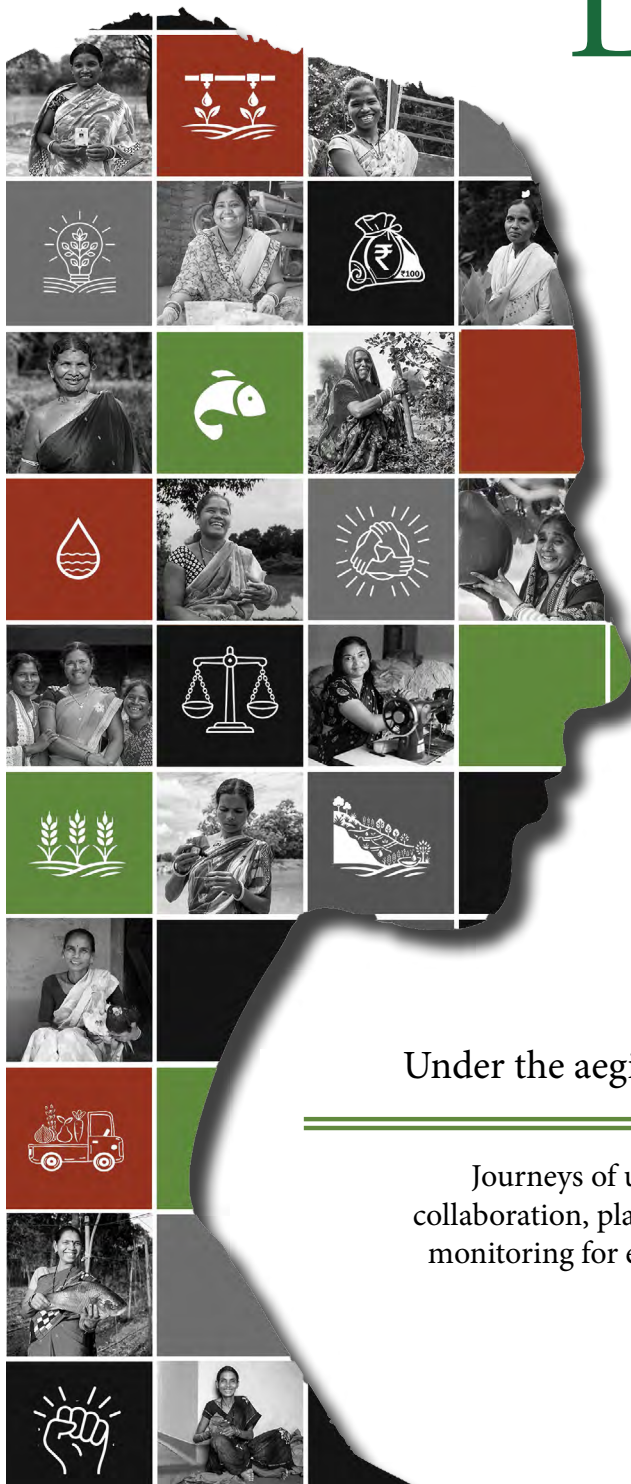


WHEN WOMEN LEAD THE MAP



Under the aegis of AWARE initiative

Journeys of unlocking potential through
collaboration, planning, implementation and
monitoring for equitable rural development





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collaboration, planning, implementation and
monitoring for equitable rural development

Designed by:
SHODHVAHINI MEDIA COLLECTIVE

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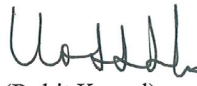
FOREWORD

Through the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), the Ministry of Rural Development has built one of the world's largest platforms for community-led development, reaching over 100 million women through more than 9.20 million Self-Help Groups. These institutions provide a strong foundation for livelihood enhancement, women's empowerment, and collective action.

The Government of India has also prioritised collaborative approaches for climate-resilient livelihoods and natural resource management. Initiatives such as the Lakhpati Didi programme, Village Prosperity and Resilience Plans (VPRPs), Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs), MGNREGS, PMKSY, NMNF, and the 10,000 FPOs scheme strengthen partnerships between Panchayati Raj Institutions and women collectives, promote durable asset creation, and support women farmers and entrepreneurs in adopting resilient and market-oriented livelihood systems.

In this context, the compendium *When Women Lead the Map – Journeys of Unlocking Potential through Collaboration*, is both timely and significant. It captures practical insights, institutional pathways, and lived experiences, demonstrating how women are leading water and livelihood planning with Panchayats and facilitating convergence for implementation. The compendium offers valuable lessons that can be adapted and scaled across diverse contexts, contributing to the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047.

I congratulate the rural women whose leadership and lived experiences have shaped these inspiring stories. I commend PRADAN, for documenting the struggles as well as the successes. I do hope that State Rural Livelihood Missions (SRLMs) and other stakeholders will continue to learn from these experiences to strengthen the programme design and implementation for greater impact.


(Rohit Kansal)

अमित शुक्ला
संयुक्त सचिव
Amit Shukla
JOINT SECRETARY



ग्रामीण विकास मंत्रालय
ग्रामीण विकास विभाग
भारत सरकार
Ministry of Rural Development
Department of Rural Development
Government of India



24th September, 2026

Foreword

India's rural development landscape is increasingly being shaped by the leadership, participation, and collective strength of rural women. Through the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), women's institutions have emerged as important platforms for livelihood enhancement, social inclusion, and community-led development.

At the same time, rural communities are facing growing challenges related to water insecurity, climate variability, and livelihood vulnerability. Responding to these challenges requires approaches that strengthen local institutions, deepen participatory planning, and enable effective convergence across government programmes. The experiences presented in this compendium demonstrate how collaboration between communities and public institutions can create sustainable and transformative outcomes.

When Women Lead the Map – Journeys of Unlocking Potential through Collaboration, developed by PRADAN, brings together case studies that illustrate how women's collectives, Panchayati Raj Institutions, and government departments have worked jointly to improve water security, strengthen livelihoods, and create durable community assets. These experiences highlight the importance of participatory planning processes such as Village Prosperity and Resilience Plans (VPRPs) and Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs) in identifying local priorities and facilitating the convergence of resources, schemes, and programmes.

A significant feature across these stories is the growing role of women as planners, decision-makers, and leaders of local development. By strengthening community institutions and building stronger linkages with government systems, these initiatives have enabled women to access productive assets, influence local planning, and contribute to more resilient rural economies.

The compendium offers valuable lessons for State Rural Livelihoods Missions, Panchayati Raj Institutions, government departments, and development practitioners working towards inclusive and climate-resilient development. It reinforces that sustainable outcomes are best achieved when communities, local governments, public programmes and civil society organisations work together around shared goals, across diverse geographies and institutional contexts in India.

I congratulate the women, community institutions, Panchayati Raj representatives, and government functionaries whose commitment has made these changes possible. I also commend PRADAN for documenting these experiences and contributing to the broader discourse on women-led development and rural resilience.

(Amit Shukla)

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Foreword

Sustainable development is achieved when communities become active partners in shaping their own future. Through the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), the Ministry of Rural Development has nurtured one of the world's largest women-led community development platforms by mobilising women into Self-Help Groups and their federations. As the Mission progresses towards the vision of enabling 6 Crore Lakhpati Didis, rural women are emerging as entrepreneurs, planners, leaders, and drivers of inclusive and resilient development through sustainable livelihoods, enterprise promotion, value addition, and market linkages.

When Women Lead the Map – Journeys of Unlocking Potential through Collaboration, developed by PRADAN, showcases inspiring stories of women-led planning, collaboration, and local leadership. These experiences demonstrate how Community-Based Organizations have mapped local resources, identified opportunities, leveraged government programmes, and strengthened livelihoods while promoting natural resource management and climate resilience. They reaffirm that lasting transformation is possible when communities collectively plan, act, and own the development process.

I congratulate the Didis whose journeys are showcased in this volume and appreciate SRLMs and PRADAN for documenting these remarkable journeys, which will inspire government's agencies, development partners, and community institutions to accelerate the national vision of building Lakhpati Didis and self-reliant rural communities.


(Swati Sharma)

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Foreword

Women have always been central to the rural economy—as farmers, producers, entrepreneurs, caregivers and active contributors to their communities. Yet, their contribution has not always been matched by adequate ownership and control over productive assets. Strengthening women's ownership of livelihood assets is therefore not only a question of economic opportunity, but also of agency, dignity, resilience and long-term empowerment.

This coffee table book, *Traversing Uncharted Grounds*, brings together inspiring stories from the ground that demonstrate what becomes possible when women are able to own, manage and make decisions around productive assets. Ownership can fundamentally change a woman's position within her household and community. It enables her to participate more confidently in economic decisions, strengthen household livelihoods and build greater security for the future.

VB-G RAM G emphasises on creating durable and productive assets, strengthening livelihood infrastructure, improving water security and building climate resilience offers an important pathway to connect public investment with women's long-term economic advancement. By consciously designing and prioritising assets that women can own, access and manage—such as land and water development structures, and other livelihood resources—the programme can help translate employment and public expenditure into sustainable sources of income and economic security for women.

Stronger integration of women's collectives promoted under Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) and Gram Panchayats in planning, combined with convergence with livelihood programmes and other public investments, can help ensure that assets respond to women's livelihood aspirations. Such an approach can create a multiplier effect—strengthening women's incomes, their role in household and community decision-making, and the resilience of rural livelihoods—while contributing to the larger vision of **Viksit Bharat@2047**.

(Rohini R Bhajibhakare)

Saroj Kumar Mahapatra
Executive Director, PRADAN



Message

India has made significant strides in rural development over the past two decades, yet many communities continue to face interconnected challenges related to livelihoods, water security, and climate resilience, with women often disproportionately affected. These challenges are particularly acute in the rainfed regions of Central India, where smallholder farmers depend largely on monsoon rainfall and are increasingly vulnerable to unpredictable weather patterns. Addressing these realities requires sustainable approaches that recognise the interlinkages between economy, ecology, and equality. Rural prosperity cannot be built on the depletion of natural resources, nor sustained without the full and equal participation of women.

This calls for integrated planning and sustained investments in institutions, knowledge systems, and infrastructure that enable long-term resilience. Equally important is strong collaboration across stakeholders—government departments, Panchayati Raj Institutions, community-based organisations, civil society, and the private sector—to align efforts and resources.

The Government of India has responded through key programmes such as Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP), Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY), and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), which promote livelihoods, water conservation, and climate resilience at scale. Central to these efforts is community-led natural resource management. Women’s collectives—through Self-Help Groups, Village Organisations, and Cluster Level Federations—have emerged as powerful institutions driving this change by influencing planning, improving implementation, and ensuring resources reach those most in need.

Experience shows that when women’s collectives are equipped with agency and technical knowledge to manage water, land, and livelihoods, the outcomes are transformative. Combined with targeted investments in irrigation, capacity building, and resilient farming, these efforts enhance incomes, reduce vulnerabilities, and restore ecological health.

PRADAN is engaging with community institution with support from government and other stakeholders to promote women-led water management, resilient livelihoods, and participatory local planning. It focuses on strengthening capacities of women’s collectives and PRIs, using technology for planning and convergence to create NRM-based assets, enhancing women’s role in water governance, and promoting women-led enterprises and climate-resilient farming. The outcomes are transformative—strengthening the rural asset base, increasing women’s ownership of assets and income, supporting ecological sustainability, and boosting rural economy and prosperity.

The compendium attempts to capture experiences, processes and best practices adopted by different systems actors to bring a long-lasting change at scale. We hope this resource strengthens collaboration, deepens implementation, and contributes to building resilient, and prosperous rural communities.

S.K. Mahapatra

(Saroj Kumar Mahapatra)

FOREWORD



The story of democratic deepening in rural India is often told through policies. Yet, its true expressions are found elsewhere: in meetings where women speak up for the first time, in collectives negotiating priorities, and in communities awakening to their power. This compendium shares twenty-five such journeys from central India's tribal heartlands. These are tales of women and local organizations discovering their agency to shape their daily lives. They reveal how participation evolves—from merely attending a meeting to influencing decisions, and from receiving aid to co-creating change.

These journeys unfold amid a larger national transformation. Today, nearly 14.5 lakh women serve in Panchayati Raj Institutions, while 10 crore rural households are organized into 90 lakh Self-Help Groups. This represents one of the world's largest efforts to expand women's participation in public life. However, the real power of these numbers lies in what happens locally.

Across these villages, women from marginalized households have engaged with once-distant institutions. Through Gram Sabhas and collectives, they articulate priorities and turn individual aspirations into collective action. Change rarely begins with grand interventions; it sparks from small acts like asking a question or tracking a plan. Over time, these actions build accountability and forge resilient local institutions.

Together, these stories offer a profound lesson: sustainable development does not happen through projects alone. It emerges when communities engage with institutions and take shared responsibility for their future. The women featured here prove this is possible even amidst deep poverty.

This compendium is a tribute to the courage and wisdom of these women and their collectives. Their experiences remind us that lasting change is built not by plans alone, but by the people who claim ownership of them to turn them into reality.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading 'Tamali Kundu' with a stylized flourish at the end.

Tamali Kundu
Integrator
PRADAN

ABOUT THE DOCUMENT

The Access to Water for Rejuvenating Rural Economy (AWARE) Initiative is a large-scale collaborative initiative to co-create an ecosystem that strengthens women's leadership and decision-making in agriculture and water governance. Working with government departments, community institutions, CSOs, donors, philanthropies, and other agencies across Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan, the initiative aims to improve socioeconomic and environmental outcomes. This document brings together shifts at the systemic, community, and practice levels. These shifts will deepen collective understanding of the intersectionality of the issues and key leverage points, and support stakeholders in designing interventions on the ground. The document presents specific practices, multidimensional processes, and lessons generated through joint efforts by government agencies, CSOs, and community institutions.

These stories are organized around six major themes:

The first theme, **co-creating inclusive natural resource-based plans**, shows how development planning is shifting from a top-down model to one shaped by communities themselves. Through the integration of the VPRP into the GPDP, women use PRA tools to identify local vulnerabilities and priorities. In places such as Lohardaga and Bhanupratappur, *Mahila Sabhas* have become important spaces where women can raise their concerns and influence how public funds are used.

The second theme, **women leading markets, growing futures**, focuses on women's growing role in local economies. By forming FPOs and FPCs, women are strengthening their identities as farmers and gaining greater bargaining power and control over crop planning, aggregation, and marketing. Examples such as Dalmadal FPC in Bankura and Koraput Nari Shakti FPC show how women are also moving into value-added processing, including ginger drying, millet milling, and *makhana* popping, helping increase incomes and shift women's traditional roles from laborers to decision-makers.

The third theme, **building livelihood assets through collective action**, highlights how communities are turning degraded or underused land into productive assets. In Begusarai, Bihar, women use the 50x50 model to transform *Chaur* lands into pond-and-bund systems that support both fishery and farming. In Godda, Jharkhand, the BHGY uses MGNREGA funds to develop fruit orchards on wastelands. In Purulia, women have also secured fishing rights, registration cards, and pond leases in their own names, strengthening both livelihoods and legal agency.

The fourth theme, **farming for resilience and regeneration**, emphasizes women-led transitions to natural farming in response to the harmful effects of chemical-intensive agriculture. BRCs enable women to produce and sell organic inputs such as compost, *Jeevamrit*, and biopesticides. Broader collaborations such as RCNF are helping promote chemical-free farming and influence public policy.

The fifth theme, **driving transformation through collaboration**, demonstrates the importance of partnerships among community institutions, CSOs, and government systems. In Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh, PM-JANMAN brought together multiple schemes to support the Kamhar community with housing, water, and livelihoods. In Gogunda, Rajasthan, collaboration across institutions supported solar-lift irrigation, veterinary services, and women's collective action.

The final theme, **women pioneers leading rural transformation**, focuses on women who are emerging as decision-makers, elected representatives, and technical experts. They are challenging proxy leadership, handling budgets and digital systems, leading Gram Sabhas, and taking on roles such as MGNREGA Mates and *Bagwani Sakhis*.

Each story includes a QR code linking to a companion film that captures the voices of the people at its center and glimpses of transformation on the ground.

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ACRONYMS

ADO	Agriculture Development Officer
APC	Agriculture Production Cluster
ATMA	Agricultural Technology Management Agency
AWARE	Access to Water for Rejuvenating Rural Economy
B2B	Business-to-Business
BDO	Block Development Officer
BHGY	Birsa Harit Gram Yojana
BLCC	Block-Level Convergence Committee
BoD	Board of Director
BPO	Block Program Officer
BPRO	Block Panchayati Raj Officer
BRC	Bio-Resource Center
BRLPS	Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society
CAZRI	Central Arid Zone Research Institute
CBO	Community-Based Organization
CC	Cluster Coordinator
CCA	Climate Change Adaptation
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CLF	Cluster-Level Federation
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CREDA	Chhattisgarh State Renewable Energy Development Agency
CRP	Community Resource Person
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CSP	Community Service Provider
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DAP	Diammonium Phosphate
DBT	Direct Benefit Transfer
DDC	Deputy Development Commissioner
DMFT	District Mineral Foundation Trust
DPM	District Program Manager
DPRO	District Panchayat Raj Officer
DRDA	District Rural Development Agency
DSR	Direct-Seeded Rice
e-NAM	Electronic National Agriculture Market
ECRP	External Community Resource Person
EWR	Elected Women Representative

FEO	Fishery Extension Officer
FIG	Farmer Interest Group
FPC	Farmer Producer Company
FPO	Farmer Producer Organization
FPORC	Farmer Producer Organization Resource Center
FRC	Fishermen Registration Card
FY	Financial Year
GIS	Geographic Information System
GPCC	Gram Panchayat Coordination Committee
GPDP	Gram Panchayat Development Plan
GPLF	Gram Panchayat-Level Federation
GPPFT	Gram Panchayat Planning Facilitation Team
GST	Goods and Services Tax
HYV	High-Yielding Variety
IBL	IndusInd Bank Limited
ICRP	Internal Community Resource Person
IESWM	Institute of Environmental Studies and Wetland Management
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
INRM	Integrated Natural Resource Management
IPPE	Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise
ISRO	Indian Space Research Organisation
JSLPS	Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society
KCC	Kisan Credit Card
KVK	Krishi Vigyan Kendra
LFC	Livestock Facilitation Center
LSDGs	Localized Sustainable Development Goals
MAKAAM	Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MSP	Minimum Support Price
MVVN	Mahila Vitta Vikas Nigam
NABARD	National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development
NAFED	National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India
NCDC	National Cooperative Development Corporation
NCNF	National Coalition for Natural Farming
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NKFL	NABKISAN Finance Limited
NRLM	National Rural Livelihoods Mission
NSK	Nagrik Sahayata Kendra
OLM	Odisha Livelihoods Mission

OMM	Odisha Millet Mission
PG	Producer Group
PKVY	Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana
PM-JANMAN	Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan
PMAY	Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana
POP	Package of Practices
PPR	Peste des Petits Ruminants
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
PRADAN	Professional Assistance for Development Action
PRI	Panchayati Raj Institution
PVTG	Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group
RAJUVAS	Rajasthan University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences
RCNF	Rajasthan Coalition for Natural Farming
S4S	Science for Society
SC	Scheduled Caste
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEAC	Small Farmers' Agribusiness Consortium
SHG	Self-Help Group
SIRD	State Institute of Rural Development
SMI	System of Millet Intensification
SPPIF	Special Programme for Promotion of Integrated Farming in Tribal Areas
SRI	System of Rice Intensification
SRLM	State Rural Livelihoods Mission
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TCB	Trench-cum-Bund
ToT	Training of Trainers
VDP	Village Development Plan
VLC	Village Level Committee
VO	Village Organization
VPRP	Village Prosperity & Resilience Plan
WBADMIP	West Bengal Accelerated Development of Minor Irrigation Project
WUA	Water User Association





CO-CREATING INCLUSIVE NATURAL RESOURCE BASED PLANS



Co-Creating Inclusive Natural Resource-Based Plans reflects a shift from top-down development to community-led planning. Women are helping identify what their villages need by integrating the VPRP into the GPDP. Using PRA tools, they map water issues, land use, vulnerable households, livelihood gaps, and everyday risks. The case studies show women securing natural assets, learning technical planning, reviving ecosystems, influencing Mahila Sabhas, and identifying the poorest families first. Across Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha, women-led planning is making development more inclusive, practical, and rooted in local realities.





MAPPING HOPE, BUILDING ASSETS

A Paradigm of Participatory Rural Development in Banka, Bihar



Scan the QR to experience the film

Sakun Hembrom stood in her village in Banka, Bihar, staring at a brand-new government sign. The late afternoon sun shone on the new pond behind her, but she couldn't take her eyes off the painted white letters. The sign read- Beneficiary: Sakun Hembrom.

A quiet joy filled her heart. For as long as anyone could remember, land and property in her family had been registered only in the names of fathers, husbands, and sons. Seeing her own name right there on the board, proving that she owned this pond, felt like a beautiful dream she never thought could come true.

She looked out at the sparkling water and smiled as she imagined the future. Soon, the pond would be full of fish. The wet soil around it would be perfect for growing fresh vegetables, now that they finally had reliable water for farming.

Just a few years ago, this very spot was nothing but dry, useless dirt. Turning it into a useful, life-giving pond had seemed impossible back then. But owning it in her own name felt like the greatest miracle of all.



For generations, land and productive assets in rural Bihar were largely registered in men's names. A participatory planning model is now enabling women to hold assets in their own names and use water structures to strengthen household livelihoods.



This personal success reflects a broader shift from top-down rural development to decentralized, community-led planning. As articulated by Birendra Kumar, the DPRO of Jamui, the GPDP empowers Gram Panchayats to design holistic, need-based plans tailored to local contexts. Supported by mechanisms like the 15th Finance Commission and the e-Gram portal, GPDP provides a structured framework for inclusive and accountable village development.

The success of the GPDP depends on an inclusive and participatory planning process. Kamal Kant Yadav, a Panchayat Mukhiya and seasoned leader with eight years of experience, notes that his early work focused heavily on government-driven initiatives, which prioritized infrastructure such as roads and drains. Saroj Kumar, the Team Coordinator from PRADAN in Katoria, corroborates this, explaining that planning was typically confined to a small executive committee composed of ward members, the Mukhiya, and a few influential people. Sukhlaal Marandi, a villager from Manjhidihi, provides a firsthand account of this issue, stating that previously, only men attended meetings. This lack of participation resulted in poor representation, conflicts, and stalled projects.

The new approach shifts the focus from preparing plans to building transparent, community-driven processes, ensuring collective ownership, inclusion, and more effective implementation.

THE NEW MODEL OF INCLUSIVE PLANNING

The shift to participatory planning was driven by PRADAN's structured, community-led approach in Banka and Jamui. The process begins with a foundational step: community sensitization. Pinky Kumari, a VDP Trainer, explains that the first day in a village is dedicated to an awareness meeting to build consciousness, using methods like *Ratri Chaupal* (night meetings) to ensure wide participation. This process helped integrate local needs directly into the GPDP, making planning more inclusive and grounded.

After awareness building activities, communities undertook participatory mapping, turning planning into a visual and inclusive process. Women-led VOs prepared development plans, which are geotagged, jointly approved by Ward Members and women representatives, and presented in the Gram Sabha for approval. DPRO Birendra Kumar shared that these grassroots-generated plans, once uploaded to the e-Gram portal, became the basis for various government departments to create their annual schemes and release funds.

This approach has created a collaborative ecosystem where all actors play interconnected roles. PRADAN acts as a catalyst, mobilizing communities and providing methodology, while VOs promoted by BRLPS, also known as JEEViKA serve as the institutional backbone. PRIs, including Mukhiyas and Ward Members,



now function as partners rather than sole decision-makers.

THE SHIFT FROM INVISIBLE TO INDISPENSABLE

The most profound outcome of the participatory model is the shift in women's identity from passive beneficiaries to active agents of change. Historically, women were excluded from public decision-making spaces. Sonamuni Soren recalls that when 25 women first went to the Gram Panchayat with their plans, *"The Mukhiya did not believe that we women would go there."* Their presence, however, earned respect and they were invited to engage directly with the village head, an opportunity earlier reserved for men. This moment broke a long-standing barrier and affirmed women's voice in public decision-making.

“

Gram Panchayat Mukhiya Kamala Kant Yadav says *"The collaborative model with PRADAN and the Directorate of Soil Conservation, Department of Agriculture, Government of Bihar has resulted in on-the-ground, tangible work rather than just paperwork. This demonstrates how multi-stakeholder collaboration can drive effective and inclusive rural development."*

This empowerment goes beyond participation and is reinforced through the creation of tangible assets in women's names. Pinky Kumari, a VDP trainer, highlights that earlier a woman's identity was often invisible, even within her own household. Today, completed assets are publicly named after women, for example, *'Pinky Devika Pokhra'*, giving them visibility, identity, and recognition.

“

Sakun Hembrom shares her joy, saying, *“There was nothing in my name before, but now I have a pond in my name.”*

Saroj Kumar further notes the scale of this shift: Of the 468 plans approved last year, 218, nearly 50%, were in women’s names, amounting to around ₹71 lakh for pond construction alone. This tangible transfer of assets marks a significant milestone in the model’s success.

