

THE LIVELIHOODS AND DEVELOPMENT BIMONTHLY

September–October 2016  
Volume 16 Number 5

# NewsReach





## Report: Mulberry Sericulture: An Alternative, Farm-based Livelihood for Small Farmers

**Saheb Bhattacharyya and Dinesh Kumar:** Establishing mulberry sericulture as an alternative farm-based livelihood activity was a slow and steady endeavour of the PRADAN team in Betul district of Madhya Pradesh, leading to income-generation and a degree of prosperity for women farmers. Saheb Bhattacharyya and Dinesh Kumar are based in Betul, Madhya Pradesh.

01

## Case Study: Women's Empowerment: At a Price

**Sushmita Dutta:** Listening to 'the story behind the story' and hearing the pain behind every success may be ways of validating the sacrifices that women across every strata of society make. Empowerment can only stem from this recognition of the inequalities inherent in the lives of men and women, in terms of responsibilities, work and sacrifices, and the appreciation for their contribution. Sushmita Dutta is based in Shikaripara, Jharkhand

19

## Profile: Sanu Bibi: An Exemplar of Transformation

**Tapas Paul:** No adversity was too big to stifle and snuff out Sanu di's indomitable spirit that saw her through life's myriad challenges, compelling her to support others suffering in a similar manner. Today, she walks tall and urges, encourages and supports other women to break free of the shackles of tradition and convention. Tapas Paul is based in Baghmundih, West Bengal.

26

## Forum: NRLM: Opportunities and Challenges

**Smriti Sah:** *Ek jungle mein do sher reh sakte hain kya?* Can an NGO exist in an area where a government programme is working intensively? Recognizing their shared vision and mission, PRADAN and NRLM need to work in alignment with each other, to realize their goal of development, agency and self-reliance. Smriti Sah is based in Jaisinghnagar, Madhya Pradesh.

34

## Case Study: Sehansha Gets Married

**Jyoti Bala:** Expressing her anguish at customs and cultural practices that are blindly followed, a young 14-year-old bride's gut-wrenching questions remain unanswered: "Why does the world have so many expectations from women? Why do we have to listen to abuses all day, even after killing ourselves to match up? My husband doesn't like to come to my mother's house, but why I am expected to live with his mother?". Jyoti Bala is based in Bihar.

45

# Mulberry Sericulture: An Alternative, Farm-based Livelihood for Small Farmers

SAHEB BHATTACHARYYA AND DINESH KUMAR

*Establishing mulberry sericulture as an alternative farm-based livelihood activity was a slow and steady endeavour of the PRADAN team in Betul district of Madhya Pradesh, leading to income-generation and a degree of prosperity for women farmers*

## INTRODUCTION

An overwhelming share of the Indian population resides in villages; considering the trend over the last few decades, however, this is expected to change only marginally in the near future. As per the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) 2011 data, more than three-fourth of rural households live on a monthly income of less than Rs 5,000, and around 70 per cent of the households are either directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture for a living. Widespread poverty in the rural areas, in the face of high and consistent growth in the national economy, indicates the declining state of the agriculture sector.

Since 2009–10, there has been a continuous decline in the share of agriculture and allied sectors in the national GDP. In the last three years, the yield of major food grains, including pulses, has increased only marginally and a few cases have observed negative growth. Similarly, the productivity of major horticulture crops has remained almost stagnant for last four to five years. The reasons for the low or stagnant productivity and the low return from the farm sector are many. Small and scattered land-holdings, poor infrastructure, lack of market access and lack of extension services are some of the key reasons.

With the monsoon becoming more and more erratic over the last 10 years, the struggles of small farmers have increased manifold. Erratic rains along with a volatile local market and inaccessible formal markets, have reduced the predictability of production, and contributed to people losing interest in farming. At the same time, no other gainful employment opportunities could absorb the workforce opting out of agriculture.

The situation calls for action towards making farms diversified and climate-resilient, on the one hand, and for putting mainstream support systems such as infrastructure, credit, knowledge- support and appropriate institutional arrangements for the backward and forward linkages in place, on another.

In Betul district of Madhya Pradesh, PRADAN, in collaboration with the Department of Sericulture (DoS), Government of Madhya Pradesh (MP), has been working for the last seven years to establish mulberry sericulture as an alternative farm-based, livelihoods activity. This article attempts to examine the potential that this activity holds for small-holders, as a response to the challenges articulated above.

## OVERVIEW OF THE SERICULTURE SECTOR

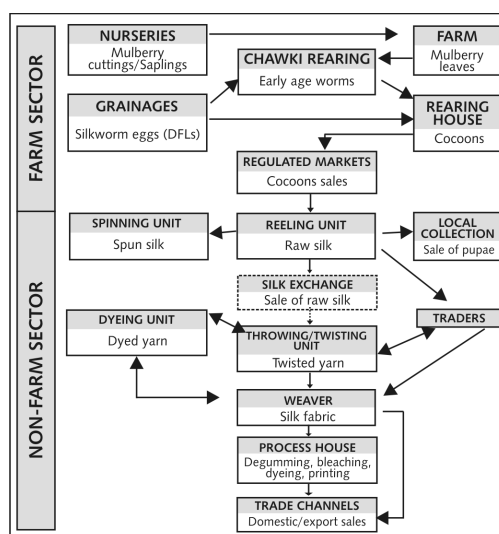
The silk industry in India involves both farm and non-farm sector participation and provides employment to seven million families, from rural as well as urban populations. Sericulture encompasses all the activities involved in raising the mulberry plantation, rearing silkworms on mulberry leaves for obtaining cocoons, yarn production and twisting it to make it suitable for weaving. The different

*The silk industry in India involves both farm and non-farm sector participation and provides employment to seven million families, from rural as well as urban populations*

activities in the silk industry are in Figure 1.

In the global scenario, India is the largest natural silk producer, after China, and contributes around 23 per cent to the global silk production. It is the highest consumer of silk and silk products

**Figure 1: Different Activities in Silk Industry**



(8 per cent of the global consumption). Table 1 explains the share of the major natural silk producing countries and their respective share in the total global production.

**Table 1: Silk Production (in Metric Tonnes) in Major Silk Producing Countries**

Country	2011	2012	2013	2014	Share in Global Production (%) *2011–12
China	1,04,000	1,26,000	1,30,000	1,46,000	79.86
India	23,060	23,679	26,480	28,708	14.91
Thailand	655	655	680	692	0.93
Brazil	558	614	550	560	1.08
Uzbekistan	940	940	980	1100	0.96



Being the second largest silk producer, India's share in global silk export is quite low. The high demand for raw silk and its allied products in the domestic market is one of the reasons for this. In fact, in the last three years, on an average, about 8,000 metric tonnes of silk is being imported from China, Indonesia and other silk producing countries, to meet in the internal demand. The final report of National Fibre Policy, prepared by the sub-group on silk says, "Domestic consumption of raw silk is estimated to increase at 3.5 per cent, per annum during the period between FY10 to FY15 and 4.0 per cent, per annum during FY16 to FY20. This would be achieved on the back of 9–9.5 per cent growth in consumption of man-made fibres, 6–7 per cent increase in private final consumption expenditure on clothing, and 4 per cent growth in the world GDP." This clearly presents the scope for increasing the production and expanding the producer base.

There are four different varieties of silk, namely, tasar, eri, muga and mulberry. India is the only country that produces all the four types of natural silks. Of the total natural silk produced, mulberry accounts for more than 90 per cent of the silk production.

At present, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Jammu and Kashmir and West Bengal collectively account for 85 per cent of the total area covered under mulberry cultivation and around 96 per cent of the total cocoon production. In the last 10 years, because of the efforts of the Central Silk Board, mulberry sericulture production has expanded to many other states, including Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Punjab, Maharashtra and Manipur. All these states are referred to as the non-

*Despite being a non-traditional state, Madhya Pradesh has shown remarkable growth in terms of outreach and the total production of cocoon and silk fibre in the last five years.*

traditional states for mulberry sericulture. Despite being a non-traditional state, Madhya Pradesh has shown remarkable growth in terms of outreach and the total production of cocoon and silk fibre in the last five years.

Although sericulture as a sector encompasses non-farm activities such as yarn and fabric production and the dyeing of fabric, the next sections of the article will focus on the farm-based part of the sector, which is mulberry plantation and cocoon production.

### SCOPE FOR SMALL FARMERS

In Betul district, for small farmers with an average of 2.5 acres of land, of which one acre is irrigated, mulberry sericulture offers far greater possibilities to realize a stable and higher income as compared to traditional crops such as wheat, maize, soya bean and paddy. A representative tribal household, with this much land, earns around Rs 60,000–70,000 a year from all sources. Forest produce accounts for 20 per cent of the total household income. The low productivity of cereals is one of the key reasons behind such a low income level. Besides, in the last three years, crop loss due to hail storms and rain during crop maturity stage has impacted returns negatively. Sudden changes in climatic conditions also impacted the production of forest produce such as mahua.

In this scenario, mulberry sericulture demonstrates better resilience against uncertain changes in precipitation, temperature and prolonged dry spells. If 75 decimals of irrigated land (upland) were to be brought under mulberry plantation, one can produce

cocoons worth Rs 50,000 to 75,000 in a year. Our experience says that it has the potential to go up to Rs 100,000, provided one has year-round irrigation support. The following Table explains the advantage of incorporating land mulberry sericulture in farm-based activities, over only growing agriculture or horticulture crops.

A representative tribal family, with two adult family members, can easily manage the rearing activities; the added advantage is that it does not compete with other crops for labour.

Unlike other agricultural activities, mulberry sericulture is far more capital intensive and requires an investment in infrastructure development. For a small land-holder, without grant assistance, it is nearly impossible to grow a plantation and produce cocoons. From Table 3 one can get a broad sense of the magnitude of investment required to erect a plantation, construct a rearing shed and carry out cocoon production activity.

At present, particularly in Madhya Pradesh, various projects of the Central Silk Board,

**Table 2: A Comparative Depiction of Land Use and Return**

Land Use without Mulberry Sericulture (for 2.5 Acres Land of which 1–1.25 Acre is Irrigated)		
Crop	Production (in Quintals)	Gross Returns (Rs)
Maize in 0.5 acre in monsoon	5	6,500
Paddy in 1 acre	8	12,000
Soya bean in 1 acre	5	15,000
Pulse in 0.5 acre	1	4,000
Gram in 1 acre	2	7,000
Wheat in 1 acre	7	10,500
Vegetables in 10–15 decimals		6,000
<b>Total (A)</b>		<b>61,000</b>
Land Use Including Mulberry Sericulture (in 75–80 Decimals of Irrigated Land)		
Maize in 0.5 acre in monsoon	5	6,500
Mulberry plantation in 75 decimals	2.5 q cocoon	62,000
Soya bean in 0.5 acre	5	15,000
Pulse in 0.25 acre	0.5	2,000
Gram in 1 acre	2	7,000
Wheat in 0.5 acre	3.5	6,000
Vegetables in 10–15 decimals		6,000
<b>Total (B)</b>		<b>1,04,500</b>
<b>Increase in income (B - A)</b>		<b>43,500</b>

Government of India, and DoS, Government of Madhya Pradesh are pro-actively supporting willing farmers to create the necessary infrastructure. The Catalytic Development Project (CDP) has proved to be an effective scheme that encourages small farmers to take up the activity. With the recent re-modelling of the revenue sharing system between the Government of India and the state government, CDP does not exist anymore. However, the Government of Madhya Pradesh has already decided to continue with the same model and the unit cost, as was proposed in CDP. Table 3 also explains the government assistance available for various kinds of infrastructure-creation, to carry out mulberry silk-worm rearing.

With the increase in the net returns from the activity at this point, it seems possible to develop a loan-based model of mulberry sericulture for small-holders.

## PROCESSES OF MULBERRY COCOON PRODUCTION

### Life-cycle of the mulberry moth (*Bombyx mori*)

The life-cycle of a silk worm, *Bombyx mori*, begins with the eggs and is complete in 50 days with the emergence of the moth from the cocoon. The stages of the life-cycle of silk-worms are: i) eggs ii) larvae iii) pupae iv) adult moths.

**Table 3: CRC Establishment Cost**

No.	Activity or Infrastructure	Unit Cost (Rs)	Government Assistance (Rs)	Farmer's Contribution (Rs)	Remarks
1	Establishing a sericulture garden	24,550	11,000	13,550	Up to the first rearing, including garden management for 4–6 months
2	Rearing house construction	2,00,000	1,37,500	62,500	Farmer usually takes the initial 2–3 rearings in temporary sheds and, from the profit earned in two cycles, she invests in the construction of a permanent shed.
3	Equipment for rearing	37,500	37,500	0	
4	Working capital	15,000	6,200 for one time as a revolving fund	9,000	
5	Developing irrigation source	18,750	18,750	0	

**Figure 2: Different Stages of the Life Cycle of Bombyx mori**

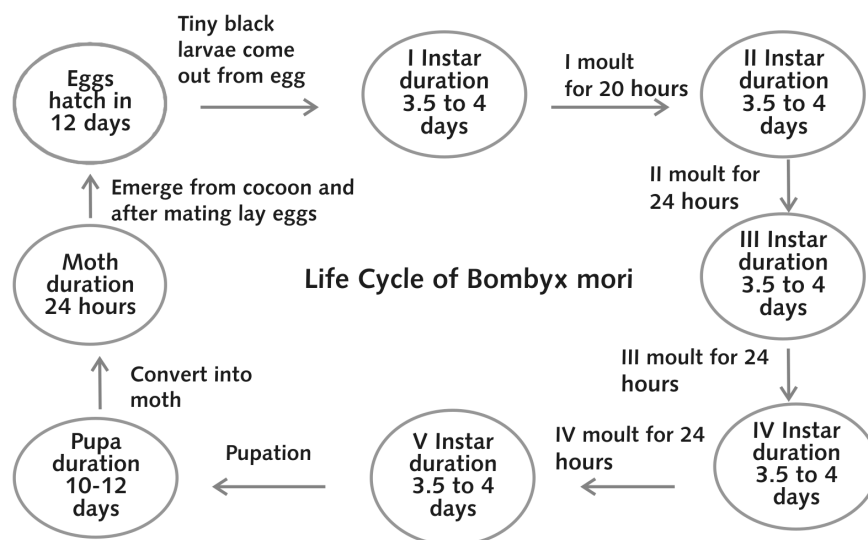


Figure 2 explains the different stages of the life-cycle of Bombyx mori.

