrical process requires a neutral party to be at the centre of the proceedings and this individual is usually called the 'facilitator'.

In Boal's literature, the role of the facilitator is referred to as the 'joker', in reference to the neutrality of the joker card in a deck of playing cards. The joker takes responsibility for the logistics of the process and ensures a fair proceeding, but must never comment upon or intervene in the content of the performance, because that is the territory of the 'spect-actors'. This form lays emphasis on the significant need to prevent the isolation of the audience. The term 'spectator' somehow makes the participants mere recipients of the knowledge and advice which, in fact, is dehumanizing; hence, this form places the onus on the participants to feel, think and act and it restores the capacity for action in all its fullness.

The audience must also be a subject, an actor on an equal plane with those accepted

Theatre of the Oppressed, like any other form, is principally based on the idea of dialogue and interaction between the audience and the performer. It is a means of igniting a process of social and political change whereby the audience becomes active, such that as 'spect-actors' they explore, analyze and transform the reality in which they are living.

as actors. The actors, in turn, must also be spectators thereby eliminating the peril of them only portraying ideals while the audience remain the passive victims of those images. In this manner, the spectators no longer delegate the power to the characters, either to think or act in their place. They free themselves; they think and act for themselves and this process puts forward a proposition that, "theatre is not revolutionary in itself but is a rehearsal of a revolution".

When the Hazaribagh team became involved in the Gender Equality Programme (GEP), the one thing that was clear was that it cannot be treated just as a programme but needs to make a pragmatic impact and, therefore, it must be adopted as an approach. GEP was launched by PRADAN in 2011, funded by the UN Women-Fund for Gender Equality, with a goal that 'by 2020, rural women from marginalized communities and their collectives, in nine districts of four states of Central India, will be able to raise their voice against violations and access their political and economic rights, as mandated under the Central and State government policies'.

Hazaribagh was one of the districts under the programme and, as envisaged, the outcomes of the programme were directed towards enabling women, who are amongst the most oppressed. Whatever the means, the programme needed to act towards giving voice to the unheard. The voiceless must rise against injustice and bias, and have an understanding of all forms of discrimination—be it social, economic or political. It seemed to be a daunting task. In fact it is.

The team came up with many ways to reach out to the people, viz., by designing small modules on gender, patriarchy, governance, livelihood and rights, to be presented at the SHG level through conducting workshops, organizing campaigns, etc. It was also realized that there needs to be a process whereby thoughts for the mass consciousness could be triggered and a discourse started at the village level.

This was when the team came across the 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. For PRADAN, this methodology to bring about change came to the fore when a 'Theatre of the Oppressed' workshop was conducted with a batch of apprentices of PRADAN in their foundation course in Kesla in Madhya Pradesh. The response was fairly enthusing and it prompted the idea of adopting this form of theatre as one of the methodologies to bring about the change envisaged under the GEP.

From the onset, it was evident that the energy of this form could impact the larger society. During the initial meeting with Jayamala Iyer (called Jaya) at Karanjia, in Odisha, to formulate a plan of action, involving three teams of PRADAN—Hazaribagh, Karanjia (Mayurbhanj) and Koderma—the Women's Federation of Karanjia, 'Sampoorna', with whom a discussion was held regarding the possibilities of theatre as a medium to bring about the anticipated change under GEP, was very animated by the concept. In an hour, the Federation leaders came up with a play, depicting a case of discrimination in the area.

The enthusiasm of the women further strengthened the belief of the team that this process would go a long way in bringing about the change required. In fact, even its philosophy was quite in tune with what the

The workshop became a challenge because the team had no experience in acting or in performing before the community. It took time but the team accomplished this difficult task.

GEP intended to achieve. It was decided to include the theatre form as one of the processes in the programme. This process to bring change was initiated by inviting Jaya, a trained 'Theatre of the Oppressed' exponent, and Lokesh Jain, a trained theatre artiste, to conduct a workshop with some women leaders

from SHGs and the associative tiers of the Federation. Their brief was to chalk out plans to create theatre troupes, capable enough to stage forums on relevant social issues.

Realizing that the team too should have a fair understanding of the underlying philosophy and beliefs of the form, a workshop was designed by Jaya for the team members. She pointed out, "Our body has a language and a memory too, and until and unless we channelize the energy of our body to come out of the shackles, in which we have been tied it till date, we will not be in a position to engage others for social change. We cannot reach out to people through verbal communication alone."

Easier said than done! The workshop became a challenge because the team had no experience in acting or in performing before the community. It took time but the team accomplished this difficult task. The members not only participated in the workshop but also created some forums and staged them at various places. They came out of their comfort zone and also got hands-on-experience. It was important for the team to understand the fundamentals of 'forums' before preaching them to others or inviting people to become involved in the process. Participating in the workshop, the team realized that theatre was a very effective means of communication, wherein the mind, body and soul can be used to stimulate awareness and social consciousness in a community.

Another challenge was to form theatre groups from among the SHG members and enable them to create and stage forums. It was decided not to restrict the theatre performances to just the GEP but to make these an engagement tool of the 'Damodar Mahila Mandal Sangh, Hazaribagh' Federation.

The team shared this idea with the Federation, the response to which was encouraging. However, one concern was that this form was not a normal message delivery play, which anyway the Federation performed every year at their annual general meeting called the 'Mahadhiveshan'.

The earlier practice of conducting plays was in a formal setting, on stage where the troupe members needed to perform and leave. This new form, in contrast to the experiences so far, required the community to engage in a dialogue with the actors. A two-day workshop was organized with the Federation to introduce to the people the idea and concept of this theatrical form, with its focus on ushering in change. The Federation, at the end of the workshop, decided to form three theatre troupes in each of the three block-level Federations of Barhi, Chouparan and Padma.

The block-level Federations sent the interested women from the SHGs and the associative tiers of the Federation to attend the two-phase 'Theatre of the Oppressed' workshop, conducted by PRADAN. These selected women leaders went through the process of training their bodies, because the main focus of this form is to use the body, its movement, its flexibility and its reflexes, as a means of communication. The other aspects of the workshop were understanding theatre and its forms, learning the skills of creating plays on relevant issues, training for the joker role and

These selected women leaders went through the process of training their bodies, because the main focus of this form is to use the body, its movement, its flexibility and its reflexes, as a means of communication.

so on. Three groups emerged at the end of two-phase workshops, one in each of the three blocks.

These groups were involved in mobilizing people in the villages across class, caste and gender, around issues such as education, property rights of women, gender discrimination, etc. However,

the journey towards these performances was not smooth. The first obstacle was the reluctance of some of the members to stage a forum, in which the actors were in costumes and outfits and that too before a crowd in the village. The women were afraid of disapproval by their family members. To overcome this apprehension, the theatre groups chose to act in places where they were not known. The strategy adopted by them fell into place and after staging quite a few forums, these groups gained enough confidence to stage forums anywhere, including in their own village.

The groups were encouraged by the response they received to their performance. People, both men and women, gathered in large numbers, and the support, especially from the SHGs in the villages, boosted their confidence. However, there were occasions when it became difficult for the group to deal with the comments of the audience. Some people laughed at the women dressed in men's attire, making the troupe members uncomfortable. The groups, therefore, decided to meet every month and review their process of conducting events, their preparations, the learning and the probable steps to be followed to stage the forums smoothly. They also realized the importance of taking the SHGs and the Federation members from the selected village into confidence, to ensure the smooth functioning of the events.

The premise for the adoption of this methodology is the belief that 'when the deprived and downtrodden get together, they can bring about change'. They can become agents to trigger awareness and can mobilize opinion about socially relevant issues. The team formed three

groups, one in each of the blocks, under the guidance of the block-level Federations of Barhi, Chouparan and Padma. They also decided that these groups must function under the supervision of the Federations so that the performances do not become merely an activity but a part of the process to reach out to the masses.

These 30 members are also active in involving other women from their vicinities into this process so that the pool can be increased, and each Cluster can have one such group. Hopefully, along with other methodologies, theatre can become an effective means to engage people in the process of change.

The theatre groups, in consultation with their block-level Federations choose the venues of their performances on the basis of the accessibility of the hamlet, the relevant issues of the village, the presence of the SHGs. They then create a forum on a relevant topic. The theatre group usually comes to a village where the villagers have already been informed of the venue and the time. After reaching the village, the group invites people of the hamlet by singing songs and raising slogans to gather the audience to the venue.