This empowerment is reinforced by a shift in women’s knowledge and mindset, moving them from dependence to self-reliance. Pinky Kumari notes that women now understand land measurements like *kattha* and *bigha* and can calculate input costs for farming, such as seeds and fertilizers, enabling them to manage livelihoods independently rather than rely on male family members. Soniya Tudu shares how her family moved from reliance on moneylenders to self-reliance, earning ₹12,000 from a 1 kilogram fish-spawn trial, which met household needs and enabled the family to share the surplus with others. This reflects a shift from subsistence to surplus and growing confidence among women.



CONVERGENCE

The success of participatory rural development in Banka and Jamui is driven by a three-tier coordination model that links grassroots planning with government systems.

Tier 1: Community-Level Planning

Women’s VOs lead participatory planning based on local needs and knowledge through mapping and community discussions, ensuring that the plans are relevant and rooted in the community’s priorities.

Tier 2: Panchayat-Level Coordination

The GPCC has become a forum where periodically collective representatives, elected PRIs, and Gram Panchayat functionaries come together to review the plans and share the plans with departments and take necessary actions for implementation of plans. DPRO Birendra Kumar notes that the technically trained GPPFT provided key technical inputs and mentoring to strengthen these plans.

Tier 3: Departmental Convergence

At block and district levels, PRADAN engaged with government departments responsible for MGNREGA, agriculture, horticulture, fisheries, and livestock rearing to align departmental schemes with community plans uploaded to the e-Gram portal, enabling convergence of funds and implementation.

The collaboration is built on mutual respect and benefit, with Panchayat Mukhiya Kamala Kant Yadav acknowledging strong support from PRADAN and government departments. Livelihoods have diversified; Soniya Tudu's family now earns from fish farming, while Tasar cultivation has turned barren land productive, increasing incomes and visible prosperity. Improved water infrastructure has further boosted agriculture, enabling multiple cropping and cultivation of cash crops like potatoes.

The projects have also driven significant ecological transformation, guided by the philosophy of protecting the '5 J's': *Jal (water)*, *Jamin (land)*, *Jangal (forest)*, *Jan (people)*, and *Janwar (animals)*. Water structures such as check dams, water-harvesting tanks, and farm ponds have raised the local water table, preventing handpumps from drying up in summer. These structures have improved soil quality, protected upland soil from erosion, and reduced siltation in lowlands.

The most enduring impact is social and cultural change, with the new system breaking traditional hierarchies and fostering community unity. The Mukhiya notes that villagers, including women, now confidently approach, engage, and even question him, marking a clear shift from past dynamics. As Sukhlaal Marandi highlights, this unity has reduced conflicts and ensured smoother project implementation, strengthening accountability and more democratic local governance.

CONCLUSION

The participatory rural development model in Banka and Jamui offers a powerful, replicable framework for grassroots governance. Its strength lies not only in the projects but also in the process: community-led, inclusive planning; systemic empowerment of women; and multi-tier convergence among stakeholders. By bridging grassroots initiatives with formal government systems, the model ensures that local needs are translated into funded, actionable plans.



ENGINEERING FROM BELOW

Community-Led Water Resource Regeneration in Kumharra, Mandla, Madhya Pradesh



Scan the QR to experience the film

In the dead of night, Soniya lay awake. Her mind was fixed on one thing: the well.

Tomorrow, every woman in Kumharra village would race there. She couldn't be last.

At 3:00 a.m., she slipped from bed and hurried into the darkness. Her heart sank as she neared the well; two women were already there, pots brimming, heading home. Soniya quickened her pace, eyes locked on the shrinking water surface. Her family's meals depended on this moment.

She filled her first pot fast. As she reached for the second, dread hit. The well was nearly dry. No water left for those behind her. Guilt tugged hard. But survival won.

She hoisted both containers and began the long walk home, carrying not just water, but the weight of a scarcity-forced choice.



Soniya's midnight race was once a daily reality in Kumharra, Mandla district, Madhya Pradesh. Water scarcity didn't just mean thirst. It turned neighbors into competitors in a brutal daily struggle for survival.

But Kumharra's story didn't end in that darkness. Through collective action and local leadership, the village achieved substantially greater water security. What follows traces this transformation: how a community stopped waiting for outsiders and planned for itself, how the women most affected by the crisis became central to planning the response and how new shared rules ensured the water would never run dry again.



Soniya's crisis was shaped by Kumharra's landscape and economy. The region's undulating terrain and basaltic geology cause rainwater to run off quickly, leading to soil erosion and poor groundwater recharge. Despite good rainfall, the village faces chronic water scarcity.

This has reshaped local livelihoods. With farming limited to a single rainfed crop, many men migrate to cities like Nagpur and Delhi for work, leaving behind women, children, and the elderly. Women bear the burden of managing households, fetching water, and caring for livestock, often with limited influence over decision-making.

The empty well Soniya faced was not only about water; it reflected a fragile ecosystem and a community under strain.

THE MOBILIZATION PHASE

Kumharra's transformation began with a shift in how knowledge was created through a participatory approach that prioritized community-led planning over quick, top-down interventions. The aim was to move people from being passive recipients of schemes to active planners of their own future.

PRADAN started by forming SHGs around savings to build trust, but the real change came through conscientization, helping women turn personal struggles into shared awareness. Safe spaces were created where women could openly discuss their challenges. When Soniya shared her story, it transformed individual hardship

into a collective issue, breaking the sense of helplessness.

Exposure visits to places like Jharkhand further shifted mindsets. They saw community-managed water systems, showing women that change was possible. These experiences fed into visioning exercises where communities imagined their ideal village.

Crucially, PRADAN transferred technical skills to the community. Through training on MGNREGA, INRM and tools such as social and resource mapping, needs prioritization, and transect walks, women became active planners. Even engineering concepts were simplified; women used locally adapted measurement methods to design water structures accurately. This broke the monopoly of experts and placed planning power directly in community hands.

THE RIDGE-TO-VALLEY APPROACH

A VLC, formed by federating SHGs, now serves as the central platform for planning, information sharing, and conflict resolution. The committee first focused on the sustainable use of common resources and on stopping deforestation, which contributed to high runoff. The Gram Sabha banned commercial logging and introduced a system of graduated penalties.

The community planned water conservation using the Ridge-to-Valley approach, capturing rainwater at higher elevations to slow runoff and improve groundwater recharge. Work was implemented in phases. The first phase focused on upper catchments, where control pits and



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As Soniya observed, *“Water now absorbs slowly, recharging our aquifer.”*

trenches were built to trap water and silt. The second phase addressed drainage lines, using boulder checks and gabions in *nalas* (stream) to reduce water flow. The third phase focused on the valley, creating farm ponds and dug wells for irrigation.

Funding came through convergence with MGNREGA, but unlike typical top-down models, the VLC prepared its own technical plan and presented it to the Gram Panchayat. The village was divided into four zones, with work completed zone by zone to ensure full coverage.

Monitoring was strengthened through the women Mate system under MGNREGA, where local women maintained records and measured work. As direct beneficiaries, they ensured quality and transparency, strengthening quality control, transparency, and accountability.

THE DECISION-MAKERS

In Kumharra, the environmental crisis was deeply gendered. Women bore the burden of water scarcity, walking long distances, losing sleep, and managing daily survival, giving them firsthand knowledge of the problem. This experience became the foundation for change.

The intervention transformed this burden into agency. When officials made toilet construction a condition for benefits, women collectively pushed back, arguing that water must come first, and they successfully negotiated their priorities. This marked a shift from passive recipients to active decision-makers.

Improved water access also reshaped household dynamics. With reliable irrigation, women began cultivating vegetables as cash crops, gaining control over income. As Soniya says, *“Earlier, even for small things, we had to ask. Now we can buy what we need ourselves.”* Ecological restoration thus led to economic independence, strengthening women’s agency within both households and the community.

LIVELIHOOD TRANSFORMATION AND ECONOMIC IMPACT

Restoring the water commons triggered a substantial economic change, beginning with farming itself. Reliable irrigation ended single-cropping. Farmers shifted to double- and triple-cropping, adding wheat, mustard, and diverse vegetables alongside traditional crops.

The deepest change was an 80% drop in distress migration. Men who once left for months now find steady farm work at home. Families stay intact, women’s labor burden eases, and children grow up with both parents present.

Income mobility followed. Average household agricultural earnings climbed to about ₹80,000-90,000 annually, and some families now make around ₹1-2.5 lakh.





REGENERATING THE LANDSCAPE

The ridge-to-valley approach delivered measurable ecological outcomes, backed by major infrastructure. The village built 153 gully plugs and 213 boulder check dams, dug contour trenches across 33 acres, created 7 new farm ponds, and constructed 14 *jal kunds* (household water conservation structures).

This dense network, paired with the deforestation ban, recharged groundwater aquifers. Wells that dried up in winter now hold water through summer. Green cover expanded as protected rootstock regenerated naturally. Soil erosion slowed, and fertile silt now settles in trenches instead of washing away, creating new assets for farmers.

CONCLUSION

Kumharra shows that sustainable development goes beyond infrastructure; it is rooted in social capital, strong community institutions, and genuine ownership. Water security here was achieved not just through technical solutions, but through communities, especially women, taking charge of their future.

The shift from beneficiary to partner enabled real empowerment. Women who once struggled alone for water now lead VLCs, shaping decisions and engaging confidently with Gram Panchayats. Through strong community institutions and self-regulated norms, they have secured their natural resources for the long term.

The water in Kumharra's wells today represents more than groundwater recharge; it reflects a journey from individual struggle to collective strength, showing the power of community-led, bottom-up development.



CULTIVATING POSSIBILITY

Reframing the Rural from Deficiency to Capacity in Bhanupratappur, Chhattisgarh



Scan the QR to experience the film

The mid-morning sun blazed over Parvi Gram Panchayat, but under the old neem tree, the heat of discussion was far more intense. The village assembly had gathered to plan for the coming year, voices rising in spirited debate. The men spoke of a paved road to the nearby city, a sign of progress and connection. “Without it, how will trade grow?” one elder asked. Across from them, the women sat on woven mats, quietly listening, until one young mother rose. Her words were few but urgent: “The road can wait. Our children’s health cannot. We need an Anganwadi here, not three kilometers away.” The air thickened with differing visions of development. Then, Sarpanch Nileshwari Dugga intervened, calm and thoughtful, bridging divides rather than deepening them. “A road may take us to the city,” she said, “but strong children and healthy mothers will carry Parvi’s future forward.”

The words settled like dust after rain. Discussion turned into dialogue. One by one, voices merged into agreement, not of one side over the other, but of shared purpose. By the meeting’s end, Parvi’s plan for the year began with a simple, unified decision: an Anganwadi center to nurture the village’s youngest and most vital citizens.



The discussion taking place under the neem tree reflects a major change in how rural development is planned. For many years, development plans were prepared with little involvement from community members. Although the 73rd Constitutional Amendment aimed to bring decision-making closer to communities through PRIs, women and marginalized groups often had limited opportunities to influence these decisions.



In Bhanupratappur Block of Kanker District, Chhattisgarh, this is beginning to change. Working with PRADAN, the district administration has developed a more participatory planning process that places women at the center. Through SHGs and CLFs, women are now actively involved in identifying priorities and shaping village development plans.

Here, development is not just about building roads or infrastructure. It is also about building confidence, leadership, and decision-making power. Platforms such as the *Mahila Sabha* provide women with a dedicated space to discuss issues, voice their concerns, and influence local priorities. As a result, governance is becoming more inclusive, and development plans are increasingly reflecting the real needs and aspirations of the community.

LOCALIZING THE SDGS

The SDGs are global concepts, but for a farmer in Chhattisgarh, they simply mean water in the field and food at home. Between these two realities lies a translation gap. While the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India had distilled the 17 global SDGs into nine local themes, even these proved too many for village assemblies. When all nine were presented together, people heard a list rather than a direction. Through consultations among district officials, NGOs, and community leaders, a simple question emerged: if everything is a priority, what actually changes?

The district administration, led by the Zila Panchayat CEO and supported by Nodal Officers, drew on ground-level assessments and the priorities repeatedly raised in *Mahila Sabhas*. Of the 9 themes, 3 were prioritized for the 52 Gram Panchayats of Bhanupratappur Block, including Parvi.

The first, **‘Prosperous Livelihoods and Poverty-Free Village’**, responded to the demand for stable incomes and asset creation beyond insecure wage labor.

The second, **‘Water Sufficient Village’**, recognized that livelihoods in this landscape depend fundamentally on water security.

The third, **‘Women-Friendly Village’**, acknowledged that women already manage much of the water, livestock, and care work that sustains rural life. As the Panchayat Secretary of Parvi observed, stronger livelihoods depend on water security, and both depend on women’s participation.



THE INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF BOTTOM-UP PLANNING

Parvi's planning process does not depend on a single village meeting. It follows a well-defined cycle that starts on October 2 and ends with approval in the Gram Sabha on January 23. During this period, communities meet several times, conduct transect walks, review proposals, and make necessary changes so that the final plans are realistic and practical.

The process begins with SHGs, small groups of 10-12 women who are familiar with the needs of every household. In Parvi Gram Panchayat, 11 SHGs identify local needs with support from VPRP facilitators. As Kaushalya Uikye, a VO leader, explains, planning is divided into two parts: individual plans, which focus on livelihood support such as poultry sheds or mushroom cultivation, and community plans, which address shared needs such as ponds, plantations, and village infrastructure.

The plans are then discussed and prioritized at the VO level, where women identify the households most in need of support. These plans move to the CLF, which brings together 22 VOs in Bhanupratappur. Here, women further refine proposals and identify opportunities to improve livelihoods and incomes. Once finalized, the VPRP is submitted to the Gram Panchayat. Technical teams review the proposals using resource and watershed maps to ensure they are feasible. The plan also includes an Entitlement Plan, which identifies gaps in social security, such as missing pensions or job cards.

FROM GOVERNANCE TO TECHNICAL LEADERSHIP

These institutional changes succeeded because women were given a space where they could speak freely. In Parvi, this was achieved by introducing the *Mahila Sabha* before the Gram

Sabha. Kaushalya Uikye explains, this separate platform allows women to discuss issues such as livelihoods, health, sanitation, and household needs without hesitation or political pressure.



Sarpanch Nileshwari Dugga notes, *“Having a woman Sarpanch encouraged more women to attend meetings, learn from one another, and gradually raise their voices. This change is also visible in village institutions such as the School Management Committee, where women’s representation increased from none to 15 members.”*

As women became more visible in decision-making, participation began to grow.

Their presence shifted development priorities from mainly infrastructure projects to livelihood-focused investments such as farm ponds, fish farming, and poultry sheds that directly improve household incomes.

The change is visible beyond planning meetings. Women are now taking up technical leadership roles traditionally held by men. Malti Kol of Ujala SHG, for example, works as an MGNREGA Mate, supervising construction work, maintaining records, and monitoring pond construction. Through monthly *Rojgar Diwas* meetings and growing community support, women like Malti have shown that they are not only beneficiaries of development programs, but active leaders shaping rural transformation.

OPERATIONALIZING CONVERGENCE

The Parvi model depends not only on community participation but also on strong convergence among government departments. Instead of working separately, departments coordinate their efforts so that assets created under one program are supported by others. As MGNREGA Program Officer Suman Kaur explains, building a pond alone does not create livelihoods. The pond becomes productive only when it is linked with fish seed from the Department of Fisheries, Government of Chhattisgarh and proper support for fish farming. Similarly, a poultry shed becomes valuable only when families can successfully raise and market poultry. To promote this approach, at least 30% of GPDP works are planned as convergence projects, supported by coordination platforms such as the BLCC and GPCC.

This convergence is also reflected in the way natural resources are planned and managed. Technical teams prepare resource and watershed maps and conduct transect walks with farmers to understand the landscape. Together, they identify the best locations for structures such as check dams and farm ponds, ensuring that investments support water conservation and livelihoods. This participatory planning process has also improved implementation. According to the Rojgar Sahayak, villagers now understand the planning process better and willingly provide documents such as Aadhaar cards and land records because they are involved from the beginning and know how the proposed assets will benefit their community.

LIVELIHOOD AND WATER SECURITY

The success of Parvi Gram Panchayat is reflected in the way livelihood improvement and natural resource management are closely linked. By linking water conservation with livelihood development, the Panchayat has created new

opportunities for households to earn more while becoming more resilient to climate risks.

A key focus has been on livestock-based livelihoods. In one phase alone, 40 poultry sheds were sanctioned under MGNREGA and registered in the names of women. These assets provide a steady source of income throughout the year and reduce dependence on seasonal farming. According to Sarpanch Nileshwari Dugga, poultry farming, fish farming, and feed production are all expanding, strengthening the local economy. The Panchayat has also improved cattle sheds and promoted compost production through NADEP tanks, helping farmers adopt organic practices. Water security has been equally important. Under the theme '*Water Sufficient Village*,' nearby Masulpani Gram Panchayat adopted a ridge-to-valley approach and constructed more than 50 interconnected ponds and water-harvesting structures. This raised the groundwater level by about five feet while also supporting fish farming and duck rearing. The success came from participatory planning, where farmers helped identify suitable locations during transect walks.

The Panchayat has also promoted lac cultivation by planting *ber* and *semialata* trees and securing land access for women. Together, investments in poultry, fishery, water conservation, and agroforestry have helped many women significantly increase their incomes. According to the District CEO, around 10,000 women in the district have become *Lakhpati Didis*, earning more than ₹1 lakh annually and gaining greater economic confidence and influence within their families and communities.

GOVERNANCE, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND DIGITAL INTEGRATION

Parvi's planning process successfully adapted to digital governance without losing its community-driven character. With the introduction of the *eGramSwaraj portal* and *Meri Panchayat App*, the administration provided training to Sarpanches to bridge digital literacy gaps. The *Meri Panchayat App* not only simplified reporting but also improved transparency by allowing villagers to see the assets planned and created in their Panchayat. Panchayat Secretary Rajendra Kumar Salam played an important role in ensuring that community priorities identified through transect walks and village consultations were technically validated and uploaded to the Gram Swaraj Portal, helping secure funds for implementation.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

Women's participation in governance has led to changes that go beyond planning. During *Mahila Sabhas*, women raised concerns about low birth weight and malnutrition, issues that rarely surfaced in traditional forums. In response, the Panchayat used DMFT funds to provide millet-based nutrition to pregnant women, contributing to improved birth outcomes and better maternal health.

Women's perspectives have also shaped local infrastructure. The Panchayat constructed a community bathroom and toilet near the village pond to ensure privacy and dignity for women and strengthened access to ambulance services across hamlets to support safe childbirth. These interventions addressed needs that are often overlooked in infrastructure-focused planning.

CONCLUSION

The experience of Bhanupratappur Block shows that effective local governance depends on meaningful community participation. By creating spaces such as *Mahila Sabhas*, strengthening convergence among departments, and prioritizing livelihoods and social well-being, the Panchayat has made planning more responsive to people's needs.

The stories of leaders like Sarpanch Nileshwari Dugga, Mate Malti Kol, and Kaushalya Uikye reflect a deeper transformation. Women are no longer passive beneficiaries of development programs; they are active participants in decision-making and governance. Parvi's experience demonstrates that sustainable development grows from local institutions, SHGs, VOs, CLFs, and *Mahila Sabhas*, where communities collectively shape their own future.





PUTTING THE LAST FIRST

Inclusive GPDP in Lohardaga, Jharkhand



Scan the QR to experience the film

The Gram Sabha in Ichri felt different that morning. The courtyard was fuller than usual, the hum of voices carrying through the neem trees. The men sat in their rows, as always, registers waiting for their signatures. Usually, these meetings followed a script: a few speeches, some nods, and then everyone drifted home. But today, the center of the courtyard wasn't theirs. A large sheet of white paper lay spread on the ground, held in place by two bricks. Around it stood a group of women with sketch pens in hand, red, green, and black. Shila Oraon was in charge, her sari tucked at the waist, eyes steady.

"Draw the school first," she said, pointing toward the top corner. "Now the handpump by the Mahua tree, is it working?"

"No," someone replied.

"Then mark it red."

The men watched quietly as lines turned into paths, and paths into houses. The map began to take shape, a rough outline of the village that suddenly looked alive. A young woman hesitated over a small hut drawn at the edge. "This family's roof leaks, and they have no land. What color should we use?" Shila didn't pause. "Black," she said. "That's a vulnerable family. They must come first for the housing scheme this year." Her voice was firm, cutting through the murmurs. "If a single house is missing on this paper, it'll be missing from development too."



For the men in the meeting, this marked an important change. They were still part of the process, but they were no longer the only people shaping village plans. Women were not just attending meetings or signing documents; they were actively identifying problems, setting priorities, and helping decide what development should look like for their community. In Lohardaga, planning became a more inclusive process, with women playing a central role in shaping the future of their villages.



To understand the changes taking place in Lohardaga, a predominantly tribal district in Jharkhand, it is important to recognize the challenges the region has faced for decades. Despite its rich cultural heritage, the district has struggled with limited livelihood opportunities, inadequate rural infrastructure, and deep social inequalities. Among these, out-migration has been one of the most serious concerns. The large-scale movement of people in search of work has reduced the local workforce, weakened village economies, and gradually eroded community ties and connections to the land.

A NEW PARADIGM OF PLANNING

The introduction of the GPDP brought a major change to local planning in Lohardaga. As Panchayat Secretary Aarti Charmaku recalls, earlier Gram Sabha meetings were often dominated by a few voices and sometimes reduced to a formality, with people signing registers without meaningful discussion. As a result, the needs of the most vulnerable households were often overlooked.

The GPDP introduced a more structured and participatory approach to planning. Guided by themes linked to the LSDGs, such as poverty-free villages, water-sufficient villages, and women-friendly villages, it helped communities identify priorities and plan systematically. Supported by organizations such as PRADAN and women's institutions, the GPDP strengthened local democracy by creating greater space for community participation and collective decision-making.

THE DRIVING FORCE: THE WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE

A key feature of the GPDP process in Lohardaga is the *Mahila Sabha*, a forum where women meet separately before the Gram Sabha. This was introduced because women often hesitate to speak openly in mixed gatherings due to social norms and family hierarchies. The *Mahila Sabha* provides a safe space where they can freely discuss issues such as livelihoods, sanitation, social concerns, and access to services. The priorities identified in these meetings are formally recorded and presented in the Gram Sabha, ensuring that women's voices become part of the official planning process.

This process is supported by a network of trained community facilitators. Isha Kumari, a VPRP Facilitator and Gender CRP with JSLPS, helps women's groups identify their needs and convert them into livelihood plans and entitlement plans using digital tools such as the VPRP app. This ensures that community priorities are properly documented and linked with government programs.

The system is further strengthened by women leaders like Pooja Devi, trained as *Samvidhan Saathis*. They build awareness on GPDP, MGNREGA, Panchayati Raj Institutions, and citizens' rights and entitlements. They help villagers obtain job cards, access employment opportunities, and claim benefits under government schemes. By connecting people with their rights and entitlements, these women play a critical role in making local governance more inclusive and accountable.

THE MECHANICS OF INCLUSIVE PLANNING

A key strength of the GPDP process in Lohardaga is its use of data and participatory tools to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable families are not overlooked. The process begins with the preparation of social maps and resource maps, which help communities identify households, local resources, and existing inequalities. The social map documents every household, categorizing families by socioeconomic status, general, middle-class, and the most vulnerable. It identifies community assets like schools and anganwadis, but more importantly, it makes inequality visible.

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Shila insists, *“It is important that a village is equal. Poor families should be helped so that they can rise.”*

The information collected is then used to prioritize households based on their level of vulnerability. Families without secure livelihoods, housing, or access to basic services are given higher priority, helping direct resources to those who need them most. This makes the planning

process more transparent and reduces the influence of local power structures.

Planning starts at the hamlet and Ward Sabha level, where villagers collectively prepare social maps, resource maps and conduct transect walks using PRA tools. The findings are then presented in the Gram Sabha for approval and integration into the formal GPDP process.

Women’s participation is strengthened through the VPRP process, where SHG members identify household-level needs and livelihood opportunities. These plans are later integrated into the GPDP, ensuring that vulnerable families are included in development programs.

Special platforms further improve inclusion. *Mahila Sabhas* provide women with a space to raise issues that are often overlooked in larger meetings. In Ichri village, for example, women successfully demanded the construction of 10 sanitary napkin disposal pits and raised the need for a community bathroom. Similarly, *Bal Sabhas* enable children to share concerns related to schools, mid-day meals, and other issues affecting their well-being, ensuring that local planning reflects the needs of all sections of the community.



ECONOMIC RESILIENCE AND A HALT TO MIGRATION: CONVERGENCE IN ACTION

The GPDP process in Lohardaga is strengthened through convergence across multiple government departments, led by the DDC, Dilip Pratap Shekhawat. Rather than working separately, departments align their programs around a common village development plan, with MGNREGA serving as the foundation.

The BDO identifies MGNREGA as a key strategy for addressing migration by providing up to 100 days of local employment, with at least half of the opportunities reserved for women. Beyond wage employment, the program supports the creation of productive assets that can generate long-term income. As BPO Raghunath Munda explains, convergence has enabled investments in water conservation structures such as ponds and check dams, as well as livelihood assets like orchards under the BHGY and irrigation wells under the Birsa Sinchai Samvardhan Koop scheme.

Women have particularly benefited from initiatives such as the *Didibadi* program, which promotes household kitchen gardens. Together, these interventions are helping transform MGNREGA from a wage-employment program into a platform for sustainable livelihood creation, reducing migration by strengthening local income opportunities.

STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION

The impact of the GPDP is best reflected in the lives of women whose participation in planning has translated into tangible improvements in livelihoods and confidence.

Veena Devi from Ichri village is one such example. Through her women's group, she secured a solar irrigation pump under the GPDP process, while MGNREGA supported land levelling on her farm. Together, these interventions enabled year-round cultivation and significantly increased her annual income, transforming her farming from subsistence-based to more profitable agriculture.

The GPDP has also strengthened food security. In Shila Oraon's village, recurring water shortages led the community to prioritize water conservation through the planning process. As a result, five small ponds and two large ponds were constructed, helping capture rainwater, improve groundwater availability, and support a second crop, enhancing food security for many households.

Beyond economic gains, the process has strengthened women's confidence and leadership. Pooja Devi, a *Samvidhan Saathi*, emerged as a community leader who now helps other women understand their rights and access government programs. "*You can't be dependent on someone else forever*," she tells the women she mentors. Women like Pooja are increasingly engaging with local institutions, visiting block and district offices, and actively participating in decision-making. Their journey reflects a broader shift from being recipients of development programs to becoming informed and confident citizens who shape local governance.



CONCLUSION

The inclusive GPPD process in Lohardaga offers an important example of how women-led local governance can make development more responsive and effective. It shows that progress is not measured only by schemes implemented or funds spent, but also by people's ability to influence decisions that affect their lives.

By creating dedicated spaces such as *Mahila Sabhas* and *Bal Sabhas*, using tools like the VPRP to identify vulnerable households, and promoting convergence across government programs, Lohardaga has strengthened both participation and accountability in local planning. The result has been a gradual but significant shift, from informal decision-making to systematic planning, from migration-driven distress to stronger local livelihoods, and from limited participation to active leadership.

Most importantly, women are no longer viewed only as beneficiaries of development programs. They are increasingly shaping priorities, influencing public investments, and playing a central role in building the future of their communities.



SOVEREIGN LANDSCAPES

Women's Agency Rewrote the Village Economy in Bargarh, Odisha



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Under the shade of trees in the newly constructed rural park, a group of elderly residents watches children play. This scene of leisure was once unimaginable in Buromunda. The laughter of youth and the relaxed conversation of the older generation signal a profound shift in the village's rhythm, replacing the silence of empty homes left behind by distress migration with the vibrant hum of a community at peace. This park, a symbol of renewed quality of life, stands in stark contrast to the village's recent past, where the struggle for survival in an ecologically vulnerable landscape dominated daily existence.



Buromunda Gram Panchayat in Bargarh District, Odisha, reveals how rural development can be reimagined through the lens of women's agency. Seasonal water scarcity and ecological degradation contributed to debt bondage and distress migration among a large share of the village's 664 households, including 166 ST households. Rain-fed agriculture barely sustained them, and women had no voice in public decision-making. Existing welfare programs did not adequately address these interconnected challenges.



The transformation was driven by a strong partnership between the district administration, PRADAN, and the GPLF. Through this convergence, women moved beyond being beneficiaries to becoming active planners and decision-makers.

Using the VPRP, women identified and prioritized assets based on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable households, following the Antyodaya principle. Their plans guided investments in water conservation structures such as trenches and water bodies, helping restore natural resources and improve local resilience.

The outcomes went beyond asset creation. Increased access to livelihoods and productive resources reduced distress migration, strengthened household incomes, and improved community resilience. Most importantly, women developed confidence, agency, and greater control over economic and social decisions.

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER SYNERGY AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

The transformation of Buromunda was driven by a strong partnership between government agencies, CSOs, and community institutions, with the GPLF and VOs at the center of the process. Under the Arrest Distress Migration in Western Odisha initiative, formal partnerships linked the state MGNREGS Society, PRADAN, DRDA Bargarh, and the Debadatta Club, creating a clear system for planning and implementation. This structure helped connect government policies with village-level action.

While PRADAN provided technical expertise on INRM, the GPLF translated these plans into local action. Comprising 6 CLFs and 65 SHGs, the GPLF became the key institution linking communities with government programs. Technical support came from GIS-based planning teams that used data on land use, soil, and watersheds to prepare INRM plans. CRPs, *Krishi Mitras*, and *Prani Mitras* then worked directly with households to turn these plans into action.

The GPLF also became the platform for convergence. It brought together support from different departments; the Directorate of Horticulture, Government of Odisha promoted fruit plantations, while the Department of Agriculture & Farmers' Empowerment, Government of Odisha encouraged organic farming. Through the federation, VPRP priorities and MGNREGA resources were aligned, resulting in near-universal job card coverage for 669 families. The *Prakalp Anumodan Sabha* was revitalized as a transparent forum where project details, budgets, and beneficiary lists were openly discussed.

The most significant change was institutional. The GPLF evolved from a beneficiary platform into a key governance institution working alongside the Panchayat. Women took a leading role in beneficiary selection, replacing informal political influence with transparent and collective decision-making. By using VPRPs to influence both the GPDP and the Panchayat's Annual Action Plan, the federation strengthened local democracy. The Gram Sabha, once largely procedural, became a genuine space for planning

and resource allocation.

Through gender-sensitization capacity-building trainings, women's leadership, and their participation in every stage of decision-making, equality became embedded in everyday governance.

THE SCIENCE OF BOTTOM-UP DEMAND

The most transformative aspect of the Buromunda initiative was the shift in the mechanism of demand creation. The intervention inverted the top-down approach, placing the tools of planning and prioritization directly in the hands of women.

The core instrument used to disrupt the top-down approach was the VPRP. Unlike traditional government surveys conducted by external enumerators who often lacked local context, the VPRP surveys were conducted by the women of the SHGs themselves. *"We do the survey ourselves. We go to everyone's house,"*

said a federation member. This peer-to-peer methodology ensured honesty, granularity, and coverage that bureaucratic surveys could never achieve.

The VPRP process began with the Household Entitlement Survey. SHG members visited every home, documenting deficits and recording gaps in assets and social security entitlements. Women received comprehensive training on INRM planning, VPRP surveys, and the legal aspects of MGNREGA. They learned to navigate bureaucratic systems with authority instead of deference.

Then came the democratic sieve. Raw data moved upward, first to SHGs, then to Cluster Level Federations, and finally to the GPLF for broader prioritization. The finalized VPRP was presented at the Palli Sabha and then at the Gram Sabha, where women publicly advocated for their identified projects. They were not requesting aid; they were advocating for rights.





A critical feature of this new model was prioritization based on economic vulnerability. The poverty categories were clear: poor, moderately poor, and extremely poor or destitute. The standing instruction was simple: prioritize the extremely poor or destitute first. This disrupted traditional patronage networks and directed resources to those most in need, embedding equity in the process itself.

Demand creation was not merely about asking; it was about presenting technically informed demands. Women learned Participatory Rural PRA, social mapping, and resource mapping. They identified water flow, soil erosion points, and optimal locations for check dams and farm ponds. Technical competence gave legitimacy. When they stood in the Gram Sabha, they proposed specific, data-backed interventions.

As women stepped out of their homes to survey others, they began to see beyond personal struggles. Poverty was systemic and shared. The federation became their safety net, a collective identity that allowed individuals to take social risks. Through this process, conscientization took root. They realized that government schemes were not discretionary benefits from leaders but entitlements of citizenship. They had the right to ask, to plan, and to be heard.

RESTORING NATURAL CAPITAL AND ECONOMIC SOVEREIGNTY

The core focus of the initiative was the restoration of degraded natural resources to improve livelihoods and reduce vulnerability. In 2020-21, staggered trenches were developed across 10 hectares, benefiting 180 families by conserving soil and moisture. TCB structures were created on 8 hectares to make land cultivable, while 14 sandbag stop dams were constructed in local streams, supporting Rabi cultivation for 140 families.

Between 2020 and 2024, the village created 12 farm ponds for fisheries and vegetable cultivation, renovated two traditional water bodies, and implemented the 5% model with bunding on 5 hectares. In 2023-24 alone, more than 100 individual assets, including dug wells and livestock sheds, were created for vulnerable households. Rural parks were established as community spaces for children, youth, and the elderly, contributing to social cohesion.

Improved natural resources directly strengthened livelihoods. Better soil moisture enabled farmers to grow longer-duration crops such as black rice, finger millet, and groundnut. Pulses were planted on bunds, providing additional income while reinforcing soil conservation structures.

MGNREGA-supported works helped create local employment opportunities, with the program aiming to provide up to 200 additional days of employment. Individual assets such as goat and poultry sheds opened new income streams,

while the *Mo Upakari Bagicha* (Nutri-Garden) initiative supported 78 households with access to fresh vegetables.

The village nursery emerged as a strong collective enterprise, producing 50,000 seedlings in the last year. At the same time, women gained greater access to credit through SHGs and federations, allowing them to invest in agriculture and small businesses.

As the Sarpanch observed, assets like dug wells enabled families to earn more consistently, improving purchasing power and reducing the need to migrate. Participation in SHGs also strengthened women's literacy, financial skills, confidence, and role in local governance.

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“We found courage through the collective power of the federation,” Snehalata says.

VOICES OF CHANGE

Snehalata Barik, the Master Bookkeeper, recalls how women once lacking social respect now walk into banks and offices with quiet confidence. *Nari Shakti*, once an abstract concept, became tangible in everyday governance. Women now command respect in Gram Sabhas, ensuring civil discourse where once only male authority prevailed. One woman shared that men began helping with cooking and household tasks once they recognized the economic value of women's participation. The Ex-Sarpanch observed, *“Administrative execution is impossible without the grassroots reach of women. They are the moral compass of this community.”*

CONCLUSION

The experience of Buromunda offers several lessons for sustainable rural development. First, institutional convergence is essential. Meaningful change emerged through collaboration between CSOs, PRIs, CBOs, and government departments. Second, women-led planning processes such as the VPRP generated more accurate and inclusive information, ensuring that development priorities reflected real community needs. Technical training significantly expanded women's roles. Women gained hard skills in GIS-based watershed planning and MGNREGA auditing, elevating them from participants to technically informed contributors and advisers.

The restoration of natural resources also proved fundamental. Ridge-to-valley treatments, water conservation measures, and land development improved ecological security and strengthened the local agricultural economy. However, the most enduring outcome was the growth of confidence and self-belief among women. As their perception of themselves changed, so did the community's perception of their role and capabilities.

When women are trusted with leadership and decision-making, they create institutions and systems that are more resilient, equitable, and rooted in community needs. As a result, migration has declined and livelihoods have improved.



WOMEN LEADING MARKETS, GROWING FUTURES



Women Leading Markets, Growing Futures highlights how rural women are moving from invisible agricultural laborers to active market leaders. Through FPOs and FPCs, they are gaining control over crop planning, aggregation, processing, pricing, and marketing. The stories show women bypassing middlemen, reviving indigenous crops, investing in value-added processing, using transparent procurement systems, and managing local economic institutions. These efforts are changing women's identities from workers to shareholders, negotiators, and entrepreneurs. When women control the value chain, income becomes more than money. It becomes dignity, bargaining power, public presence, and freedom.





NO LONGER WAITING OUTSIDE

The New Defense of the Dalmadal Women, Bankura, West Bengal



Scan the QR to experience the film

“Earlier, I couldn’t even enter the ADO office; I had to wait outside. Now, I can go in and sit in the officer’s room.”

One board member’s words capture a change that goes far beyond farming. In West Bengal’s Bankura district, the women-led Dalmadal FPC, supported by PRADAN, has helped more than 4,000 women shareholders turn a difficult landscape into a base for better livelihoods. The lateritic red soil is porous and hard to farm. Still, the collective has developed farming and market strategies suited to these constraints.

A big reason for their success was how the women cleverly blended the old with the new. They took familiar traditions that their community already trusted and mixed them with modern business rules.

To inspire everyone, they looked to the Dalmadal Cannon, a famous local symbol of protection. They treated their new business venture like a modern-day battle to defend their community. Only this time, they weren’t fighting off an invading army; they were fighting against greedy middlemen and unfair prices to get the fair deal they deserved.



That shared identity gave the group the confidence to move from informal networks into a registered company that can speak to markets and government offices. With coordinated cultivation, aggregation, and direct payments, the FPC has replaced isolated vulnerability with collective strength. Women’s work has become visible, valued, and harder to ignore.



The success of the Dalmadal FPC did not come from imposing an outside business model on the village. It worked because the women built the organization from local history, shared stories, and existing social bonds. The name comes from the Dalmadal Cannon in Bishnupur. Local history and legend say the cannon was used by the Malla kings to defend the kingdom, and that Lord Madan Mohan himself fired it to save the city. By naming their company 'Dalmadal,' the women sent a clear message that they were building a new kind of defense. This time, the threat was not an invading army but the moneylenders and middlemen who eroded livelihoods through high interest rates and low farmgate prices.

PRADAN helped women graft the idea of a producer company onto existing SHGs. The women were already used to meeting regularly, saving money, and supporting each other in small groups. The FPC scaled up that habit of cooperation into a business institution. That continuity made the company feel familiar and safe, rather than risky or alien.

The women officially registered the company and secured essential licenses and certificates, which enabled the sale and purchase of inputs and produce. They structured leadership so that village women, long excluded from formal power, sat on the BoDs and took decisions in arenas that men had traditionally controlled.

Finally, the idea of a FPC had to become real and believable for members. At first, it felt distant and abstract. To address this, a group of women visited another successful collective in Gumla, Jharkhand. There, they saw women like themselves managing nurseries and selling crops in bulk. They returned to Bankura with confidence and stories, helping the company shift from a strange concept into a practical goal that truly belonged to them.

THE MECHANICS OF TRANSFORMATION

It began with a simple but game-changing idea: scattered, small quantities lack power in the market, but a village that can send out a full truckload can negotiate better prices. With PRADAN's guidance, women began coordinating what they grew and when they grew it, so their produce could add up to volumes that attract buyers and strengthen price negotiation. This is where the logic of aggregation became practical, not theoretical.

To make coordination work on the ground, PGs were formed at the village level. Each PG typically aggregated produce from about 10-20 farmers, creating marketable volumes of crops like cucumbers, vegetables, and rice. This also demanded a mindset shift: farmers aligned with a shared crop plan, which only becomes possible when trust in leadership is strong.

A turning point came through the exposure visit to Gumla, Jharkhand. On the technical side, the

visiting women saw what bulk-oriented farming looks like in real life: entire fields dedicated to one crop to simplify harvesting and transport, and a centralized nursery system that improves efficiency. Seeing women confidently managing logistics and speaking with authority replaced the belief that they were ‘just housewives’ with practical confidence that they could run such systems too.

Then came the crisis. The FPC registered and soon after faced the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, exactly the kind of period when a new organization can collapse because trust-building usually depends on face-to-face contact. Leaders adapted by shifting to phone-based coordination, staying connected with farmers, managing seed distribution, and compiling harvest information remotely. Instead of fading, the network expanded during and after this period, and the FPC became a lifeline by helping members access inputs and sell produce when normal supply chains were disrupted.

One of the most radical changes unfolded through money flows inside households. Earlier, men often sold crops and controlled cash, while women stayed unaware of real earnings. The FPC deliberately reversed that pattern by ensuring payments from FPC sales were routed directly to women shareholders’ bank accounts. Leaders insisted on handing receipts or proof of payment to the women directly, which forced transparency and reduced the chance of income being hidden. By delivering seeds to homes and involving women in procurement, women learned actual prices and could question inflated spending, creating financial literacy through practice as well as formal training.

AGRONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION

The Dalmadal FPC’s farming strategy was built around the realities of Bankura’s red, dry, and iron-rich soils. For years, most farmers depended

on rainfed paddy, leaving fields unused for much of the year and limiting income opportunities. To address this, the FPC focused on three priorities: improving water access, diversifying crops, and promoting better farming practices.

The first step was strengthening irrigation through farm ponds, wells, and water-harvesting structures developed in collaboration with government departments. With more reliable access to water, farmers were able to move beyond single-crop farming and adopt multiple cropping systems. Land that once produced only paddy during the monsoon began supporting crops such as watermelon and vegetables across different seasons. Crop choices were matched to local conditions, with vegetables promoted on higher and drier land where paddy was less productive.

Watermelon emerged as a major income-generating crop because it suited the local climate and provided returns during the summer season. The FPC supported farmers with improved cultivation practices through trained agriculture cadres who provided guidance from planting to harvest. This helped improve productivity, quality, and market readiness.

At the same time, the FPC encouraged the use of low-cost organic inputs made from locally available materials such as cow dung, cow urine, and household waste. This reduced cultivation costs and dependence on chemical inputs while strengthening women’s role in farm management. As women gained technical knowledge, they increasingly became trusted sources of advice within their communities.

The FPC also promoted livelihood diversification beyond crop farming. Members were supported in activities such as fisheries, livestock management, and non-timber forest produce enterprises including sal leaf plate-making and turmeric cultivation. Together, these efforts



transformed farming from a seasonal activity into a more diversified and year-round livelihood system, creating multiple income opportunities for rural households.

MARKET INTEGRATION AND POLICY INTERFACE

Acting as a bridge between farmers, government systems, and private buyers, the FPC helps members secure more stable incomes and better prices for their produce.

A key part of this strategy is its engagement with the West Bengal government's *Sufal Bangla* initiative, which provides a reliable market for vegetables. For crops such as watermelon, the FPC organizes aggregation, grading, weighing, and transportation, allowing produce to be collected directly from villages. This reduces dependence on commission agents and helps farmers retain a larger share of the final value.

For paddy, the FPC supports farmers in accessing government procurement systems and selling at the MSP. Digital platforms such as e-NAM and e-Permit have improved transparency, planning, and payment processes, helping farmers receive timely payments and reducing reliance on informal credit sources.

The company has also successfully used government programs such as PKVY to promote organic farming and establish vermicompost



units that create livelihood opportunities, particularly for women. Recognition from the Agriculture Department, Government of West Bengal has further strengthened the FPC's credibility and improved access to technical support and government services. As women leaders gained confidence and visibility, they were increasingly able to engage directly with government officials and institutions.

Alongside government-linked markets, the FPC has developed business relationships with private buyers for crops that fall outside procurement channels. By aggregating produce from many farmers, it can access larger and more distant markets, reducing the risk of local price fluctuations. Digital tools such as WhatsApp groups help members track market prices, coordinate sales, and respond quickly to market opportunities, making information an important part of the FPC's business model.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT: THE 'AFTER' PHASE

Earnings matter, but the deeper change is how women's roles, status, and self-belief shift once they become shareholders and public-facing decision-makers. The most visible change begins inside the household. With fewer leakages to middlemen and greater focus on higher-value crops, families have more income and can plan beyond bare survival. A member shares, *"We all come from backgrounds where we rose from*

zero without a single rupee of support from our fathers or husbands. Today, there's no lack in our household." This financial autonomy translates into better futures for their children. The same income is also used for household improvements, especially toilets, which women link directly to dignity, safety, and peace of mind for adolescent girls.

Alongside money, identity changes quietly but decisively. Many women describe how they were earlier known only as 'someone's wife' or 'a housewife,' but now they are recognized through the FPC and approached with respect.

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"Earlier, in the village, my only identity was as the housewife," explains one shareholder. "I am now treated with such respect that the women address me as 'Madam,' and even their children warmly announce my arrival by telling their mothers that their 'Didi' is here. Even a simple identity card, whether connected to fisheries, farming, or credit, becomes a marker that says: I have a profession, I have standing, and I have rights."

These shifts also reshape gender relations at home. When women know market rates, handle payments, and track accounts, the old knowledge gap that allowed men to control cash starts to collapse. Women describe becoming equal partners in financial decisions, and sometimes the main decision-makers. The women frame this stewardship in grounded terms. As one member explains, *"If a woman has 100 rupees, she will spend 80 and return with 20. However, if a man has 100 rupees, he will spend it all and borrow 20 more."* Several narratives connect this prudence to reduced conflict. When finances become transparent and repayment is planned,

there is less space for unplanned spending and more room for negotiation and respect.

CONCLUSION

The Dalmadal FPC shows what collective action can achieve in some of India's toughest farming conditions. By linking a shared history of resistance with modern governance, the FPC has grown into an organization that carries credibility in the village and bargaining power in the market.

It also demonstrates the value of a 'beej se bazaar tak' (seed to market) approach. When smallholders coordinate production, manage aggregation, and negotiate sales, more of the surplus stays with farming households instead of being captured by intermediaries. In Bankura, water harvesting and crop diversification helped turn red, lateritic soils, often dismissed as low-potential, into land that can support more reliable and profitable farming.

Most importantly, Dalmadal reshapes how we think about women's empowerment. It goes beyond microfinance by positioning women as business actors, directors, price negotiators, and planners of their own futures. As the FPC matures, its next test will be strengthening infrastructure and pushing deeper change in land rights, but its trajectory offers real hope for other rain-fed, marginalized regions seeking dignity as well as income.



COUNTING THE UNCOUNTED

The Institutional Evolution of Aamon Mahila Chaasi FPC, Jhargram, West Bengal



Scan the QR to experience the film

The late afternoon sun was shining beautifully on the fields of Nayagram, but Panchabati Baskey wasn't looking at the crops. She was completely lost in her memories. She was thinking back to the very beginning, when their company, Aamon, was nothing more than a hopeful dream shared by 25 scared women.

The women would travel across rough, dusty land to meet. Some lived 15 or 25 kilometers away, and nobody had cell phones to coordinate. Still, they never missed a meeting. They came riding old, bumpy bicycles, taking long bus rides, or just walking until their feet were covered in dirt.

Sitting next to her, Swarnaprabha Mahata seemed to know exactly what Panchabati was feeling. Her own hardest battles hadn't been out on the dusty roads, but right in her own kitchen. She remembered the day she told her husband she wanted to try growing traditional rice. He wasn't supportive at all. Instead, he gave her a terrifying warning: "If this fails, it's all on you. You will have to figure out how to feed this family." It was a huge, scary risk to take with her family's food supply.

Every single one of those first 25 women had a similar story. "We raised this company like it was our own child," Panchabati said softly. And looking at where they were now, after all the tears and hard work, that child had finally grown up and learned to stand on its own two feet.



This emotional ownership is the social foundation of the Aamon FPC. Situated in the Jangal Mahal region of West Bengal, an area historically marked by political instability and extreme poverty, Aamon grew from a loose collective of *Adivasi* women facing social and economic exclusion into a multicore enterprise.



In Nayagram, women performed 80% of the agricultural labor, but they made none of the decisions. The fields ran on an expensive, chemical-intensive model controlled by men. Profits rarely stayed within households, and families were trapped in debt. The crisis came fast.

Cultivating HYV paddy such as ‘*Swarna*’ had become a luxury. Costs had climbed to ₹4,500-5,000 per *bigha*, but market rates for the harvest hadn’t budged. Farmers were spending more and earning less. Seeds had to be bought every season, and fertilizers came from outside. Each year, dependence on purchased inputs and debt increased.

Then, with the facilitation of PRADAN, small groups of women began asking questions. What if they stopped buying everything? What if they could produce what they needed themselves? They traced the problem to its root: they had no capital because they were trapped in markets they didn’t control. The solution became clear: they needed to reclaim the means of production, starting with seed.

The women decided to revive indigenous rice varieties. These weren’t old seeds gathering dust in memory; they were viable, fertile, and, crucially, saveable. One season’s harvest became the next season’s seed. This reduced the need to purchase seed each season, dependence on external markets, and exposure to market risk.

But they faced a barrier immediately: they didn’t own land. Any plot they worked belonged legally

to their husbands. They had to negotiate usage rights, often under threats, as Swarnaprabha’s story shows. They started small, on marginal plots where they could prove the concept without risking the family’s main livelihood.

The economics shifted dramatically when they switched to regenerative agriculture. Instead of purchasing chemical fertilizers, they produced bio-inputs in their backyards: kitchen waste, animal manure, and locally available materials. The cost per *bigha* dropped from ₹4,500-5,000 to ₹700-1,000. What had been debt became savings.

FROM SUPPLICANTS TO A COMPANY

Before Aamon could become a company on paper, something had to shift inside the women. Development workers call it ‘conscientization.’ The women described it more simply: finally seeing what they had been carrying.

A breakthrough in collective identity occurred during an exposure visit to Khatra, Bankura. When asked to present their journey, instead of a standard report, the women performed a play. They enacted the roles of their oppressors, the village elders who mocked them and the husbands who squandered earnings while drunk. The performance allowed them to externalize their struggles and recognize a shared reality.

To formalize this identity, the group adopted symbols of corporate unity. They chose the name ‘Aamon,’ referring to the primary paddy season, rooting the company in their labor identity. The 25 women who would lead as the Board of



Directors selected a specific *saree*: green with a red border; green for the crops they grew, red for the soil they worked.

The green sari with a red border became a symbol of their shared identity. It armored them against the shame and suspicion they had faced as individual women. It announced, “*We are not here as supplicants. We are here as a company.*”

When they wore it to block offices, banks, and government meetings, something changed.

FROM FARM TO FINANCE

A crucial element in Aamon’s establishment was the structured capacity-building process facilitated by PRADAN. Transitioning from agricultural laborers to company directors required entirely new skill sets, from agronomy to corporate compliance. PRADAN provided the initial hand-holding needed to shift from chemical to organic farming.