For commercial purposes, different races of Bombyx mori have been developed by Central Sericultural Research and Training Institute (CSTRI), Mysore, and other government-sponsored research institutes. Each of the races has a specific agro-climatic suitability and each one produces specific types of cocoons. The accompanying Table illustrates the races suitable for specific agro-climates and their commercial importance.

### Mulberry cocoon

Mulberry cocoon (pupal stage) is the raw material for the silk industry. There are several types of cocoons and each one has a specific utility in the silk industry. Based on the race of the silk-worm, the cocoons are categorized in two broad categories. Table 4 captures the specific features of the different categories of cocoons.

Cocoon yield depends on the following factors.

- ♦ Quality of the Disease Free Laying (DFL) and the selection of the appropriate race:

**Table 4: Various Races of the Bombyx mori and their Agro-ecological Suitability**

No.	Race	Description	Climatic Suitability	Commercial Importance
1	PM X CSR2	Multi-voltine race	Throughout the year	Length of the filament is less than that of the bi-voltine cocoon
2	PM X FC1	Multi-voltine race	Throughout the year	
3	CSR2 X CSR4	Bi-voltine race	Winter, beginning of monsoon and autumn	Length of the filament is more than that of the multi-voltine race
4	FC1 X FC2	Bi-voltine race	Winter, beginning of monsoon and autumn	



**Table 5: Features of Various Types of Cocoons**

Parameters	Bi-voltine Cocoons	Multi-voltine Cocoons
Colour	White	Yellow
Filament length and quality	1,000–1,200 m/cocoon and finer filament	800–900 m
Cocoon weight	1.8–2 gm	1.25–1.5 gm
Silk percentage	Average 22	Average 19
Price (Rs/kg)	350	270
Suitability for reeling	Good for multi-end reeling machine	High percentage of 'un-reelable' cocoon; the filament breaks quite often

Disease-free eggs laid by one adult female moth of the *Bombyx mori* are called Disease-free Layings (DFLs). One DFL comprises 450 to 500 eggs. Based on the weather conditions, the races of the silk-worm are selected.

- ♦ Hatchability of DFLs: Proper incubation of DFLs and timely exposure to light are two critical factors that lead to a high hatchability of eggs. About 85–90 per cent hatchability is ideal for any race, in any season.
- ♦ Sufficient feeding for the silk worm: Larvae emerge from one DFL of any bi-voltine race and, on an average, consume 12.5 kg of leaves before producing cocoons; it is 10.5 kg for multi-voltine races.
- ♦ Sanitation and hygiene of rearing houses and the Chawki Rearing Centre.

### Mulberry plant and raising plantation

A plantation of mulberry (*Morus alba*) is the primary step of mulberry sericulture. Mulberry thrives under various climatic conditions, ranging from temperate to tropical regions. The ideal range of temperature is from 24 to 28°C. Mulberry grows well in places with an annual rainfall ranging from 600 to 2500 mm. In areas with low rainfall, the growth is limited.

**Table 6 – Plant Varieties and Leaf-yield**

No.	Variety	Suitability	Production in tonnes/ha/yr
1	S 36	Irrigated	45
2	V 1	Irrigated	60
3	M 5	Irrigated	50
4	S 13	Rain-fed	18
5	S 34	Rain-fed	17

Mulberry flourishes well in soils that are pH neutral, deep, fertile, well-drained, loamy to clayey, and porous with a good moisture-holding capacity.

The leaf-yield is an important parameter for any mulberry species because silk-worms mainly feed on leaves. A good cocoon yield depends on the volume of leaves produced per plant. The leaf-yield, in turn, depends on the spacing of the plantation. Paired row system (5 x 3 x 2) is ideal for the growth of mulberry plants and the production of quality leaves. In the paired row system, the rows are alternate to one another at 5 ft and 3 ft distance and the plants are evenly planted at a distance of 2 ft in the rows. In this plantation system, 5,550 plants can be planted in one acre of land. The V1 variety of mulberry is a highly

leaf producing variety and produces 60 tonnes of leaves from one hectare annually. Table 6 depicts the leaf-yield of the various mulberry species.

The year-round availability of irrigation is crucial for raising a successful plantation and to obtain the desired leaf-yield. The rearing of 100 silk worms DFL, requires roughly 1.3–1.4 tonnes of leaves. In 75 decimals of land, with a paired row system, one can raise at least 4,000 plants. This will mean that each plant must produce 500 gm of leaves to feed 100 DFLs. In the climatic condition of Satpura, one can take up four rearing cycles in a year. In order to obtain 2 kg of leaves in a year, it requires adequate irrigation. Table 7 gives a rough idea of the irrigation requirements for 75 decimals of land in normal monsoon conditions (1000 mm annual rain fall, 80 per cent of which occurs between July and September).

**Table 7: Irrigation Requirements for 75 Decimals of land**

No.	Season	Irrigation Interval	Duration of Each Irrigation (3 HP Motor Run on Electricity)
1	July–September	NA	NA
2	October–January	At 15-day intervals	Irrigating one acre takes 3–4 hours.
3	February–March	At 10-day intervals	
4	April–June	Weekly	

## Key activities of mulberry cocoon production

### ♦ Raising mulberry plantation

Usually, mulberry plantation takes place in the monsoon. The ideal time for plantation is between July and August. However, if irrigation facilities are available, the period can be extended up to October. After 4–5 months of plantation, cocoon production can be taken up, but that depends on the leaf-yield.

### ♦ Construction of rearing house

For each individual producer, constructing a concrete rearing house (RH) of 40 x 20 ft dimension within 6 to twelve months of plantation is essential for rearing silk worms. An RH of this size can accommodate up to 200 DFLs in one rearing cycle. The RH should be constructed in the east-west direction with sufficient aeration.

### ♦ Chawki rearing activity

The rearing of silk-worms is completed in two phases. The first seven days after hatching, which includes two instars and two moultings, is very critical for a good harvest. CRCs provide a controlled environment for the silk-worm larvae to grow uniformly in the first seven days of its life-cycle. Any deviation from standard practices in CRC can lead to 100 per cent mortality of the silk-worms in the later stage of growth. Two main activities take place in CRC.

- i) Black boxing: At a temperature of 28–29°C and 80–85 per cent relative humidity, black boxing is a process of controlled exposure of the eggs of the silk-worm moths to light. It ensures uniform hatching.

**Table 8: Infrastructure Requirement for CRC**

CRC capacity 8,000 DFL at one time and 32,000 DFL in a year		
No.	Description	Value
1	Plantation area	0.5 acre
2	1 chawki rearing house	30 x 30 ft
3	Leaf chopping machine	1
4	Cooler	1
5	Exhaust fan	2
6	Room heater @ 1500 wt	4
7	Humidifier	2
8	De-humidifier	1
9	Electricity supply	24 hr
Total cost of infrastructure (approx)		Rs 4.5–5 lakhs

- ii) **Brushing:** The emergence of larvae from the eggs and subsequently separating out the larvae from the empty egg shells with a feather is called 'brushing'. After brushing, the larvae start feeding on the finely chopped mulberry leaves.

A CRC with 8,000 DFL rearing capacity can support up to 50 producers in a contiguous patch, in one cycle.

#### ♦ **Latage rearing**

The farmers receive worms from the CRC after seven days. The silk-worm larva completes its life-cycle up to the pupal stage in the rearing houses of individual cocoon producers. Here, the core task of a farmer is to ensure timely feeding of the worms, taking proper disinfecting measures inside and outside the shade, and maintaining appropriate temperature and humidity in the rearing house. Depending on the seasons, the worms take 24–26 days to enter the pupal stage.

**Table 9: Conditions for Instar Growth**

No.	Stage	Temperature	Humidity
1	Instar 3rd	24–26	70–75
2	Instar 4th	22–24	65–70

#### ♦ **Spinning and cocoon production**

After the last moulting, the worms feed voraciously for 6–8 days until they turn a pale yellowish colour and, thereafter, begin emitting silk from their mouth and the scaffolding around its body forms the cocoon. The worms take 3–3.5 days to make a cocoon and the cocoons mature in three days. Thereafter, cocoon harvesting takes place.

#### ♦ **Marketing**

After the harvesting of the cocoons, the farmers either sell the cocoons to government-regulated markets. In different states, state governments have their own procurement system.

**Table 10: Key Production and Quality Parameters**

Parameters	National Standard
Leaf-yield/ha in a mulberry garden	45–60t/ha
DFL reared/ha/year	2,000
DFL to cocoon conversion ratio	50%
Silk ratio of cocoon	23%
Good cocoon percentage (Reelable cocoon/Total cocoon produced x 100)	90-95%

## EXPERIENCE OF PROMOTING MULBERRY SILK-WORM REARING IN BETUL DISTRICT OF MADHYA PRADESH

### Journey So far

PRADAN started promoting mulberry sericulture way back in 2002 in a few villages of Kesla block, Hoshangabad district. The early days of promoting the activity were more about exploring the feasibility of the activity in the area and its potential, in terms of raising household incomes. In the last 12 years, the team has experienced several ups and downs; on the one extreme, it had to close down

the activity in the oldest villages and, on the other, it had an overwhelming number of families adopting the activity in relatively new pockets and the people earned more than Rs 1,00,000. Beyond these successes and failures, what was gained is experience and learning. The current state of the activity in 50 villages of the Betul district, with approximately 724 women farmers, can be seen as the cumulative learning of the last one decade, converging to fine-tuning and strengthening the activity. Table 11 portrays a comprehensive picture of the long journey.

**Table 11: Glance at the Comprehensive Journey of Mulberry Sericulture in PRADAN**

No.	Period	Milestone	Challenges
1	2002–07	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Initiation of mulberry sericulture in the Kesla block, Hoshangabad district</li> <li>♦ Activity expanded to nearby Shahpur block of Betul</li> <li>♦ Total 180 farmers adopted the activity</li> <li>♦ A separate technical team was placed and an accounting system and book-keeping was put into place.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Less grip on technical aspect of rearing and, therefore, leaf-yield and conversion of DFLs to cocoon was very poor</li> <li>♦ Average income per household was as low as Rs 3000/year</li> <li>♦ Farmers' focus was more on availing subsidy</li> <li>♦ Error in farmer selection</li> </ul>
2	2007–09	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ The idea of building a producers' collective was conceived and the Simant Krishak Shahtut Krimi Palan Sangh (SKSKS) was born.</li> <li>♦ A separate office space was created for SKSKS.</li> <li>♦ Activity started expanding to newer pockets of Shahpur block.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Drop-out rate of old farmers was very high.</li> <li>♦ Average income/farmer/year was low.</li> <li>♦ Struggle for stabilizing productivity continued.</li> <li>♦ SKSKS was established but it was hardly serving any purpose.</li> <li>♦ For DFL and sapling activity, complete dependence on Department of Sericulture.</li> </ul>

No.	Period	Milestone	Challenges
3	2009–11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Studied and identified drop-out and weak performer regions.</li> <li>♦ Set up a criteria and plan for expansion. It was more about setting exclusion criteria to reach out to genuinely interested farmers.</li> <li>♦ Closed down the activity in Sukhtawa, and operations handed over to DoS.</li> <li>♦ Concentrating on newer pockets of Shahpur and Ghoradingri blocks.</li> <li>♦ Cash transaction with farmers stopped completely. Each woman opened a bank account.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Irregularity in production</li> <li>♦ Mortality of plants increased due to weak supply of saplings.</li> <li>♦ Convergence of cocoon from DFLs was not as good as per the potential of the activity.</li> </ul>
4	2011–13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ With the support of an external expert, a medium term business plan was developed for SKSKS.</li> <li>♦ Village-level Producer Groups (PGs) meetings were regularized.</li> <li>♦ Sapling production started in the local area.</li> <li>♦ Chawki rearing, earlier assumed to be a technical and sophisticated activity, tried for the first time in the villages with experienced farmers.</li> <li>♦ Productivity stabilized at nearly 50%.</li> <li>♦ For the first time, SKSKS organized and celebrated a <i>kisan mela</i> and the members shared their achievements and motivated others.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Smaller rearing cycles, spread throughout the year, imposed heavy load on the systems of supervision and field support.</li> <li>♦ Volume of production was low.</li> <li>♦ Frequent and smaller rearing cycles led to complexity in managing operations in CRCs.</li> <li>♦ Operational cost of SKSKS was largely met by PRADAN.</li> </ul>



No.	Period	Milestone	Challenges
5	2013–present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Producer-wise production plan and DFL consumption plan preparation initiated at Mahila Resham Samiti (MRS).</li> <li>♦ MRS was entrusted with the responsibility to review the plan and help each other achieve planned production.</li> <li>♦ Producers' base increased six-fold as compared to 2011.</li> <li>♦ Total production increased eight-fold, as compared to the production in 2011.</li> <li>♦ Batch rearing initiated. It reduced the batch size from 11/year to 5/year.</li> <li>♦ Average income of the producers: Rs 40, 000 and more/year.</li> <li>♦ SKSKS started generating revenue to sustain its operations.</li> <li>♦ Gross business volume of SKSKS crossed Rs 20,000,000.</li> <li>♦ Accounting software developed for SKSKS.</li> <li>♦ Six new CRCs established and SKSKS became self-reliant in terms of DFL requirement.</li> <li>♦ Betul became the second-highest producer of mulberry cocoon after Hoshangabad. The farmers of SKSKS accounted for more than 80% of the total production of Betul district.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Other than the department, no other buyers of cocoon existed in the market.</li> <li>♦ For timely supply of eggs, SKSKS is still dependent on the DoS.</li> <li>♦ Infrastructure for storage and post-production operations such as stifling were inadequate in the face of the growth in production.</li> <li>♦ Reduction in cocoon price because of the removal of excise duty on Chinese yarn.</li> </ul>

### Trend and Current State of the Activity

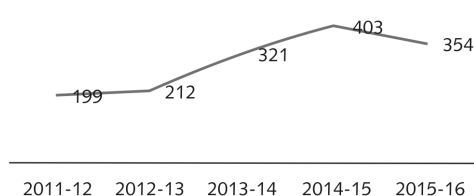
PRADAN's involvement in mulberry sericulture covers only a small part of the entire value chain. It starts with the brushing of DFLs in CRC and ends with the sale of the cocoons to the Madhya Pradesh Seri Federation, promoted by the DoS, Government of Madhya Pradesh. At present, 724 women from 50 villages of the Betul district are involved in the mulberry sericulture activity. SKSKS, an informal producers' collective, is integrating the operations. Table 12 explains the current state of the activity in terms of production and yield.