The group stages a 'forum', which is actually an incomplete scripted drama. The action freezes at a point showing the oppressor tormenting his victim. The spectators are not just meant to be watching, they are expected

The premise for the adoption of this methodology is the belief that 'when the deprived and downtrodden get together, they can bring about change'.

to participate in the 'forum', by reacting to the situation. They are supposed to take on the role of the oppressed. Usually, a member of the audience completes the story: thus, the spectators are also called 'spect-actors'. The interested people are persuaded and invited by

the 'jokers' to come to the 'forum' one by one and give their opinion, more often than not, generating a heated discussion on the issue, on the probable actions that can be or need to be taken. The main purpose of the opinion-generation exercise is not to arrive at a solution but to trigger questions, which are again put forward to the audience for discussion. The idea is to involve the people in a dialogue rather than find remedies.

As already pointed out, 'Theatre of the Oppressed' is one of the many approaches adopted by the team to move towards the stated outcomes under the GEP. Other events of engagement such as games and exercises at the SHG level, issue-based rallies and campaigns are, therefore, supplemented or rather complemented by the 'forum theatre'.

The aim of these events is to trigger thoughts and actions, and to alter the set norms and attitudes. The three theatre groups are within the purview of the Federation, which plans and reviews these events so as to track the progress to the desired direction. Till September 2013, these three groups staged 106 shows in 108 hamlets of 54 villages across the three blocks. More than 13,300 spectators participated in these events and more than 550 people have come to the forum to state their views publicly. On an average, in each of the forums, about 125 people gathered in the audience and the average number of responses as 'spect-actors' was about five.

People across various sections, sex and age articulated their beliefs, and a comprehensive dialogue process has been initiated in the villages. These three groups have also promoted six new groups, which have staged 30 shows during the last year's Cluster *adhiveshan*, and plan to increase the number of theatre groups, which can initiate the journey towards a just and conscious society.

The theatre performances, training and workshops have helped create an environment of dialogue in the villages of Hazaribagh. The issues raised at the theatre events were later discussed in public forums such as the *gram sabhas* and other informal gatherings of the villagers. There have been instances when the people of the village, both men and women have, inspired by the thought-provoking theatre events in the villages, engaged in serious dialogue to alter set practices of society.

In Sonpura village, on the fringes of the forest, in Padma Block of Hazaribagh, people are trying break taboos and attempting to send their daughters and daughters-in-law for higher education.

In October 2012, two forum theatres were staged on the subject of education for girls in two hamlets of the village. Being a far-flung village, until then, the idea of sending girls for higher education was not even thought of. Even brides who came to the village were barred from completing their studies because education for women was considered worthless. The theatre group, with the help of the Padma Federation, identified this village as one of the many villages where such discrimination was prevalent and planned a forum theatre about the education of girls.

Before these theatre events were staged, exercises on the discrimination between girls and boys were conducted at the SHG level in the village. Because of the awareness created, as many as 250 people gathered to participate in the performances.

The theme of the forum was that a daughter-in-law is discouraged from pursuing her education and when she objects to it, her wishes are dismissed and her in-laws force her to forego the dream of education. During the staging of the play, action was frozen at a point when the husband is about to slap the woman and abuse her physically. The audience is stunned, some recognizing their own attitudes and behaviours reflected on stage. At this point, the people of the village were invited by Neelam, the 'joker', to take on the role of the daughter-in-law and respond to the situation; No one responded.

The joker continued to ask, "Do such situations arise in your village? How do you feel about this? Are you okay with it? Do you want to change it?"

There was not a single reply to these questions because the villagers were appalled at the representation of their own behaviour. A woman named Kanchan Devi, finally rose from her seat and came to the forum and simply said, "This is wrong. I will send my daughter-in-law to complete her education."

This one person's response encouraged the others to express their views publicly. It was the beginning of a discussion and a sharing of views about the problems of sending a girl child to study beyond the primary and secondary levels. People voiced their concerns around the safety of girls. This led to further dialogue about the issue of early marriage of girls.

These issues were brought up in the *gram sabha* meeting. The SHG members also began discussing the need for educating their daughters and daughters-in-law. Kanchan Devi sent her daughter-in-law to a higher secondary school. Another four women from the village followed. The SHG members even decided to convince the parents of those who were not sending their girls and daughters-in-law to pursue further education. People from all sections engaged in this discourse, taking a small step to tackle one of the many forms of discrimination.

The question that is often asked is whether these theatre performances have actually had any realistic impact in the villages. There are anecdotes of women, who have started discussing the forums staged at their villages, and there are instances where women have taken concrete action of sending their girl child for higher studies. Women and men of the villages have also started discussing the prevalent discrimination, but visible change has not really taken place. In fact, immediate change was never the expectation.

What these events aim to achieve is to trigger thoughts so that an environment can be created in the village for a dialogue to begin on the subject—an environment in which each person can put up their views and a comprehensive discussion takes place; where people can come up with solutions and actions against the discrimination.

A major challenge that the team is facing in the last two years is that the number of theatre troupes has not increased to what was planned in its initial phase. Moreover, the forum was supposed to be followed by Focussed Group Discussions (FGDs) at the village level, to

actualize and track the changes. This required concerted engagement, which the groups were not able to initiate.

However, the enriched understanding that the team and theatre groups have acquired will go a long way in bringing about the real changes that are envisaged. The theatre groups recently took the responsibility for building more theatre groups in their respective blocks so that the pool could be increased. The intention is that the forums do not simply remain events, but rather, take the shape of a movement.

A plan has been chalked out to organize the FGDs, in which forums have been staged, and to form and groom other theatre groups to expand to new areas. Above all, the learning and the experience of the women involved as actors and jokers have been invaluable. The vigour with which they design their forums and conduct themselves as performers is truly appreciable. As Neelam Devi, a joker from a theatre group, said, "In all other activities, the energy seems to fade by the end of the day but while doing theatre, the energy keeps on soaring; I don't know from where such energy comes."

Training Women in Farmer's Field Schools: Shifting Equations in Purulia

SOURANGSHU BANERJEE AND SHIV SANKALP

Bringing about a paradigm shift in power equations through training women in farmers' field schools, so that they are acknowledged for their contribution in the fields and the decisions they make, is a dynamic decision of the PRADAN team in Purulia—a process and a movement that will have far-reaching consequences

Women are the poorest among the poor. If women are to be at the centre of the change process, the recognition of women as farmers needs adequate attention. Even within a poor family, women are deprived of the recognition they deserve. They work longer hours than the men; yet they are not considered to be farmers. Often, in the various articulations by a state, women belonging to the poorer sections are not counted as a separate category but are, instead, clubbed under the umbrella of 'family'. Any policy, formulated for the poor, supports the family and not women separately. Because their contribution and their plight go unrecognized, women's poverty needs separate and strategic attention.

WOMEN AND AGRICULTURE

PRADAN's Purulia team works with women—the most-deprived section of society. We in the team realized the need for developing a vision for change. With the help of the Gender Equality Programme (GEP), we visualized a different scenario for the women. So far, the endeavours had been limited to collectivizing women into groups, which did not necessarily ensure women's empowerment and did not take into account the plight of the woman farmer.

India's agricultural sector today faces issues of efficiency due to the lack of mechanization. Farm sizes are small and the farmers poor. According to the 2011 statistics, the average farm in India is about 1.5 acres, minuscule when compared the average of 50 ha in France, 178 ha in the United States and 273 ha in Canada. The small farm tradition in India is a result of the first farm reforms of independent India. Known as the Laws of Divided Inheritance, the reforms were meant to limit the accumulation of land by mandating redistribution and dividing the land among male inheritors of the previous generation. The perpetuation of these laws not only limits farm size but also bars women from ownership or inheritance.

According to the recent data from the Planning Commission, 75 per cent of the total female work force is in the agrarian sector and 85 per cent of the total rural female work force is engaged in the agriculture sector. That is, 75 per cent of women work force is engaged in producing 13.7 per cent of the total GDP. In the primary sector, mainly two types of employment options are available. One is own-farm cultivation and the other is wage labourer. Recent statistics indicate that only 9.21 per cent of the rural women have agricultural land ownership. This necessarily does not mean that the rest of the women are employed as wage labourers, but definitely implies that most of them are engaged in agricultural activities in fields that belong to either their spouses or their fathers-in-law.