They organized practical, field-based training where women learned to prepare bio-fertilizers and other organic inputs. Women who were once



afraid of earthworms were taught to handle and manage them as productive assets. PRADAN also introduced new crops, turmeric, vegetables, and spices, so the women’s agricultural portfolio expanded beyond paddy, reducing risk and opening new markets.

Farming knowledge alone wasn’t enough. PRADAN organized exposure visits to other successful collectives in Gumla and Khatra. When women walked into offices run by women-led organizations, they saw what a company looked like in practice: women chairing meetings, managing budgets, and negotiating with buyers. These trips also challenged social norms that had restricted women’s mobility.

Women who had never entered a bank were trained to maintain stock registers, cash books, and balance sheets. This learning often followed a Training of Trainers (ToT) model. For instance, in the leaf-plate enterprise, experienced women taught stock management to new entrepreneurs, ensuring that knowledge was democratized within the community rather than remaining with NGO experts.

GROW WELL, EAT WELL

Aamon was formally registered as a Producer Company. But registration is only paperwork; the real task is operationalizing democratic governance among thousands of non-literate or semi-literate women shareholders. The BoD is elected from the shareholder base. To reduce the risk of elite capture, Aamon instituted a rotation policy under which the BoD changes every five years. Below the BoD, the FPC manager, accountant, and community cadres handle daily operations and logistics. Community cadres act as the bridge between remote villages and company management.

Instead of cash transactions, Aamon relies on bank transfers and DBT mechanisms where applicable. Panchabati Baskey, a BoD member, explained: *“We have managed many transactions since the FPC was formed, and so far there has been no major mismanagement. Because of that, women trust Aamon.”* If a quorum of 25 leaders is not met, meetings are cancelled, reinforcing that decisions cannot be made by a minority.

‘Grow Well, Eat Well’ was not a slogan on a wall; it shaped decision-making. The shift to organic farming was driven by a maternal instinct to protect the next generation, and in internal discussions women often refer to chemical pesticides as poison.

As one shareholder put it: *“We are consuming poison, and we’re feeding it to our children. Our goal with Aamon is to eat well and ensure others eat well.”* They refuse to sell products they would not feed their own families. Solidarity also defines their practice; when the company faced a financial crisis after a truck accident destroyed stock, BoD members pooled personal resources to pay farmers. Swarnaprabha Mahata highlighted the farmers’ trust in Aamon and the patience shareholders show during crises.

STRATEGIC MARKET INTEGRATION AND BRAND BUILDING

Aamon didn’t just change how food was grown; it changed how food was sold. The transition from ‘price takers’ to ‘price makers’ required a marketing strategy that bypassed exploitative structures. Historically, the paddy cycle was controlled by local *arhatiyas* (middlemen), who bought harvests at rock-bottom prices and sold inputs at high premiums.

Aamon disrupted this by aggregating produce directly from its 56 clusters. By holding stock and selling in bulk, the FPC negotiated prices significantly higher than local *mandi* rates. This integration ensured that margins previously captured by traders flowed back to women shareholders.

When Aamon introduced black rice, the market resisted. Local consumers saw the dark grain and assumed something was wrong, while traders spread rumors that it was dyed with chemicals. To counter this, the women adopted experiential marketing. They set up stalls at district fairs such as the *Sabala Mela* and at government outlets such as *Sufal Bangla*.

They didn’t only display raw grain; they cooked and served it: black rice pudding and black rice biryani. As people tasted it, skepticism dissolved. Consumers learned about anthocyanin, the natural pigment that gives the rice its dark color and contributes to its health benefits. What had been dismissed as a weird tribal grain began to be seen as a ‘superfood’. The rebranding worked because it relied on direct engagement, not advertising claims.

To stabilize demand, Aamon forged B2B partnerships with private companies such as *Sahaja Samridhi* and *Arjhyabhatta* that specialize in organic products. These partners function as consistent bulk buyers, providing revenue

stability and insulating the FPC from local market fluctuations. The alliances also validate product quality and provide access to high-value urban markets.

The FPC retails under two brand identities, Ecomust and Aamon, across online platforms. It has listed products on national e-commerce marketplaces such as IndiaMART, expanding reach beyond West Bengal to states including Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. It also supplies rice to the Tirupati Temple, reflecting strong logistics and fulfillment capacity.

DIVERSIFICATION AND GOVERNMENT ALLIANCES

Aamon's journey reflects a shift from simply accessing opportunities to gaining greater control over production, processing, and markets. The FPC expanded into value-added enterprises, including the *Krishna Sarathi Organic Enterprise*, which produces vermicompost at a commercial scale. In one production cycle, an investment of ₹7,945 generated revenue of more than ₹15,800, demonstrating the potential of community-led enterprises.

Building on the region's abundant sal forests, Aamon also organized women to produce sal leaf plates, creating livelihood opportunities for widows and single mothers. The establishment of a women-managed rice mill in Murakati further strengthened local value addition by enabling members to sell processed rice rather than paddy, allowing them to capture a larger share of the value chain.

Aamon evolved from a beneficiary of government programs into an important implementation partner. It now plays a key role in the *PKVY*, with 10 women serving as lead trainers and technical resource persons who support other farmers in adopting organic farming practices. Aamon's growing credibility has also earned

it representation in meetings of the ATMA, providing women with a voice in agricultural planning.

CONCLUSION

The impact of these efforts has been significant. In FY 2023-24, Aamon reported a turnover of approximately ₹2.2-3 crore, while many members saw their incomes increase substantially. Women's growing economic contribution translated into greater recognition within households and communities. This transformation was recognized nationally when Aamon received the *Community Impact Champion Award* at the PepsiCo Voices of Harvest Awards 2025.

From a small group of women promoting organic farming to a multi-crore producer company, Aamon demonstrates the transformative potential of collective action. By strengthening women's control over production, processing, and markets, the organization has created a model that combines economic growth, ecological sustainability, and women's leadership.



TAKING BACK THE VALUE CHAIN

Cultivating a New Legacy of Women-Led Enterprise and Economic Resilience in
Koraput, Odisha



Scan the QR to experience the film

At 4:30 a.m., the local mandi in Koraput is usually a place of loud male traders and quiet, waiting farmers. But today was different. A group of women marched in together. They wore bright red saris and white caps. Blue identity cards hung from their necks.

Their coordinated presence drew attention. Who are these women, and why are they here?

They didn't wait for an invitation. One woman walked straight up to a merchant and began negotiating. She didn't blink. She demanded a price that actually reflected the hard work of the harvest. A few feet away, another woman pulled a digital machine from her bag. Instead of letting the trader guess the quality of the grains by eye, she tested the moisture herself. She showed the exact reading to the village farmers watching nearby. The measurement reduced uncertainty and limited deductions by intermediaries.



These women were not just farm wives waiting on the sidelines; they were the new gatekeepers of their community's agricultural wealth, representing the Koraput Nari Shakti FPC. Their confident arrival at the *mandi* was not just a daily transaction, it was a declaration of economic independence that set the stage for a much larger transformation.



The Koraput region of Odisha is known for its rich biodiversity and beautiful landscapes. Today, it is also emerging as a hub of women-led enterprises. A strong example is the Koraput Nari Shakti FPC, formed by 5,900 women farmers who came together to build a collective business.

What began as a small experiment in collective action has grown into a successful enterprise. The FPC now reports an annual turnover of ₹2 crore and profits of over ₹1.12 crore. Supported by government agencies, PRADAN, and the APC initiative, the women organized themselves to aggregate produce, reduce dependence on middlemen, and secure better prices in the market.

The impact goes beyond business. Women are increasingly recognized not just as farmers' wives, but as entrepreneurs and decision-makers.

One Board Director recalls the change, *"Earlier, when we went to the market, people questioned why women were dealing with traders. Today, we run our own company, serve as Board Directors, and earn profits. People now trust and respect us."*

Women who once hesitated to sell their produce now negotiate in markets, manage enterprises, and control their own earnings with confidence.

THE COLLECTIVE POWER

The Koraput Nari Shakti FPC is more than a business, it is a federation of women's institutions built for democratic governance,

collective marketing, and fair benefit sharing. By bringing together thousands of women farmers, it transforms individual efforts into collective bargaining power capable of engaging directly with government agencies and corporate buyers.

At its foundation are SHGs, which serve not only as savings groups but also as spaces for mobilization, leadership, and grassroots governance. As Board Director Mahima Khillo recalled, *"Before we dreamed of forming a company, we built SHGs in every village. These groups gave women their first platform to come together, speak up, and organize."*

What began with weekly savings of ₹10-15 gradually became a space where women shared common challenges and recognized that their struggles stemmed from exclusion from markets and opportunities. Because every shareholder is first an SHG member, the FPC remains deeply rooted in community ownership and trust.

The next layer is the PG, which brings together multiple SHGs engaged in similar farming activities. PGs coordinate production, distribute inputs, and aggregate harvests. Today, the FPC consists of 24 Producer Groups across the block.

The Maa Lakshmi PG in Muliaput village with 150 women from five neighboring villages have transformed how members access markets. Earlier, women carried small quantities of different crops individually, often waking up at 1 or 2 am to find transport and spending entire days in the market.

By planning production collectively and aggregating larger volumes, women can now



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“Sometimes we were so exhausted that we felt like throwing away the produce,” recalled Namita Singh, the group’s President.

fill vehicles, reduce transport costs, and save valuable time. The shift has not only improved market access and incomes but has also helped women to balance farming with their unpaid care work at home.

FROM FARMERS TO COMPANY LEADERS

At the top of the structure is the Koraput Nari Shakti FPC, a company owned by 5,900 women shareholders. Ten women serve on its BoD, having grown from first-time market participants into confident leaders managing a multi-crore enterprise.

The Board functions with discipline and transparency, meeting on the 30th of every month at 10:00 AM. Decisions are made collectively, and major choices, such as selecting seed varieties, are discussed with farmers at the village level to ensure that plans reflect local realities.

To support day-to-day operations, the FPC has a professional team that includes a CEO, accountants, and field managers. They work closely with CRPs and CCs, who provide technical support, maintain records, and ensure compliance.

PRADAN has played an important role in building the capacities of Board members and staff through training and exposure visits on enterprise management, organizational development, and marketing. Together, this blend of community ownership and professional management has enabled the FPC to grow into a strong and sustainable institution.

STRATEGIC VALUE CHAIN INTERVENTIONS

A key reason for the FPC's success is its ability to move beyond production and take control of aggregation, processing, and marketing. Ginger provides the best example of this transformation.

Earlier, farmers sold only the larger ginger roots. Smaller or damaged ginger was either discarded or sold to traders at very low prices of ₹4-5 per kilogram. Today, the FPC's CRPs collect even small ginger directly from villages, ensuring farmers receive better prices and reliable market access.

With support from a ₹2 crore fund and an investment of ₹25 lakh in processing machinery at Anantpur, the FPC has started processing and packaging ginger instead of selling it only in raw form. As one farmer explained, *"Earlier we sold raw ginger. Now our company processes and packs it using machines."*

Processing allows the FPC to store, produce and sell when prices are favorable, reducing distress sales. As a result, farmers' earnings from ginger have reportedly increased from ₹10-20 per kilogram to as much as ₹80 per kilogram during good market conditions.

Partnerships with companies such as Parbata Food and S4S have further strengthened market access, helping connect tribal farmers directly with larger buyers and higher-value markets.

MILLETS: FROM SUBSISTENCE CROP TO MARKET OPPORTUNITY

Millets, once grown mainly for household consumption, have become an important source of income through the FPC's partnership with the OMM. The FPC helps farmers navigate procurement processes by supporting registration, Aadhaar linkage, token issuance, and weighing at government mandis, making it easier for them to access MSP benefits.

The impact has been significant. Millet prices have increased from ₹17-18 per kilogram to ₹38.40 per kilogram, while yields have risen from about 2 sacks under traditional methods to 10-12 sacks through the SMI. CRPs play a key role by training farmers in improved cultivation practices and supporting them from production to marketing.

To create demand beyond government procurement, the FPC also organizes food festivals featuring millet-based products such as cakes, idlis, and snacks, encouraging wider consumption. These efforts have earned recognition, with Lamtaput Block emerging as the second-highest millet procuring block in Koraput district and receiving an award of ₹17 lakh.



BUILDING RESILIENT FARMS THROUGH DIVERSIFICATION AND ORGANIC PRACTICES

Beyond individual crops, the FPC promotes diversified farming systems that improve income and reduce risk. Farmers are encouraged to grow ginger alongside beans, chilies, pumpkins, and tomatoes, allowing them to harvest multiple crops from the same plot and avoid dependence on a single commodity.

The Jyoti SHG enterprise in Silpandi village, led by Debaki Sisa, demonstrates how women are building a local circular economy. After receiving training in Bhubaneswar, Debaki and nine other women began producing organic inputs such as *Handi Khad* and *Agniastra* using locally available materials.

“

Debaki explains, “*Chemicals are harming our soil. Organic inputs help keep it healthy.*”

Last year, the group sold nearly 800 liters of organic products and earned around ₹40,000, with plans to increase sales to ₹1 lakh. These inputs are supplied through the FPC, reducing farmers’ dependence on costly chemical fertilizers. Members observed visible improvements in soil quality. One farmer noted, “*The soil has become more fertile, and crops are growing better.*”

By combining crop diversification with locally produced organic inputs, the FPC is helping farmers build more resilient, low-cost, and sustainable farming systems.

FROM WELFARE TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC POWER

The journey of the Koraput Nari Shakti FPC reflects a gradual shift from welfare to economic control. In the past, many women earned only ₹20,000–30,000 a year. Today, members commonly report annual incomes of ₹80,000–1,00,000, while some ginger farmers earn as much as ₹3–4 lakh.

Improved incomes have also strengthened awareness about health and sustainability. As Debaki Sisa noted, *“If we use organic methods, we can eat healthy food.”*

The FPC has helped women gain direct access to markets by reducing dependence on local traders. Members now purchase quality seeds at lower prices and sell produce through government procurement systems, securing better returns.

As women became more involved in farming and marketing, they also began questioning traditional gender roles.



As one member reflected, *“We realized that women should know the market too. Now the profits are in our hands.”*

This growing confidence has strengthened collective action. Whether addressing delayed payments, resolving market issues, or supporting one another during family events, women increasingly act together rather than individually.

The transformation is supported by the growth of four forms of capital. Physical capital has expanded through investments in processing units and equipment. Financial capital has grown through increasing turnover and profits. Human capital has strengthened through training in

improved farming practices and organic inputs. Most importantly, social capital has deepened as women rely on collective knowledge, shared labor, and mutual support to overcome challenges and build stronger livelihoods.

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

The Koraput Nari Shakti FPC is now looking beyond growth toward long-term sustainability. While it currently serves nearly 6,000 women farmers, it estimates that another 2,000–3,000 women can still be brought into the fold. To expand its reach, the FPC is partnering with local entrepreneur agents, including BRC entrepreneurs, who promote bio-inputs and help mobilize new members.

The FPC's growth has been strengthened through convergence with multiple government programs. Mission Shakti provided initial support for salaries and working capital, while programs such as SPPIF and the OMM support livestock activities, CRPs, and millet procurement. These partnerships have helped the FPC grow while retaining community ownership and control.

One of the clearest signs of success is the changing aspirations of rural youth. Where migration was once seen as the only option, many young people now view farming as a viable livelihood. As one member remarked, *“If we can earn ₹3–4 lakh from farming, why look for another job?”*

CONCLUSION

The journey of the Koraput Nari Shakti FPC shows what is possible when women are placed at the center of institution-building and market development. Women now serve as directors of a successful enterprise.

Produce is now processed and marketed for higher returns.

Perhaps the most significant change is in women's confidence and agency. They negotiate with buyers, manage procurement systems, and engage with public institutions to claim their rights. As members proudly note, they have moved from a time when 'men used to point us out' to a future where 'women and men stand equal'.





THE NEW AGRARIAN ARCHITECTURE

Rise of Women-Led FPOs in Katihar, Nawada, Jamui and Begusarai, Bihar



Scan the QR to experience the film

In the quiet, dusty village of Balua in Katihar, people are stopping in their tracks to watch something amazing. For the first time ever, they are seeing a woman step out from behind her traditional veil to take charge of a business. Her name is Kiran Devi. She stands proudly at a digital weighing scale, carefully checking and buying grains. She is stepping into her new role as a center manager, and you can feel her fresh confidence.

Not too far away in Nardiganj, Nawada, two women named Sonakshi and Rani are making their own waves. As confident leaders of their local farming group, they sit comfortably in front of a glowing computer screen. With just a few simple clicks, they use technology to track exactly what hundreds of local women farmers need for their crops.

For generations, the soil here has been incredibly fertile, fed by the waters of the Ganges river. But despite the rich land, the farmers, especially the women were stuck in a never-ending cycle of poverty and hard work. Today, that story is finally changing. Women are no longer just quietly working the fields; they are stepping up, using technology, and running the business.



Historically, women farmers in Bihar existed in a state of profound invisibility. They performed the most backbreaking labor: transplanting paddy in knee-deep water, weeding under the scorching sun, and harvesting with bent backs, yet they possessed no decision-making power. They were denied the freedom to choose what to grow, how to sell it, or how to use the income generated. They had limited opportunities to make choices about production, marketing, and income.

This narrative explores the significant shift in this landscape through the emergence of women-led FPOs. Facilitated by PRADAN and supported by a convergence of government agencies, this movement has mobilized over 17,000 women into a collective economic force.



The journey began by addressing the social and economic barriers that kept women isolated from markets, assets, and decision-making. Through FPOs, small farmers came together to build collective strength, creating a shared platform for resources, learning, and market access. Over three years, nearly 17,000 women were organized into structured producer institutions and collectively contributed more than ₹2 crore as share capital. More than an investment, this gave women a sense of ownership and transformed them from beneficiaries into shareholders and decision-makers.

Mobilization was rooted in existing SHGs. Through regular discussions, women identified common challenges such as lack of irrigation, dependence on moneylenders, and low farm incomes. In places like Nardiganj, the adoption of improved seeds and practices such as DSR demonstrated tangible benefits, encouraging more farmers to join the FPO.

To inspire wider participation, PRADAN supported the creation of short video stories featuring successful women farmers. Screened across villages, these stories motivated new members and strengthened the confidence of women leaders. Exposure visits, leadership workshops, and regular meetings further helped transform informal groups into strong producer collectives built on trust and shared purpose.

Alongside institution building, the focus was on strengthening women's capabilities. Through the FPORC, women received training in business planning, financial literacy, governance, and

gender awareness. Women directors also visited institutions such as KVKs and successful producer organizations in other states. For many, these experiences were transformative, expanding their confidence, knowledge, and ability to engage with markets and institutions beyond their villages.

BUILDING FINANCIAL STRENGTH AND ACCESS TO CREDIT

Access to finance was critical for transforming women's producer organizations into sustainable enterprises. The FPOs in Bihar built a strong financial foundation by combining women's collective savings with government support and formal credit systems. Operating under the Government of India's 'Formation and Promotion of 10,000 FPOs scheme, the FPOs benefited from policy support and financial assistance that helped them grow at scale.

A key boost came through an equity grant that matched a significant portion (70%) of the share capital mobilized by women members. This strengthened the financial position of the FPOs and encouraged women to invest confidently in their own institutions.

The FPOs also worked to reduce dependence on informal moneylenders by establishing links with formal financial institutions. NABARD, through NKFL, provided cash credit support for working capital needs, while individual members accessed loans through the KCC scheme from banks such as Dakshin Bihar Gramin Bank, Punjab National Bank, and State Bank of India.



To address the wwbanks' concerns about lending to emerging FPOs, NABARD introduced a Credit Guarantee Fund, which reduces risk for financial institutions by covering potential defaults. This mechanism has encouraged greater lending to women-led enterprises and improved their access to formal finance.

Together, these financial arrangements have enabled women and their FPOs to invest in procurement, infrastructure, and business expansion, turning access to finance into a pathway for greater economic independence and growth.

THE ECOSYSTEM OF COLLABORATION: INSTITUTIONAL CONVERGENCE

The success of the Bihar FPOs has been driven not only by strong community institutions but

also by effective collaboration among government agencies, technical institutions, and CSOs. A broad partnership involving NABARD, NAFED, NCDC, and SFAC provided the policy support, guidance, and institutional framework needed for the FPOs to function as strong producer-owned enterprises. PRADAN played a key role in mobilizing communities and connecting women farmers with these larger institutions.

To strengthen livelihoods, the FPOs also built partnerships with technical agencies. KVKs provided training on improved farming practices, climate-resilient crops such as millets, and modern production techniques. At the same time, the Block Horticulture Office helped farmers access government schemes that would otherwise have remained out of reach.

DIGITAL TOOLS AND DATA FOR BETTER DECISIONS

Earlier, farmers often depended on middlemen for market information and crop advice, which left them with little bargaining power. The Bihar FPOs addressed this gap by introducing digital tools that put information directly in farmers' hands.

One important innovation was enabling small farmers to pool fragmented landholdings and collectively meet eligibility requirements for high-value interventions such as shade-net cultivation of capsicum. By bringing together community institutions, government departments, financial agencies, and technical experts, the FPOs created a supportive ecosystem that expanded opportunities and strengthened the productive capacity of women farmers.

Through the FarmChat app, farmers can access real-time crop advisory services by uploading photos of diseased crops, reducing dependence on local input dealers. The FPOs also use a digital dashboard that provides real-time information on business turnover, stock levels, and member participation. This has made governance more transparent and data-driven.

By improving access to information, digital tools have strengthened farmers' ability to make informed decisions, negotiate better prices, and participate more confidently in managing their producer companies.

THE MUMBA DEVI NETWORK: WOMEN BRINGING MARKETS CLOSER TO FARMERS

One of the most innovative features of the Bihar FPOs is the Mumba Devi procurement network, developed in partnership with S4S. It was designed to address long-standing problems in traditional markets, such as unfair weighing, unclear pricing, and delayed payments.

At the center of the model is the Mumba Devi facilitator, a woman selected from the village who aggregates produce from farmers. Instead of farmers traveling to distant markets, she visits their homes, conducts harvest surveys, weighs produce using a digital scale, and provides a receipt. This transparent process builds trust and makes marketing easier, especially for women farmers.

As facilitator Kiran Kumari explains, selling produce was once considered a man's responsibility because dealing with traders was difficult and intimidating. Today, women confidently bring their produce forward when they see another woman managing procurement.

The system also guarantees direct payment into farmers' bank accounts within 72 hours, reducing dependence on moneylenders and ensuring timely cash for the next cropping cycle. By ensuring fair prices, transparent transactions, and quick payments, the Mumba Devi network has helped farmers gain greater control over their produce, income, and market decisions.

DIVERSIFYING LIVELIHOODS AND BUILDING RESILIENCE

The FPOs have helped women move beyond the traditional paddy–wheat cycle by promoting high-value crops and local processing enterprises. Through convergence with the Directorate of Horticulture, Government of Bihar, small farmers could collectively access schemes such as shade-net cultivation and begin growing crops like capsicum, dragon fruit, and strawberries. This diversification provides an additional source of income and reduces risks from climate shocks.

The FPOs also invested in processing units that add value to local produce. In Katihar, a *makhana* processing unit reduced drudgery and enabled women to earn more by selling processed products. In Nardiganj, pulse processing units helped farmers market packaged pulses instead of raw produce. In the tribal-dominated block of Chakai in Jamui district, the Kodo Bazar Samiti FPO represents another significant stride. Here, women have established a millet processing unit, turning a traditional subsistence crop into a high-value commercial product.



CONCLUSION

The experience of women-led FPOs in Bihar shows that development is about much more than higher incomes. It is about expanding women's choices, confidence, and ability to shape their own futures. Through these institutions, women have moved from being passive recipients of support to active decision-makers, entrepreneurs, and leaders in their communities. An officer from NABARD mentioned that financial support alone is not enough. Women also need knowledge, skills, and the confidence to engage with markets and manage their own organizations. As their capabilities grow, so does their ability to make informed decisions, access opportunities, and influence change.

The impact extends beyond individual women. By strengthening their voice, agency, and economic independence, these FPOs are helping challenge long-standing inequalities and creating more inclusive and resilient rural communities.



LEDGERS OF LIBERATION

Women Owning the Enterprises in Sirohi, Rajasthan



Scan the QR to experience the film

For fifteen years, Indra Devi's husband collected the cash for her buffalo's milk; money that often vanished into liquor shops. Today, in Fulabai Kheda village, the script has flipped. Indra now steps into the Asha Dairy collection center, an enterprise run entirely by women. The operator weighs the milk and records the fat content in a ledger, handing Indra a receipt. There are no middlemen. The value accumulates safely, to be transferred directly to Indra's bank account. "For years, I didn't know the price of my own produce," Indra says. "Now, the account is mine, and so is the money."

Ten kilometers away in Pindwara, Geeta Bai bypasses local moneylenders and their debt traps. Instead, she visits a retail input shop owned by the Abu Parwat FPC. As a shareholder, she buys high-grade wheat seeds and bio-fertilizers at fair rates. "Before, we took poor-quality seeds that failed in the rocky soil," Geeta explains. "Here, we decide what to stock. We buy what works for our land."



Indra and Geeta represent a vibrant constellation of rural enterprises across the Aravallis. Beyond dairy and input shops, an ecosystem of women-led businesses thrives, from LFCs staffed by *Pashu Mitras* (para-vets) to tribal women-run poultry units and aggregation hubs for castor and mustard. Unified under two large FPOs, 3,567 tribal women have transitioned from invisible laborers to owners of this complex economic engine.