From the Table, it can be inferred that there has been a substantial and consistent growth in the production since 2012–13. The key strategic interventions made in the last four years are as below:

- ♦ **Increase in DFL consumption/farmer/cycle:** Low DFL use has been one of the key reasons for the farmers realizing a low income. From 2013 onwards, the focus of the activity has been to ensure a high leaf-yield so that the farmers rear at least 80 DFLs in one rearing cycle. Figure 3 shows the trend of DFL use/farmer/year. In 2015–16, the average DFL use is expected to
- ♦ **Batch rearing:** Before 2013, there used be 10–11 smaller rearing cycles, spread across the year. In order to bring efficiency in management and supervision, batch-rearing was initiated. Operationally, it means that all the farmers in a village will start rearing at the same time. It consequently systematized the entire operation, starting from garden management to DFL supply

reach 480. In order to encourage farmers to use more DFL/rearing, the price of DFL was incentivized. The more the number of DFLs, the less the price. At present, if one farmer uses 150 or more DFLs in one cycle of DFL, the price goes down to Rs 5.5/DFL, whereas for 80 or less numbers of the DFL/cycle, the price is Rs 10/DFL.

**Figure 3: Average DFLs Reared by Old Farmers**

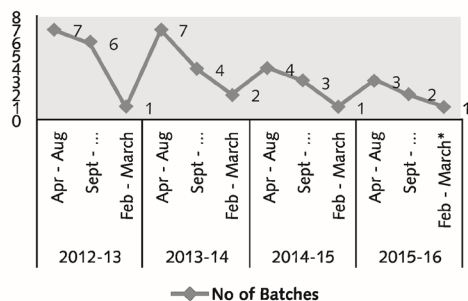


**Table 12: The Current State of the Activity (Production and Yield)**

No.	F.Y.	Number of Farmers	DFLs Reared	Production in Kg	Productivity %age	Gross value of cocoons sold (Rs)
1	2009–10	222	12,662	6,087.9	48.08	7,06,063.0
2	2010–11	161	19,632	8,997.0	45.82	1,101,089.0
3	2011–12	218	25,228	12,636.7	50.08	2,051,251.0
4	2012–13	185	28,395	13,079.0	46.06	2,141,323.0
5	2013–14	227	56,785	26,903.9	47.37	6,415,936.0
6	2014–15	347	90,511	45,911.3	50.72	15,277,134.0
7	2015–16*	724	13,5019	74,273.0	55.00	21,459,351.0

to cocoon procurement. This helped farmers take up rearing in the best season. Figure 4 indicates the trend of 'the number of batches' in a year.

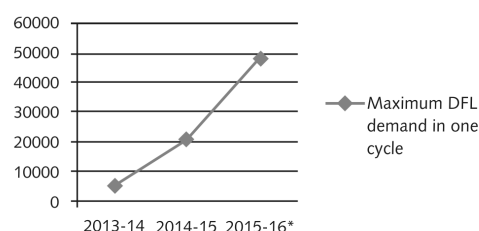
**Figure 4: Trend of Number of Batches in a Year**



- Planning for each producer:** Synchronizing production cycles for all the farmers required an intensive planning exercise at each individual producer's level. In 2014–15, the team initiated a planning process in MRS. Each farmer was asked to set an income target for the year, leading to farmer-wise DFL demand for each rearing season. For the first time, we could freeze the rearing seasons: a) before sowing of maize in the monsoon b) before 'Ganesh Chaturthi' c) before Deepawali d) before Holi. In 2014–15, 80 per cent of the farmers reached 70–80 per cent of their

planned income targets and were able to translate the same into the DFL use plan. In 2015–16, the producers were intelligent enough to set the DFL consumption plan instead of setting the income target. For 2015–16, the total DFL use plan was set to be 200,000 and we expect the farmers will achieve more than what they have planned.

**Figure 5: Maximum DFL Demand in One Cycle**



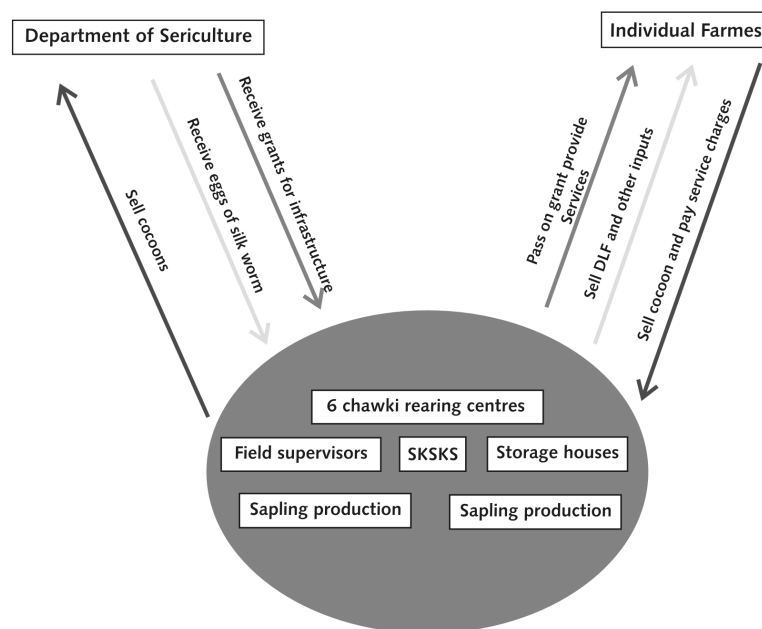
- Complete control over CRC operation:** With the increase in the producer base and DFL demand, bringing Chawki Rearing under total control of SKSKS was one of the most significant strategies. Before 2014–15, there were only two CRCs run by SKSKS. In 2015–16, five new CRCs were established. At present, with seven CRCs, SKSKS has a total Chawki Rearing capacity of 70,000 DFLs at a time.

**Table 13: Number of Farmers in Plantation**

FY	New	No. of Farmers Who Took Up Rearing in Plantation Year	No. of New Farmers Who Earned More than 15,000 in Plantation Year
2011–12	54	31	0
2012–13	62	27	0
2013–14	51	43	4
2014–15	152	134	18
2015–16*	360	224	21

- ♦ **Minimizing the gestation period:** Four years back, it took a new farmer almost a year before she could realize production. At present, around 80 per cent of the farmers are achieving this in the very first year of plantation.
- ♦ **Entrusting MRS with greater responsibilities:** In 2013–14, a huge effort was made to revive all MRSs. The team understood that unless the producers' collective shares the responsibility to support each other and hold each other accountable, efficiency in production cannot be achieved. Earlier, all activities from DFL distribution to settling household-level issues to regular monitoring of rearing activity to cocoon procurement were the supervisor's responsibility. From 2013–14 onwards, MRS started taking a stake in setting the annual plan for individuals, in activity monitoring, particularly for new farmers, and also in confronting each other in MRS meetings, for non-achievement of production plans.
- ♦ **Strengthening the functioning of SKSKS:** Established in 2009, SKSKS was to integrate operations at the Production Cluster Level (conceived more or less like an FPO). From 2013 onwards, concerted efforts were made to make it functional. Earlier, SKSKS was merely a 'grant passing' body for the DoS. Instead of giving infrastructure grants directly to farmers, DoS used to give them to SKSKS and, in turn, SKSKS would distribute the funds to the individual producers. For the supply of chawki (DFL) and procurement of cocoons, DoS was in direct touch with individual farmers. The producers used to pay Rs 3 per kg of cocoon to SKSKS as service charge. A few key decisions were taken to strengthen the functioning and identity of SKSKS.

**Figure 6 : Schematic Representation of Transaction of Produce, Subsidies and Raw Material**



- Direct transaction between DoS and the farmers was stopped. SKSKS was placed between the farmers and DoS for each and every transaction.
- SKSKS established six new CRCs, to ensure timely supply of quality DFLs to member producers.
- SKSKS also started producing saplings required for new producers to raise plantations.
- A membership fee was levied on new farmers joining the activity.
- The grants for raw material were withdrawn. SKSKS now receives a few raw materials such as disinfectants from DoS free of cost, but for the farmers, nothing is free of cost.
- Service charge for the cocoon produced increased from Rs 3 to 15 per kg, to generate the funds for the operating costs of the organization.
- The cost of DFLs also increased and incentivized the farmers to take bigger learning cycles.
- A small fund was created to support the farmers, whose rearing had been affected by extreme climatic conditions.
- The Governing Board of SKSKS was trained on specific business indicators so that they could keep track of the

movement and decisions. All these were discussed and approved by them.

- Initiatives were taken by SKSKS to support students in pursuing higher education.

### IMPACT ON INCOME

At the individual producer's level, there has been spectacular growth in the gross returns from mulberry silk-worm rearing, particularly in Betul district. Figure 6 shows that in 2013–14, 30 per cent of the producers earned above Rs 40,000 from cocoon production, which went up to 60 per cent in 2014–15. In 2015–16, till December, 51 per cent of the producers have crossed the level of Rs 40,000. We expect around 70 per cent of the farmers will earn Rs 40,000 or more from the activity by the end of 2015–16.

Figure 7: Income Trend among farmers

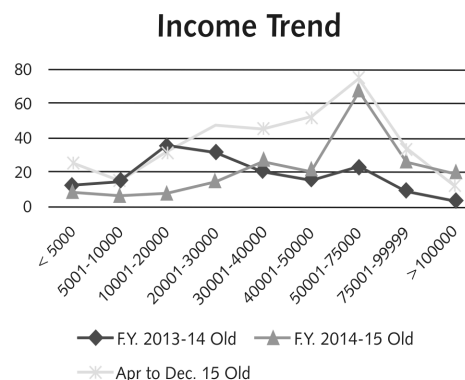


Table 14: Comparison of Production in Traditional States with Betul

Parameters	Standards of Traditional States	Status in Betul
Leaf-yield/ha in a mulberry garden	45–60t/ha	30–35t/ha
DFL reared/ha/year (average)	2,000	1,200
DFL to cocoon conversion ratio	67.13 (Karnataka 2013–14)	51% (average of last three years)
Silk ratio of cocoon	23%	22–24%
Good cocoon % (Reelable cocoon/ Total cocoon produced x 100)	90–95%	90%



## STANDARDS OF PRODUCTION

Table 14 shows that Madhya Pradesh, despite being a non-traditional state for mulberry sericulture, is catching up with the farmers of the traditional states, on certain production parameters because of the farmers of Betul district. There is huge scope to increase DFL consumption/ha/year, provided appropriate management and leaf-yield are ensured. Because of the climatic conditions, realizing productivity beyond 60 per cent, throughout the season, seems a little difficult.

## CHALLENGES AHEAD

- ♦ To increase total production, there is a need for urgent attention to establish infrastructure for post-production operations such as storage and stifling. At present, SKSKS does not have independent stifling and storage units. Therefore, expansion and deepening of the activity, to a great extent, depends on the government system.
- ♦ A few months back, the Silk Federation of Madhya Pradesh announced a 30 per cent decrease in cocoon price. In Madhya Pradesh, there is no other marketing channel and, therefore, farmers were compelled to sell their produce to the Madhya Pradesh Silk Federation. Increase in production necessitates exploring the possibilities of direct marketing of cocoons.
- ♦ For supply of DFLs, SKSKS is still dependent on DoS. For autonomous functioning, it needs an independent channel for procuring quality DFLs and infrastructure for the incubation of eggs.
- ♦ The demand for chawki will rise two-fold by 2016–17, and to cater to the need, at least four more CRCs will be required. The current grant assistance for CRC is falling far short of what is required.

- ♦ Over the last 3–5 years, the monsoon has been quite unpredictable. Crop loss due to hail storms or excess rain or sudden rise in humidity has been frequent in the last couple of years. In this situation, putting in place, a suitable insurance programme is the need of the hour.

## CASE STUDIES

### Shivkali Bai from Chhuri Village

Shivkali Bai is just like any other woman but has acquired a distinct image, today, among all the women of Chhuri village in Betul. Eleven years ago, she got married to Suraj. Their financial condition was very unstable. She started working as a house-maid to a well-off upper caste family of the village. Then she worked as a labourer on others' fields and sometimes for *panchayat* works. Meanwhile, her family grew as she had a son and two daughters. Financial burdens, clubbed with the issue of food security, pushed the family into a very difficult situation.

Some women of village informed her about SHGs and how they may be of help for her credit needs. She joined the Devi Mahila Samiti in February 2007 and started saving ten rupees every week. Meanwhile, she also started cultivating paddy and maize on a small piece of land, which was not sufficient to cater to the food and cash needs of her family. She started mulberry silk-worm rearing in 2012 and reared her first trial crop in late 2012, which fetched her Rs 140. Her new endeavour was not an easy one like other crops. It required technical knowledge, continuous care of silk-worms and a responsibility about bringing success to the activity. She says *"Bhaia, agar sab kuch sahi nai hota to sab kehte ke kaam theek nahi hai* (If it had been a failure, people would have said that I have not worked properly)."

In the next season, some of the older farmers like Kamla *bai*, Jaiwanti *bai* and Rampyari *bai* supported her to learn the technical aspects of silk-worm rearing and monitored each of the critical practices. In 2013–14, she successfully completed one rearing cycle with 50 DFLs and earned Rs 12,000. The next cycle fetched her Rs 17,000.

As she said, this was first time that she had a lot of money in her bank account, and the first thing she did was to purchase a cycle for her son so that he could attend school regularly. Even after getting some success in silk-worm rearing, it took a significant amount of time for her to get out of her self-view of a silent wage labour.