The agrarian sector offers seasonal employment opportunities; in the busy season, many women are gainfully employed as wage labour; however, in the lean season or in the fall of season, women's labour in maintenance and preparation for farm activities remains unnoticed. Even in the busy season, women are not gainfully employed for the entire period. Instead, they take on the extra burden of working on other people's fields after completing work in the fields owned by their spouses, for which they don't receive any direct gain. Women lack the freedom to be employed gainfully. Their availability to work is highly regulated by the families' decisions and their needs. Adding to this, minimal land rights over the agricultural land shrinks their decision-making powers substantially. The nature of economics has reduced women to subservient and exploited economic agents in the sector.

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Traditionally, women's roles in agriculture are specified by various societal norms that are strictly gendered. These gendered role expectations in agriculture make women more vulnerable, subject them to exploitation and deny them access to resources and recognition in society. These norms not only exert control over women's labour but also on their expression, body and sexuality.

In India, there are regional disparities in the gender norms and role expectations in agriculture; however, the politics behind these remain the same. Patriarchy deploys all possible ways and means to perpetuate the system. In Chhattisgarh, it is taboo for women to sow seeds. In West Bengal, women are not allowed to use the plough, which, as an implement, is considered holy. If the women touch the plough, it is considered a serious sacrilege and calls for punitive action.

Ploughing a field is also attached to the notion of land ownership and land is considered feminine. Only men/owners can penetrate the land with a plough. So denying women the right to even touch a plough actually denies them land rights and allows the landowner to control her sexuality. Also, according to customary laws, because women are not the landowners, they have to depend on their spouses—the owners—for survival. This, in turn, arms the men to control women and their bodies.

Ploughing is considered critical to agriculture whereas the more tedious work such as transplanting, weeding, carrying cow dung and harvesting is considered to be unskilled work and can be performed by women.

Decision-making about whether to fertilize and use pesticides lies in the domain of men because they are the more 'knowledgeable' gender, and the identity of the farmer is attached to it, also an attribute of masculinity. On the other hand, women don't have access to the market or, therefore, to knowledge related to inputs and techniques. Naturally, the agricultural decision-making power, therefore, is assumed by the men.

Women are supposed to just perform certain tasks in farming. Though these constitute the lion's share of agricultural activities and are labour intensive, they remain unrecognized as work and become a part of the gender role that women are expected to perform. Women's knowledge and skills about transplantation, weeding, reserving seeds, etc., are placed lower in the hierarchy of agricultural knowledge.

Furthermore, women are paid at least 20 per cent less than men if both are employed as wage labour. The volume of work is not taken into account. This discrimination happens more because of the perception that women are physically less capable than men. So, the women have no role to play in the decision-making process and, in other respects, they are projected as less capable. Together, these shape them as secondary partners in agriculture.

These perceptions about women are constantly reiterated to establish them as less capable. Knowledge and other resources are withheld from them, and they are strategically imprisoned in family and society, therefore, strengthening patriarchy. The structural indoctrination also makes women fit into the system in which they also begin to think of themselves as less capable and subservient members of society.

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In Purulia, we observed that there are slight differences in the decision-making procedures across caste. Tribal women enjoy a little more space in their community than the women belonging to the OBCs. With an average family size of six and a land holding size of half to one acre, the major decisions in agriculture are taken by the men. A simple exercise to analyze the sharing of tasks

between men and women in paddy cultivation yielded interesting results. Women perform 60 per cent of the work alone; 20 per cent of the work is done by both men and women; and only 20 per cent of the work is done by men alone. This was then contrasted with the amount of control they have over the produce. If a woman tries to dissuade her husband from selling the produce to get money to get drunk, she is beaten up and abused. The husband usually abuses her by saying, "*Tor baaper khacchi?* (Am I eating what belongs to your father?)"

Incidents such as the husband getting married again because his wife has fallen sick and is no longer able to work hard in the fields are not uncommon. If a woman suggests cultivation of a particular crop and the man does not agree to it, he will not plough the field, leaving the woman helpless. She cannot even hire a tractor or draft power on her own to get the field ploughed by someone else. If she were to somehow manage to get it done, she would be subjected to violence. A common form of violence is verbal abuse, "*Aekhon onno lok dia hal korcchis, or ghore gia thakte hobe tokey.* (You have hired another to plough the field, so you have to stay with him from now onwards.)" Or "*Tor baaper jomi je onno lok dia hal korli? Amar bari theke beria ja* (Is it your father's field that you ploughed? Get

lost from my house).” Physical violence usually accompanies such verbal abuse.

Whenever there was a meeting for agricultural planning, the husband’s presence was imperative. On many occasions, if the men were not present, the women went home from the meeting to seek the permission of their menfolk to make little changes in the crop practice; or they brought their spouses or fathers-in-law back with them, to understand what was being said because the women did not consider themselves capable of understanding what needed to be done.

Often, the men did not participate in the agriculture meeting in spite of having been invited. The perception is that women cannot do agriculture. “*Verir ghot, uhader abar budhi/ mayechele loker buddhi*. (Flock of sheep with brains/women with brains.)” are what men say in public. In the busy season, women work in the fields, sometimes for as long as nine to ten hours, in addition to completing all the household chores; they are, however, never regarded as farmers and neither is their knowledge recognized or valued.

The team has been looking for a strategy where at least some agricultural knowledge can be provided to the women, without compromising on outreach or quality. The age-old male service provider-driven, hand-holding support in agriculture extension methodology, followed by PRADAN, needed to be changed. Although this approach had proved effective in increasing production, it consistently failed to make available any agricultural knowledge to women. With all the service providers being male, the women developed a hierarchical relationship with them. Obviously, in many places, it resulted in holding the women guilty

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for any crop failure or for not being able to learn.

Moreover, the primary decision-makers being the male members, women found it difficult to follow what the service providers suggested. On the occasions when the service providers directly consulted

with the men, the women found it easy to follow the technique, and because the men were the primary recipients of the knowledge, the women were again unrecognized in the process. The men recognize that because of the women’s association with the SHG institutions, many developments have been possible, both in agricultural productivity and technique. It has not, however, altered the status of women in society. It has not provided women the expected decision-making authority and neither are they acknowledged as knowledgeable agriculturalists in society.

CHANGED APPROACH

Soon after the team integrated issues relating to gender in its approach, the prime focus shifted from family as a unit to the individual woman. The vision around agriculture broadened with the new perspective. The team realized that productivity enhancement may lead to economic benefit in the family but it may not necessarily benefit women. It does not empower women with enhanced mobility or financial benefits. The men do not recognize that the women have an increased knowledge of agriculture even though the team’s primary engagement has always been with women.

The Cluster was the team’s nodal point of communicating with the women, and team members decided to equip the Cluster so that it could orchestrate the agriculture programme towards reducing gender discrimination.

Cluster representatives, and not necessarily the Cluster leader, were trained to do the agricultural planning in their respective SHGs. They underwent various training programmes to mobilize other women to participate in agriculture. A major part of these training programmes comprised a critical analysis of the women's status in agriculture from a gender perspective. They used their new understanding to excite other women to actively participate in agriculture.

The team followed the farmer's school concept in agriculture. The farmer's field school model is based on the adult learning methodology wherein, it is said, that unlike children, adults learn by their experience on planned activity and continuous reflection, followed by a re-plan. A demonstration plot was selected and a farmer's school was organized. Strict norms, such as the participants have to be women only, were put in place. The farmer's school was run on a specific crop or a crop group. Women who had planned to grow that particular crop attended the farmer's school. Usually four to five separate demonstrations were conducted at the various stages of the crop. A brief meeting was designed before every demonstration, during which the women shared their field experience from the previous demonstration. The entire package of practices (POP) was broken down into four or five modules. Each was to be taught in a separate demonstration.

The purpose was to make women more confident about working in agriculture so that they could also think of themselves as farmers and could actively take part in decision-making. A black-board carrying the names of the women attending the farmer's school was

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placed in a prominent place in the village, mainly to establish the women's identity as farmers. Around 3,000 women from three different blocks participated in the farmer's field school.

Although the farmer's school model was able to ensure that the knowledge was transmitted

to women directly and also made women and their names more visible in public, their dependency on men remained high, especially because all the Service Providers (SPs) were male. Moreover, the SPs were being paid; thus, the notion that men were always engaged in productive work was reinforced.