In the rugged and drought-prone landscapes of Rajasthan's Sirohi district, tribal women have long been the backbone of agriculture, managing livestock, sowing crops, and supporting household livelihoods. Yet despite their central role, they had little control over income, markets, or decision-making, remaining dependent on middlemen, moneylenders, and male family members.

The emergence of the Abu Parwat and Abu Swarup FPOs has begun to change this reality. By coming together as formal collectives, 3,567 tribal women have overcome barriers of isolation, limited market access, and information gaps. What started as an effort to improve livelihoods has evolved into a process of empowerment, enabling women to participate in markets, access services, and make economic decisions with greater confidence. Their journey reflects a larger transformation, from being seen only as agricultural laborers to becoming shareholders, entrepreneurs, and active participants in the rural economy. Through collective action and institution building, these women are not only improving incomes but also gaining recognition, dignity, and a stronger voice in shaping their futures.

BUILDING INSTITUTIONS, BUILDING OWNERSHIP

The transformation of tribal women in Abu Road was built through a gradual process of institution building. It began with SHGs, where women learned to save regularly, manage records, and repay loans on time. Over the years, this financial

discipline helped build credibility with formal banks.

Initially, banks were hesitant to lend to women from remote tribal communities. However, the women's strong repayment performance changed perceptions. Small loans of around ₹1 lakh were repaid with near-perfect consistency, encouraging banks to increase lending. As Mal Singh Vasra, a local bank manager, put it, almost in disbelief, *"Defaulters? No way; 100% payment is being made. Today the time has come where we provide loans of ₹8-9 lakh to a group."*

The next step was the formation of PGs. Individually, farmers produced too little to negotiate with traders or attract buyers. By pooling produce such as wheat, castor, and milk, and collectively purchasing inputs, women gained economies of scale and stronger bargaining power. These groups also became spaces where women developed leadership, coordination, and negotiation skills.

The final step was the formation of FPOs. Women became shareholders by contributing equity and registering their own companies. Two FPOs were established, Abu Parwat FPC for agriculture and Abu Swarup FPC for livestock. As formal business entities, they could obtain licenses, manage GST compliance, and enter into contracts with larger buyers. More importantly, women moved from being participants in collectives to becoming owners of institutions, securing a stronger place in the regional economy.



BUILDING THE BOARDROOM

The Abu Parwat and Abu Swarup FPOs were built not only to improve livelihoods but also to place tribal women at the center of business decision-making. Designed around local farming and livestock systems, these organizations have created spaces where women lead enterprises that directly reflect their economic realities.

Abu Parwat FPO, with 1,435 women shareholders, focuses on agriculture, aggregating crops such as castor, wheat, and mustard. It operates an input shop and five extension centers that provide farmers with inputs, advice, and local support. The FPO records an annual turnover of ₹2.23 crore. Abu Swarup FPO, with 2,132 women shareholders, specializes in livestock and poultry. Through four LFCs and trained *Pashu Mitras*, it provides decentralized animal health services and generates a turnover of ₹1.38 crore. Together, the two FPOs have achieved a combined turnover of over ₹3.61 crore.

Both organizations are governed by all-women BoDs, elected by members. Board members collectively make decisions on procurement, pricing, and business strategy, ensuring that the interests of producers remain at the center. For example, often choosing to set input prices ₹10–15 lower than prevailing market rates. Their decisions balance business growth with member welfare, keeping services affordable while strengthening the organizations.

Most directors began with little formal education. To support their transition into leadership roles, PRADAN provided extensive training on governance, financial management, inventory control, and regulatory compliance. Women learned to read financial statements, understand business operations, and manage requirements such as GST and Mandi Licenses. Over time, this investment in skills has enabled them to move confidently from the fields to the boardroom, building institutions that are increasingly self-reliant and led by women themselves.

CORRECTING THE VALUE CHAIN

The FPOs helped women overcome long-standing challenges in livestock and agriculture by improving access to services, markets, and finance.

For livestock, the Abu Swarup FPO established LFCs, or *Pashu Suvidha Kendras*, staffed by trained *Pashu Mitras*. These centers provide doorstep veterinary care, regular vaccination, and deworming services, reducing animal deaths and protecting an important source of household income. The result: mortality rates from diseases like PPR have dropped dramatically, saving household assets that families could not afford to lose.

To ensure fair pricing, weighing machines were installed at LFCs, replacing the old practice of visual estimation. The FPO also partnered with the CAZRI for Breed improvement, introducing high-quality Sirohi goat bucks to upgrade genetic stock for better weight gain and milk yield and also, promoted climate-resilient animal sheds that reduce heat stress and improve productivity.

As livestock production improved, women launched Asha Dairy through Milk Producing Producer Groups. Instead of only selling milk to outside buyers, they began managing collection and marketing themselves. The enterprise also supplies quality cattle feed, creating an additional source of income while strengthening the local dairy value chain.

The FPOs also improved access to affordable finance. Through the L-KCC, women can access working capital of up to ₹1 lakh at subsidized interest rates, reducing dependence on moneylenders.

On the agriculture side, Abu Parwat FPO runs input shops that provide quality seeds (wheat, mustard, castor) and fertilizers at lower prices. By collectively purchasing inputs and aggregating produce, the FPO helps farmers reduce costs, negotiate better prices, and retain a larger share of market value.

THE DIVIDENDS OF EMPOWERMENT

The impact of the Abu Parwat and Abu Swarup FPOs can be seen not only in their business performance but also in the lives of women and their families. Together, the two FPOs generate a turnover of over ₹3.61 crore, creating income and opportunities that stay within the community.

Membership has helped many women move from uncertain wage labor to more stable livelihoods through livestock and poultry enterprises. Many now earn ₹10,000-15,000 per month. Improved feed, veterinary services, and breed management have also increased milk production, with daily sales rising from 2–4 liters to 10–15 liters for many members. Collective purchasing of inputs and group marketing have reduced transport costs and improved profits.

The change goes beyond income. Payments are deposited directly into women's bank accounts, giving them greater control over household finances. Women are increasingly using their earnings for food, education, healthcare, and savings, strengthening their role in family decision-making.

The FPOs have also transformed women's visibility and confidence. Women who once hesitated to visit banks or government offices now confidently manage accounts, apply for loans, and negotiate business deals. As families witness the benefits of women's enterprises, household relationships are changing too, with many men increasingly recognizing and supporting women's economic leadership.

CONCLUSION

The ledgers of liberation in Sirohi prove a simple truth: economic democracy leads to social democracy. The experience of Abu Parwat and Abu Swarup FPOs shows how economic empowerment can transform social and community life. Starting from small SHGs, 3,567 tribal women have built strong producer-owned institutions that now manage businesses with a combined turnover of over ₹3.61 crore and an impressive record of 100% loan repayment. But their achievement is not only about business growth. It is about women gaining ownership, confidence, and a stronger voice in decisions that affect their lives. By becoming shareholders, directors, and entrepreneurs, they have challenged long-standing barriers and created new opportunities for themselves and their communities. Looking ahead, the focus is on strengthening these gains. The FPOs aim to build advanced business and digital skills, connect directly with larger markets, and become even more self-reliant. Their journey shows that poverty and exclusion are not permanent. When women have strong institutions, access to markets, and control over resources, they can reshape both the economy and society.

Today, the women of Sirohi are not just farmers or laborers. They are business leaders, decision-makers, and owners of institutions that they have built themselves. Their story demonstrates the power of collective action to turn vulnerability into strength and create lasting change.

कृषि मेला व आबुस्वरूप महिला पशुपालक प्रोड्यूसर कंपनी लिमिटेड का हुआ उद्घाटन



महिलाओं को आत्मनिर्भर बनाने को लेकर जागरूकता का संदेश

♦ भारत टाइम्स ♦

फिरोज खान सिरोही। आबुरोड के मुंगथला ग्राम में स्वयं सहायता समूह की ग्रामीण महिलाओं ने प्रदान संस्था व नाबार्ड के सहयोग से आबुस्वरूप महिला पशुपालक प्रोड्यूसर कंपनी लिमिटेड का उद्घाटन रीबन काट कर किया। इस उद्घाटन में नाबार्ड के डीडीएम दिनेश कुमार प्रजापत, मीनल , प्रदान संस्था से टीम कॉर्डिनेटर सुमीत

कुमार, मनोहर सिंह भाटी, एसएमएस रमेश कुमार, अदिति, तालिब, आरती, कैलाश, सरपंच मुंगथला किकाराम , युवा समाजसेवी चेतन चौहान, बीओडी अध्यक्ष लक्ष्मी व सदस्य, एवं ग्रामीण अंचल की स्वयं सहायता समूह की सैकड़ों महिलाएं आदि शामिल रहे। इस मौके पर डीडीएम सर ने महिलाओं को पशुपालन व कृषि सम्बंधित, मीनल ने सामाजिक उन्नयन को लेकर महिलाओं को जागरूक किया। प्रदान संस्था से महिला माहवारी व कृषि एवं पशुपालन में तकनीकी जानकारी प्रदान की गई। इस मौके पर मुंगथला के सैकड़ों ग्रामवासी भी मौजूद रहे।

आबुस्वरूप महिला पशुपालक प्रोड्यूसर कम्पनी लिमिटेड से जैविक कृषि मेले का आयोजन



उन्नति एक्सप्रेस/दिनेश मोघवाल

आबुरोड। खेती कर रहे आबुरोड ब्लॉक के किसानों की आय को बढ़ाने के उद्देश्य से शुरू हुई आबुस्वरूप महिला पशु पालक कम्पनी लिमिटेड ने निचलानगढ़ पंचायत के निचलानगढ़ गांव में कृषि मेले का नेतृत्व किया। निचलानगढ़ में आयोजित इस मेले में सिंघावा, पाबा, जावड़ा, उपलानगढ़, राड़ा, निचलखेजरा, उपलखेजरा, निचलानगढ़ समेत 6 पंचायतों के 10 गांवों से 100 से ज्यादा दीर्घियों ने भाग लिया। मेले में सिंघावा गांव की दीदी मंजू ने जैविक इनपुट जीवामूल, अमिनस, नीमसख, बहु बीज अर्क, समेत अन्य जैविक पदार्थों की प्रदर्शनी की। मेले में उपस्थित दीर्घियों को वीडियो, रंगोली, प्रदर्शनी, बैनर, चार्टरलाप, एवं किसानों के अनुभव के माध्यम से जैविक खेती के फायदे बताए गए। साथ ही एफएमओ द्वारा उन्नत खेती एवं बेहतर मार्केटिंग विधियों पर भी आबुस्वरूप महिला पशु पालक प्रोड्यूसर कम्पनी लिमिटेड की बीओडी गवरी और कंकरी बाई द्वारा समझाया गया। मेले में उपस्थित निचलानगढ़ सरपंच रेखा दीदी ने कम्पनी के कार्य की तारीफ करते हुए खेती सम्बंधित पंचायत के आगामी कार्यक्रमों का जिक्र किया। जयक, भास्कर महिला सवैगिन विकास सहकारी समिति



निचलानगढ़ सीएलएफ की एकाउंटेड ने अपने अनुभवों को साझा किया एवं दीर्घियों को आगे बढ़कर जैविक खेती से जुड़ने के लिए प्रेरित किया। मेले में निचलानगढ़ पंचायत एलडिडी लाला राम ने भी उपस्थित दर्ज की। मेले को घरातल पर उतारने के लिए आबुस्वरूप महिला पशु पालक कम्पनी लिमिटेड की सहयोगी संस्था प्रदान से अर्जित जैन, योगेश साहू, शैलक बलदानिया, एवं तालिब खान ने उपस्थित रहे। आधे दिन चले इस बड़े मेले के अंत में दीर्घियों ने उपलब्ध जैविक इनपुट खरीदे एवं सिंघावा गई जैविक विधियों को घर पर दोहराने का भी संकल्प लिया।



FARMING FOR RESILIENCE AND REGENERATION



Farming for Resilience and Regeneration shows how women are leading the shift from chemical-intensive farming to natural, regenerative agriculture. By producing organic inputs such as compost, biopesticides, and Jeevamrit, women are reducing dependence on costly chemicals and restoring soil health. The stories highlight women managing BRCs, reviving indigenous farming practices, adopting biogas and solar irrigation, and transforming waterlogged lands into productive fishery and farming systems. These efforts improve livelihoods, reduce debt, protect health, and regenerate local ecosystems. The theme shows that agricultural resilience begins when women lead the restoration of land, water, and community knowledge.





THE ENTREPRENEURS OF MOTHER EARTH

A Fertile Pathway Adopted In Begusarai, Bihar



Scan the QR to experience the film

The stench of chemical fertilizer hangs over a winter morning in Begusarai as a farmer tears open yet another sack, his hands rough from years of dependency he can no longer afford. A few fields away, Gunjan Devi kneels beside a compost pit, turning warm, living earth in her palms as steam rises in the cold air. Under a tin-roof shed, stacked bags of super compost—neatly stencilled with a local BRC’s name—wait to be loaded onto a cycle van for delivery to nearby villages. At the weekly haat, women farmers proudly display their vegetables; a customer holds a tomato firmly in her hand and smiles at its unfamiliar freshness, asking quietly, “Are these all organic?” In village meetings and dusty courtyards, Women discuss profits, soil health, and school fees in the same breath as a new kind of agriculture and rural economy quietly takes root in Begusarai.



For decades, farming in Begusarai was a story of expensive chemicals and dying soil. Debt piled up. Sickness spread. But the women here decided they had seen enough. What began as a desperate search to heal their land has become a quiet rebellion. No longer just field hands waiting for the next bad harvest, these women are now entrepreneurs. By turning farm waste into a thriving organic compost business, They are not only regenerating the soil; they are also gaining greater control over their livelihoods.



Begusarai, in Bihar's northern Ganga plains, has long symbolized intensive chemical agriculture, with fertilizer use far above the national average. Baseline studies show soil organic carbon levels at just 0.2–0.5%, compared to the healthy 2–5% required for fertile soil, leaving fields hard, exhausted, and increasingly unresponsive to inputs. For farmers, this ecological degradation became a mounting economic burden. Rising costs of chemical fertilizers and insecticides, frequent irrigation due to poor water retention, and exploitative practices like forced purchase of nano urea and black marketing of key inputs pushed many to the brink. About 30% of farmers reported increasing pest and disease attacks, signaling ecosystem imbalance, while communities linked growing health issues, including cancers, to prolonged chemical exposure.

Amid this environmental, economic, and health crisis, the Natural Farming movement, driven by the establishment of BRCs, emerged as a vital and viable alternative. Its core objective is to restore soil health by reintroducing organic matter and fostering microbial activity, thereby improving water-holding capacity and reviving soil vitality.

WOMEN TAKE THE LEAD: BIRTH OF BRCs

After PRADAN's awareness initiatives, women like Gunjan Devi, Pushplata Devi, Nutan Kumari, and Nutan Devi began understanding the harmful effects of chemical farming. Learning about sustainable alternatives, they started questioning the 'torment on mother earth' caused by relentless chemical use and decided to intervene.

When PRADAN began working in Begusarai, women from different panchayats were taken on exposure visits to Godda and Patna to observe alternative farming practices. Over the past three years, PRADAN has focused on community mobilization, training, and capacity building for local farmers. The foundational strategy involved forming FIGs and mobilizing women's SHGs at the village level. These groups became platforms for discussions, awareness building, and collective decision-making, fostering community ownership and shared purpose.

From each panchayat, one entrepreneur was selected through FIG discussions to manage the BRC, supported by members of that area's FIG. Initially, PRADAN assisted these entrepreneurs with infrastructure; providing plastic bags for composting, raw materials like bio-inoculants and earthworms, and hands-on guidance in preparation methods.

Through this process, women like Pushplata Devi, Nutan Kumari, and Nutan Devi pioneered BRCs in their panchayats, establishing local hubs for organic inputs and reducing farmers' dependence on external, chemical-intensive markets.

BRC: A DECENTRALIZED RESOURCE CENTER

BRCs function as decentralized production and distribution units for organic inputs, bringing regenerative tools directly to the farmer's doorstep. Their core product is a nutrient-rich 'super compost', a vermicompost base enriched with seven locally sourced ingredients to balance nutrients and enhance microbial activity. Production begins with raw cow dung,

agro-waste, and microbial cultures arranged in carefully layered pits. Over 30–40 days, this biomass transforms into high-quality compost, and every metric ton produced generates about 17 person-days of local work, most of it for women. Beyond super compost, BRCs manufacture a suite of bio-insecticides and liquid manures, including *Jeevamrit*, *Mathastra*, and *Agneyastra*, offering farmers a comprehensive package for natural farming. Unlike chemical fertilizer outlets that often require Aadhaar authentication and other bureaucratic steps, BRCs provide easy, immediate access, making them especially valuable for small and marginal producers. To improve outreach to farmers, BRCs are linked with local women-led FPOs. The FPOs collect orders from Panchayats, place purchase orders with BRC entrepreneurs, and support doorstep delivery of organic manure.

PARTNERING WITH PANCHAYAT

Seeing the positive results of the Gram Panchayats have further strengthened the initiative. Panchayats are rigorously working to integrate various government schemes and garner institutional support. The MGNREGA has played an instrumental role in promoting and funding the construction of two compost pits with a shed, providing approximately ₹14,000 in benefits to farmers. This support helps farmers build durable and long-lasting vermi-beds, a foundational element for organic manure production.

Meanwhile, various *Kisan Melas*, workshops, and village chaupals were organized in collaboration with PRADAN and the Gram Panchayat, which helped broaden the vision of the Natural Farming movement. Gunjan Devi and Nutan Kumari shared that participating in the *Kisan Mela* organized in their panchayat was highly beneficial, they got the opportunity to interact with other farmers, showcase their products, and build direct contacts. Farmers now reach

out to them for products and advice. Women now hold crucial agricultural knowledge, and farmers trust and seek their guidance.

ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION ON THE GROUND

The economic impact of the BRC model has been striking for both entrepreneurs and farmers. Women like Nutan Devi report earning ₹50,000–60,000 in just six months from four compost pits, while Gunjan Devi has turned low-value cow dung, once sold at ₹700–800 per tractor, into compost fetching ₹6,000–7,000, saving around ₹1.5 lakh a year.

Similarly, entrepreneur Nutan Kumari earned about ₹1.5 lakh from selling 1,200 compost bags in a year. Across seven active entrepreneurs, each BRC now averages an annual turnover of roughly ₹4 lakh, with net profits in the range of ₹1–1.1 lakh. This enterprise model creates a layered rural economy: each center produces about 100 MT of compost annually, employing 4–6 regular workers and significantly expanding local livelihoods. Farmers who buy from BRCs benefit from lower cultivation costs, as organic inputs replace expensive, often black-marketed chemicals that frequently arrive late or at inflated prices.



REGENERATING SOIL AND WATER

At the heart of the natural farming movement is a deliberate ecological repair. By reinfusing soils with organic matter, BRC-supplied inputs help loosen hardened earth, making it easier to work with simple tools, especially in vegetable plots where changes are most visible. Improved soil structure enhances water-holding capacity, allowing farmers to extend intervals between irrigations and cut water costs, a crucial advantage as climate variability grows. Increased microbial activity supports nutrient cycling and soil aeration, directly addressing the critically low organic content that has undermined Begusarai's agricultural base. At landscape scale, reduced reliance on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides curbs contamination of water bodies and soils, contributing to a more balanced ecosystem. The movement, therefore, is not merely about substituting inputs but about restoring the living foundation of agriculture.

SHIFTS IN TASTE, MARKETS, AND MINDSETS

Farmers consistently note a tangible difference in the taste and shelf life of vegetables grown with organic inputs compared to their chemically raised counterparts. Consumers, too, are increasingly willing to wait for and pay more for such produce, creating an 'organic premium' that rewards quality rather than sheer quantity. FPOs play a critical bridging role in this emerging value chain. They procure bio-inputs in bulk, place large compost orders with BRCs, and work to connect farmers' organic produce to premium markets, ensuring that ecological gains translate into sustained economic incentives.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AT THE CORE

One of the most profound impacts of the BRC model lies in how it reconfigures gender roles in rural Begusarai. Women entrepreneurs

describe themselves as empowered, asserting that education level is no longer a barrier as they now have their own employment and income. Through FIGs and SHGs, PRADAN's strategy of backing the women like Gunjan and Nutan Devi has enabled them not just to lift their own households but to become employers of other village women and laborers. This redistribution of economic power challenges entrenched norms and builds a more inclusive local economy where women are central decision-makers in agriculture and enterprise. By turning everyday, locally available materials, cow dung, crop residues, and simple microbial cultures into value-added products, these women have also claimed a new space in the rural market, one that is rooted in ecological stewardship and community service.

Women have also developed strong entrepreneurial skills. Pushplata Devi says that earlier only one family member earned an income, whereas she now runs an independent enterprise. Her growth is evident in the fact that she no longer depends solely on PRADAN or FPOs to sell her products; she independently visits potential buyers in her region. She has established her own brand, 'Suhani Jaivik Khad,' and sells her products independently.

SCALING A REGENERATIVE FUTURE

PRADAN's vision for Begusarai over the coming years is ambitious and granular. The plan is to support 100 BRC entrepreneurs across roughly 110–120 panchayats in nine blocks, each producing around 100 MT of super compost annually. Collectively, this would generate about 10,000 MT of compost a year, enough to serve approximately 12,500 farmers cultivating one acre each with two cropping cycles, at a recommended eight quintals of compost per acre annually. At this scale, each BRC could achieve an annual turnover of nearly ₹10 lakh, with net profits of ₹2–3 lakh, while creating about 1,700 person-days of employment per unit. By establishing a dense network of decentralized input hubs across the area, the strategy aims to make organic inputs as convenient and predictable as conventional chemicals, but at lower ecological and financial cost. Coupled with strong FPO-led marketing and guaranteed buyback arrangements, this network could close the economic loop from input to premium output, making natural farming a secure livelihood choice rather than a risky experiment.



CONCLUSION

The natural farming movement in Begusarai, anchored by women-led Bio-Resource Centers and a dense web of community institutions, offers a powerful template for rural transformation. It addresses intertwined crises: soil degradation, farmer indebtedness, and public health risks, while also advancing women's economic agency and local employment. As demand for safe, high-quality food grows, the 'organic premium' emerging from these fields underscores a wider shift from yield-centric to value-centric agriculture. The challenge now is less about proving the model and more about scaling it with integrity: speeding up public support, deepening farmer engagement, and strengthening market linkages so that Begusarai can fully claim its place as a leader in regenerative, community-driven farming.



BRANDING THE BIO-ECONOMY

Women-Led BRCs in Lohardaga, Jharkhand



Scan the QR to experience the film

In a small home in Lohardaga, a husband and wife found themselves completely at odds over how to tend their farm. Pramila Kumari wanted to stop using chemical fertilizers and go back to natural farming. Her husband couldn't help but laugh at the idea. To him, relying on nature seemed like a massive step backward.

"What are you going to do with this cow dung and trash? Nothing will grow from this," he teased her, fully believing that real farming meant buying heavy bags of chemicals from the city. But Pramila believed the secret to healthy crops was already sitting right in their own backyard.

To settle the argument, they decided to divide their land. Her husband took the largest share so he could keep using his store-bought chemicals. Pramila was given just a tiny patch of dirt to test out her compost and natural waste.

Over the next three years, that little piece of land quietly proved her right. While her husband's chemically treated soil stayed dry, hard, and lifeless, Pramila's patch slowly healed. It turned rich, dark, and wonderfully soft. Her small plot not only produced a healthy tomato crop; it also demonstrated that natural farming could restore soil health.



A small disagreement at home reflects a much larger transformation taking place in Lohardaga district of Jharkhand. In the villages of the Chota Nagpur Plateau, women are leading an organic farming movement that is changing both agriculture and social relations. For years, farming became heavily dependent on chemical fertilizers such as DAP and urea. While these inputs initially increased production, over time they damaged soil health. Farmers found that their land was becoming less fertile, requiring larger quantities of fertilizers each season. As farmer Rita Baxla recalled, *"the soil had turned as hard as stone."*

Earthworms disappeared, soil lost its natural vitality, and farming costs continued to rise.



Women were particularly affected by this system. Although they carried out much of the farm work, they had little control over agricultural decisions or finances. Inputs were usually purchased from markets located far from the villages, making it difficult for women to access them directly. As a result, men controlled most farming transactions while women remained dependent despite their significant contribution to agriculture.

When women suggested alternatives, their ideas were often dismissed. Pramila Kumari remembers her husband laughing at her proposal to use organic inputs made from cow dung and household waste. Yet these experiences also highlighted the need for change.

Against this backdrop, the women-led BRCs emerged as more than input supply centers. They became spaces where women could learn new skills, access knowledge, and take leadership in agriculture. Through these centers, women began moving from unpaid farm labors to trained entrepreneurs, organic farming practitioners, and custodians of their local environment.

THE INTERVENTION AS CATALYST (RESOURCES)

BRC, developed by PRADAN in partnership with the Directorate of Horticulture, Government of Jharkhand and supported under the National Mission on Natural Farming, became a catalyst for change in Lohardaga. More than an input shop, it was designed as a community-run

production centers where farmers could make their own bio-inputs instead of buying costly chemicals.