### **Sangeeta *Bai* from Dhappa**

Sangeeta Evne, of Dhappa village, is no different from the other women of the Gond

community in this area. Her family has 5 acres of land but the undulating terrain and the lack of irrigation support made her husband migrate to nearby cities in search of employment. In 2011–12, she was the first person of her village to agree to start mulberry sericulture in one acre of land. In 2013–14, she earned Rs 1,50,000 from cocoon production and sapling production. In 2014–15, her earning further increased to Rs 2,00,000. In 2015–16, she expects to earn above Rs 3,00,000.

Her success has inspired many others in Dhappa and, today, there are 43 women producers who have adopted mulberry with great confidence. She has also served as a Governing Board Member of SKSKS for three consecutive years.

---

The references for this article are available on request from [newsreach@pradan.net](mailto:newsreach@pradan.net)

## Women's Empowerment: At a Price!

SUSHMITA DUTTA

*Listening to 'the story behind the story' and hearing the pain behind every success may be ways of validating the sacrifices that women across every strata of society make. Empowerment can only stem from this recognition of the inequalities inherent in the lives of men and women, in terms of responsibilities, work and sacrifices, and the appreciation for their contribution*

Empowerment is a big word; more than that, it has a deep meaning. But do we really understand what it means?

Empowerment, as I understand it, means to take charge of one's life. And that whatever may happen in a person's life, he or she is totally responsible for it. The question that comes to mind is, "How does a woman become empowered?" By being strong, by being confident or by being independent?

Let us suppose that she becomes strong, independent and confident. She becomes a woman who takes her own decisions. She might no longer need to ask someone's permission before taking a decision. However, after she has taken a decision, what happens to her? Does she pay a price for her independence?

Women are the most targeted victims of this world. They have always been told what to do and what not to do. Has anyone asked them what they want to do? From the time of the birth of a child, we differentiate between a boy and a girl. Recently, I attended a workshop on gender, in which tribal and non-tribal women shared their life stories. The one thing which I noticed was that the identities of most of the women speakers came from the family they belonged to, and not from their own selves.

Each one of these women was working, either as a trainer or a group leader, and one was even a Board Member of a yarn producing company. From their sharing, however, it was clear that not much had changed in their lives. Each one of them may have come far and may have acquired a dignified life outside; but inside, they were still the same.

*Society is usually very harsh to a widowed woman. Anita's case was no different. The women around her started to speak ill of her. She was forbidden to enter her own house. She realized that it is not easy to survive in this world alone*

Each one of them had struggled to break out of the confines. Each had lived the life of a captive and had not been aware of her own value. What happens to such women when they step out of their homes? What happens when they return home late? Or what happens to their children when they leave them at home because they have a training to attend?

Do their husbands accept their moving about freely? Do they allow the women to go to places without their permission? Do they still abuse the women physically or verbally? And if they do, can we say that women are empowered? Are they happy? Have they made some compromises to become empowered? They may not be happy about the compromises they have made.

Let us take a look at some of these women.

Anita Dasi collects data of groups. Earlier, she worked for Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT). She became a trainer for accountants of groups and, today, she feels so confident that she talks with government officials without any hesitation. One day, when she was conducting a training, I asked her what her journey had been like and from where had she got so much courage.

She replied, "I have faced a lot of difficulties, *didi*. I have worked and conducted trainings without food and water. I have gone to block offices and worked for the Federation for more than two years. I have dedicated my life to my work. Whenever I used to go out of my home, my children used to cry. *Mujhe accha nahi lagta tha* (I didn't like it). But what else could I have done? *Pet*

*to bharna hoga na* (I have to fill stomachs). I used to wear some ordinary clothes and used to get out of the house and then change into a saree somewhere on the way so that my children do not cry."

She was married at a very early age and had two children. After a few years of her marriage, her husband migrated for work and committed suicide. According to her, he went out of the village in search of work and somehow was entangled in a false police case. He got arrested and had taken a huge loan from money lenders; with these pressures later he committed suicide. After his death, people began to talk and blame Anita *didi* for her husband's death.

Society is usually very harsh to a widowed woman. Anita's case was no different. The women around her started to speak ill of her. She was forbidden to enter her own house. She realized that it is not easy to survive in this world alone. She took training for tailoring and used to teach the local students Hindi for Rs 600.

In 2013, she joined the Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh (a block-level Federation), where she became a Board Member and a *panchayat* representative. She used to introduce herself

as, "Mera naam hai Anita Dasi. Main Inderbani gaon ke Murayam panchayat ki hoon aur main Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh ki sachiv ke pad mein hoon (My name is Anita Dasi. I am from Inderbani village in Murayam panchayat and I am the Secretary of the Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh)."

She reminisces, "I have earned a lot and lost a lot too. I have earned the respect of being a Board Member but I have faced disrespect too. I will not be able to forget how people treated me. I have come a long way from the situation that I was in. But I have missed a lot. I will never be able to see my children growing up again. I might have food sufficiency now, but I cannot feed my two children with my own hands. I have become a known woman, thanks to the Federation, but no one will ever know what I have gone through. Initially, when I was a widow to all, everybody criticized me. When I got involved with the Self Help Group (SHG), the people in my village passed comments about me. They used to say, 'Pata nahi kahan jaati hai aur kya karti hai (Don't know where she goes and what she does)'. They did not believe me. The *dadas* (men), especially, used to pass such comments about me."

Anita *did*i looked at me and said that during this difficult time, she thought that being a woman was so pathetic. The boundary that she was confined to suffocated her. She realized that it was important to break that boundary rather than sit at home doing nothing.

She, then, started to become involved in strengthening and nurturing of SHGs. Gradually, she entered this new world of SHGs, village organizations (VOs) and the Federation, where she nurtured herself as a leader. She told me that she got a lot of exposure to the outside world, working with SHGs and the Federation, and she was learning to be a better person.

Today, her identity comes from her work and not from being a widow, hemmed in by social boundaries. She is becoming more confident by the day and wants to join hands with the other *didis* in her village. I asked her about her motivation and she said, "*Didi, aaj to main bohot aagey aa gayi hoon apni pichhli zindagi se. Par jo mere aas paas didi rehti hain wo to nahi na agey badh payi hain. Mere jaise kitni aise didiyan hain jo kabhi bank tak nahi dekhi hain. Kya mera farz nahi banta ki unko bhi agey le kar aaun (Didi, I have moved ahead today from where I was earlier; but the other women around me have not moved ahead. Many women have not even seen the bank. Isn't it my responsibility to take them ahead)?*"

"Maybe they too face difficulties in their day-to-day lives against which they are unable to raise their voice. Society has made a *lakshman rekha* (boundary) around women and it is considered a sacrilege to cross it. We, as women, need to get out and break that boundary." Anita is proud of being a woman. "*Mahilao ne is sansar ko banaya hai, aur ek mahila ke pas jo shakti hai wo puri duniya badal sakti hai* (Women have created this world and the power of one woman can change the whole world). I have understood this from the ups and downs in my life and, therefore, I want to join hands with as many women as I can. I want them all to join hands with each other and make this land suitable to live in."

She became a trainer for SHGs and VO and later on soon she was visiting Ranchi and Deoghar for presentations. She got so many opportunities to step out and meet people that she became more confident day by day. Today she works as a social mobiliser and earns around Rs 6000 but money has never been her motivation. She says, "I know everything—'everything' means how to form an SHG, train the members of an SHG, vermicomposting,



agriculture, MGNREGA, and what not but I want to extend myself to others, *Nahi karenge to kaisa hoga didi* (If I won't do, how will it happen)."

I asked her whether during this journey of hers, she had ever felt sad about the sacrifices that she had to make. She replied promptly, "You know, when I was alone with my two children, everybody was against me. At that time, I felt the urgency of getting a job to feed my two children. Today, both my children are studying and they are proud of me. I did not care about the world. I did not care about what anyone was saying. I have listened to many abuses from men and from women too. People have slandered me. It never created any disturbance in me because I knew that, at the end of the day, when I went home after work, my children would be there waiting for me. My heart sinks when I think that besides paying for their necessities, I have never been by their side. When they needed the utmost care from their mother, they had to spend time with some other woman whom they did not know. I was constantly tense about whether they had eaten or not, slept or not, bathed or not. They have never complained about this to me, but I know that I have missed my children's childhood. I do not remember how I was as a kid, but my children have been the greatest support of my life."

She seems so confident today about her work that she is not hesitant at all to speak about what is right and what is wrong. Today, everything seems fair and just from the outside. It appears like she has gained so much, but no one talks about her losses. She had tears in her eyes when she spoke not because she was sad, but because when she thinks about her achievements she also thinks of her sacrifices.

\*

Whenever I see her, she smiles and greets my colleague, Sagarika, and me as if we are her sisters. But she has sad eyes. She is a woman in her mid-twenties and has a husband who works as a farmer. She is a non-tribal Christian woman who has been educated until Class IX. She got married at 16 and has a baby boy. Her name is Sunita Digal and, in 2014, she was chosen as an Agricultural Trainer by the Cluster in Rebingya village. She was the most educated woman in the village. Through consistent hard work, she trained two farmers and their resultant yield doubled. She then gained confidence and started encouraging other women to practice agriculture in an improved way.

She said she felt more confident now. She was anaemic because of which she often had concussions, sudden blackouts and other gynaecological problems. We talked about how nutrition is important for women and how eating healthy would help her.

After a while she said, "This is impossible, *didi*. There is a custom in my family that we can't eat anything before the men do. If I do, my husband may beat me." From this disclosure, I inferred that Sunita is independent enough to teach others to eat well; yet, within her own family, she cannot eat before the men and, if she does, she will have to pay the price by getting beaten up or being bad-mouthed by people.

From a distance, Sagarika and I see her preparing the bed for the brinjal and tomato seedlings. The heat is scorching and she is sweating, but she is there standing with the farmers spreading Di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) over the field and explaining the purpose to the villagers, looking at me apprehensively once in a while, worried that

she might say something wrong. I give her a reassuring smile and she continues with her work. After she finishes her work, we talk about the practices in the village, the customs, how a girl is treated in the village, etc. We talk about marriage, love, sex, childbirth, and customs, and the role of women in all these.

From the gender perspective, I realized that the most vulnerable section of the society, are women. Women have to sacrifice their self-respect, dignity, health and everything else related to them, just to satisfy the male ego. Sunita shared with us that after the birth of her first child, she did not want another because she was very weak and because there were some financial issues as well. Her husband agreed, but he did not want to use any protective measures, nor did he agree to be operated upon because, according to him, it was against his dignity and that he might lose respect in the village. Thus, the only way to stop childbirth was that she takes the precautions. So, she started taking the pill; however, the method she explained was different from the usual. There were two pills. She had to consume one, and insert the other into her body through the vagina. When the pill gets absorbed in the body, the conceived foetus gets aborted. This causes a huge amount of bleeding and the body becomes weak. And, therefore, she is suffering from anaemia and her body is weak due to the repeated use of these pills. She has frequent concussions too.

I ask her whether she has talked about this situation with her husband. She says, "Yes, *didi*. I did not want kids any more because it is difficult to give proper education and food to one child, let alone more. Also, my body is very weak. I have discussed this with

*We work with women. We work for their empowerment and their livelihood. We sit in groups and talk with women, train them, work on several projects to reduce their drudgery and improve their living conditions. I wonder, however, if we are really doing anything to reduce their drudgery*

my husband but he does not understand these things. He says, 'Everybody in the village manages, so why can't we?'"

In this village, on an average, a family has three or four children. One family had seven children. It was shocking to hear the pain Sunita went through; maybe all the women in the village suffer the same pain. Sunita is educated, works for her community, is a learner and

also teaches others. She earns for her family. Despite this, her opinion does not matter in her family. She seems to be just another empowered woman, without any power!

We work with women. We work for their empowerment and their livelihood. We sit in groups and talk with women, train them, work on several projects to reduce their drudgery and improve their living conditions. I wonder, however, if we are really doing anything to reduce their drudgery. Everything starting from drinking water to the Indira Awaas comes to their doorstep; yet, they do not know why a condom is needed or why girls should use sanitary pads and what happens when a woman loses blood and becomes anaemic. Even though she is the most educated person in her village, Sunita is paying the price. What will the situation of the other women, who are illiterate and have not been exposed to the outer world, be? Some women share their plight with us; however, there are many, who are still behind the curtain and are paying the price.

\*

Her *anchal* carelessly flows in the air as she runs towards her daughter. Her daughter doesn't want to have food. The little girl cries out loud, but her mother will not let her go.

She tells her stories, roams around the garden, carrying her in her arms, pointing at trees, birds, the blue sky so that she stops crying and eats something. The mother does not want her baby to remain hungry. That was many years ago.

Twenty-five years later, she is still dedicated to her daughter, having moulded the baby into a woman, who is now able to feed herself and stand on her own feet.

This mother has spent her whole life obeying everyone, acting on whatever others have decided for her. When she was a young girl, she wanted to dance, sing and paint her own world in a new colour. The family had other plans for her. She was to be married. She quietly accepted that as her fate. When she was getting married, her father told her that her in-laws home was her world from then on.

"You will have to obey every little word there," he told her and she obeyed.

Gradually, the girl, who wanted to earn her own living and to paint, sing and dance, had to depend on someone she did not know. She was a graduate, but her degree was to be used for reading her daughter's school books to her.

She was married when she was studying for her graduation. Since then, she has been juggling her life. She has been a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law and has played almost every other role. She has always proved herself in every relationship, be it that of a daughter, a sister, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother or any other. She has tried to be perfect in all of them. She is capable enough to take her

*Gradually, the girl who wanted to earn her own living and to paint, sing and dance had to depend on someone whom she did not know. She was a graduate, but her degree was to be used for reading her daughter's school books to her*

own decisions and is free to choose any path she wants. She is a multi-talented lady. She is an A-class singer. She has danced on many stages, performed in many plays. Her embroidery cannot be differentiated from the one bought from shops. But what did she miss?

She is an educated woman, she has a life, she has responsibilities, and she has sacrifices to make. I ask her what it is that she would like to do. She says, "When I was in college, I aspired for a job, but my father said that women are not meant to do jobs. So, I obeyed him. I graduated with a first class. Now, if someone were to hire me, I am not sure whether I will be able to do the work or not, but I wish, some day..."