Keeping these points in mind, the team tried to build upon the previous year's experience. In the team's mid-term review, it was articulated that taking the services of a male SP indicates that the core team does not believe that women can also manage the critical knowledge input and disseminate it. In a way, this was dis-empowering and women saw themselves as completely dependent on the males for any knowledge inputs.

The team has gradually abandoned the traditional SP-dependent agriculture intervention and has arrived at a system in which women spearhead the programme. Neo-literate women (women who have attended the adult functional literacy centre for three years) have been encouraged to assume this new role. A decision was taken to broaden the leadership base. The underlying assumption was that through this many new leaders would emerge.

Team Purulia took this opportunity to integrate its pilot adult functional literacy project with livelihood intervention and gender. Women were identified, based on the achievement

data of the literacy programme. They were trained on how to make a plan. In Jhalda-1 Block, the planning process was conducted in the literacy centre. These women made a plan for around 2,835 women across 300 SHGs.

Data about the women, who attended the farmers' field school the previous year, were taken into account. The two sets of data were tallied and another group of women selected. They were to be the agriculture trainers. Women were selected, based on the competencies with a particular crop that they had developed in the farmers' field school.

The entire planning data of a village were scrutinized and the women were segregated, according to the similarity of the crops they were planning to grow. In the first meeting, the women were introduced to the other women that they would train with. Thus, those who had developed a command over the bottle gourd cultivation were introduced to the bottle gourd farmers of that village. A

similar process was followed for all the other crops.

In Barabazar Block, a hundred women were selected to conduct farmer's field schools and act as agricultural trainers. Each trainer was responsible for training an average of five to eight women. The trainer was someone known to the women, perhaps a co-member of their group. It was a non-remunerative role; therefore, the other women welcomed it spontaneously.

The POP, called *Krishi Darpan*, was printed in a large font for the convenience of the trainers. PRADAN Executives provided support to the trainers. There are three levels of meetings between the team and the trainers. Before every demonstration, the Executives discuss the process with the trainers, to encourage them. In the first five to six demonstrations, an Executive's presence with the trainers was mandatory. After the demonstration, the group meets once again for reflection.

Jormani Mandi, now in her 40s, got married at the age of 15 and is a mother of six children. Last year, her husband passed away. Her only education was in the adult functional literacy centre. Being the sole bread-earner of her family, she needed to work harder in the fields than the others. She has been a sincere participant of the farmers' field school. When the idea to teach agriculture to other women was shared with her, she was very excited. She liked the idea of sharing the skills she had acquired from attending the farmers' field school. For her, it was recognition of her capability by the village and her SHG. It was also a way for her to express herself. She often used the example of her own life to motivate other women, "*Amra saradin to kaj kori, kintu kaj kore hocche ta ki? Saradin kaj kori aar rate matal aar hate mar khali; abar amader kichu kore dekhate hobe. Somman pete hobe.* (We work hard the entire day but what do we get in return for that in our life? We work all day long and are roughed up at night by our drunken husbands. The time has come. We now need to do something, we need to gain respect)." She proudly narrates that she has taught cucumber cultivation on a trellis (locally known as *machan*. It's a structure constructed with the help of bamboo, GI wire and nylon thread for the proper cultivation of creeper crops) to Sarubali, Shyamoli, Lilmoni, Jhuni, etc. She concludes, "*Khub bhalo lage je didira sikche, ora rojgar korche; sobai aekhono korche na, oderkeo korate hobe.* (I feel immensely happy that women are learning and earning. However, there are still many who are left behind. We need to rope them in also)."

Through the process, many leaders emerged. Women revelled in their new role and identity. They could consult with the trainers, as and when required. All these steps took the women farmers to a new level of confidence. Interestingly, the entire process was non-remunerative and based on the principle of lateral transmission. The main strength of the approach of it being rooted in the allegiance and cohesiveness of the primary group—the SHG—was that the women assumed the new role quickly and happily.

The team has reached 92 per cent of the target families, in case of vegetable cultivation, 80 per cent have been reached. Another significant achievement is that of the total agricultural families, 67 per cent have been covered through food crop and cash crop intervention. As many as 586 farmers' field schools have been organized and, by August 2013, as many as 157 CSPs/Trainers had completed 1,533 demonstrations with SHG members, generating 9,812 trainee days. PRADAN professionals were present at 20 per cent of the demos. About eight families were covered per SHG, which is quite high. The coverage of the area under each crop per family is also higher than planned.

Introducing women agricultural trainers (69 per cent of the total) for the demonstration entailed a lot of hand-holding both pre- and post-demonstration. However, the team faced the challenge enthusiastically. Although the women quite readily accepted the role of trainers, preparing them for the job required time and inputs. Conducting a series of meetings pre- and post-demonstrations, followed by hand-holding support through the actual demonstration, called for massive managerial abilities.

Whereas the women were ready to participate in the training, the men were not ready for

the shift. The team had to strategize, starting from the planning stage, to address these complexities. Unlike in the past, the team focussed on preparing specific crop planning rather than an elaborate planning for the entire year. The approach seemed pragmatic for the team because the focus shifted away from trying to influence the entire crop choice. The men were then able to see it only as an experiment. The women were encouraged to concentrate on a specific crop and tap the maximum profit from it. The approach has proved to be effective in curbing the resistance from the men.

The women also faced the problem of the curiosity of the men when they demonstrated agriculture to other women. Ensuring women's participation in the farmer's school required that the women leaders as well as professionals step in at various stages. The collective strength of the Clusters played a crucial role in mobilizing women to participate in the farmer's school.

Women have shown their potential for adopting and disseminating advanced agricultural knowledge and techniques. This is a step towards women being recognized as central to agricultural knowledge and practice. The ball has just started rolling. So far, the team's experience has been encouraging. It is true that the team is not equally experienced across locations. Interventions, so far, have been largely directed at the capacity-building of women. The challenges before the team are to effectively link women's authority of decision-making with their enhanced knowledge, and then to surpass it. So far, things have not been in total harmony although there were no major clashes either. Establishing women's authority over production and decisions, based on their new-found knowledge, poses a threat for men. The team has to deal with this aspect delicately.

The Change in My Perceptions

GYAN PRASAD SHARMA

Working on gender-related issues such as domestic violence and social discrimination that affect their lives and dignity has brought women closer to each other and has given them insights into how much they have suffered silently as well as how they are themselves the perpetrators of regressive customs and traditions

When I look back and reflect on whether the training programmes, events and discussions that we organized for the women in the villages have had any impact on me personally or have brought about any changes in my team members, I realize that there has definitely been a shift—as if we have shifted gear from low to high. The change is perceptible in the manner of functioning of the team.

The team has been working on many fronts of governance such as the PDS, the Indira Awas Yojana and social security schemes; on issues of domestic violence (DV) and other women-related issues, however, the work earlier varied depending on the proclivity of the professionals towards these issues.

The impact of our efforts was limited to those areas in which SHGs and Clusters were strong, and where these had taken some action regarding issues of violence against their members. The protests were sporadic in nature, and mainly reactive rather than proactive. The women and even the team members had very poor knowledge about the different forms of violence. Apparently, no one had really thought about this aspect earlier.

Even when some members brought up their problems in the meetings, the issues were not given priority by the facilitator or other members. The issues were relegated to the background to be discussed separately when the facilitator was not present. When engaging with the community, my aim used to be to finish my agenda first, which could range from checking SHG accounts, organizing a Cluster meeting, facilitating a loan repayment, grading of the group or agriculture planning. It was only after all these had been dealt with that the personal issues of the women were discussed.

I used to share with my colleagues my concerns about issues, other than the credit and livelihood issues that we dealt with every day, that affect the lives of the women but I was not sure how I could engage with them, what my stance could be and how far I could become involved in dealing with these issues. The action plan and review meetings in the team focussed more on the output rather than the outcome.

These issues bothered us as a team yet we were hesitant to step in and become involved. However, one day in 2009, when we had just finished conducting the visioning of our Federation and Cluster across the three blocks of Padma, Barhi and Chouparan, the members of the Federation voiced their desire to focus on issues of violence against women.

The leaders of the three blocks clearly articulated their desire to work on issues of social discrimination and injustice—ranging from dowry to violence and other issues affecting the dignity and lives of women. They were aware of their power as a Federation and were confident that with the backing of members, they could influence their family, society, village, *panchayat*, police and other government institutions.