Women entrepreneurs were trained to produce inputs such as *Mridha Shakti* compost, vermicompost, *Agniastra*, and other natural tonics using locally available materials. This shifted the village economy from one dependent on external inputs to one that generated value from local resources, keeping income within the community.

The BRC also helped women recognize the value of resources that had long been overlooked. Materials like cow dung, straw, and grass, once treated as waste, became valuable inputs for farming. As Saraswati Devi from Navatoli recalled, they realized that everything they needed was already available around them. Instead of spending money on chemical fertilizers, they could rely on their own resources, reducing costs and increasing self-reliance.

A strong focus was placed on building skills and confidence. With support from the block administration, KVK, and PRADAN, women received training in natural farming, composting, soil health, and the preparation of bio-inputs such as *Agniastra* and *Brahmastra*. These trainings did more than transfer technical knowledge; they helped women see themselves as skilled practitioners and entrepreneurs rather than unskilled labors.

This growing confidence was evident when Saraswati Devi and her group established the BRC in Navatoli. Although the selected site had



no road access, villagers did not wait for outside support. Earlier, this kind of hurdle would have stopped people from moving forward, as they would have waited for the government to help. Led by women, the community came together through shramdaan and built a 150-meter road themselves. For Saraswati Devi, the road symbolized more than connectivity, it reflected a community taking ownership of its future.

The bio-inputs produced at the BRC also represent a different approach to farming. Products like *Agniastra* repel pests without harming beneficial insects, soil life, or the environment.

“

As Rita Baxla explained, *“It doesn’t destroy life, it restores balance.”*

For many women, natural farming is not simply a change in agricultural practice; it is a shift toward working with nature rather than against it, creating a more resilient and sustainable farming system.

FROM EXPERIMENTATION TO IDENTITY

The transition to organic farming was not easy. Much of the resistance came from within households. When Pramila Kumari requested a small 10-decimal plot for organic cultivation, she was not just asking for land: she was seeking an opportunity to prove that her ideas could work. Rather than challenging existing practices outright, she started small, using results from the field to build trust and confidence.

The journey also required patience. Years of chemical farming had weakened the soil, and improvements did not appear immediately. Pramila noted that in the first year of applying 200 kgs of organic fertilizer, the results were



negligible because the soil had been ruined by chemicals and couldn't be fixed instantly. By the second year, applying another 200 kgs, Pramila began to see visual changes. By the third year, reducing the input to 150 kilograms as soil fertility was naturally restored, the plants improved significantly.

A key factor in this transition was the support of the Kisko Women FPO, which connected village-level BRCs to the wider market. The FPO addressed an important challenge: access to credit. Unlike private input dealers who often required cash payments, the FPO enabled farmers to purchase bio-inputs on credit through women's group networks. This reduced risk for farmers and gave legitimacy to BRC-produced inputs, encouraging more families to adopt organic farming. Perhaps the most significant transformation was in how women

viewed themselves. Earlier, they were often seen only as helpers in agriculture, while men were considered the real farmers. Through managing BRCs, producing bio-inputs, and demonstrating results in their fields, women began claiming a new identity. As Pramila Kumari put it, being a woman does not stop someone from being a farmer.

This shift represents a quiet but powerful change. By taking charge of seeds, soil health, and farming knowledge, women have moved beyond supporting agriculture to leading it. They are no longer just cultivators of land; they are becoming its managers, innovators, and custodians. Their journey from experimentation to confidence, and from confidence to leadership, lies at the heart of Lohardaga's organic farming movement.

A NEW BALANCE: HEALTHIER SOIL, STRONGER LIVELIHOODS

The BRC initiative has helped restore both soil health and rural livelihoods in Lohardaga. After years of chemical-intensive farming, fields that had become hard and lifeless are now softer, healthier, and better able to retain water. Farmers report the return of earthworms and improved soil structure, making farming easier and reducing the effort required for tasks like weeding and ploughing.

Organic soils hold moisture longer, helping crops withstand dry spells. Farmer Rita Baxla shared that she once irrigated her tomato field twice a week, but now only once is enough. This has cut water use significantly and made farming more resilient to erratic rainfall and drought.

The transition has also reduced production costs. Rita estimates that the cost of cultivating tomatoes fell from about ₹30,000–35,000 per acre to around ₹25,000 per acre after adopting organic practices. At the same time, yields remained strong, generating annual earnings of ₹1.5–1.75

lakh per acre. Lower costs and stable production have increased profits and improved financial security for farming families.

The BRCs have grown into viable rural enterprises. Saraswati Devi's BRC now sells around 22 metric tons of organic fertilizer and more than 3,000 liters of bio-tonics annually. What began with 100–150 farmers has expanded to over 1,200 farmers. Across Jharkhand, 98 BRCs are now serving more than 53,000 farmers. Saraswati herself earns about ₹45,000–50,000 annually from the enterprise, giving her greater financial independence and a stronger voice in household decisions.

Farmers have also observed improvements in the quality of their produce. Organic vegetables remain fresh for longer and are often perceived as tastier. For example, organic radishes stay crisp for three to four days, while chemically grown ones wilt much sooner. This longer shelf life allows farmers to wait for better market prices rather than selling immediately after harvest.

CONCLUSION

The BRC model is also creating local employment. By producing, processing, packaging, and selling bio-inputs within the village, BRCs generate work opportunities close to home. As Rita Baxla explains, women can now find employment locally instead of migrating in search of wages. This helps families stay together while strengthening the village economy.

Looking ahead, entrepreneurs like Saraswati Devi envision supplying organic inputs across Jharkhand. What began as a small pilot has grown into a movement that combines ecological restoration, rural enterprise, and women's empowerment, demonstrating that healthier soils can support healthier and more prosperous communities.





PONDS OF PLENTY, BUNDS OF HOPE

Sustainable livelihoods and ecological restoration in waterlogged regions, Begusarai, Bihar



Scan the QR to experience the film

The 'Chaur' in Chandpura used to be a boundary, a stagnant, submerged expanse that swallowed the land and kept the women confined to their courtyards. But today, as the morning mist lifts off the newly transformed Chaur, the water acts not as a barrier, but as a mirror for a revolution. For the first time in her life, Kumari Madhwi stands at the edge of her newly reclaimed pond, not as a silent observer, but as its guardian. In her hand, she holds not a pitcher for fetching, but a pH testing strip, a tool of science that grants her dominion over the life teeming in the pond half. As she checks the water's acidity, her mind drifts back to the tribal women of Dakshinkenbana in Bankura; she remembers the strength with which they commanded their fisheries, a spark she carried back to Bihar to ignite her own village. A few yards away, on the emerald ridges of the raised farming half, built from the very soil dug out to form the pond; Shanti Devi inspects the lush Napier grass, vital feed for the village animals. This crop is more than just fodder; it is the physical manifestation of her own agency. She chose the crop, she tended the soil, and she will claim the profit. In a society where patriarchal roots run as deep as the old floodwaters, these women are doing something radical. By reclaiming the 'Chours' with their 50x50 model, half pond, half farmland, they have inadvertently terraformed the social structure of their village, proving that when the land rises, so do its women.



In a society where patriarchal roots run as deep as the old floodwaters, these women are doing something radical. By reclaiming the 'Chours' with their 50x50 model; half pond, half farmland, they have inadvertently terraformed the social structure of their village, proving that when the land rises, so do its women.



Bihar, especially its northern regions, faces persistent challenges from ‘*Chaur*’ (submerged) lands—low-lying floodplains that remain waterlogged from the monsoon until January due to rainwater accumulation and river overflow. According to the National Wetland Atlas (ISRO and IESWM, 2010), about 4.4% of the state’s area (4,03,209 hectares) is under wetlands, with over 4,400 major and 17,500 small wetlands, the majority being natural water bodies.

In districts like Begusarai, over 40% of the land is affected by such submersion, with water levels frequently reaching three to six feet.

The socio-economic implications of these waterlogged landscapes are profound and far-reaching:

- **Land Unproductivity:** Prolonged waterlogging makes large areas of fertile ‘*Chaur*’ land unusable for much of the year. Farmers cannot cultivate until the water recedes, leading to economic losses and underutilization of valuable land.
- **Low Agricultural Intensity:** Despite fertile soil and ample water, cropping intensity in ‘*Chaur*’ areas remains low (135–145%), indicating significant underutilization of agricultural potential.
- **Unemployment and Rural Migration:** High population density, limited access to productive land, and long periods of

agricultural inactivity force many, especially landless labors, to migrate for work. The lack of local employment deepens poverty and social vulnerability in these communities.

The Landscape Development Model represents an innovative and integrated approach to rural development, spearheaded by PRADAN with crucial financial backing from IndusInd Bank CSR’s IBL flagship program. This initiative directly confronts the pervasive challenge of ‘*Chaur*’ lands, vast tracts of waterlogged, unproductive land in Begusarai regions, transforming them into dynamic, multi-purpose agricultural and aquacultural ecosystems.

The core objective of this model is to convert previously unusable, submerged land into a dual-purpose system that enables intensive fish farming and diversified agriculture simultaneously. This enhances land utilization, boosts rural incomes, and generates local employment.

This innovative approach uses balanced earthwork: soil excavated from one part of the land is used to raise another. By deepening half an acre and elevating the remaining portion, it creates a pond for aquaculture alongside raised land for cultivation, transforming previously waterlogged and unproductive areas into productive assets. This approach, known as the ‘50X50 model,’ involves excavating part of the land and using the soil to create raised bunds. The deepened area retains water for fish farming, while the elevated bunds provide well-drained land for crop cultivation.



A key factor in the model's success is strong, durable bunding. Unlike earlier methods prone to damage, improved techniques introduced by PRADAN ensure better compaction and stability. This prevents fish loss during floods and provides secure, long-lasting land for cultivation, making the system more resilient and sustainable.

The model promotes integrated farming by using ponds for fish culture and bunds for growing vegetables, fodder, and flowers. This efficient use of land turns excavated soil into a productive asset, enabling diversified income and year-round cultivation even in waterlogged areas, and exemplifies circular economy principles at a micro-level within the agricultural landscape.

The approach is characterized by:

- **Community Engagement and Mobilization:** The initiative began with PRADAN closely

engaging with farmers, understanding their practices and challenges through discussions and community meetings. This helped build trust and local buy-in, especially among landholders, by demonstrating the model's potential for improving unproductive land.

- **Technical Training and Handholding Support:** Continuous training and handholding to farmers, including guidance on fish disease management, proper netting techniques, and cost-effective feeding practices such as preparing feed at home or enhancing natural feed sources. This ongoing support helps farmers manage operations efficiently and achieve sustainable returns.
- **Exposure Visits and Capacity Building:** Exposure visits, especially for women, were organized to successful fishery sites to inspire adoption of improved practices. It

also conducts structured training programs within and outside the state to strengthen capacities.

The model's success is further strengthened by strong convergence with government schemes and effective collaboration with departments.

- **Convergence with Government Schemes:** PRADAN engages with line departments to support farmers in accessing government schemes, inputs, and assets and linking them to provisions like the *Matsya Vipanan* Kit, which offers a 70% subsidy for women fish vendors. Schemes like Chaur Vikas Yojana and MGNREGA are enabling investments in this 50-50 model through convergence. In Begusarai, this has led to the creation of 24 ponds (IBL CSR), 25 ponds (Directorate Of Fisheries, Government of Bihar), and 214 ponds under MGNREGA, demonstrating strong potential for state-led expansion.

INCOME & LIVELIHOOD ENHANCEMENT

The model transforms unproductive land into a high-income asset, generating around ₹4.5 lakh annually with a net profit of ₹2.5–3 lakh per acre, despite initial investments. The 50X50 model ensures year-round productivity through integrated fish farming and crop cultivation on bunds.

It promotes diversified livelihoods, including vegetables, fodder, and marigold cultivation. Farmers adopt adaptive practices: such as timing crops for market demand (like festivals or marriage seasons for marigold), and reuse waste (like flowers as fish feed), reflecting circular economy principles. Continuous training improves efficiency and reduces costs. Farmers also benefit from easy market access, as local youth purchase fish directly from ponds and transport it to markets, reducing the need for farmers to travel, further strengthening incomes.

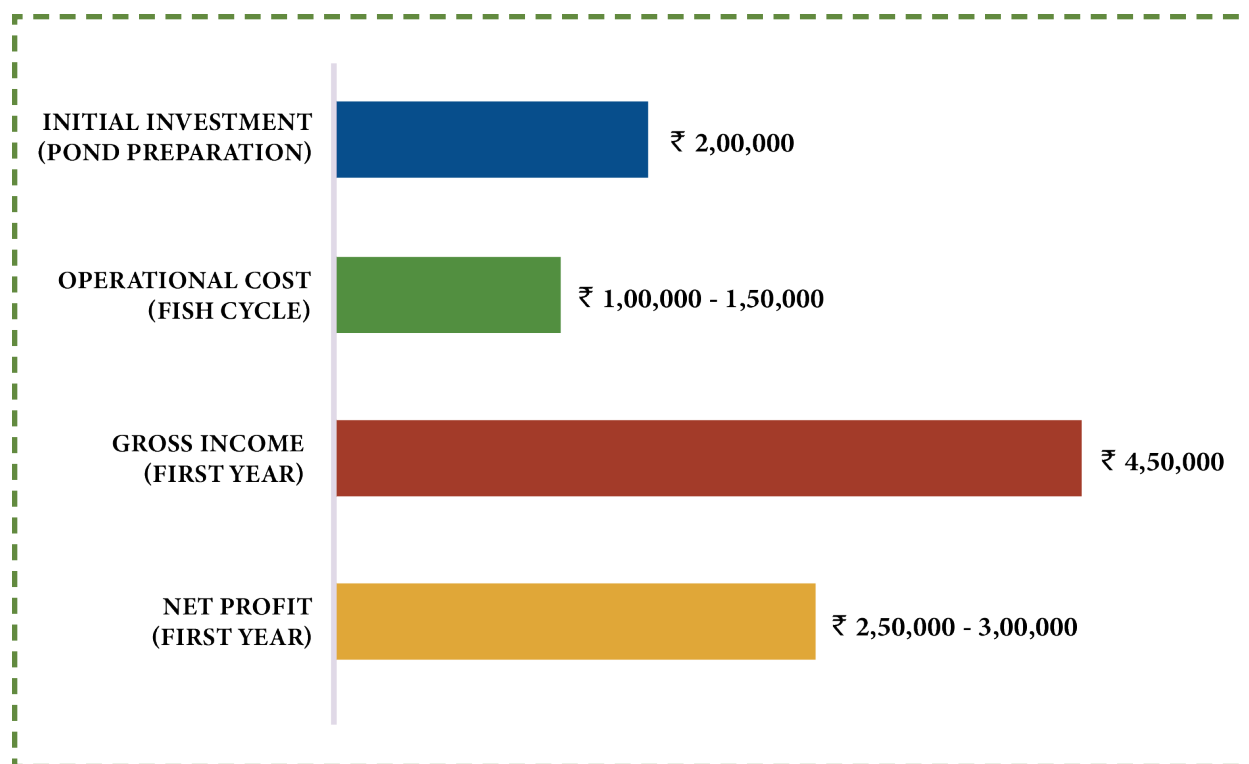


Figure: Cost-Benefit Analysis of Fish farming

EMPLOYMENT GENERATION AND MIGRATION REDUCTION

The Landscape Development Model directly addresses the challenge of migration in regions like Begusarai by creating robust and sustainable local employment opportunities within the villages.

- **Direct Labor in Fisheries:** A one-acre pond under this model engages 7–8 labors regularly, generating around 100 person-days of employment annually. These local labor opportunities offer competitive wages, typically ranging from ₹300-400 per day, higher than the local labor rates.
- **Targeting Landless Farmers:** The model is particularly beneficial for landless farmers who possess prior experience in fish farming, offering them consistent work and a dignified livelihood within their own communities.
- **Multiplier Effect:** If 20-30 acres in a village are converted using this model, it can generate approximately ten times more employment opportunities.

Beyond pond management, the model creates jobs across the value chain, especially in fish marketing. The government's *Matsya Vipanan* Kit (Fish Marketing Kit) scheme, which offers a 70% subsidy, aims to empower individuals involved in fish selling. The District Fisheries Officer observes that women are predominantly active in this sector, indicating that this scheme directly supports their livelihoods and employment within the fish marketing value chain.

CONCLUSION

The Landscape Development Model demonstrates how unproductive 'Chaur' lands can be transformed into productive, multi-functional ecosystems. In Begusarai, it has delivered net profits of ₹2.5-3 lakh per acre, created 100 person-days of employment per pond, and reduced migration by generating local livelihoods. The model has empowered women through their active participation from training to planning to adoption of improved practices, challenging traditional barriers and fostering stronger community cohesion. It also promotes ecologically friendly practices like integrated farming and groundwater recharge. With strong community-government convergence, the model serves as a scalable approach for holistic and sustainable rural development.



FUELING FREEDOM

Women at the Forefront of the Green Energy Revolution, Udaipur, Rajasthan



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Before the first light of dawn could touch the jagged peaks of the Aravalli range, Nawli Bai was already navigating the treacherous, rocky slopes of Kelthara. Thirty years ago, her mother had only to walk a hundred meters to find firewood; today, the receding forest line forces Nawli into a grueling ten-kilometer round trip that consumes five hours of her morning. Every step is a gamble against loose stones and the hidden threat of vipers, all for a headload of wood that may be too damp to ignite if the monsoon rains have set in. Back at her phala, a homestead isolated on a lonely hillock, her children wait near open piles of livestock dung, a breeding ground for the pathogens that keep them perpetually frail and anemic.



For Nawli Bai, the beauty of the Rajasthani landscape is a deceptive mask for a daily humanitarian crisis, where the simple act of cooking a meal is a tax paid on physical exhaustion, respiratory illness, and the stolen time she desperately needs for her farm. This localized ‘nexus of deficits’, comprising acute fuel scarcity, water-stressed agriculture, and a pervasive public health crisis, defines the socio-economic isolation of the Gogunda block. Historically, the dispersed settlement pattern and ecological degradation trapped tribal families in a cycle of debt, forced to abandon 70% of their arable land due to the prohibitive costs of diesel-powered irrigation.



In Kelthara and Mahula villages of Gogunda block, Udaipur, the Green Village Initiative led by PRADAN changed the way development was seen. Instead of bringing in outside plans, the intervention began by listening to what women like Nawli Bai said they needed most. Women came together to form PGs and mapped their daily struggles through PRA: fetching water, collecting firewood, and managing cattle waste.

They soon realized these issues were tied together, not separate problems. Acting on that insight, the initiative went beyond building infrastructure. It introduced solar-powered irrigation, biogas systems, and better sanitation, a set of connected measures that reduced women's drudgery and supported ecological restoration. Over time, these small, connected actions turned scattered hamlets into self-sustaining Green Villages, where women's ownership of modern technology became a symbol of empowerment.

ACCESS TO NEW ASSETS

To dismantle long-standing structural barriers, the Green Village Initiative brought together three kinds of strength: physical capital, social capital, and human capital. Each became a pillar in building sustainable rural prosperity.

The first step focused on physical assets to break the constraints of energy and water scarcity. With support from the Schneider Electric Foundation, two solar-based lift irrigation systems were installed in Kelthara village, marking a decisive move away from diesel-powered irrigation. Unlike the older pumps that drained both pockets and aquifers, the new solar systems

ran at near-zero operational cost and came paired with sprinkler sets to promote precision irrigation instead of wasteful flooding. The results were immediate: nearly 70% of previously uncultivated land came under crops during the Rabi and Zaid seasons, effectively tripling cropping intensity and restoring faith in farming as a viable livelihood.

To tackle the fuel shortage and sanitation risks that shaped women's daily drudgery, the project introduced domestic biogas units. An initial group of 17 families in Kelthara began feeding cattle dung and water into these systems, producing gas that flowed straight to kitchen stoves and a nutrient-rich slurry used as organic fertilizer. The initiative later expanded to 37 families across the cluster. What once meant walking six kilometers for firewood now meant cooking with clean energy generated right at home. For households too remote for grid connectivity, 10 families received solar lamps, ensuring bright, portable light that supported children's evening studies and improved safety against snakes and scorpions after dark.

Strengthening social capital came next. With PRADAN's facilitation, women formed PGs that met regularly, shared resources, and handled joint finances. In Kelthara, ten families contributed ₹1,000 each, creating a group fund of ₹10,000. They used this corpus to dig canals and deepen wells worth ₹40,000, combining their funds with external loans or support. This transparent, collective management shifted their role from beneficiaries to active investors, building confidence and cohesion within the village.

The third pillar, human capital, brought modern science to villages through a partnership with the RAJUVAS, Udaipur. Farmers attended exposure visits and training sessions where they learned about deworming schedules, vaccinations, and better livestock care. RAJUVAS conducted fecal sample testing, showing the real parasitic load that had silently reduced animal health, a revelation that encouraged the community to adopt improved sanitation. Training also covered genetic management to prevent inbreeding in local goat and cattle herds.

Alongside this, PRADAN trained women intensively in organic farming, preparing natural manures, insecticides, and pesticides with cow urine, dung, jaggery, and pulses. Seventeen families with cultivable land learned to build and maintain vermicompost beds, mastering the art of converting bio-waste into rich manure through earthworm cultures. This reduced their dependence on costly urea and DAP while turning organic farming into both a science

and a shared community practice.

FROM PASSIVE LABORERS TO ACTIVE DECISION-MAKERS

The true success of the Green Village Initiative lay in shifting women's agency, their ability to make strategic life choices, which soon began showing up as visible changes in agriculture, health, and household economies. Because women led the initial needs assessment, women's lived experiences were documented as central evidence in planning. Early meetings were marked by hesitation, and some women faced violence from their husbands just for attending SHG gatherings. Yet, when they started mapping their own income and expenses on chart paper, something changed. The simple act of writing numbers and discussing them aloud built a sense of ownership. When the PG used its ₹10,000 corpus to manage canal excavation and hire JCB machines, the experience challenged a deep internal belief: 'We cannot.'





Among them, Thawri Bai of Mahula village stands out. Her success with organic cucumber farming didn't just raise incomes; it gave her recognition. Neighbors now visit her to buy organic manure and learn her methods. Once a learner, she has become a community expert.

That inner confidence soon showed up with new technical and managerial skills. Women like Dapu Bai proudly speak of how recordkeeping and financial management are now handled entirely by women, a striking reversal of old norms where men or moneylenders controlled the finances. With this financial literacy came resilience. Women learned to synthesize organic fertilizers such as *jivamrit* and *neemastra*, blending knowledge of soil health with hands-on experimentation.

Earlier, men dictated what crops to plant. Now, as Udi Bai notes with quiet pride, men themselves agree to grow okra, ridge gourd, and eggplant, crops that bring steady, daily cash flow managed by women.

The results could be seen in their fields: 70% of earlier fallow lands were now cultivated, creating what villagers called 'new land'. Wheat yields increased eightfold, from one sack to eight for the same seed input, and the old monoculture of maize and soybean gave way to a vibrant mix of wheat, okra, ridge gourd, cucumber, and eggplant. This diversity not only improved diets but shielded families from price volatility and erratic rainfall.

The shift has changed household economic relations: grain production and income were largely controlled by men, whereas vegetable sales have created income streams managed by women. The end of the five- to six-kilometer firewood trek was equally transformative. Reclaiming those lost hours each day gave women command over their own time, now used for agriculture, childcare, and rest. Nawli Bai says she no longer fears the monsoon or the forest, an indicator of how safety and autonomy have intertwined. Producing their own wheat also ended dependency on distress labor.

“

As Dapu Bai puts it, *“Earlier we worked for others just to eat. Now we choose when and for whom we work.”*

The outcomes were not just felt but measured. Confined animal waste in biogas digesters instead of open pits cut intestinal worm infections among children by 20%, breaking the fecal–oral transmission cycle. Cleaner kitchens from biogas use meant less smoke and fewer breathing problems for women who once inhaled fumes equivalent to dozens of cigarettes daily. The economic returns came from both earning more and spending less. By cutting out diesel and chemical fertilizer purchases, families plugged a major leak in their household budgets. Food security became a form of saving—as Dapu Bai explained, what once went into buying food now funds small assets. Monthly savings through the PG created another income stream, and plans for a solar-powered flour mill point toward the next step: local value addition led by women themselves.

THE MULTI-STAKEHOLDER MODEL

The Green Village Initiative succeeded because it brought together partners with complementary strengths: a multi-stakeholder model that combined community, PRADAN, RAJUVAS, and corporate partners like the Schneider Electric Foundation. Each played a distinct role that made the whole stronger than its parts.

Women were in the driver’s seat for the entire process through their collectives. PRADAN provided the social mobilization and institution-building expertise. Without their work to mobilize the PGs, even the best solar pumps would have sat unused, lacking collective ownership. PRADAN mobilized the community and nurtured leaders like Udi Bai and Dapu Bai, turning hesitant participants into confident decision-makers.

RAJUVAS brought scientific rigor, connecting academic research to village realities. They conducted fecal testing to expose the hidden health crisis and provided veterinary training to improve livestock health. A key insight from this model is how scientific research became practical action. Findings on zoonotic diseases weren’t left as reports, PRADAN and RAJUVAS turned them into mobilization tools, giving villagers science-backed reasons to change waste disposal habits. This fulfilled the university’s social responsibility while creating a blueprint for collaborative rural solutions.