She has spent her life caring for everyone and obeying everyone, but no one has certified her as a perfect daughter, sister, wife mother, etc. She adjusted to a new environment and new family but no one has credited her with being a perfect daughter-in-law or a good wife. It seems as if her dreams had been locked up in a small box and thrown far into the sea. A brilliant soul like hers was restricted by social responsibilities and, gradually, that became her life. She forgot about her dancing, her singing and her painting and, most important, she forgot what she wanted.

She says, "I have struggled a lot in my life. The path of my life had so many difficulties, so many twists and turns, yet I never lost hope. Today, I have a family, two daughters, a house, a husband, and a car but I own nothing. I am responsible for everyone but no one is responsible for me."

She raised some very pertinent questions that every woman asks of herself at some point.

She asked me, "I was born the same way that my brother was.

There was no difference between me and my brother; why then am I bound to keep a fast for him so that he can live long...and he is not bound to do the same? My husband and I both got married to each other and we both took vows for each other, why is it then that I change my name for his? Why am I the one to sacrifice my job for having his baby? Why am I the one to serve him when he is tired? Don't I get tired? Why am I the only one asked to keep quiet when these questions are raised?"

Today, her identity comes from her family. We say that educated women are strong, independent and confident. But I see something different here. I have known this woman for quite some time and I asked her what it was that she liked to do before and now you don't. She said, "I liked to dance, to sing, to draw, to read books, to cook and now I do not do any of them."

I asked her why she had stopped doing all those things. She replied, "I obeyed everyone. I am educated enough to stand up and teach my children. I am strong enough to carry my daughter in my arms and fight against the whole world. It was my choice to obey

*These are stories of three different women with different lifestyles and economic status; and each one has paid a price*

everyone and I have paid the price for it. My sacrifice may not be visible to anyone, but I know what I have given up. But I am happy that I have known so much."

Her name is Mamata Dutta and she is my mother.

\*

These are stories of three different women with different lifestyles and economic status; and each one has paid a price. When these stories are shared, these sacrifices and compromises (one side of the coin) are usually overlooked and the shiny side of the coin is admired, the side that shows success stories of a woman's journey. Stories of how a woman has grown. Those appeal to the audience more.

All success stories have a story of pain behind them. Can we just pause and listen to others' plight? Can we truly empathize with them and reflect back what they are saying? Empowerment only happens when both sides of the coin shine. Every woman is special and each one has her own story to tell. We can surely engage ourselves with their stories and hear their needs. To identify those needs, we have to hear both sides of the story, look at both sides of the coin, because EVERY SIDE OF A COIN HAS ANOTHER SIDE. There is always a story behind the story.

# Sanu Bibi: An Exemplar of Transformation

TAPAS PAUL

*No adversity was too big to stifle and snuff out Sanu di's indomitable spirit that saw her through life's myriad challenges, compelling her to support others suffering in a similar manner. Today, she walks tall and urges, encourages and supports other women to break free of the shackles of tradition and convention*

Scene 1: Bhendi, a 14-year-old girl, walks to her school with her friend, Padma. Both of them study in the 9th Standard. One day, as they walk home, Bhendi shares with her friend that after passing her exams, she will continue to study for the higher secondary examinations because she wants to become a doctor. While they are walking, some young boys standing on the crossroads pass some lewd comments about them. Bhendi becomes irritated but doesn't say anything and quietly walks away. After some time, Bhendi's brother Bhenda, who studies in college, passes by the same place and the boys again pass comments regarding his sister and her character. Bhenda gets very angry and decides to talk to his father about Bhendi.

Scene 2: Bhenda comes home and tells his father, Dharani, about the comments he has to listen to about his sister. Dharani says that there is to be no more studying for Bhendi and it is time to marry her off. They contact Bablu, Bhendi's uncle, who has a prospective groom for Bhendi. Bhendi's mother is not convinced about the marriage but she doesn't say anything. When Bhendi comes from school, her brother tells her that she will not be going to school anymore.

Scene 3: Bablu brings home the prospective groom but Bhendi tells them that she does not want to get married and that she wants to study further. Her father and brother get very angry. Her brother brings a chain and ties Bhendi's hand saying, "You are born as a girl and you will die a prisoner of someone."

The Theatre of Oppressed (participatory theatre that fosters democratic and cooperative forms of interaction among participants) ends there; Sanu di, who plays the role of Bhendi, starts engaging with the audience, who are dumbfounded by the intensity of the play.



I first saw Sanu di acting as Bhendi and was awestruck by her performance. Again, I saw her in an evening class of the Adult Functional Literacy (AFL) Centre of Karmabera village in Barabazar block, where she as a Shiksha Sathi (teacher) was teaching women. In the next few months, I saw Sanu di in different roles—teacher, actor, SHG member, attending a Cluster meeting, and organizer of a Mahaadhivesan (annual event of SHG members). Sandhya di, a member of the Federation Sabuj Sathi Nari Shakti Sangh (SSNSS), once said, “Sanu jodi groupe naai aasto, tahole etodine morei jeto (If Sanu hadn’t become a part of the SHG, she probably would have died).”

Curious to know more about her, I telephoned Sanu di to ask if we could meet. She readily agreed but not at her own house because her in-laws would be around and she would feel uncomfortable talking about her life in front of them. We met at Shikha di’s house at Bansbera.

Sanu di, alias Rupsun Bibi, is a short, slim, lively woman from Ransi village in Barabazar block. She lives with her in-laws and her ten-year-old daughter. Sanu di says that her story is no different from the story of Bhendi. She belonged to an ultra-conservative Muslim family from Sukhtawar, Purulia. Her father was a serviceman and his earning was just enough to run his family. Sanu di has two brothers and two sisters. She was the third child of her parents.

As she was growing up, her parents were more interested in investing in her brothers’ education. When she was in the 10th Standard, her parents and some relatives began planning

*As she was growing up, her parents were more interested in investing in her brothers’ education.*

*When she was in the 10th Standard, her parents and some relatives began planning her marriage. Sanu’s father was poor and had very little land; therefore, her marriage was fixed with her aunt’s son, who was double her age and also a diabetic patient*

her marriage. Sanu’s father was poor and had very little land; therefore, her marriage was fixed with her aunt’s son, who was double her age and also a diabetic patient.

Sanu di did not want to get married so early; she wanted to study and told her parents so. No one listened to her, however, and they forced her to get married. In the end, she had to say yes. Sanu di married Rafique Ansari of Ransi village, Barabazar block, when she

was just 16 years old. She had just passed her Madhyamik examination from the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education.

Her life, at her in-laws house, was miserable. She was afraid of her husband. She was also scared of his physical proximity. He used to force her to get intimate and perform things that she didn’t like. She bled as a result of this, but she never got treated. If she asked to consult a doctor for the problem, her husband and in-laws would refuse. They asked her to go to her father’s house for any medical treatment that she needed. He would beat her for small things. Within one month of her marriage, when she visited her father’s place, she shared all that was happening with her and said that she didn’t want to return to her husband. In spite of knowing all that had happened to her, her father and the other family members said that she had no right to stay at her paternal house. She was asked to leave and return to her husband’s place. Helpless, she returned to her husband and accepted it as her fate.

A year after the birth of her daughter, her husband died of an illness. She was plunged into another phase of life after the death of her husband. Her in-laws started blaming her for

his death as if she were the cause. The family treated her worse after that. She was not given enough food to feed herself and her daughter. She was restricted to within the boundaries of the house.

After the death of her husband, her father came to take her back to his place. But Sanu di refused. She told her father that when she had urged him not to give her in marriage to this man, she had not been heard. Even when she had told them that her would-be-husband was a diabetic patient, it had not counted. After her marriage, when she was facing torture at her in-laws' house and had requested her father to allow her to stay at his house, her request had been denied; she had been told that she had no right in her paternal home and she had to return to her in-laws house. Now she had reached a point in life where she realized she had no one in this world. And, if she died, she would prefer to die in her in-laws' house.

Sanu di's elder sister-in-law was an SHG member; she introduced Sanu to the SHG and asked her to accompany her and observe the group meeting. She said, "Hamaar saathe haamader group meetinge jaabi chol, dekhbi kotogulo mohila eksonge boshe taka joma korchhe, nijeder bhitore golpo korchhe (Come with me to our group meeting. You'll see women sitting together, talking to each other, collecting money)."

She liked the group meeting and joined the SHG. Becoming a member of the SHG came like a blessing for her. The women in the SHG kept her alive. They helped her mobilize and break out from the prison that was her house. They listened to her, provided the required advice, stood by her in her tough times and, above all, constantly encouraged her.

Sanu di is a member of the Sitaram Mahila Samiti in her village. The SHG was formed

in 2003. She joined the group in 2008. She began saving Rs 10 per week in the group. Her father used to send her some money from which she used to save. Today, she saves money from the remuneration she gets as a trainer and a Shiksha Sakhi.

Because she used to go to the meetings with her elder sister-in-law, no one objected. Sanu di gained confidence and courage after joining the SHG. Her education stood her in good stead and she was asked to manage the books of accounts of her SHG, to which she readily agreed. Her efforts and honesty were noticed by the others and she was praised by members of the group. She underwent PRADAN's 'membership training' along with her other fellow group members.

When the Cluster was formed, she was selected Cluster Representative for her group. It was not an easy decision for her to accept because now she would have to go outside her village for the meetings. She negotiated with her in-laws to be able to go to a neighbouring village to attend the meetings. She was allowed because her elder sister-in-law convinced the in-laws that Sanu would not be alone but that there would be other SHG members from the village going to the meeting as well.

Sanu di was a member of the Parikalpana Cluster. In the Cluster meetings, she met women from other villages. It was a wonderful opportunity for her. She enjoyed being a part of these meetings. These were like a breath of fresh air to her, supplying her with the much required oxygen to survive. She took her daughter along with her for the meetings.

She was very shy initially, and did not talk much with the other women; regular interactions with them, however, brought about a change in her. Being a Cluster Member, she attended the Leadership Training conducted

by PRADAN. "Aaj jante paarli bhalo neta kemon hoy. Bhalo neta chinir moto hoy, je sobar songe thaake aar sobar songe mishe jaay (Now, I understand who a good leader is. A good leader, like sugar, is one who is present to the people and mixes with them easily)."

*By attending these trainings and meetings, she accumulated enough confidence to stand up for and to situations and people. She resisted any efforts of her in-laws to stop her from going for any meeting or training*

By attending these trainings and meetings, she accumulated enough confidence to stand up for and to situations and people. She resisted any efforts of her in-laws to stop her from going for any meeting or training.

When, in 2009, the Education Programme started, she became the Shiksha Sathi in an AFL centre. This was another turning point in her life. She not only became independent, she looked at it as a continuation of her education. In the AFL Programme, many learning centres were opened at the village level. The focus was to provide primary education to illiterate women, beyond the conventional way of education. The teaching was through games, props, mutual learning. The centres were open in the evenings so that women could take out time for classes after they had finished their work for the day. For the programme, a Shiksha Sathi was required. The names of the aspirants were given by the Clusters to the Federation and the Shiksha Sathis were chosen through a selection process. To manage the programme, another body called the Education Management Group (EMG) was formed by the Federation.

Sanu di strived to perform her best and that reflected in her work. Very soon, Sanu di became famous as a teacher and the women of her centre appreciated and valued her work very much. When the AFL programme started and Sanu di joined it as a teacher, her daughter was merely three years old. She used to take

her daughter with her to the centre and to the trainings. As Rehana turned four years old, Sanu di left her daughter at her father's place to provide her a better education and a better environment. Sanu di attends many trainings, meetings and performances of the Theatre of Oppressed; it, therefore, is not

always possible to take her daughter with her; moreover, it affects her daughter's studies. The remuneration from the AFL centre was a great help for her. Being the Shiksha Sathi, Sanu di got Rs 1200 per month as honorarium in the initial period. After the working hours increased, the honorarium was revised to Rs 2500 per month.

Around 2012, she underwent training in the Gender Equality Programme (GEP), which included Babu-Munur Khela (a training game played to understand the different discriminatory practices between girls and boys that take place in the households and society), 24 Ghontar Kaajer Bhaag (another form of gender training, in which participants reflected on the work a woman does in a normal day, vis-a-vis what a man does, and the difference in the kind of respect and recognition that they get.). Bandhoner Khela (a training to understand the barriers a woman faces all her life). In one of the games in this training, a woman stands in the middle and the others stand around her in a circle. One of them names a barrier she faces; she goes and ties a ribbon around the woman. When all the participants tie a ribbon for every obstruction or restriction they face on the woman at the centre, they stand back and look at the woman. They see that all the parts of her body are covered with ribbons.

This visual representation of the restrictions on a woman generates a discussion. The women

are also asked to identify the similarities between that woman's life and their own lives and whether they want to change the situation or not.

Playing and teaching these games during trainings, Sanu di learned that many customs of our society are made to deprive women of their rights and to curb their wishes. After one such gender training, Sanu di started crying. She said, "Haami bhabti sudhu haamar uporei eto bandha, ekhon janchhi haamader samaj sob mohilader baandhe rakhechhe (I thought I was the only who had so many restrictions. Today, I realize that all the women in our society are suppressed)."

Sanu became more and more confident with these trainings. She has been selected as a trainer and provides trainings on gender, rights and entitlement, domestic violence, child protection, early marriages, nutrition and nutrition-sensitive agriculture, etc. She started challenging the practices she had followed like all the other women. She cites an example. In her family, the women went to work in the fields early in the morning and returned after finishing work in the evening. They left home without eating anything in the morning. Just because that was the custom. Because she did not eat at the right times and worked long hours on an empty stomach for many years, she became very weak.

After the GEP training, she started challenging this practice. She was severely criticized by her family members but she didn't change her stance. She said, "If I get weak by working on an empty stomach, why should I work to grow food? How will that food grain help me if I die." Khadijan Bibi (the elder daughter-in-law of the house), who had also undergone gender trainings as part of the SHG, appreciated Sanu's efforts and supported her. Today, the

women cook in the morning and eat before going to work.