The members were eager to bring about a change in their lives. They wanted to live with dignity and the only way they thought they could do so was to work together, extend their support to each other and raise their voice collectively against any injustice.

The team wanted to work with women for their empowerment. During the perspective planning meeting of the team, the focus of the vision, the objective and the goal setting shifted; it was looked at from the point of view of women, which was different from before.

The most significant change that I see in myself and my colleagues is in our approach to our work. We devote more time to the Gender Equality Programme (GEP). The Hazaribagh team now focuses on evolving a methodology of engagement at the community level, which will result in the desired outcome. However, it

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has not been easy. The women who dreamt of an equal society were not large in number. There were only a few who were aware and were articulating a dream they had for the thousands of oppressed women, who were resigned to their fate. The majority not only believed in the existing social system but also propagated it. It was important to create awareness among them and to bring about a paradigm shift in our own thoughts and actions.

In order to reach out to the women, the team decided to build upon the community resource base, that is, the women leaders. A pool of facilitators was created from among the women leaders of the SHGs and the associative tiers. These women leaders were responsible for mobilizing and facilitating groups on issues of gender, governance, rights and livelihood.

These leaders attended various training programmes organized by professionals from JAGORI and PRADAN. The women gained a better understanding of gender, deepening their understanding of socialization, patriarchy and power relations. They were also sensitized about the violence against women—the different forms of violence, the mechanisms to deal with these forms, in their own lives as well as in society.

Four 'working committees', were formed at the Cluster as well as the Federation levels on Nyay Samiti, Adhikar Samiti, Rozgar Samiti and Mahila Mandal Sahyogi Samiti, to provide support and guidance on issues of justice, entitlement, livelihood and SHGs.

Because there was a need to increase and broaden the base of the leadership pool,

some structural changes were introduced in the Federation, which are, at present, in the nascent stage. In addition, training and capacity building of Community Service Providers

(CSPs) and Community Resource Persons (CRPs) was undertaken, on the basis of their skills and competencies, to deliver services to SHGs and associative tiers. At present, there are three separate pools of resource persons: *Nyay Sakhis* for legal counselling and support, *Krishi Sahyogi* for agriculture support and *Sahyogi* for SHG-related functioning.

Resource Persons and Service Providers have been exposed to various types of training programmes, conducted by in-house trainers, as well as by bringing in expert institutions and professionals on aspects such as gender-related issues, legal issues, entitlements, *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs), etc.

Apart from this, theatre was also used as a medium for women to express themselves and to articulate their feelings on various issues. Tool kits were assembled and exercises introduced to create awareness about social issues such as discriminatory practices in society vis-a-vis the boy and the girl child, work distribution and assets, institutional mapping, and DV issues. These resources were meant to be used by women leaders in their day-to-day meetings. The team also motivated the women leaders to form modules on their own. The DV module and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) module have been prepared by the women leaders, who were given training on these aspects.

The team also realized that just conducting training programmes would not bring about the desired change. The women needed a platform at the basic level, to discuss these issues further. SHGs could be the avenue through

Theatre was also used as a medium for women to express themselves and to articulate their feelings on various issues.

which training programmes could be conducted and where members could frequently hold discussions because they were from the same hamlets. The discussions could then be shared

with the Cluster for cross-learning purposes.

Further, to reach a large number of people, we needed to disseminate information to women leaders of the Clusters and Federations. However, we were skeptical about whether the women would do what we were expecting them to. We decide to give it a try anyway.

This was the first step—what we thought was the need of the hour then. We trusted in their capability and, over a period of time, the methodology of our work began to change. Even the women leaders feel very motivated, and say that they now have a purpose, which they are carrying forward to the other women.

The issues of gender and violence, entitlements and governance were flagged, with the women leaders staging theatre performances and by organizing camps on various issues at the village and the *panchayat* levels.

To break gender stereotypes and taboos associated with women in society, women's football matches were organized in Cluster *adhiveshans*, and a women's football tournament was organized at the district level. It was a big achievement to see women coming out of their homes and playing football, which is viewed mainly as a male sport.

These training programmes, events and discussions not only brought changes in the women but also in me. I was shaken when I first heard the stories of these women. I had never realized the biases that women had to face in their homes. With no voice, no control and no decision-making power, they work

as labourers in their husband's homes from where they can be thrown out at any time on any minor issue. I struggle to describe these women—are they weak or strong? A person needs to be strong to bear so much discrimination.

The stories of brutality and violence began to surface soon after the first gender training of these women. It was perhaps because the women now had a platform to share their stories. They had, until then, thought that women had no choice but to suffer in silence. My concern about whether these training programmes would have an impact and whether the women would really understand the message behind them has dissolved when I see that the programme has touched them to the very core and they have embraced it with their hearts.

Gender training programmes, focused on issues of discrimination between a boy and a girl child during the whole life cycle, from division of work in a home to the ownership of assets, have triggered a tremendous response. The people now understand and relate to the issues of discrimination they had faced during their own lifetime; they are now aware that they are also guilty of perpetuating this discrimination with their children in their homes.

The discussions now revolve around what they can do to reduce or curb the discriminatory practices in their homes so that their daughters get what they deserve and the sons become more sensitive. The women have realized how they themselves were stopping their daughters from going to school and how they are biased toward their sons. They restrict their daughters to the home, so that they get help in household

Many women have come forward to share how they have made positive changes in their lives after attending these training programmes. Many of them say that they are now sending their girls to private schools.

chores whereas they allow their sons to wander free. Many women have come forward to share how they have made positive changes in their lives after attending these training programmes. Many of them say that they are now sending their girls to private schools. Some of the women from Ankurhwa Cluster stated that they are now

sending their girls to Hazaribagh for higher studies in college.

They say that they have realized that their girls can opt for employment in future and could be independent and secure in their lives. Many women shared that there is discrimination during the birth rituals also. The practice of *Chatiyari* for the girl child is performed after the fifth day of birth with minimum celebrations as compared to the boy child's birth, which is celebrated on a grander scale six days after his birth. The whole village is invited, through the ritual beating of the plate. After the women have become aware, they have begun to celebrate the birth of their girl child in the same manner as the birth of a boy. They now see the discrimination that women face through their lives and have begun to share their experiences.

I feel very delighted when in Cluster meetings and other assemblies, women speak about the different forms of gender discrimination they face and how they are now working on eliminating it.

One such memorable story was that of the women of Jhapa village. They had tried to break some of the myths regarding widowed women. The practice in the village was that the widows were allowed to draw water from the well only after every other woman had finished taking water. They had broken

this trend in their village. They also started the trend of giving widows a chance to participate in the *parchan* (a practice of welcoming the new bride into the home) ceremony, which they were hitherto not allowed to be a part of. One woman had strongly stated, "*Pati mar gaya to mera sharir nasudh ho gaya kya. Ek to man mein bojh hai upar se samaj ka riti riwaj. Sab hum logon ko dabane ke liye*

hi banaya gaye hain. (Has my body become impure with the death of my husband? As it is there is so much pain inside and to top it the rituals and laws of the society suppress us)." This was supported by almost every member present in the meeting. Women, neglected in their home and in society, are now coming forward to raise their voice collectively.

A dalit SHG member shared with other members about the day some tyrants tried to molest her and she had somehow saved herself. She went to the police station the next morning along with a few women leaders. I had also accompanied them. The police registered the FIR but under very weak sections. We were not satisfied. The next day about 250 women leaders came forward to help her and finally a strong FIR was registered.

This is a very common practice in our society. The cases relating to violence and violations against women are easily dismissed, with police stations and other institutions usually turning a blind eye. The women are treated badly in offices and harassed in many ways so that they drop the case. Even when they try to mobilize the authorities for quick action, the case is registered under weaker laws to favour the men.

I have started looking beyond the picture, regarding women's issues. Earlier I used to focus more on the nitty-gritty of the situation; now I sense a change. I would term the change as 'kaizen' because I am growing as a human being and the change is happening almost daily.

Patriarchal society finds it difficult to accept that a woman would dare to go to a police station to complain or lodge an FIR against a bunch of village hooligans, and that too for an attempt to rape. In this case, even the political leader had instructed the police to somehow dismiss the FIR. The women went forward and surrounded the police station in protest. They demanded to talk to the DSP, who was responsible

for any cases pertaining to atrocities on those belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The DSP came to the site and finally the women were able to lodge the FIR. Change is possible. It requires a great deal of perseverance.