Corporate partners like the Schneider Electric Foundation supplied the financial and technical hardware. Their funding for solar lift irrigation overcame the high upfront costs that tribal farmers could never afford alone. They ensured high-quality, durable systems with efficient power management that would last for years.

The initiative also aligns with India's policy landscape, including the Green Credit Program notified in October 2023. By focusing on afforestation and water conservation, the villages now generate verifiable Green Credits that can be monetized. Companies like Tata have already begun investing, using these carbon credits to support sustainability.

This marks a smart evolution in development funding. Responsibility no longer rests solely with communities or CSOs such as PRADAN; private companies can also contribute through verified financing mechanisms. Through biogas systems and organic farming, Kelthara villagers have embraced circular economy principles, using market mechanisms to ensure their efforts remain financially viable for years to come.

CONCLUSION

Energy, agriculture, and health aren't separate issues. They're the threads of daily village life, woven tightly together. Solar pumps enabled crop diversification and filled plates with better nutrition. Biogas units cut disease through better sanitation while feeding fields with rich fertilizer. Each step strengthened the next, building a resilient system where one gain rippled everywhere.

For women, time became the true breakthrough. No more five- to six-kilometer firewood treks or smoke-choked kitchens. Those reclaimed hours went to farming, learning, and leading their families forward.

This pilot in Kelthara and Mahula is just the start. The next step is to scale the pilot across Gogunda by integrating Green Village plans into the GPDP and linking them with the MGNREGA, Swachh Bharat Mission, and other public programs.

When women gain real power, they transform scarcity into sustainability and dignity. The Green Village Initiative reveals rural India's true potential.





BUILDING LIVELIHOOD ASSETS THROUGH COLLECTIVE ACTION



Building Livelihood Assets Through Collective Action shows how women are transforming barren, degraded, and underused lands into productive livelihood assets. Through SHGs and VOs, women are moving from unpaid agricultural roles to recognized leadership in planning, creating, and managing natural resources. The examples from Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Bihar show women building farm ponds, trenches, bamboo nurseries, mango orchards, fruit plantations, and irrigation systems. These assets reduce migration, strengthen local incomes, and improve climate resilience. The theme emphasizes that when women gain access to land, water, and commons, they build not only livelihoods but also ownership, dignity, and collective power.





STREAMS OF LEADERSHIP

Women Rewriting the Script of Scarcity in Kalahandi, Odisha



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The sun is still low when the women of Champadeipur begin to gather on the slope above the fields. A few years ago, this same hillside watched silent queues of families leaving for distant cities, driven out by failed rains and empty granaries. Now, the women stand over contour trenches and farm ponds they demanded and helped design, tracing with their fingers how each line of stored water has pulled their village back from the edge.



In a place once defined by drought and forced migration, the women of Champadeipur have stepped from the margins to the planning table. By claiming control over land and water, they are quietly rewriting what survival and dignity looks like in their village.



In Champadeipur, what was once marked by distress migration has transformed through the collective leadership of 1,280 women across 17 villages. Supported by OLM and PRADAN, 112 SHGs came together as a GPLF, actively participating in Gram Panchayat planning and driving investments in water conservation structures like TCBs and farm ponds.

Distress migration has fallen below 10%; MGNREGA employment and improved farming now support most households, and rice yields have doubled. With 80% participation in Gram Sabha, women have emerged as key decision-makers, they are no longer silent participants taking charge of assets and social issues. This transformation shows how women's leadership can reshape livelihoods, governance, and the future of entire communities.

STRATEGIC DESIGN: FROM VISION TO ENGINEERING

The transformation began with women envisioning a future beyond scarcity. Through collective spaces like Mahila Gram Sabhas, they imagined a water-secure and inclusive village, where even the poorest had access to water and dignity. At the core of this vision was a powerful shift: assets in women's names, ensuring legal ownership, economic security, and control over resources. By raising their voices in *Mahila Sabha* and shaping local planning, women moved from silence to leadership, laying the foundation for equitable and sustainable development.

Turning vision into reality, the GPLF, supported by PRADAN and government experts, implemented INRM models suited to local terrain. A key innovation, the 5% model, captures runoff in small pits to provide sub surface seepage and life saving irrigation during dry spells. Specific assets were named after women leaders in villages like Kanti Majhi, ensuring their long-term agency and control.

Complementing this were TCBs (2×1.5 ft) that slowed runoff, reduced soil erosion, and enhanced groundwater recharge. Farm ponds (50×50×10 ft) supported pisciculture, while solar lift irrigation systems ensured water access in off-grid areas where traditional systems were not feasible.

These interventions were supported by strong institutional systems and capacity building. A robust MGNREGA plan ensured up to 300 days of employment, backed by careful planning, resource envelope and synchronized fund releases. A decentralized cadre, CRPs, *Krishi Mitras*, and *Prani Mitras*, provided continuous technical and community support.

Extensive training by PRADAN and the government strengthened women's skills in INRM planning, MGNREGA guidelines, livelihoods, and governance. Women were trained to work on GIS based resource maps. Financial systems, credit linkages, from federations fostered financial stability. Planning using VPRP application helped to capture women's plans and integrate it with Gram Panchayat's plans.



DESTINY IN ACTIVATION

Through engagement with MGNREGA systems through capacity building and coordinations, planning translated into action. Households completing 100 days of employment rose sharply from 640 (FY 2019–20) to 5,506 (FY 2023–24), while women's share of person-days reached nearly 49%. This marks a significant shift, women moving from the margins to becoming central drivers of local development and landscape transformation.

On the ground, communities turned plans into reality, creating assets like 5% model pits through MGNREGA. Flexible work arrangements allowed women to balance caregiving and employment, while creche facilities, where an older woman was paid to care for children at worksites, enabled young mothers to participate. Together, these measures made worksites more inclusive and unlocked women's full labor potential.

The Solar Lift Irrigation system brought water access to remote villages where pipelines were not feasible. Initiatives like *Mo Upakari Bagicha* turned backyards into productive kitchen gardens, where women, guided by *Krishi Mitras*, grew vegetables using organic methods, improving nutrition and reducing dependence on markets.

The most visible change was the sharp decline in distress migration, as local livelihoods under MGNREGA and agriculture enabled 60% of the workforce to stay back, reducing migration to below 10%. This strengthened family stability: more men remained in the village, shared farm and household responsibilities, and reduced dependence on debt.

At the same time, women's leadership deepened. The GPLF intervened to prevent the marriage of a 15-year-old girl by warning that the matter would be reported to the police, demonstrating its

growing public role. With women's participation in person-days rising from 38.6% to 48.9%, the model reflects increased financial independence and a clear shift toward women-led development.

CELEBRATING OUTCOMES AND VOICES

As women's leadership aligned with INRM practices, Champadeipur saw a sharp rise in productivity. Villages that once struggled to coax two sacks of rice from the earth now celebrate harvests of 4-5 sacks, driven by improved water retention through the 5% model and TCBs. Water availability also enabled diversification into horticulture, mushrooms, and pisciculture, creating multiple income streams and stronger livelihood security.

Stories of financial independence highlight this transformation.



Jannani Ghade shares, "Initially, as an ICRP, I earned ₹9,000 per month. After being promoted to an ECRP, I earned ₹15,000. I am proud of what I earn."

This economic empowerment has shifted traditional dynamics, women are no longer dependent but are key decision-makers, with families relying on them for financial support.

Asset ownership marks a decisive and lasting shift. With assets and payments in women's names, they gain control over finances, and strengthen their decision-making power within households.



Women say it with relief and a little triumph: *"Husbands cannot withdraw the money without our permission."*

That control curbs wasteful spending on alcohol and, in many homes, reduces domestic violence. This shift not only improves economic security but also contributes to reduced conflict and greater dignity, with women emerging as equal partners.

Over time, these changes have transformed Champadeipur from a migration-prone area into a model village, now recognized as a top performer in its block, visitors now arriving from other districts to tour their lands and learn from their work. Women-led SHGs like Maa Dharani SHG and Maa Thakurani SHG have moved into entrepreneurship, while high participation in Mahila Gram Sabhas has strengthened women's role in governance. With improved livelihoods and access to safe drinking water in 13 villages under Basudha Yojana, everyday life has become more secure, dignified, and resilient.

CONCLUSION

Champadeipur's transformation is dynamic and rooted in long-term sustainability across ecological, institutional, and social dimensions. Durable assets like TCBs, farm ponds, and wells have strengthened water security by reducing runoff and recharging groundwater, while orchards and aquaculture create year-round livelihoods. The shift to organic inputs further ensures soil health and climate resilience.

Sustainability is reinforced by strong community institutions like the GPLF, supported by a trained local cadre and improved systems such as digital planning and reporting. This has enabled the community to manage resources, finances, and governance independently.

Equally important is the intergenerational shift; women are investing in education, skills, and asset ownership for the next generation, moving away from practices like child marriage. The 2024-25 Annual Action Plan institutionalizes specific projects targeting SC/ST beneficiaries, such as land development for Harijan families and farm ponds for Majhi families, ensuring social justice remains central. As a result, Champadeipur has emerged as a model village, with its approach now being replicated across regions.





SURFACING THE ICEBERG

Making Visible The Productive Power Of The Kamhar In Dhamtari, Chattisgarh



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The red earth of Piprahibharri feels different beneath Kamla Mandaavi's hands today. As she kneels to press bamboo seeds into a nursery bed, she is joined by the women of the Jai Maa Durga SHG, their quiet chatter a testament to a newfound collective strength. For generations, Kamla's family, part of the Kamhar tribe which is a PVTG, navigated the forest as foragers who collected bamboo to weave the baskets that barely sustained them. The forest was their only provider, but it was a relationship defined by scarcity and the constant threat of depletion. Today, however, the bamboo represents a revolutionary shift in perspective. These seeds are destined to become a living perimeter for the village's 18-acre mango orchard, a protective fence for an asset they helped design and now manage. In Kamla's mind, bamboo is no longer just a raw material for tradition; it is a tool for protection, a symbol of growth, and a bridge to a future where her community is no longer 'invisible' to the world. This transition from forest collection to deliberate cultivation is the defining narrative of Piprahibharri's transformation through the convergence among government, CSOs and the community under the PM-JANMAN Yojana.



Piprahibharri, a settlement of 37 families in Dhamtari district, shows how long-standing exclusion can be addressed through inclusive governance and strong community partnership. Under the PM-JANMAN, an integrated intervention valued at approximately ₹1 crore linked multiple schemes with participatory planning and treated community members as co-creators of development.



For the Kamhar tribe, isolation was not only about geography but also about history and exclusion. Living closely with the forest, their livelihoods depended on seasonal collection of mahua, tendu leaves, and honey, along with bamboo weaving. Farming was not central to their way of life, and shrinking forest resources made survival increasingly difficult.

Over time, deep neglect by the state created strong mistrust. Development had rarely reached them, and when officials came for surveys, many people would retreat into the forest rather than engage. For generations, they remained outside the reach of government systems and services.

Addressing this required more than schemes: it needed trust-building. Led by the Dhamtari District Administration with support from PRADAN, the intervention focused on rebuilding relationships between the state and the community. Cultural tools like street plays, along with strengthened women-led SHGs, helped slowly break long-standing fear and skepticism.

What began as confidence-building gradually evolved into a locally driven development process. Multiple government schemes were converged under a shared plan, enabling the community to access entitlements in a coordinated way. As a result, Piprahibharri achieved near full coverage of basic services and livelihood assets.

The experience shows that when trust is rebuilt and communities are engaged as partners, even

the historically excluded groups can become active participants in development.

COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE: BUILDING TRUST IN PIPRAHIBHARRI

The Dhamtari District Administration recognized that routine bureaucratic approaches would not work with the Kamhar PVTG. To reach a deeply isolated community, they shifted toward collaborative governance under the PM JANMAN Yojana. While the administration had financial resources and institutional authority, it lacked the social trust needed to engage effectively with the community. To bridge this gap, they partnered with PRADAN, which brought long-standing experience in tribal regions and strong community relationships.

This partnership worked as a balance of strengths. The administration provided institutional power, funding, and access to government systems, while PRADAN contributed trust, community mobilization, and cultural understanding.

The engagement began with a simple but powerful tool: street plays. Instead of formal meetings or written communication, performances were used to reflect everyday life in Kamhar villages. Scenes on alcoholism, malnutrition, and confusion around government entitlements were enacted in ways that people could relate to. This approach broke the usual distance between officials and villagers. When people saw their own experiences reflected on stage, they responded with recognition rather than fear or resistance.

The street plays created a safe space for dialogue, turning governance from an intimidating process into a shared conversation. This helped women like Kamla Mandaavi and Dineshwari Markam gradually find their voice. The presence of PRADAN also reassured the community that the state was approaching them with a genuine intent to listen and engage, not just to deliver directives.

Through this approach, the administration signaled a clear shift: development would no longer be imposed from above but shaped through trust and participation.

PARTICIPATORY PLANNING AND COMMUNITY-LED DESIGN

The transition to active community ownership was solidified through a structured three-day process, which became a turning point in the intervention. The process reversed the usual planning hierarchy, placing tools of analysis directly in the hands of the community instead of officials.

Using *rangoli* powders, seeds, and stones, villagers created detailed social and resource maps on the ground. Every household was mapped, along with gaps in basic infrastructure. This exercise made development needs visible and collectively understood.

The process then moved to transect walks, where villagers guided technical teams through their settlement and surrounding forest areas. This reversed traditional roles, with community members sharing local ecological knowledge. They identified natural drainage paths suitable for six check dams and pointed out appropriate soil conditions for an 18-acre mango plantation.

A key moment was the '*Khushal Pariwar*' (the Ideal Family) visioning exercise, where families expressed their aspirations beyond immediate needs. These included a permanent roof, access to tap water, and nutrition gardens for children. This shifted discussions from deprivation to concrete, achievable goals.





The outcome was a community-driven development plan. The planning process identified the need for pucca houses for 34 families and selected sites for 14 farm ponds through collective mapping and discussion.

To strengthen accountability, feedback systems were introduced. SHGs and Circle Heads were linked through WhatsApp groups with district officials, enabling real-time updates, monitoring, and reporting of delays. It allowed the community to define priorities and track progress.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AND THE DIGITAL BRIDGE

To sustain momentum, the intervention built a system of distributed leadership across Piprahbharri, ensuring responsibility was shared at every level of the community. At the top was Lata Netam, the Ward Panch, who evolved from a formal representative into an active coordination hub. Deeply connected to

local struggles, she worked closely with block-level officials, advocated for entitlements, and organized documentation camps so that no household was excluded from benefits. The village was further divided into 10 circles, each led by a Circle Head responsible for key areas such as livelihoods and grievance redressal. This ensured leadership remained close to households rather than concentrated in one place.

A crucial role was played by Jan Man Mitras, a group of young volunteers who formed the technical backbone of the system. They helped residents complete essential documentation like Aadhaar cards, job cards, and bank accounts, achieving near-universal coverage and bridging the digital divide. A Bank Sakhi also supported local financial transactions, making it easier for families to access and manage their income within the village.

SHGs, strengthened through PRADAN's support, functioned as social auditors. Groups such as the Jai Maa Durga SHG monitored the quality of housing construction under PM Awas, checked materials, and tracked progress of initiatives like the bamboo nursery, which involved planting 500 bamboo saplings with technical guidance.

This layered system created strong accountability and collective ownership. As a result, key outcomes such as nearly 200 MGNREGA workdays per family and 37 functional tap water connections were achieved.

THE MULTIPLIER EFFECT OF CONVERGENCE

The impact in Piprahibharri comes from a chain reaction created by converging 11 government schemes into one integrated system. Instead of working in isolation, housing, water, and livelihoods were treated as interconnected pillars of development

At the center was MGNREGA, which linked directly with water infrastructure. The construction of 14 farm ponds and 6 check dams improved groundwater levels and strengthened water security. This made the 18-acre mango plantation and bamboo nursery possible. In turn, these plantations created sustained employment, showing how water security enabled livelihoods, and livelihoods justified continued investment in water.

Housing under PMAY added another layer of transformation. The 34 pucca houses provided not just shelter but improved health conditions, each with a toilet and piped water connection.

With support from PRADAN, nutrition gardens were established in 11 households, using greywater and tap water to grow fresh vegetables and directly address dietary gaps.

A new Anganwadi center, designed using the BALA approach, strengthened early childhood education and care. Families collectively supported the rehabilitation of severely malnourished children, leading to significant weight gain and recovery.

FROM SILENCE TO LEADERSHIP

The true impact of transformation in Piprahibharri is best understood through the personal journeys of women who moved from distrust to leadership.

Kamla Mandaavi represents this change. When she arrived in 2018, she experienced significant social and institutional exclusion. However, through the SHG and PM JANMAN initiative, she gradually found her voice. Today, she works as an Anganwadi assistant and actively participates in Panchayat meetings, where she raises practical demands like drip irrigation for mango orchards. With PRADAN's support, she now leads initiatives such as the bamboo nursery and irrigation planning, guided by a simple belief: silence leads to inaction.

Dineshwari Markam reflects that, although she once avoided interactions with officials, she later became an SHG recordkeeper and community surveyor. She also speaks proudly about improved child health, hygiene, and the cleaner, more active village environment. As women like Kamla and Dineshwari began earning and participating in decision-making, shifts were visible within households. Kamla observes that men are gradually moving away from alcoholism and showing greater interest in savings and household investment.

At the center of this change is Lata Netam, the Ward Panch, who bridged community aspirations with government systems. Her journey, from a distressed neighbor to a confident local leader organizing documentation camps, reflects the rise of grassroots leadership.



REPLICABLE PRINCIPLES FOR PVTG TRANSFORMATION

Piprahibharri offers a practical and replicable framework for improving outcomes in PVTG regions across India, built on trust, participation, leadership, and convergence.

1. **Trust-building through culturally rooted entry points:** Street plays and similar culturally familiar tools helped break fear and build rapport. Such empathetic engagement must be the first step before any infrastructure or scheme rollout.
2. **Authentic demand through participatory planning:** The three-day PRA ensured that planning came directly from community realities. This bottom-up process built ownership, as people themselves designed solutions. Tools like WhatsApp feedback loops further strengthened accountability.
3. **Distributed leadership and local institutionalization:** Leadership was shared across Ward Panchs like Lata Netam, Circle Heads, Jan Man Mitras, Bank Sakhis, and SHGs. This network prevented dependence on a single authority and ensured 100% near-universal documentation coverage and faster grievance redressal.
4. **Multiplier effect of holistic convergence:** The convergence of 11 schemes showed that integrated planning is essential for lasting impact. Resources were coordinated across schemes: MGNREGA supported water assets, which enabled livelihoods, while PMAY housing was linked with tap-water connections and nutrition gardens. District-level convergence systems can help replicate this model at scale.



CONCLUSION

Piprahiharri shows that long-standing exclusion can be addressed through trust, participatory planning, distributed leadership, and convergence. Under PM-JANMAN, 11 government programs were linked so that housing, water security, nutrition, and livelihoods were planned as connected priorities. Women such as Kamla and Dineshwari moved into public leadership roles, while responsibilities were shared among Ward Panchs, Circle Heads, Jan Man Mitras, Bank Sakhis, and SHGs. The experience offers a practical model for strengthening services and community institutions in PVTG settlements.



CLAIMING THE COMMONS, CLAIMING THE PLAN

Women's Institutionalization in BHGY, Godda, Jharkhand



Scan the QR to experience the film

That afternoon in Paraspani was quieter than usual. There was no clatter of dishes or chatter from the houses, only the soft crackle of a big sheet of paper being spread out on the ground. It was a revenue map, full of lines and numbers. Sonamuni Devi knelt beside it, studying it closely. Around her, a small group of women leaned forward, their eyes tracing the plots of land with the care of people who knew every inch of it.

“Focus here, on the northern ridge,” Sonamuni instructed, her finger tracing a contour line. “The soil testing shows good retention here. But look at the distance from the water source. If we plant the orchard in this sector, can we guarantee irrigation during the dry months?”

A younger woman adjusted her sari pallu and pointed to a blue marking. “We can if we dig the trench lines along this slope. It will trap the runoff. Otherwise, the saplings won’t last past March.”



From the periphery of the courtyard, a group of men watched in quiet bewilderment. This was a disruption of the natural order they had known for generations. Land, its management, its ownership, and its future had always been their conversation. Women belonged to the courtyard’s inner shadows, not its strategic center. Yet here they were, debating topography, hydrology, and resource allocation. In that moment, the women of Paraspani were no longer just inhabitants of the village; they had become its architects, redesigning their future one plot at a time.



For years, Godda in Jharkhand's Santhal Pargana was counted among the most underdeveloped districts. Agriculture depended entirely on rainfall, and after the monsoon, fields remained dry and unproductive for most of the year. This led to large-scale male migration in search of work, while women stayed back to manage households. Their participation in public life was minimal, shaped by deep social restrictions. As Panwati Devi recalls, *"Back then, we didn't even know what our rights were."* Karuna Devi also remembers being discouraged by her family even for stepping outside the home.

Against this backdrop, the BHGY was launched in 2015 and strengthened in 2020. The scheme marked a major shift by converging MGNREGA wage employment with long-term horticulture development. Its aim was to transform over 2 lakh acres of wasteland into fruit orchards, benefiting nearly 5 lakh families, each supported with around 100 fruit-bearing plants, mainly mango. Unlike short-term interventions, BHGY focused on creating long-lasting productive assets.

In Godda, the impact has been significant. By 2024–25, about 3,676 acres of land had been developed, benefiting 3,919 farmers, with over 3.6 lakh fruit trees planted across the district. In the current phase alone, 2,000 acres across 264 villages are targeted, with notable progress in blocks like Boarijore (165 acres) and Poraiyahat (200 acres).

The model works through convergence and shared responsibility. MGNREGA funds support wage labor and earthwork, while the state and

district provide quality saplings and fencing. Importantly, families receive usage rights over plantation plots, ensuring individual ownership even on common or community land.

Implementation is driven by a triangular partnership: the administration provides resources and policy support; CSOs like PRADAN, along with JSLPS, support mobilization and technical guidance; and community institutions such as SHGs and Village Organizations handle execution. This demand-driven approach required sustained effort to shift mindsets, from seeking short-term wages to investing in long-term livelihood assets.

ORGANIZING THE COLLECTIVE

The journey of women's collective empowerment in Paraspani village began with the strengthening of SHGs. With support from PRADAN and other CSOs, these groups gradually evolved from small savings and credit circles into platforms for local governance and development dialogue.

In Paraspani, SHG meetings shifted from routine savings discussions to wider conversations on village issues, including governance and development planning. Through these regular interactions, women built strong mutual trust, essential for taking on more complex responsibilities like managing village commons.

Even when orchards were established on individual plots, their success depended on collective resource management. Women created shared rules for using water from MGNREGA-supported wells, ensuring fair distribution so saplings could survive dry summer conditions.



They also introduced ‘social fencing’, where community members took turns protecting plantations from grazing animals, gradually changing long-standing open grazing practices.

A major shift was visible in the Gram Sabha. Once dominated by men, it slowly became an inclusive space where women began to participate actively. Supported by their collectives, women attended in large numbers and started contributing to decision-making. Sonamuni Devi, working as a NSK fellow, played a key role by helping document SHG demands and presenting them as a collective agenda in formal planning spaces.

They ensured that orchard and livelihood initiatives were included in the Annual Action Plan, reflecting genuine bottom-up planning and ownership. In Boarijore block alone, 58 villages participated in plantation activities this year, demonstrating the scale of mobilization achieved through strengthened Gram Sabhas and women’s collectives.

BUILDING BRIDGES AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

A key element in bridging the gap between villages and the state was grooming of community resources. Sonamuni Devi, working as an NSK fellow, played an important bridging

role. She helped translate complex administrative processes, such as forms, job cards, and muster rolls into simple, understandable steps for villagers, reducing errors and rejections. At the same time, she handled upward communication by raising issues like delayed wages directly with officials such as the *Rozgar Sevak* and BDO. Being from the community herself, she was able to build trust and address sensitive household concerns that formal officials often could not access.

As women demonstrated organized effort and visible progress in orchard development, banks began to change their perception. According to the District Project Manager (JSLPS), orchards and disciplined group management started being seen as a form of ‘reputational collateral’, which helped improve access to credit. This in turn enabled women to diversify into inter-cropping and small enterprises.

Over time, the relationship with the local administration also evolved. Instead of being distant beneficiaries, women’s groups began engaging directly with officials. Field visits by leaders like BDO Mithlesh Kumar Singh helped make governance more accessible and responsive. These interactions built confidence among women such as Karuna Devi and Panwati Devi, equipping them with the skills to engage with officials independently and access future government schemes more effectively.

To bridge the gap between the village and the state, the initiative utilized community-level intermediaries. Sonamuni Devi, serving as an NSK fellow, acted as a vital social capital bridge. She translated complex bureaucratic requirements, such as forms, job cards, and muster rolls, into a language the villagers understood, minimizing technical rejections. Furthermore, she engaged in vertical advocacy, raising grievances about delayed payments directly with the *Rozgar Sevak* or the BDO.



Her position as a woman from the community allowed for trust building, resolving sensitive household issues that male officials could not access.

As banks witnessed the women's organized management and the growing value of the orchards, their perception changed. The DPM of JSLPS noted that banks began viewing the orchards and the women's discipline as reputational collateral. This financial inclusion allowed women to diversify into inter-cropping and small businesses.