Sanu di also shared that women had to wait till all the men of the family had eaten before they could eat their meals. She challenged this norm as well and started eating whenever she felt like eating, even if it was before the men had eaten. Now, these practices have changed in her family. Her elder sister-in-law also eats food before going for any work and eats whenever she wants to eat.

Initially, Sanu di was not allowed to go outside her home alone. Today, she goes to trainings, meetings, performances in Theatre of the Oppressed, her father's place and other places on her own. Criticism by her family or the villagers no longer bothers her. She either ignores the criticism or answers with due logic. She participates in residential camps that last for three to five days. She works as a trainer in residential camps and she does stage performances on the occasion of Mahadhivesan of SSNSS. She either ignores the criticism or answers with due logic.

She has challenged age-old norms. She now wears colourful sarees, which widows are forbidden to wear. She was not allowed to wear salwars but she now wears them when she acts in Theatre of Oppressed performances and even at other times. She uses sindoor (vermilion), alta and ornaments when required for her role in any play, even though it is forbidden for her.

Sanu di's deceased husband, Rafique Ansari, had some savings, which, after he died, she had deposited in her bank. Some years ago, her elder brother-in-law asked her to give the money to him so that he could start a business. Sanu di refused. Everyone in the family put pressure on her but she didn't bend. She was

threatened and asked to leave the house, but she remained adamant.

She brought up the issue in the Cluster meeting and sought help. The problem was discussed there and a few women from the Cluster visited her house and talked with her family members, which minimized the tension.

Sanu di says that she has had to face many challenges while bringing about change in her life and influencing change around her. She has been criticized and has faced many obstacles when she started moving out. She was humiliated by her family and others in the village. Her in-laws did not have a good opinion of her. They expressed their anger against her by doubting her and accusing her of having illicit relationships with other men, including with a nephew of the neighbouring family.

Her in-laws still try to restrict her from doing many things. But she no longer cares about their views and what they say about her. She believes that the work she is doing is very noble and that she can bring change in the lives of other women like her.

Sanu di is an active member of the Theatre of Oppressed troupe and plays the central character. In a drama called 'Early Marriage', she played the role of the girl Bhendi, who was forced to get married at an early age by her father and her brother. In another play, 'Discriminatory Practices with Girls and Women within the Family', she plays the character of the girl, who raises her voice against all the discrimination happening with her and the violence taking place against her mother.

*Her in-laws still try to restrict her from doing many things. But she no longer cares about their views and what they say about her. She believes that the work she is doing is very noble and that she can bring change in the lives of other women like her*

In January last year, an incident took place during the performance of the play 'Early Marriage'. That evening at Bankati village in Barabazar block, a girl voiced her opinion as a 'Spect-actor'.

Suddenly the father of the girl came and started beating her and saying, "How dare you to speak over here?"

The troupe stopped their performance and rescued the girl from her father's rage and took her to the Barabazar police station. They lodged a complaint against the man and urged the Officer in Charge (OIC) to arrest him. They waited till 11 pm while the police went to the village and arrested the father of the girl and brought him to the police station. Sanu di was present throughout. She was appreciated by the SHG women and the Cluster appreciated her efforts to support the girl.

Sanu di has set an example among women, who work to stop violence against women just as she has overcome many such challenges in her own life. She is now a role model and inspiration for many. Women believe that if Sanu Bibi, who belongs to a conservative Muslim family and is a widow, is able to cross so many hurdles, they too can change their situation.

Sanu di is present in every meeting, taking part in all the discussions. She shares her life experiences with other members and listens to theirs. She, with other Gender trainers of the Federation, accompanies victims to the police station and other places. Through trainings, she shares the stories of women who have fought and have overcome their struggles,

and trains them on what to do if they face the same. She takes active part in all the activities of the Cluster and the Federation.

When I asked her what obstacles she had been able to overcome, she listed out the things that she had achieved.

1. Freedom of movement: She was able to counter restrictions on going to places on her own and of her own choice.
2. Freedom of expression: She was not allowed to talk with others, especially any men other than her family. She fought to express her views openly and began to protest against those who spoke badly about her. She says, "Aage kaarur sathe kotha bolte naai paarti, bhoy paati jodi keu dekhe ley. Aar ekhon haami bhoy naai pai (I could not talk to anybody earlier. I was afraid if anyone saw me. Now I'm not afraid)."
3. Freedom to dress: Being a widow, she was not allowed to wear coloured sarees or any ornaments. Now, she wears colourful clothes much against her in-laws' wishes. She even dresses as per the demands of her character in the various plays that she acts in.
4. Freedom to spend (purchasing power): She had no right to buy things earlier. Whatever she needed, she had to ask her husband and later from her in-laws' permission. If they thought it was right for her, they would buy it. She had to use whatever they bought for her, whether she liked it or not. Now, she buys things as per her wishes and she does not take permission to do so.

*Gradually, the girl who wanted to earn her own living and to paint, sing and dance had to depend on someone whom she did not know. She was a graduate, but her degree was to be used for reading her daughter's school books to her*

5. Freedom of choice of food (eating whatever she likes): Sanu is choosy regarding food and does not eat if she does not like it. Earlier, she had to eat whatever food was available at home. She had never been able to express her choice over food. She can now cook for herself any food she likes and which is good

for her health. She has even started eating things that are forbidden for a widow to consume.

6. Freedom to eat (right to serve enough food for herself): In her family, the women had to eat after all the men had finished their meal. The women ate the leftover food, and sometimes there was not enough. She was also not allowed to serve her own food. She had to eat whatever her mother-in-law served her. Now, Sanu eats whenever she wants, sometimes even before the men have eaten and she doesn't wait to be served.
7. Freedom to be healthy (giving importance to her own health): Now, if she feels unwell, she goes to the doctor by herself before the ailment worsens; she follows the doctor's advice. Over time, she has improved her health (as noticed by the women who have been seeing her over a period of time) and has started consuming many things that she didn't eat earlier and which are good for her health.
8. Freedom to learn (capability to educate herself and her daughter): Sanu *di* is educated enough to earn for herself. She dreams of educating her only daughter. She negotiated with her brothers to help her in providing a good education to her daughter. She and her brothers bear all



the cost of Rehana's education. "*Hamar swapno haamar betike manusher moto manush korbo, aar hamar moto mohilader jonyo kaaj korbo* (I dream of raising my daughter as a good human being, and I'll continue my work for the women who are in situations like mine)."

Sanu di wishes to study further. She is inspired by her colleague, Shikha Rani Mahato (a Shiksha Sathi of Bansbera), who also got married after the 10th Standard and is now pursuing her final year of a three-year Graduation (Bachelor in Arts) programme this year. Sanu di is preparing to restart her studies once again.

She has become an example for other women in society, who appreciate her struggles

and her achievements. Whereas she knows that she is a role model, she says that her biggest challenge is still ahead of her—that of making the women in the villages believe in themselves. Although the women appreciate her work and efforts, they still think very little of themselves and consider themselves incapable of bringing similar changes in their own lives. It saddens her to see the injustices against women in society and she cannot do much about it. Just talking with them doesn't help. Her main concern now is to highlight these issues on a bigger platform and bring a mass change in society.

She proudly says, "Aage morte ichchha korto, ekhon baanchte ichchha kore. (Earlier, I wished to die; now I want to live)."

# NRLM: Opportunities and Challenges

SMRITI SAH

*Ek jungle mein do sher reh sakte hain kya?*

*Can an NGO exist in an area where a government programme is working intensively?*

*Recognizing their shared vision and mission, PRADAN and NRLM need to work in alignment with each other, to realize their goal of development, agency and self-reliance*

National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), popularly known as Aajeevika, aims to reach out to all the poor, rural families or those who live Below the Poverty Line (BPL), and to link them to sustainable livelihoods opportunities. The idea is to nurture them to break free of poverty and enjoy a decent quality of life.

At the same time, PRADAN, with its core competency in the area of sustainable livelihoods, seeks to help poor, rural families live a life of dignity.

Can an NGO like PRADAN and a major government programme such as NRLM work amicably together, in an area that is the resource block for the programme?

NRLM's key features include partnering NGOs and strengthening the collectives promoted by them. Its working at the ground-level, however, has not been clearly defined anywhere, and thus, needs critical analysis.

Can NGOs work with the government to create a synergy, facilitate a more holistic development and, at the same time, avoid the struggle for turf?

PRADAN works in Jaisinghnagar, an NRLM-intensive area. If you look closely, however, it could have been any NGO and any government programme and the situation would still not be very different.

## BACKGROUND

NRLM is a national-level programme, formed with the main aim of reducing poverty by helping poor households access gainful self-employment and improve their livelihoods on a sustainable basis. This was to be done through easy and cheap credit facilities to villagers, who are unable to save large amounts through their weekly savings of Rs 10 in their women's Self Help Groups (SHGs).

Jaisinghnagar is a block in the Shahdol district of Madhya Pradesh. It is also a resource block under NRLM, and has been chosen to be a model block for other areas to learn from and replicate. This means that it works on mission mode and a lot of time, energy and resources are put for regular monitoring and evaluation to ensure the success of the programme and the total saturation of the block.

PRADAN entered the Shahdol district in October 2011; after a survey of the area, it decided to work in two blocks—Jaisinghnagar and Gohparu, where the Madhya Pradesh Rural Livelihoods Project (MPRLP) project of the government was being wound up. A small team of two professionals—one agriculture specialist and one team leader—was put together whereas other human resources were being arranged for the team.

In February 2012, PRADAN came to know about NRLM's entry into the area. They tried to be part of the two project facilitating teams (PFTs) that were being set up to oversee 15–16 villages in Gohparu and Jaisinghnagar blocks.

In April 2012, their proposal was rejected, but PRADAN continued to work in the area and formed new SHGs. The District Project Manager (DPM) of NRLM supported PRADAN

*NRLM is a national-level programme, formed with the main aim of reducing poverty by helping poor households access gainful self-employment and improve their livelihoods on a sustainable basis*

and even came to seek help from PRADAN and asked it to provide the external support person for trainings.

In July 2012, the Society for the Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP), Andhra Pradesh, was made the resource NGO for

NRLM. In March 2013, NRLM's movement into the villages increased and by May 2013, Community Resource Persons (CRPs) from Andhra started making visits to the villages. This created a lot of disturbance in the PRADAN-promoted SHGs that by then numbered 60.

Many SHGs underwent restructuring because a few members interested in the revolving fund (RF) and cash credit limit (CCL) loans left their groups because the rest of the members were scared of bank loans and did not want to join NRLM. At that time, the PRADAN team was also apprehensive about a convergence with NRLM because it was not sure how it would be able to work with NRLM. PRADAN and NRLM may have a conflict of ideologies when dealing with the community. By July 2014, things had worsened for PRADAN because it had lost quite a few of the SHGs in the new villages that it had entered.

In September 2014, things finally started to improve. Prakash Rao, the then state Anchor of SERP visited PRADAN SHGs in Jaisinghnagar. After the visit, some Project Facilitation Team (PFT) members (such as Mr. Shrivastav from the Sidhi PFT and, later, his team) agreed to work with PRADAN.

All willing PRADAN SHGs were linked to NRLM. Those that refused to be linked to NRLM were left out. During this time, many PRADAN-promoted women leaders were also selected to become NRLM CRPs.

In 2015, there was a state of confusion both for the organizations and for the community. There were three different PFTs in the area and the response of each PFT seemed different, some were very cordial and helped nurture the area, others were not so.

In PFTs, both the organizations nurtured the SHGs with regard to SHG norms, livelihoods, gender issues and training, etc., and as the relations between professionals of both the organizations were cordial, it created good working conditions. Both professionals worked alongside, without disrupting each other's work, the community felt the energy and many leaders were identified and nurtured.

In some of the other PFTs, PRADAN's existence was accepted with a certain level of indifference due to which the energy in these villages was low. Most of the PRADAN-promoted SHGs were linked to NRLM; however, some SHGs thought that they were not being graded and that their SHGs were not receiving the RF and CCL because these SHGs were promoted by PRADAN.

This created resentment against Aajeevika, for example, in Jhara village, a member of the PRADAN-promoted SHG said, *"Unki SHGs jo baad me bani thi unhe RF mil gaya aur humein nahi diya* (Their SHGs, which were formed after ours, are recipients of RF whereas we are not)." The SHGs lost trust because of this and discontinued writing their books of accounts. Community members identified themselves as either PRADAN SHGs or NRLM SHGs. This affected the 'we' feeling in the community and made it difficult for the professionals to work with the community as a whole.

*There seems to be considerable confusion among the community about the role and the functions of PRADAN and that of NRLM—mainly whether they are similar or different. There is also confusion within the two organizations about how to work together*

Recently, PRADAN renewed its efforts to work with NRLM-promoted SHGs in villages where they are already working and even in villages where there are only NRLM-promoted SHGs.

## ISSUES ON THE GROUND

There seems to be considerable confusion in the community about the role and the functions of PRADAN and that of NRLM—mainly whether they are similar

or different. There is also confusion within the two organizations about how to work together. Some of the areas of confusion are:

- ♦ Self-image: The community seemed confused about their status as a PRADAN SHG or an NRLM SHG, or how to view the roles of PRADAN and NRLM. SHGs that were linked to NRLM thought that they were transferred to NRLM and that they were no longer associated with PRADAN. This also made them anxious, and as they put it, *"PRADAN ne humare samuh ko Aajeevika ko de diya* (PRADAN has given our SHG to Aajeevika)." Efforts were made to clear this confusion among members so that they could work with both the organizations better.
- ♦ Shift away from Volunteerism: Whereas, conceptually, the whole SHG group process of NRLM and PRADAN are not very different, operationally there are differences. For example, NRLM plans to create a sustainable institution, just as PRADAN does; however, the use of women leaders to work as CRPs for payment has resulted in a shift away from volunteerism and towards materialism. This has resulted

in another phenomenon—some leaders, more driven by money, are paid by NRLM and are de-motivating community members from working with PRADAN. Perhaps, they feel loyal to the organization paying them and, therefore, think it is their duty to motivate other women to join it, even if it means discouraging them about joining PRADAN.

This has led to some confusion among the community, which seems skeptical, because they are being told continuously that PRADAN is a private organization, which will withdraw very soon, leaving them stranded, or that if they work with PRADAN, they will receive no material benefits. The community members had, probably, stopped listening to the leaders because they thought that the leaders worked for money. They tell the leaders, “You come to us because you earn from the organization, but we do not have time to spare for you.”