The training programmes, the regular discussions in various forums and the empathetic relations that have developed among them have helped women to collectivize. This is not limited to one or two cases. It is increasing and continually evolving. The collectives were already present and mobilization around issues and the empathy for other women is the main cause for the change that is taking place.

I have started looking beyond the picture, regarding women's issues. Earlier I used to focus more on the nitty-gritty of the situation; now I sense a change. I would term the change as 'kaizen' because I am growing as a human being and the change is happening almost daily. (Kaizen is a Japanese philosophy for process improvement that can be traced to the meaning of the Japanese words 'Kai' and 'Zen', which translate roughly into 'to break apart and investigate' and 'to improve upon the existing situation'). The training programmes and the

time my team members and I have spent with these women are helping us to evolve. The more I interact with them, the deeper is my search for answers. My colleagues too are in the same boat. The resonance between us also helps me understand women-related issues better.

I now see that patriarchy plays a role, not only in our field area but also in our homes and localities. On my visits home, I have voiced my concerns about discrimination to my parents. I realized that earlier I used to think the difference in treatment between genders was

natural but with my increasing awareness, I began to notice the discrimination in my home as well. It is happening everywhere and in every house. One of my colleagues once said, "Where do we begin to pull the chords so that equality can be brought in the whole society. At least, I will try to bring about change in my home first."

Listening to the problems of gender discrimination and violence, I realize that we need to find solutions together. It is difficult work and we have miles to go before we reach a society of equality.

Nari Adalat: Justice for Women and Women for Justice

BANDANA DEVI

Positioned as a social justice system between wronged village women and the formal legal mechanism, the Nari Adalat plays a significant role in bringing about conflict resolution within families, ensuring that the voice of the woman is heard and she lives a life of dignity

INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS SOCIAL JUSTICE

Many forms of judicial proceedings exist in India, creating a decentralized system of justice. Alternative local dispute resolution in the sphere of social justice has been practised since historical times—some of these still exist such as the *panch*, the *jati panchayat* and the *khap panchayat*.

In 1950, the concept of *nyaya panchayats* emerged along with the traditional *panchayats*. Unlike traditional *panchayats*, the *nyaya panchayats* were designed to follow statutory laws, rather than indigenous practices. Other than these, Public Interest Litigation (early 1980s), *Lok Adalats* (1982), Family Courts (1984), and Legal Services Authority (1987) also emerged gradually.

Lok Adalats were first conceptualized in Gujarat in 1982. Members of the legal profession, college students, social organizations, charitable and philanthropic institutions and other similar organizations are associated with *Lok Adalats*. The salient features of this system of dispute resolution are participation, accommodation, fairness, expectations, voluntariness, neighbourliness, transparency and lack of animosity. After studying a case, *Lok Adalats* try to resolve simple differences through mutual understanding and compromise—differences that otherwise may have far-reaching consequences.

In 1985, the Government of India constituted the Department of Women and Children and, in 1986, the National Education Policy demonstrated a level of progressiveness with its policy of 'Education for Women's Equality'. The Mahila Samakhya Programme, which began in three States, was a direct consequence of this policy. It was influenced by the realization that equality and equity for women could not evolve only through economic development of poor women but had to stem from a process of socio-political empowerment that made women themselves the main agents of their transformation.

The first *Nari Adalat* began operations beneath a *neem* (margosa) tree in September 1995 in front of the *Taluk Panchayat Bhawan* in Vadodara. Now, there are 29 *Nari Adalats* in six districts of Gujarat. The *Mahila Samakhya* programme (MS programme) is an initiative of the central government for empowering rural women. Between 1995 and 2001, as many as 1,200 cases were resolved in Vadodara.

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Gradually, the model has been replicated in other states of the country such as Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Experienced members from Vadodara began training the members from these states.

Incidents of domestic violence, marital abuse and other forms of gender-based violence were brought into the public eye through mass mobilization, which took different forms in different Indian States. Modelled on a similar concept, the *Nari Adalat...Insaaf ki Awaaz*, is run voluntarily by the women groups of Damodar Mahila Mandal Sangh (DMMS), a women's organization working in Koderma district of Jharkhand.

DAMODAR MAHILA MANDAL SANGH

The DMMS is a group of federated poor women from several villages, mobilized by PRADAN. Initially, it was a collectivization of all the 32 villages, evacuated for the construction of Tellaiya Reservoir by Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC). The DMMS mobilized the people to fight against DVC, to fulfill the demands of the people for compensation and rehabilitation.

The handing over of the legal documents of the land distributed by the DVC was a big issue. The villagers had some other demands as well such as the construction of roads, a school building, installation of hand pumps for drinking water, infrastructure creation to facilitate irrigated agriculture, input distribution of agriculture and a health awareness programme, which had been promised to them but had not been implemented.

In 1992, PRADAN started work in these villages with the objective of impacting livelihoods. They began by organizing women into Self Help Groups (SHGs), leading to the formation of DMMS. There are about 10,000 women members organized into about 900 SHGs in five blocks of Koderma district: Chandwara, Jainagar, Satgawan, Koderma and Domchanch. The foundation of DMMS is its village-level SHGs, followed by the Clusters formed by combining SHGs of two to three villages. Two members from each SHG are selected as Cluster members, and two members from each Cluster are selected to come to the block level, which is known as a Federation, or the General Body (GB).

Gradually, apart from livelihoods, other social issues also began to be addressed in SHGs and Clusters. If the SHG was not able to solve an issue, it was taken to the Cluster and from there, if needed, to the Federation. Within the structure, there are various roles played by the members such as: agriculture service providers, SHG service providers, paralegals and women leaders. These role players are provided training by PRADAN and they help create awareness amongst the masses residing at the grass roots. The *Nari Adalat* is an outcome of the need of those members of

the DMMS and even outside the DMMS who were facing abuse—mentally, physically and sexually by their husbands or their families, a problem that was found to be rampant and widespread in Koderma.

NARI ADALAT... INSAAF KI AWAAZ: THE BEGINNING

Many training programmes and workshops were conducted for the women of DMMS. In 2006, PRADAN, partnering with JAGORI (a Delhi-based NGO working on women's issues), provided a four-day training on 'Gender and Patriarchy' to 45 women from the Chandwara Block. In March 2007, an exposure visit to the *Nari Adalat* run by DISHA (an NGO working on women's empowerment), in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, was organized by PRADAN, for the women leaders. The leaders got an opportunity to follow and learn the procedure that DISHA uses to run the *Adalat*. These training programmes and exposure visits encouraged the women to share their problems with their peers, resulting in many cases of violence coming to light and being taken up at the SHG level; if not solved, these were taken up at the Cluster and the Federation levels. Women leaders took the initiative to bring cases from the villages to the SHGs. A visioning exercise was conducted in the General Body meeting and the women began to understand the need for such an initiative. They spoke of why a forum such as the *Nari Adalat* was needed. They thought that there was need for greater intervention in women's issues such as in the physical abuse that women face; husbands getting married a second time; the lack of value for women in village-level, conflict resolution bodies; and their dependency on men for justice (due to the patriarchal system, the village-level conflict resolution body does not provide justice to women).

With the aim of helping women overcome such hurdles, some of the leaders began moving from village to village searching for cases to resolve. They met once a month to review their progress and the challenges that they faced. In the process, women leaders began to participate in the village-level conflict resolution body (the *panchayats*). They began to speak up in the village forum, where they started to get some recognition. SHG members started to invite them for conflict resolution and they were appreciated for their fair decisions.

Gradually, the number of cases in the Clusters began to increase. After two years of such interventions, the women realized that it was not possible to solve the cases in an SHG or a Cluster meeting, and they needed something more formal. Significant amount of time and additional skills were required to listen to a victim, her family members and the accused, and then to come to a conclusion. The Cluster and the SHG meetings had many other matters to discuss.

For leaders to go from village to village was also not possible on a regular basis; every case required a minimum of three to five meetings, and follow-up required continuous engagement. Cases and decisions needed to be documented in detail for future reference, and educated women were required to do this. The DMMS made a decision to give the appellants a specific time-frame, to solve their cases. Based on these learnings and ideas, the *Nari Sahayata Kendra* was initiated in two Clusters, namely, Madangundi and Tham in Chandwara block in April 2010.