- ♦ Growth of Materialism: The growing expectation is that PRADAN should provide the community with funds just the way NRLM does. Questions are being raised as to what PRADAN has to offer the people. It is difficult to explain the value of training programmes around SHG-strengthening, accounts-keeping, gender issues, livelihoods, etc., to a newly formed SHG or to people who were looking only for material benefits. Articulate leaders seemed to be discouraging the community from engaging with PRADAN for this very reason. A few structures such as farm ponds and compost pits were built

*Questions are being raised as to what PRADAN has to offer the people. It is difficult to explain the value of training programmes around SHG-strengthening, accounts-keeping, gender issues, livelihoods, etc., to a newly formed SHG or to people who were looking only for material benefits*

and some implements such as pumps were demonstrated and some training on the SRI, improved paddy and vegetables was conducted with the community. Due to the bad monsoon, however, the utilization and output from these interventions have not been significant; PRADAN, therefore, has not been able to create a huge impact.

PRADAN lays emphasis on community mobilization and trainings as a basis of livelihood, governance and institution-strengthening. The community, it seems, is trying to use NRLM as a lever to negotiate with PRADAN, to provide it with some material benefits, if PRADAN wants to work with it. Recently, a community member, who wanted to be included in an exposure visit, told the PRADAN professional, “*Aap agar mujhe le kar nahi jayenge toh main kisi training me nahi aungi* (If you don't take me, I will never come to any of your training programmes).”

- ♦ Village Organization (VO) vs Village Level Committee (VLC): Although they seem like the same thing, operationally, the two institutions are very different. Whereas the primary focus of a VO, formed by NRLM, is on the financial needs of SHGs and only SHG representatives are invited (they do have a quarterly *gram sabha* for village issues where all members are invited), a VLC, promoted by PRADAN, is an open forum for all villagers (beyond SHGs, even including non-poor, men, boys and girls). Particular emphasis is given to women's participation, to come together and identify issues in the village, talk about and find possible solutions to these problems.

This differentiation is difficult for the community to understand. For instance, a VO meeting was held in Serimar village, just one day prior to PRADAN's scheduled VLC meeting. This created confusion among the community and no one came for the VLC meeting. They said, *"Humne socha gram sangathan ki baithak to kal ho gayi thi (We thought that the village-level meeting was held yesterday)."* If the differences between these two entities are understood and accepted, the confusion can be erased and the community can grow much faster.

*Shanti tells us that the film, Ek Ropa Dhan, made by PRADAN, helped her understand SRI, and that was true for many other women as well. The screening of the film became the starting point of a belief in organic practices*

- ◆ NRLM's Saturation Drive: Almost all PRADAN-promoted SHGs became linked but a few refused to join NRLM for various reasons, including *"Hum itne padhe likhe nahi hain, kitabe kaun likhega (We are not that literate, how will we write so many books)"*, *"Karza lenge to wapas bhi toh karna padega, humari toh kamayi hi itni nahi hai (If we take a loan, we will have to return it; but we do not earn that much)"*, *"Hum apni bachat se paise jod kar lein-dein kar lenge. Humein zyada paise ki zaroorat nahi (We do not need a lot of funds. We will take loans from our own savings)"*. But NRLM was under pressure to saturate the whole village (at least 80 per cent) and they tried all kinds of strategies to link the *didis* to NRLM. PRADAN professionals were asked to help negotiate with the *didis*.

NRLM officials also made efforts to break the groups that were not willing to join in their entirety and create a new group with the members that were willing to join NRLM. In some places they were successful,

such as in Pateriatola, Serimar. This manoeuvring was very exhausting as well as frustrating for the PRADAN team, which was under the constant fear of their SHG being broken and re-formed into an NRLM SHG. In some places, where the groups were very strong, such as in Jhara and Bachha, eight SHGs adamantly refused to join

NRLM, even though a few members were willing.

PRADAN, on its part, has always extended support to NRLM and hoped that women join NRLM and enjoy easy credit from banks. However, when some groups decide not to join NRLM, PRADAN does not pressurize them. PRADAN believes that the community has an innate capability and can take decisions on its own. Some groups could not come to a consensus to join NRLM and so decided against it. And, in some places, where some groups were not running due to their internal conflicts, SHGs were broken and re-formed with the problems still remaining.

- ◆ NRLM's approach to village saturation: NRLM is also making women join SHGs by persuasion or by creating fear. Many women reported that they were told, *"Agar samuh se nahi judenge to galla nahi milega (If you do not join an SHG, you will not receive PDS ration)."* The women joined NRLM SHGs with this fear in mind, putting into question the sustainability of these groups. Would these women participate in the groups? Would it cause dissatisfaction among group members? Or could they later be motivated to continue in their SHGs?



- ♦ Different understanding among different PFTs: PRADAN has approached all NRLM PFTs under its area and has been welcomed everywhere. PRADAN was requested to persuade those PRADAN-promoted SHGs that had refused to join

NRLM to change their decision. PRADAN tried its best to work with NRLM and has received some support. Some PFTs have been supportive whereas others have been indifferent.

When PRADAN and NRLM worked cordially, more time was spent on nurturing the community. SHGs met more regularly, the books of accounts were better written, the RF fund was better utilized, repayment of loans was more regular, the community was better mobilized and worked together without being torn about belonging to either PRADAN or NRLM. In areas where the relations between PRADAN and NRLM were not cordial, the community was divided into PRADAN and NRLM SHGs.

## GAPS

There were some areas of gaps due to the two different structures. If a consensual agreement could be arrived at by both the organizations, there would be better results.

1. Books of Accounts: SHGs found the PRADAN books easier to write. With NRLM, they had to write seven books, if they wished to receive the RF and the CCL money. Some people were unwilling to join NRLM just to avoid writing the seven books of accounts. It created double work on PRADAN-promoted groups, linked to NRLM, because they had to write the same data twice for both the

*There were some areas of gaps due to the two different structures. If a consensual agreement could be arrived at by both the organizations, there would be better results*

organizations. How could this drudgery be reduced? This is the great debate in the team.

Writing the same data twice put a lot of pressure on an SHG accountant. There were some suggestions on how to work around this problem. PRADAN could negotiate with NRLM to

accept the three books of accounts that they had introduced along with NRLM's three books, as had been done by the Narharpur team in Chhattisgarh. Or PRADAN could take the data from NRLM registers and develop a book of accounts that was easy to write and was accepted by NRLM, as was being done in Bihar. Another way out was that NRLM be persuaded to accept the three books promoted by PRADAN, with some additions such as the 'home-grown model' developed by PRADAN in Jharkhand.

2. Cashbox: PRADAN's concept of a cashbox has been widely appreciated by SHGs; it gives them a sense of security because the key is with one person and the box with another. Also, going to the bank every week for Rs 100–120 collected has a large cost attached to it; taking a loan every week so that the money does not lie idle with someone puts the pressure of unproductive loans on women. This concept, adopted in some villages by NRLM, was soon discontinued for reasons unknown. Could things like these be adopted by NRLM? Or could this be an intervention point for PRADAN? Should SHGs be motivated to buy these boxes from their own money?
3. Pressure of trainings: Both the organizations offered trainings and that put pressure on the community. There were agriculture trainings, membership trainings, gender trainings, CRP rounds

(that included new SHG formation, membership and accounts training), and so on. This resulted in the members getting tired of the trainings and also becoming averse to them. At times, there was confusion because PRADAN and NRLM trainings started to coincide due to lack of communication between the professionals. The community then had to choose between the trainings and this also affected the participation in trainings. Proper information dissemination became impacted. Sometimes very important village issues could not be addressed as half the people were attending some other training.

## FILLING GAPS

### 1. Group processes

NRLM, with its huge CRP pool that stayed in the villages for 15 days to train SHG members, did a fabulous job of training the groups in SHG norms, loan repayment through installments, book-keeping, etc. The SHG meeting process promoted by NRLM ensured maximum participation from each member and ensured that every member was able to introduce herself. Elements, however, such as an equal distribution of power and responsibility among group members, ensuring unanimous decision-making, listening and so on were not very visible on the field.

Many NRLM leaders were very vocal women, and some were even from the higher castes. They dominated because of the social hierarchy and were able to voice their opinions strongly. Many times, they seized the space of the other members of the community, hampering the process of facilitating unanimous decision-making and ensuring that every woman finds a space to voice her opinion.

For example, in a VLC meeting held in Budsar village, NRLM CRPs were very vocal and

conducted the entire meeting while the other members of the community became mere attendees. This also leads to most of the power and responsibility of SHGs being concentrated in the hands of the *Adhyaksh* and the *Sachiv*.

Issues such as governance, social issues and gender issues were not the prime focus under NRLM, even though it had a dedicated space for these in the books of accounts. This was one area that PRADAN thought it could intervene and ensure that these discussions were not missed because they helped to strengthen SHGs on things other than money.

### 2. Distribution and use of funds

Several times, NRLM has been under pressure to ensure that the community takes the CCL loans transferred to it. At times, the community is forced to take a loan without generating a proper demand. Loans are taken up only so that they have a share in the finance provided, just in case the people fail to pay and the SHG dissolves, and causes the loans to be taken up for unproductive purposes.

As PRADAN is not under pressure to ensure that loans are taken by the community, it is in a better position to ensure proper micro-investment plan (MIP) or distribution of loan among members in a way that they best utilize the RF money for gainful employment.

### 3. Lack of proper knowledge

At times, SHGs feel pressurized to take loans while the members were not confident about the utility of the loan of the whole Rs 50,000 that they receive as CCL fund. This has resulted in one person taking a large portion of the fund as loan with very little or none left for the others.

There have been a few cases wherein members did not trust others in the SHG and, therefore, distributed the fund equally among

themselves, resulting in very small amounts accruing to each member. The fund could not be used for productive purposes. Although NRLM is worried about this trend, it becomes difficult for it to reach out to every SHG because the numbers are very large. PRADAN has intervened in many situations and helped SHG members by suggesting ways out, for example, telling members that they can take a part of the fund as loan and the rest when they feel more confident.

PRADAN, on its part (through membership trainings and by regular interactions in the SHG meetings), has tried to build trust among members and has tried to facilitate the developing of plans of how members within a group can use the funds more productively.

#### 4. Working with the village as a whole

Both NRLM and PRADAN focus on savings and credit (S&C), and livelihoods promotion. There is need to look beyond these two areas to larger developmental issues such as health, nutrition, gender or governance for a more holistic development.

The Village Organization (VO), a village-level forum created by NRLM, focuses more on S&C and is conducted only with SHG representatives. Another meeting, conducted quarterly, is the *gram sabha*, wherein all SHG members are invited. The concept is very similar to village-level committees (VLCs); however, there does not seem to be clarity about whether women other than NRLM SHG members are to be invited. Also, because these meetings are held once in three months, it becomes difficult to reach an action point.

*She travelled to Delhi to receive the award at a glittering ceremony. In fact, she even gave a much applauded speech, where she dedicated the award to the women in her village and added that the success was possible only with the support of each member of the Federation and the SHGs*

PRADAN, on the other hand, works with the village as a whole. It tries to ensure that both the PRADAN-promoted and NRLM-promoted SHGs sit together and discuss various issues relating to the village. One such example is in Serimar village where the VLC meeting was held. The women met and discussed the issue of meals served in the *aanganwadi*. They mobilized some more community members, arranged for transport and went to the

block office of Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), to complain about the issue. For this, the women came forward of their own volition, standing united for an issue; they worked on many other issues after this in a united manner.

#### 5. Facilitating a larger societal change

For larger societal change to be accomplished, a majority of the villagers need to understand the issues their village is facing. Therefore, it becomes important that a larger number of people are reached out to, without discrimination. For example, in some villages, PRADAN and NRLM-promoted SHGs need to be sensitized around gender discrimination, patriarchy and domestic violence, so that the understanding about such issues percolates down to the grass roots and more people talk about such things, to bring about a change in the present situation.

These women were also taken on visits to other villages (known as 'exposure visits') such as to the Mahadiveshan so that they are able to understand the idea of one Federation of women with no discrimination whether belonging to SHGs of PRADAN or NRLM. This had a positive outcome because

the Mahadiveshan, held in Jaisinghnagar, saw a large number of women coming together to celebrate their togetherness without any discrimination.

*PRADAN could support NRLM in its endeavour to link the poor, rural families to various livelihood opportunities and nurture them till they come out of poverty*

### **FURTHER SCOPE TO WORK TOGETHER**

NRLM operates with an understanding that for accelerating the pace of programme implementation in the states, it needs to build upon the already existing social capital in the form of women's SHGs, Federations and women-led producer organizations. It seeks to draw on the strength of the agencies, which have promoted and nurtured them.

PRADAN could support NRLM in its endeavour to link the poor, rural families to various livelihood opportunities and nurture them till they come out of poverty.

The possible areas where PRADAN can support NRLM are as follows:

1. Providing support to NRLM and the community to reach a higher goal of faster development

NRLM places high emphasis on convergence with other programmes of the Ministry of Rural Development, other central ministries and programmes of state governments for developing synergies, directly and through other institutions set up for the rural poor. These government departments also try to take advantage of the broad base created by NRLM. They try to reach out to families in the villages through VOs and SHGs and link them to their programmes and schemes.

NRLM, on its part, also works with departments to reach out to a larger number of women. However, it has its limits, in terms of time and

energy, due to which things get dropped half-way. For example, under the new government and the Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan programme, there is a lot of focus on the construction of toilets. NRLM was approached to reach out to people and

motivate them to construct toilets. The idea was to create a list of interested families and get the scheme approved. The families would then invest their own money, with the help of CCL funds, and would be reimbursed by the government. In Pateriatola *panchayat*, 90 families showed interest; of these, around 85 got approval. The hope was that the women would take loans and construct toilets. This idea did not get transferred to the community properly, which was a cause for frustration among community too. It said, "*Sir ne itne sapne dikhaye shauchalay banana ke, phir kuch nahi kiya* (You showed us so many dreams of building toilets and have done nothing)."

PRADAN then worked with the community to enhance its understanding of the situation. Through VLCs and by arranging a meeting with PRI members to discuss the issue, it made plans about how the community could work together to build toilets.

NRLM also tried linking the community to the sericulture department. A list was prepared with 25 interested farmers. However, the farmers did not understand how they had to go about setting up the plantation. They knew that there would be a mulberry plantation but had no clarity about the reason for the plantation. They were told about silk-worms and the whole process of cocoon formation during a VLC meeting but they were not able to make the connection. A number of farmers opted out because they were not willing to invest time and effort into raising silk-worms.

In another case, NRLM and Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) worked together, to spread the technique of cultivating pigeon-peas, using the dibbling method. They distributed the seeds and told the women to sow the seeds at a distance of one metre each. Telling the women to plant the trees did not work and very few adopted the method. This year, PRADAN introduced the same method to the community.

It seems to be well-accepted by the women, who came forward themselves to adopt the new technique.

## 2. Federation formation process

Both PRADAN and NRLM have a three-tier structure for women's collectives—the SHG, the VO/VLC and the Federation. But the needs and purposes of creating each differs for each. NRLM aims to create the structure, to support livelihood activities such as co-operatives and producer groups. PRADAN's purpose behind creating a structure also includes enhancing the sense of agency, with women asserting themselves as equals in society and influencing change.

The need to form a Federation and the urgency to start the formation process differ in the two organizations. PRADAN thinks it is highly necessary to form a Federation as quickly as possible; SHGs may start to fall apart because of the lack of stimuli other than S&C. This is not so with NRLM. However, in order to avoid any further confusion, both the organizations could come to a consensus on how to proceed and form Federations together.

## LIMITATIONS

There have been limitations at our end, perhaps due to certain biases we have regarding the

*There have been limitations at our end, perhaps due to certain biases we have regarding the level of acceptance by NRLM-promoted SHGs. These biases impede us from working with those SHGs. They need to be acknowledged and certain efforts need to be made*

level of acceptance by NRLM-promoted SHGs. These biases impede us from working with those SHGs. They need to be acknowledged and certain efforts need to be made.

### 1. Reaching out to the whole community

Currently, PRADAN is working intensively with only its own SHGs and only engages with NRLM-promoted SHGs in

village-level trainings and meetings (such as VLC) or gender trainings. However, if we intend to create a strong structure, it is important that the base is made even stronger. This means we need to make more efforts at strengthening women's solidarity at the SHG level. It also means that we need to reach out to more SHGs than we currently are and leave our biases (that NRLM-promoted SHGs will not listen to PRADAN) behind.

In some instances, NRLM-promoted SHGs have been invited for trainings such as gender training, with the aim of increasing understanding about gender structures in society. In two cases, women from NRLM-promoted SHGs came but left soon thereafter because they did not come prepared to stay overnight. Their leaving half-way caused a lot of disruption.

### 2. Reaching out to NRLM

Many efforts have been made at the block level. The response from each PFT seems different. In order to have an impact on how the two organizations respond to each other at the village level, some efforts need to be made at the district or higher levels, where all decisions about implementation take place. There may have been some discussions earlier about reaching a point of convergence; not



much seems to have changed, however, on the ground. The areas for discussion could be:

- Partnership in:
- ♦ Livelihoods: With its core competency lying in the area of livelihoods, PRADAN possesses experience and a technical base, which can be used to support NRLM in its endeavour to create livelihoods support structures such as producer groups. PRADAN could also share its expertise in areas where it already has successfully running models such as in sericulture or agriculture.
- ♦ Institution building: NRLM works to create a support structure to link the poor families to livelihood options by way of capacity building, enabling access to finances and other livelihood resources. Thus, the focus of its work is financial independence of the community at the SHG and the village levels, and less on building a Federation. This may be because the need for a Federation is not yet thought necessary for financial inclusion or livelihoods promotion. Some SHGs in the area are more than three years old, however, and need a higher structure to add value to the time they invest in their SHGs.

PRADAN, with its experience in institution building, can again add value to NRLM work and aid the building of a strong, vibrant, transparent and democratic Federation structure.

- Building a better understanding about each other's work:

PRADAN could share with NRLM its ideology and its work processes, and how PRADAN

*Is there a need to fight for turf or can the space be shared by both? If the area of work is divided clearly, specialization can be achieved through the division of work. The goals of both are in alignment; therefore, the two can be co-travellers, working together towards their goals*

may be able to add value to their work. At the same time, PRADAN professionals working in the area may also be oriented on how things work in NRLM so that both the organizations understand each other's work and priorities better; instead of being hurdles to each other's work and processes, they may be able to aid each other's work.

### **Can we be like the rain and sunshine for the jungle?**

Rather than fighting for space or competing with each other, perhaps, both organizations can complement each other, leading to a more holistic development of the community. Both the organizations, using their resource pool and expertise in various areas, can nurture the community to transform it into a vibrant, flourishing collectives.

The objectives of both organizations are not very different. Both work to reduce poverty, strengthen livelihoods and grass-roots institutions. However, their way of working differs. Whereas one is very good with ensuring the following of norms and other structures, the other works on strengthening of collectives through group processes, building cohesiveness and solidarity.

Is there a need to fight for turf or can the space be shared by both? If the area of work is divided clearly, specialization can be achieved through the division of work. The goals of both are in alignment; therefore, the two can be co-travellers, working together towards their goals.

Or will NGOs such as PRADAN have to exit government-intensive programme blocks?



# Sehansha Gets Married

JYOTI BALA

*Expressing her anguish at customs and cultural practices that are blindly followed, a young 14-year-old bride's gut-wrenching questions remain unanswered: "Why does the world have so many expectations from women? Why do we have to listen to abuses all day, even after killing ourselves to match up? My husband doesn't like to come to my mother's house, but why I am expected to live with his mother?"*

The sun in June is ruthless as it beats down on the upper plains of Bihar; usually, there is an uncanny quiet because not even a bird dares to venture out into the scorching heat. Today, however, the hamlet was resonating with loud chatter and giggles as young girls seemed to be celebrating. The cacophony became louder as they spotted me approaching.

My eyes inquired, "What?"

The answer to my silent question was a resounding chorus, "Sehansha is getting married. Today is the 'turmeric' ceremony, and tomorrow is the wedding!"

I was surprised. A volley of questions ran through my mind, "What? How? Who is the groom?" I asked them all, one after another. Then I added, curious, "How old is Sehansha?"

An old aunty started to calculate tediously. "The October in the year of the flood, that means..."

Many others joined in the effort. The task was insurmountable! At last they gave up, and the old lady declared righteously, "She is old enough!"

My next question was deceptive. "When do girls become old enough?"

The response was simple, quick, and direct, "When she starts wearing a kurta."

My eyes reflected my lack of conviction with the response.

Pat came the justification: "See, your city and our village are very different. Who will marry a girl who is over-age?" The lady continued. "You know, we won't be able sleep in peace if our girls grow to be your age and are not yet married...By the time they become your age, they would (should) have had two or three children. We think your Abbu did not have the money to marry you off!" She declared in conclusion.

*Oh my God! She was a sight to behold with open locks of hair, face glowing with turmeric, eyes flooded with kohl, a golden saree, hands radiant with henna, a shiny stone on her nose and large rings in ears – all in riotous contrast with her fair skin*

The reply was not on expected lines...Was there is a tinge of rebellion in her voice?

"You shameless whore! Bloody slut!! Loose character!" A barrage of shocking expletives... and many more, flowed easily and violently from the old grandmother who was in a rage. "Is this how you speak of your groom? Did your parents not teach you basic civility? Is this your culture?"

Wise-cracks such as these have become a part of my daily interactions with these feisty folks. I brushed the comment aside and started admiring the new art work that has come up on the walls of the cow-dung green court - yard. So pretty the sketches were: flowers, men, women, girls...there were also ornamental festoons on the doorway that added to the splendor!

"Where is Sehansha?" I asked.

"Oh, she has gone to take a bath," her Aunt responded.

I found a seat for myself on a bundle of straw, and settled down to wait. A little while later, Sehansha appeared in the doorway.

Oh my God! She was a sight to behold with open locks of hair, face glowing with turmeric, eyes flooded with kohl, a golden saree, hands radiant with henna, a shiny stone on her nose and large rings in ears – all in riotous contrast with her fair skin.

Getting the congratulations out of the way quickly, I asked, "How is your boy?"

Spreading the wet clothes that she had washed onto the wooden fence, she replied loudly, "Oh that fellow? He is ugly. Black as ink!"

Perhaps, Sehansha had crossed the *Lakshman rekha* of conformity somewhere. The old women in the group joined in the melee and abused her to their satisfaction, happy to have won one more fight against change.

Sehansha was in tears as she made herself busy doing nothing in particular. I sneaked her away to another room. Slowly, she became cheerful. She displayed her new necklace and the earrings, and asked, "How do I look?"

"Gorgeous!" I said, smiling.

There was a movement outside...Sehansha's father had returned from the field. In spite of being a farmer, he had gone for weeding in the landlord's field, as his own land had been mortgaged away.

I stepped out of the room, and asked Sehansha's mother, "So, how are you preparing for the wedding?"

The heat was debilitating. Swinging the grass-fan even more vigorously, she replied gloomily, "What do I tell you? We haven't even bought new clothes and nor have we arranged for the feast. We need a lakh and a quarter, and we have managed only seventy thousand, as of now. There are more landlords whom we could ask, but I don't know how we will work on so many fields."

My eyes kept returning to the father. The frail man was a picture of dejection and despair. He listed the details of the bridal-gifts, "Bed, bedding, table, chair, almirah, motor-cycle, utensils, new clothes; then there are the other routine expenses—the music band, mutton—the list is long. We need at least a lakh and a quarter." He sighed.

As we chatted, a few persons from Sehansha's *sasural* (husband's family) came visiting, to hand over the customary wedding invitation; along with the card, they left behind a new demand: "Include a calf in the list of gifts."

Sehansha's father turned pale; and he rushed off to the market.

Evening set in. It was time for me to return home. Each of the family members invited me for the wedding. Sehansha walked me to the gate. She complained, "I am sick of all this. I am supposed to eat sweets and not drink any water! I can't do this."

I listened to her for a while and then left.

My mind was distraught as I travelled back. Where would they arrange the money from?

I remained busy for the next few days and was not able to go for Sehansha's wedding. I called her Amma later, to apologize. "All well? Sehansha has gone off to her in-laws?"

"All well," said Amma. "You must come to meet all of us."

I went to the village after a few days. All the girls came and assembled around me.

*My eyes kept returning to the father. The frail man was a picture of dejection and despair. He listed the details of the bridal-gifts, "Bed, bedding, table, chair, almirah, motor-cycle, utensils, new clothes; then there are the other routine expenses—the music band, mutton—the list is long. We need at least a lakh and a quarter." He sighed*

Sehansha was also there. She brought a chair for me, but did not seem to be in high spirits. She looked different; her attire was not her usual one. I asked the reason.

She replied dispiritedly, "My husband likes me wearing long kurtas."

Sehansha's friends (Sahista, Sadia, Ruhi, Bastari, Afroza, Rukhsana, Takallum), all of 13 or 14 years of age, had a lot to tell me.

"Oh, you should have come for the wedding. You know, Sehansha fainted at her *bidai* (farewell). She was crying non-stop." They told me excitedly.

"Why? Why did you cry so much?" I asked.

"I cried because of the bangles sent by my in-laws," she replied.

"What?" I was taken aback by the strange reply.

"The bangles and ear-studs that they gave were ugly; I have never worn such bad-looking bangles ever in my life; also I was famished and thirsty; I wasn't allowed to even take a bath before leaving, in this heat, imagine! Abbu also could not arrange for the calf that they had demanded; My friends were not there with me, with whom I have played all my life. I was alone; The sweet (*kheer*) that I was to carry with me was not there; You know, on top of it, my husband—he is a big man—was scolding me for no reason, and I was scared of him. I cried and cried loudly, hoping that Abbu would stop me from going, but no one stopped me," she wailed.

I was shaken, I had not expected this. How many reasons could a young girl have to cry on her wedding day? I had never thought about that before.

I asked the obvious, "How is your *sasura*?"

Her throat was choked up and her eyes filled up. There was an avalanche of tears. And between her sobs, she let out her woes: "It is like I am in a prison. There are restrictions on everything. I can't lift a finger without someone scolding me. They are annoyed with me for not bringing the calf. I am forced to go on a fast every other day for some or the other ceremony. I have never seen my husband fasting for anything. No one cares about me! Even for food, I have to ask; otherwise I will not be given food."

Then she looked at me and asked in all innocence, "Why does the world have so many expectations from us women? Why do we have to listen to abuses all day, even after killing ourselves to match up? My

*Her throat was choked up and her eyes filled up. There was an avalanche of tears. And between her sobs, she let out her woes: "It is like I am in a prison"*

husband doesn't like to come to my mother's house, but why I am expected to live with his mother?" She took deep breath and continued, "Remember, you had said that the meaning of my name is, 'a person who lives by her will'? But today, I have no voice in anything that I do!"

There was a heavy silence in the room as she finished speaking. The girls were not chattering anymore. All the rhetoric of equality, a good life, I realized, had just been blown to smithereens. I was uneasy. It was as if something had broken inside me as well. I wanted to say something to her, I wanted to respond to her, but I didn't know if I should. I was not sure if what I had to say should be told to a young 14-year-old.

The girls came to see me off as I left. Sehansha did not. So much had changed. It was, as if in an instant, Sehansha had grown up. There were restrictions on her now. She was an adult woman. She was now the wife of Mohd. Parvez.



Having faced many challenges and criticism while bringing about change in her life, Sanu di has become an example for other women in society, who appreciate her struggles and her achievements. Whereas she knows that she is a role model, she says that her biggest challenge is still ahead of her—that of making the women in the villages believe in themselves.





**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.

*NewsReach* is published by the National Resource Centre for Livelihoods, housed in the PRADAN Research and Resource Centre.

**PRADAN**, E-1/A, Ground Floor, Kailash Colony, New Delhi - 110048 **Tel/Fax:** 011 40407700/29248831-32 **E-mail:** [newsreach@pradan.net](mailto:newsreach@pradan.net)