Simultaneously, PRADAN, in collaboration with JAGORI and realizing the need for greater focus on women's issues, initiated the Gender Equality Programme (GEP) in 2010. Under this programme, training programmes

are provided to SHG members on gender and patriarchy, violence, the availability of assistance to women through various government schemes, etc. The awareness created encouraged the women to bring to light the violence they were being subjected to. It took on such a momentum that cases of violence were registered almost every day.

The advantage of this system is that these complaints are attended to by women from the same community as those who were registering their complaints. The *Nari Sahayata Kendra* over time changed into the *Nari Adalat...Insaaf ki Awaaz*. Today, it has become a forum where a woman can share her suffering fearlessly because she knows that the person listening to her, a woman like her, will understand her problems.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE NARI ADALAT... INSAAF KI AWAAZ

Four years of experience and learning brought about the understanding that it is important to maintain a smoother linkage with the mainstream legal system, that is, the courts, the protection officer, the police administration and other governmental forums. The *Nari Adalat* has eight judges drawn from different villages. They are the decision-makers. There are two to three paralegals responsible for the tracking records and for counselling the victim and the accused. Some members are allowed to express their opinion on the issues being discussed. Other than that, whoever wants to witness the proceedings can sit as audience.

The judges and the members are rural women, not necessarily literate, who volunteer some of their time for a just and equitable society. The paralegals are literate rural women, selected

by the DMMS. They are being given training on legalities by PRADAN, with assistance from MARG (Multiple Action Research Group), a Delhi-based NGO with expertise in working on legal issues at the grass roots.

FILING THE CASE

The registers and files for documentation of cases such as the case register file, the case detail register, the notice file and the judgment paper file are maintained by the paralegals. The filing process has been streamlined. The victim first submits an application addressed to the president of the *Nari Adalat*, listing the details of the incident. The *Adalat* assesses the intensity of the case. If the intensity is such that only the Cluster can handle it, it refers the victim to the Cluster.

After the assessment, the *Nari Adalat* registers the case. It is registered in a particular format in the case register; case details, as described by the victim, are noted in the case detail register. Additional details are taken from the witnesses present—family members, friend or neighbour. A notice is then prepared against the accused, asking for his/her presence in the next *Nari Adalat*. The decision given by the judges is documented on the judgment paper.

THE PROCESS

The objective of initiating such a forum for rural women was to settle family disputes, so that a woman can breathe freely and live a life of dignity. The SHGs at the village level are the first forum, which the victim approaches to put forward her case. The intensity of the case determines whether it should be referred to the SHG or the Cluster. The *Nari Adalat* is the last option for justice within the DMMS's arena of influence.

When it began, the *Nari Adalat* was held one day every month at the Chandwara block, where cases from various blocks such as Koderma, Jainagar and Chandwara were heard. However, considering the number of cases being registered, the *Nari Adalat* at Chandwara began to be held twice a month and DMMS General Body of Jainagar block began another *Nari Adalat*. Now the *Nari Adalat* meets on the 16th and 28th of every month at Chandwara block, and on the 6th of every month at Jainagar Block. On the 16th, the venue is at the Tham *Panchayat Bhawan*, about 12 km from Tellaiya town and on the 28th it is held at the Madangundi *Panchayat Bhawan*, 8 km from the Tellaiya. In Jainagar block, the venue is the DMMS training hall, which is in the block headquarters.

The victim or the first party, along with family members or peers, comes to the venue. The case is registered in the *Adalat*. Before registering the case, the *Adalat* asks the victim and his/her family whether they will abide by the decision given by the *Nari Adalat*. Only if the party agrees is process taken forward. The accused, called the second party, is then sent a notice, mentioning the charges filed by the victim and is asked to appear in the next

Adalat. A maximum of two notices are sent by the *Adalat* and if the accused fails to appear, necessary legal action is taken against the accused; this is also mentioned in the notice sent to them.

After the case is registered, three or four members from the *Adalat* go to the village where the incident has occurred, to conduct further investigations. They approach the SHGs or the neighbours for more details. This process is conducted secretly so that the maximum information is gathered, to help the *Adalat*, arrive at a decision.

The case moves forward only when the accused or the second party arrives after getting the notice. As the accused and his/her family arrive in the *Adalat*, details of the case are taken from them as well. Before giving the judgment, each paralegal sits with the victim as well the accused and counsels them. After hearing both the parties and their witnesses, the Judge gives a decision, which is documented in the judgment paper. Also mentioned in the judgment is the warning that in case of any violation of the decisions, necessary legal action will be taken by the *Adalat*.

Table: Cases in the Nari Adalat...Insaaf ki Awaaz

Type of Cases	Total Cases till Date	Cases Solved by Nari Adalat	FIR Filed/ Legal Punishment	Solved through Court	Pending	Not solved
Domestic violence	64	42	6	4	8	8
Rape	1	-	1	1	0	0
Separation	4	4	4	0	0	0

The responsibility of the *Nari Adalat*, however, does not end there. The *Nari Adalat* follows up on whether the situation has improved and whether there has been any violation of the decision by any of the parties. If there is a recurrence of the incident, the case is taken forward for legal action, with the consent of the victim.

FROM THE DIARY OF THE NARI ADALAT...INSAAF KI AWAAZ

Case Study 1: Registration date: 28/02/2010

Anju Devi (names changed) was married to Manoj Rabidas, a resident of Chilodih village of Chandwara Block of Koderma district, Jharkhand, in 2008. She was originally from Barhi, a block in the Hazaribagh district of Jharkhand. Within two years of her marriage, Anju Devi's husband began to torture her mentally by saying that she was having an extra-marital affair. She was tortured to the level that her husband denied accepting the unborn baby in her womb. Not only her husband but also her mother-in-law and her husband's maternal uncle were involved in the torture. Gradually, the mental torture changed to physical violence and she was beaten up by her husband on many occasions. Once she was beaten because she was taking a bath near a well. Her husband fought with her saying that she was bathing in the open to attract other men. She was called characterless, again and again.

One day, she decided to share her problem with the SHG women of her village. The case was taken up at the Cluster level. But justice still eluded Anju. She was then advised by the Cluster to approach the *Nari Adalat*, which she did in February 2010. At that time, her daughter was about eight months old.

Nari Adalat registered the case against her husband and mother-in-law, Dulari Devi, and filed a notice asking for their presence in the next meeting. Anju Devi had accused them of mental and physical violence. Anju Devi and her parents from Barhi, and Manoj Rabidas with his parents from Chilodih arrived at the meeting. The *Nari Adalat* couldn't arrive at a decision on that day because the accused party overpowered the victim's family and started accusing the victim and her family and refused to allow the proceedings to continue.

The victim's party asked for more time. Another date was fixed for the meeting when the parties were asked to bring along the *mukhiyas* from their villages, to be witness to the proceedings. A second meeting was held at Urwan, a place located between Chandwara and Barhi. But the situation became violent because some men from the victim's party attacked the accused Manoj and his family. The *Nari Adalat* decided to take the help of the Chandwara police station. The police advised both the parties to go with the decision of the *Nari Adalat*, otherwise legal action would be taken against them. The situation was thus controlled; the *Nari Adalat* gave the judgment that Anju and Manoj were to live together peacefully and in case of any further violence, legal action would be taken by the *Adalat*.

But that was not the end of the case. After the judgment, Anju continued to be tortured mentally. She was not allowed to talk to her parents at Barhi. She was also not allowed to visit her mother's house. Manoj Rabidas was given another warning by the *Nari Adalat*, which was following the case. Since then there have been no further incidents. Today, Anju Devi is a mother of two children—a daughter and a son.

Case Study 2: Registration date: 16/4/2011

Rakhi is from Baradih, a village in Chandwara block. Manoj is from Mahuadohar village of the same block. The distance between both the villages is only 2 km. Rakhi's mother and Raju's mother belong to the same Cluster.

Rakhi and Manoj were married in 2006. Raju migrated to Mumbai for livelihood. Rakhi was pregnant at the time. Due to the lack of proper medical check-ups, she lost her child. After five years of their marriage, she came to know that her husband had married another girl in Mumbai and had two children. When the information reached the village, the *Jati panchayat* gave the decision that Raju would have to divide his time equally between both the wives. But Raju fled to Mumbai, leaving Rakhi behind.

After that, her in-laws started torturing her mentally, telling her to leave the house. She was even forced to attempt suicide by her in-laws. Rakhi decided to approach the *Nari Adalat* when the torture from her in-laws became physical.

The *Nari Adalat* registered the case on 16 April 2011. Rakhi Devi accused her mother-in-law, as well as her father-in-law of mental and physical torture, and her husband of forcing her to leave his house. The accused were sent a notice. As per the rules of the *Nari Adalat*, both the parties gathered at the next meeting.

Rakhi wanted to stay in her in-laws house because that was her right. But her in-laws were not ready to take her back. The *Nari Adalat* couldn't arrive at a decision in the first meeting because the accused party asked for more time. In the following meeting as well, the accused party was not ready to take her back. Rakhi Devi then gave the husband's family three options: to search for a groom

for her and arrange her marriage or give Rs 1,000,000 as compensation or she would take the case to Court. The accused party accepted the option of taking the case to Court.

An FIR was filed against the husband, the mother-in-law and the father-in-law. Because the police prepared an arrest warrant, some people from the accused party went to Baradih and met Rakhi and her parents. They asked for a decrease in the compensation amount. After looking into the assets and property of her in-laws, she agreed to a compensation of Rs 2,50,000, more because she did not want to create a problem for her parents. The *Nari Adalat* and her parents agreed with her decision, accepting that she could invest the sum to start some form of livelihood activity and secure her future.

With the help of the *Nari Adalat*, Rakhi took the compensation and got a legal divorce. Of the amount, Rs 2,00,000 has been placed in a fixed deposit in the Jharkhand Gramin Bank and Rs 50,000 has been deposited in a savings account in Rakhi Devi's name. She has bought a sewing machine and has learned to stitch. Today, she is happily married to a resident of Bendi village of Chandwara block. Now she is expecting a child.

Case Study 3, Registration dated 16/11/2013

Kameswar Yadav, a resident of Ghorwatanr village of Chandwara block complained about his wife's frequent visits to her parents' house, and her expectation that he would accompany her and live in his in-laws' house. They had been married for five years. His mother and he want her to stay in their house peacefully.

Usha Devi, on the other hand, said that her husband drank every day and beat her over the smallest issues. She said that she was not

treated well at home and was not given proper food. She also complained that her mother-in-law as well as sister-in-law tortured her mentally and blamed her for the problems. Therefore, she did not want to stay in her husband's house.

The *Nari Adalat* counselled the family and the couple separately. Kameswar agreed to take care of Usha Devi, give her respect as a wife, and provide her with all the basic requirements, and to not consume alcohol any more. He promised not to torture Usha Devi, mentally or physically, and said he would ensure that

no other member of his family tortured her. He would give her money to run the household. Usha Devi promised she would stay in the house of the in-laws and would help her in-laws in the household chores and would go to her parents' house occasionally.

Any violation of this agreement, from either party would invite legal action.

Today Kameswar and Usha are living happily in Kameswar's house and there have been no further complaints.

Sunita Kumari (name changed), a 17-year-old girl, is a resident of Jarga *panchayat*, Koderma block, Koderma district. She lost her mother at a very early age. She lives with her father, a younger sister and brother. Her father is a daily wage labourer. She could not continue her studies after standard VIII because of financial problems and the pressure of household chores.

On 22 February, 2012, at about 5 p.m., Sunita was busy with her daily household chores; her father was out of the house for work. Seeing her alone, two persons entered her house and assaulted her. One was married and the other was not. According to Sunita, the unmarried person was the one who assaulted her sexually. The person was from Jharkhi village of Bisunpur *panchayat*, Koderma block. Both of them were known to her because they used to visit her relatives' house frequently.

In Sunita's words:

"That day I was all alone at home. My father hadn't returned from the jungle yet. I was preparing the meal. Two persons, namely Sanichar Singh and Karu Singh entered my house and began teasing me. When I tried to stop them, Karu Singh held me tightly and tied my legs and hands in the *khatia* and went out of the room. Sanichar then assaulted me sexually. When I started screaming, he shut my mouth with his hand and said that if I do not stop shouting and tell this incident to anyone, they would kill me and throw my body in the jungle. Due to this fear, I did not share the incident with my father. But gathering some courage, I did share it with my aunt later.

After she was assaulted sexually, she was consoled by the accused, who asked her to accompany her to his home and promised to marry her. They took her to Ghajhandi, a nearby railway station and boarded a train. They made her sit in the train and fled from there saying that they would come back in some time. But they didn't. The TTE (train ticket examiner) came and asked her for her ticket. She told him that there were two men along with her. Seeing her alone at Howrah, the TTE asked her to accompany him to his home and have some food. He then called her uncle whose mobile number Sunita remembered and two days later her uncle and aunt came to take her back.

Back in the village, when the incident was shared, the Jati *Panchayat* of both the parties sat to discuss the matter. The party from the girl's side was determined that Sanichar Singh marry her and the boy's party was against it. The Jati *Panchayat* could not take any decision in the case. Also, the party from boy's side threatened the girl's party.

There were some newly formed SHGs in that village set up by PRADAN. The issue was being discussed in the SHG and then in the Cluster. The news about the incident reached the *Nari Adalat* after 18 days. As soon as the *Nari Adalat* came to know, the members went to the village and met the victim. After counselling, she narrated the whole incident and refused to marry the accused. Soon after that, an FIR was filed in the Tellaiya police station on 14 March 2012. But even after the FIR, the police did not arrest the accused. The members of the *Nari Adalat* then began to pressurize the higher authorities, that is, the Superintendent of Police, to arrest the accused as soon as possible. After about one-and-a-half months, the accused was put behind bars.

However, it was very difficult for Sunita. She couldn't get over the whole incident; besides, it was difficult for her family, which had to face the humiliation. The members of the *Nari Adalat* supported her and also counselled her family. The SHG members also supported her. Now the case is in the High Court and Sunita is living a normal life with her family in the village. Her father is looking for a suitable boy for her marriage.

THE CHALLENGE OF BEING JUST AND RIGHT

Most of the cases being dealt with by the *Nari Adalat* are in some way or the other regarding violence against women. They are victimized by their family, husband, in-laws or by a wider community. It is not new that a woman is being beaten up by her family, in-laws or husband. But it is very rare to hear a woman raise her voice against it. In Chandwara and Jainagar blocks, women have created a forum from which they are fighting for a just and equitable society. They are breaking the barriers of illiteracy, gender and patriarchy. They are raising their voice loud enough to say that they are no longer oppressed. Today, it has become a common scenario to see male counterparts sit in the forum of the *Nari Adalat*. This is the forum where a man has to do as a woman instructs.

Running *Nari Adalats* demands a significant amount of time and dedication. The members of the *Nari Adalat* are women with families, and have to carry out their household responsibilities as well. Working as volunteers to help other women who are suffering, however, has helped build their confidence.

They do face obstacles in the form of the existing structure of gender and patriarchy. Most of the cases handled by them are about violence against women for not doing their duties as a daughter-in-law, a wife, a daughter and so on. She is beaten by her husband or in-laws because she talks on a mobile phone, or moves about freely in the house, or because she doesn't cook tasty food. She is sometimes called infertile; she is tortured for not bringing enough dowry, etc. The women who run the *Nari Adalat* today are part of the same society. They have suffered these indignities and,

therefore, are able to empathize with the victims. They are able to break the barriers, to some extent, and live a dignified life. They are extending themselves to bring changes in the lives of other women too.

Today, the *Nari Adalat...Insaaf ki Awaaz* occupies an important space in the sphere of social justice. Victims from nearby blocks and districts also approach it for justice.

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Most importantly, the victims, by and large, want to settle the disputes amicably and live happily, rather than end their marriages or divide their homes. Not only the women but the mainstream legal protectors and the government officials also appreciate this fact. This space has not been created easily. It has taken years to build. Today, people come to the *Nari Adalat* with the trust that justice will be served.



Women And Men Participate in a Gram Sabha in Sidhi, Madhya Pradesh

Women have gradually started representing themselves before *panchayats*, where they had faced humiliation and disrespect earlier. The women unitedly fought against the system and gradually began to get due respect and recognition. Men are becoming aware of women having equal rights of citizenship.



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. *NewsReach*, PRADAN's bimonthly journal, is a forum for sharing the thoughts and experiences of these professionals working in remote and far-flung areas in the field. *NewsReach* helps them to reach out and connect with each other, the development fraternity and the outside world.

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