Officials like BDO Mithlesh Kumar Singh often came to the villages and spoke directly with women's groups. These visits helped make the government feel more approachable and taught women like community cadres Karuna Devi and Panwati Devi how to deal with officials on their own, a skill that will help them access new schemes in the future.

CULTIVATING CAPABILITY AND TECHNICAL LEADERSHIP

The project enabled women to take up technical and supervisory roles that were traditionally reserved for men, breaking long-standing gender barriers in the process. The experience of Karuna Devi illustrates this shift. After receiving training from PRADAN and the local administration, she became a skilled Mate (worksites supervisor).

She learned how to measure land, mark plots, and supervise pit digging as per technical specifications. She also ensured proper soil management by separating topsoil and subsoil to improve plantation survival. Managing nearly 40 workers, she maintained attendance and monitored work progress.

To ensure long-term sustainability of orchards, the role of *Bagwani Sakhi* was introduced as a

As R.S. Priya, a *Bagwani Sakhi*, notes, her role challenged the belief that women cannot handle technical or physically demanding responsibilities.

cadre of trained women orchard experts and field level professionals. In 2024–25 alone, 132 *Bagwani Sakhis* worked across Godda district, including 30 in Poraiyahat and 26 in Boarijore, managing and supporting orchard development across hundreds of acres.

Their responsibilities include pest and disease management, irrigation scheduling, plantation monitoring, and coordination with junior engineers for site verification. Over time, this role has positioned them as 'Guardians of the Land', giving women a formal professional identity.

The program also introduced digital tools into their work. Women were trained to use mobile applications for monitoring plantations, uploading geo-tagged photographs, and tracking labor. By placing smartphones in their hands for official work, the system legitimized their access to technology and integrated them into the state's digital governance framework.

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN DEVELOPMENT

The transition from beneficiaries to women actively asserting their entitlements. A striking example is a voice raised by Panwati Devi. When contractors attempted to deploy JCB machines for pit digging, bypassing manual labor and reducing local employment, Panwati and other women collectively stopped the work. They insisted that excavation must follow MGNREGA norms and be done manually. For them, the Right to Work mattered more than contractor convenience or profit, marking a clear moment of community enforcement of the law.

Over time, women also learned to engage directly with local administration. They began organizing *Rozgar Diwas*, where they collectively raised issues such as delayed wages and missing job cards. With support from NSK fellows, they strengthened their ability to demand transparency and accountability from block-level offices. This collective engagement helped reduce leakages and improved administrative responsiveness.

As a Mate, Karuna Devi ensured that the most vulnerable groups, such as elderly persons and new mothers, were not excluded from work opportunities. She assigned them lighter but legitimate tasks like crèche management and serving water.

IMPACT AND TRANSFORMATION

The economic impact of the BHGY project in Godda has unfolded step by step. In the short term, MGNREGA wages gave families much-needed cash support, especially during crises like COVID. Over time, farmers began earning more stability by growing pulses and vegetables between their trees. This helped ensure both food and income while the orchards were still growing. Now, the change on the ground is clearly visible. About 2,147 acres of land in Godda have started

bearing fruit, directly benefiting 2,238 farmers. Together, these farms are expected to produce around 1,400 metric tons of fruits like mangoes and guavas.

Poonam Devi's assertion, "*This orchard is in my name*," reflects a shift from dependency to capital ownership. Socially, the project catalyzed intergenerational change. Karuna Devi used her earnings to support her daughter's preparation for an engineering entrance exam, defying norms of early marriage. The visibility of women as Mates and technical experts created a role model effect, resetting aspirations for young girls in the village.

Environmentally, the project converted barren land into green cover, aiding groundwater recharge and climate-proofing the region. Local jobs and better use of village resources are now encouraging people to stay instead of leaving for cities.

CONCLUSION

BHGY in Godda demonstrates how horticulture, MGNREGA employment, and women's collective institutions can be linked. Women have taken on roles as Mates, *Bagwani Sakhis*, planners, and managers of productive assets. Across the district, 3.6 lakh trees have been planted and more than 1,400 metric tons of fruit are expected or produced, subject to verification of the reporting period. The case shows how collective planning, technical skills, and documented rights can strengthen livelihoods and women's public leadership."



FROM FRAGMENTED SCHEMES TO INTEGRATED LANDSCAPES

Convergence Approach in Banka, Bihar



Scan the QR to experience the film

In Leelawaran village, after finishing the household and livestock work, the evenings used to arrive with the same question on Sakurmuni Murmu's lips: would the money come into the account this month, or not at all? Her husband had vanished into the distant haze of the city, chasing work that paid just enough to send home a few crumpled notes, money that, as she often said, "could only buy salt and spices, not a future." With those coins, she stretched days into weeks, feeding her children and herself on thin dal, borrowed grain, and stubborn hope. In the fields, her struggle was even more bare. The family's tiny patch of land was too small to count in government records, too invisible to qualify for schemes, and not even in her name. As a tribal woman without land papers and without the support of her husband, she tilled soil that did not officially belong to her, always wondering: commercial farmers get so many government schemes, why not me?



Change in Leelawaran began with women meeting collectively to discuss water, land, and livelihoods. The institution faced setbacks and was rebuilt with stronger systems. Today, Sakurmuni farms within a landscape planned by the collective and supported through converged government schemes. She now measures progress through crops, seasons, and her goal of earning ₹1 lakh annually as a farmer in her own right.



The villages within the Katiyari Gram Panchayat and Katoria Block of Banka district, Bihar, faced chronic socioeconomic and environmental challenges. Geographically, the area is situated a significant distance from the district and block headquarters, which historically contributed to its isolation and a lack of access to government services. The land itself was described as barren and undulating, making it susceptible to severe soil erosion. During the monsoon season, heavy rainfall would cause water to run off the land, preventing its retention and leading to a significant drop in the groundwater table.

Agriculture, the primary livelihood, was precarious. The land was only suitable for low-yield, single-crop cultivation, such as paddy and maize. The absence of a reliable water source meant that even these crops would often wither and die due to a lack of water at critical growth stages. This combination of environmental and agricultural challenges resulted in a very low per-capita income. The lack of local economic opportunities forced a significant number of men to migrate to cities and other states in search of work, leaving the women to manage the households with limited resources.

Recognizing the need for a strong social foundation, PRADAN initiated the formation of SHGs in every village. The women recognized that the core problem was the lack of water. They reasoned that the construction of ponds and check dams would not only store rainwater for year-round cultivation but also prevent soil erosion and recharge the groundwater table,

which had been steadily declining. This vision led to the first phase of the Jal Chajan (Water Conservation) project, supported by NABARD. This initiative focused on comprehensive watershed work across 13 villages, including pond construction, tree plantation, and bunding. However, the project's momentum could not be sustained. Due to a lack of continuous follow-up and internal institutional strengthening, the efforts waned and the project stalled.

The pause in work was not a simple failure. It became an important reminder that community-led development often moves in cycles, and that setbacks can reveal what is missing. It also made one point clear: creating physical assets such as ponds is only part of the work. If strong, self-governed local institutions are not in place to maintain these assets and use them well, the benefits do not last. This lesson shaped the project's restart in 2023. The focus shifted from a one-time intervention to building durable, community-led systems.

BUILDING A FOUNDATION OF COLLECTIVE AGENCY

In 2023, with a renewed focus on empowering the community, the project was revitalized. The centerpiece of this renewed effort was the formation of the Gram Jal Chajan Nyas Samiti, a central committee comprising representatives from 13 villages. Its purpose was to serve as a platform where the community could collectively identify their needs, prioritize projects, and coordinate their implementation, effectively shifting the locus of control from external agencies to the villagers themselves.

Initial efforts to form the committee revealed a significant social challenge: the lack of women's participation. The Nyas was initially dominated by men. Recognizing that the sustainable development model required the equal participation of women and men, PRADAN intentionally worked to achieve gender parity within the committee. Women leaders from other organized groups like JEEViKA and the VO's, were brought into the Nyas to ensure their voices and needs were represented.

PRADAN conducted training and capacity-building programs for collective members on various aspects such as institution building, financial management, INRM, livelihoods, and gender. Several exposure visits were organized for the members; the visit to Maharashtra was especially eye-opening, as it led to the emergence of the idea of the Bagwani Kisan Utpadak Samuh. PRADAN also acted as a bridge between government departments and the Gram Jal Chajan Nyas Samiti by facilitating events and meetings between Samiti members and government officials, which increased awareness of relevant government schemes among the members.

The Bagwani Kisan Utpadak Samuh was formed, comprising 27 farmers who voluntarily decided to pool their land to create a large-scale cluster plantation. No single farmer owned the 25 acres of contiguous land required to qualify for the government's horticulture scheme. The success of this initiative is underpinned by several key factors. First, the foundation is built upon self-governing community institutions, namely the Gram Jal Chajan Nyas and the Bagwani Kisan Utpadak Samuh. These groups serve as powerful examples of collective action enabling the community to plan and implement projects autonomously.

Secondly, it demonstrates that women's empowerment is a direct result of their equal participation in decision-making and their direct ownership of productive assets, such as the collective lemon plantation. Finally, the initiative exemplifies a successful convergence model, where the community's organized structure served as a strategic interface for leveraging government schemes and funding from institutions like NABARD and the Directorate of Horticulture, Government of Bihar.

A HOLISTIC ECOSYSTEM OF ASSETS

The Gram Jal Chajan Nyas spearheaded the renovation of 6 ponds, a project that now provides irrigation to a substantial 30-35 acres of land. This secured water supply has enabled farmers to diversify their crops beyond the single-season rice cultivation, allowing for the planting of vegetables like potatoes, tomatoes, and chilies, and even wheat during the winter season.

In addition to water conservation, the community has planned and implemented initiatives such as bunding to prevent soil erosion, and constructed vermicompost beds, Azolla beds, and NADEP manure pits. This integrated approach built both economic and ecological resilience. The compost and manure pits supported the transition to organic farming. Simultaneously, the Azolla beds provided a low-cost, nutrient-rich feed source for livestock, further enhancing the livelihood security of those involved in livestock rearing. The collective efforts and the holistic planning ensured that the community does not rely on a single source of income and that the assets created support one another, creating a mutually reinforcing livelihood system.



A SYMBOL OF EMPOWERMENT: THE LEMON PLANTATION CLUSTER

The Bagwani Kisan Utpadak Samuh's flagship project, the 25-acre lemon plantation, is more than an agricultural venture; it is a powerful symbol of women's empowerment and a direct challenge to the social norm of women not owning assets. A group of 27 farmers, with a significant number of women, came together to cultivate 5,500 lemon saplings. This initiative is particularly noteworthy as it is the first of its kind in Bihar to be undertaken in the name of a ST community and to be led by women.

The project's design also consciously addresses the social realities of gender and labor. The community adopted a drip irrigation system, a technology that delivers water and liquid fertilizer directly to the plants with minimal human intervention. Traditionally, agricultural tasks like watering and operating heavy motors were considered a male domain, and with many men migrating for work, women found it nearly impossible to manage large-scale farming. The

drip system fundamentally changes this dynamic, reducing the physical burden and making large-scale agriculture accessible and manageable for women, thereby enhancing their capacity and participation in productive labor.

THE CONVERGENCE MODEL: SYNERGY FOR SUSTAINABILITY

A critical element of the Leelawaran model's success is convergence. PRADAN acted as a crucial bridge between the organized community and government institutions. The organization facilitated the creation of proposals and documentation, which the Gram Jal Chajan Nyas then used to apply for government schemes. This strategic partnership opened up a channel for convergence with state-level departments and funding agencies.

NABARD provided a grant of approximately ₹39 lakh for the comprehensive water conservation and livelihood initiatives. Concurrently, the Directorate of Horticulture, Government of Bihar sponsored a large-scale project for the

FUNDING MATRIX	 POND RENOVATION	 LEMON PLANTATION	 DRIP IRRIGATION & BORING	 COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTION
FUNDING SOURCE	NABARD	Horticulture Department	Horticulture Department	Jal Chajan Nyas Samiti & Farmers
AMOUNT	₹39 lakh (total project funding for various initiatives)	₹16.5 lakh (Year 1 grant) + INR 8.5 lakh (Year 2 grant)	₹ 25.50 lakh (total for drip and boring)	₹6,84,850 (for drip irrigation) (total farmer share)

lemon plantation. The Horticulture Cluster Plan provided a grant of ₹16.5 lakh in the first year and pledged an additional ₹8.5 lakh in the second year, contingent on project performance. Separately, the Directorate of Horticulture, Government of Bihar provided ₹25.5 lakh for the installation of the drip irrigation system and borewell, covering the major technical costs. The total value of the horticulture project, including both government and community contributions, was estimated at approximately ₹42 lakh, a substantial investment in the community's future. To reinforce ownership, the community contributed ₹6,84,850 from its collective savings toward the irrigation infrastructure. All project assets were registered under the collective name of women, challenging deep-rooted gender norms and ensuring shared decision-making.

Additionally from NABARD's CCA project 15 vermi compost tanks are also under construction which will ensure round year availability of vermicompost for maintaining nutrition of lemon plants.

FINANCIAL ENGINEERING AND OWNERSHIP

The financial model was designed to ensure community ownership. While the majority of the funding came from government grants, the projects, particularly the drip irrigation system, required a mandatory community contribution. Individual farmers, who often live on the margins of poverty, would have found it impossible to bear this cost alone. The Gram Jal Chajan Nyas stepped in to address this challenge. By pooling resources and leveraging their collective savings, the committee provided the required contribution, which was reported to be approximately ₹6,84,850. By investing their own funds, the community has a vested interest in the long-term success of the project, ensuring its maintenance and sustainability long after external support concludes.

The women of Leelawaran have transitioned from being passive beneficiaries of development initiatives to active agents of change. The project has equipped them with the skills, confidence, and institutional platforms to solve problems, manage



resources, and create wealth for themselves and their families. This empowerment is challenging the traditional division of labor and power by

demonstrating that women's participation is not just an ideal but an essential ingredient for holistic and sustainable development.



CONCLUSION

The Leelawaran's success is not a happy accident but the result of a deliberate, long-term strategy built on the pillars of community-led governance, holistic and integrated planning, strategic convergence with key stakeholders. The project's resilience, particularly its ability to revive after an initial failure and overcome internal and external conflicts, demonstrates that institutional strength is the key to long-term sustainability

Because many Santhal women do not hold land titles in their own names, they face barriers in accessing government schemes. The Leelawaran Bagwani Utpadak Samuh provided a collective institutional mechanism through which project approvals and assets could be sanctioned in women's names. Verify the precise land-tenure arrangement before stating that the women collectively own the land.

They now collectively own the land, and implementation has been sanctioned in the name of their collective. It was the first such asset-based project in the entire region to be sanctioned in women's names.





WOMEN PIONEERS: LEADING RURAL TRANSFORMATION



Women Pioneers: Leading Rural Transformation captures the rise of rural women as decision-makers, technical leaders, and public representatives. Women who were once excluded from governance are now entering Panchayat offices, Gram Sabhas, worksites, and planning spaces. The stories show elected women challenging proxy leadership, women becoming MGNREGA worksite supervisors, Self-Help Group members leading Integrated INRM work, and communities using participatory mapping to create useful assets. These changes are helping women gain confidence, technical knowledge, and public recognition. The theme shows that rural transformation is not only economic. It is democratic, built through women's leadership, institutional support, and shared decision-making.





MORE THAN A SEAT

Elected Women Representatives from Godda, Jharkhand



Scan the QR to experience the film

In Beldang village of Godda district, Phool Kumari Hansda stands before a mirror, carefully pleating a crisp cotton sari. Unlike other mornings, she is not reaching for her sickle or preparing for a day of labor in the paddy fields. Sensing the shift in her routine, her young son tugs at the hem of her garment and asks, “Ma, where are you going today? To the fields?” Phool Kumari smiles, adjusts her badge, and replies, “No, beta, I am going to the Panchayat Bhawan for the meeting.” The boy looks confused and tilts his head. “But Ma,” he insists, “Baba always goes to those meetings.” Phool Kumari pauses, looks at her reflection, and says firmly, “Not anymore. The village elected me, so the work is mine. Baba is just going to drop me there today.”



This simple, everyday exchange signals a major shift from proxy representation to women leading in their own right. It echoes the journeys of many EWRs in Jharkhand whose political paths began in SHGs before they stepped into formal office.



The journey of women leaders in Jharkhand began in villages where social norms, poverty, and tribal marginalization often kept women away from public life. Women like Manju Hansda grew up believing that governance was not their space. Before support from PRADAN, the government, and other institutions, most women remained confined to household responsibilities, with little role in community decision-making. Manju recalls that as a housewife, public spaces such as the Panchayat Bhawan felt like places meant only for men.

For many women representatives, the Structural barriers were reinforced by limited exposure to public institutions and low confidence in speaking within them. Rita Murmu remembers being afraid to speak in public and feeling intimidated by government offices. Before becoming an elected representative, she had never even entered the Panchayat Bhawan.

At the same time, many women who held elected positions were unable to exercise real authority. The widespread practice of the *Mukhiya Pati* meant that husbands often made decisions on behalf of women Mukhiyas, reducing women to signing documents while men retained control. As Dorothy Soren explains, *“If a woman depends on her husband for everything, the title of Mahila Mukhiya loses its meaning.”*

Changing this reality required more than elections alone. It demanded a shift in confidence, knowledge, and social attitudes. Institutions such as the SIRD, the Department of Panchayati Raj, Government of Jharkhand, CSOs, and PRADAN played an important role in this transformation

through continuous training, mentoring, and leadership support. Over time, women who once hesitated to enter public offices began finding their voice and claiming their place in local governance.

THE ARC OF TRANSFORMATION

Breaking deeply rooted social norms required more than information; it required women to see themselves as leaders. The journey from silent observers to active decision-makers began with building awareness, confidence, and collective strength.

Training programs led by PRADAN, SIRD, and the Department of Panchayati Raj, Government of Jharkhand focused not only on governance but also on encouraging women to question, discuss, and solve problems together. Through sessions on gender, good governance, GPDP, and MGNREGA, women gained a better understanding of how local institutions function and how they could influence them.

As women shared their experiences, fears that once felt personal such as speaking in public or entering a block office, became collective challenges. Discussing these openly helped build solidarity, confidence, and the courage to act.

Exposure visits to model villages in Chhattisgarh and Bodh Gaya further expanded their horizons. Women saw other elected representatives leading Gram Sabhas, securing pensions, creating water structures, and improving local services. For leaders like Manju Hansda, these visits made leadership feel achievable. If other tribal women could lead, so could they.

Practical training strengthened this confidence. According to the BPRO, digital literacy has significantly reduced proxy leadership. Today, nearly 90% of women representatives use digital signatures and conduct online transactions themselves, making it far harder for husbands to take over official responsibilities. Since official approvals require their presence, women now exercise greater control over governance processes. The ToT model has further accelerated change, with experienced women leaders becoming trainers and mentors for others.

As their confidence grew, women moved beyond helping people access schemes and entitlements. They began to focus on access and control, crossed old barriers, and entered spaces like the Panchayat Bhawan to manage local resources directly.

Leaders such as Dorothy Soren actively participate in Village Organization meetings and Gram Sabhas, ensuring that GPDPs are prepared through participatory tools such as social mapping, resource mapping, and transect walks. She ensures the GPDP is prepared through genuine participation.

Their priorities have also become more strategic and gender-responsive. Women leaders champion initiatives such as Water Sufficient Villages, recognizing that better water access reduces the burden on women and improves livelihoods. They plan ponds, wells, and irrigation structures where they can have the greatest impact. Funds from the 15th Finance Commission are increasingly directed toward nutrition gardens (*Didi Badi Yojna*), women's community bathrooms, and other services that address women's needs.

Equally important, training on legal roles and responsibilities has reinforced that leadership brings both authority and accountability. This awareness has helped women move beyond symbolic representation and emerge as confident, independent leaders who actively shape the future of their communities.

TRANSFORMING LOCAL GOVERNANCE

The growing participation of women in PRIs has changed not only who makes decisions but also how local governance functions. Across many villages, women now hold Mahila Sabhas before Gram Sabhas, creating a space to discuss issues, build consensus, and present collective demands. As a result, women's voices are becoming more visible in village decision-making.

This shift is also reflected in planning processes. GPDPs are increasingly linked with VPRPs prepared by SHGs. By incorporating household-level needs identified by women, Panchayats are making planning more inclusive and community-driven. The introduction of the e-Gram Swaraj platform requires biometric verification for key decisions and transactions. This ensures that the elected woman representative must be present and participate actively, making it harder for male family members or others to act as proxies.

Women are also taking on roles that were traditionally dominated by men. Under MGNREGA, many SHG women now work as Mates, supervising worksites and managing measurement, previously dominated by men. This not only gives them technical responsibility but also challenges long-held assumptions about women's capabilities. Government officials, too,



are increasingly engaging directly with women representatives rather than relying on male family members. As women leaders become more knowledgeable and active, their authority is gaining recognition and respect.

The impact is most visible in the types of development priorities emerging from villages. The Director of the Department of Panchayati Raj, Government of Jharkhand also shared examples where *Mukhiya Patis* struggled to discuss issues such as antenatal care, while women Mukhiyas spoke with confidence.

Under the water-sufficient village theme, many Panchayats have prioritized ponds, wells, and water conservation structures, improving irrigation and enabling second crops such as wheat and mustard. In some panchayats, 8–10 new ponds and several dugwells are being constructed in a single year. Women, who manage water daily for cooking, cleaning, and livestock, often understand water scarcity most directly and ensure funds are directed toward addressing this challenge.



Under women-friendly village sankalp women representatives included projects that promote well-being, including community bathrooms, public toilets, and safe spaces for women. Initiatives such as Didi Badi nutrition gardens have linked agriculture with nutrition and household food security. Together, these efforts reflect a broader shift in governance priorities, from a focus solely on infrastructure to dignity, health, inclusion, and environmental sustainability.

Leaders like Rita Murmu are helping ensure that village development responds to the needs of women and girls.

THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

A defining feature of these women leaders is that none of them lead alone. Their leadership is rooted in the strong social networks built through the SHG movement. For women like

Rita Murmu, Manju Hansda, and Basanti, SHGs became spaces where they learned to save, solve problems collectively, and speak confidently in public. These groups helped women recognize their own capabilities and develop the confidence to take on leadership roles.

For many EWRs, the idea of contesting elections emerged directly from these networks. Fellow SHG members encouraged them to stand for office so that women's concerns could be represented in village decision-making. Rita Murmu says that her campaign relied less on money than on the support of women who trusted her leadership. Dorothy Soren's repeated election as Mukhiya reflects the confidence her community places in her leadership.

After entering office, women leaders expanded these networks beyond their groups and became bridges between communities and government institutions. Women who once hesitated to

approach officials now seek support directly from leaders such as Dorothy, who helps them access schemes, complete applications, and resolve grievances. Stronger relationships between Panchayat leaders, block officials, and organizations like PRADAN have made government services more accessible and responsive.

This collaboration also helps close the gap between government systems and citizens. SHGs provide real-time information on vulnerable households and local needs, while Panchayats use public resources to address them. CSOs and government departments work together to ensure that community experiences shape planning and implementation.

Importantly, these networks provide collective strength and protection. Manju Hansda recalls how women came together to challenge alleged irregularities by a ration dealer, an action that would have been difficult for an individual alone. SHG federations and VOs create a support system that helps women leaders stand up to entrenched interests and advocate for their communities with confidence.

Together, these networks have created a powerful form of collective leadership, ensuring that women leaders are supported, accountable, and able to drive meaningful change in local governance.

THE FUTURE OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN RURAL GOVERNANCE

In rural Jharkhand, the rise of women Mukhiyas and Ward Members shows how sustained training and institutional support can transform leadership. Through the combined efforts of PRADAN and the state government, women have gained not only skills but also confidence, networks, and a stronger sense of purpose.

Women who were once expected only to approve decisions are now actively shaping village plans and development priorities. As a result, initiatives such as *Jal Paryapt Gram* and *Mahila Hiteshi Gram* are becoming visible realities through water conservation structures, nutrition gardens, safer sanitation facilities, and Gram Sabhas led confidently by women. This progress has been made possible by a training ecosystem that treats leadership development as a continuous process rather than a one-time event.

Challenges remain. Social norms still restrict women's participation in some areas, and many leaders continue to need technical support to engage more effectively in governance. Yet the momentum is clear. A strong leadership pipeline is emerging, with women progressing from SHG members to Ward Members and Mukhiyas. Experienced leaders are now returning as trainers, helping prepare the next generation of women leaders.

As the culture of *Mukhiya Pati* gradually declines, a new reality is taking shape. Women who have experienced leadership are aspiring to larger roles in public and economic life. Today, these women are moving from participation in development programs to leadership in village planning and governance, they are leading it, redefining leadership in rural Jharkhand.



CONCLUSION

The journey of Elected Women Representatives in rural Jharkhand is a powerful story of change. Women who once stayed entirely within their households have stepped up to become strong, independent decision-makers. With the steady support of SHGs, government departments, and organizations like PRADAN, these women have built the necessary skills and confidence to lead. The introduction of digital signatures and biometric verification have reduced the scope for proxy decision-making and strengthened women representatives' control over official processes. Women leaders are prioritizing projects that genuinely help their communities, such as building ponds for water security, creating nutrition gardens, and constructing safe public toilets. These representatives do not work alone; they rely on the strong networks of SHGs to solve problems together and advocate for their villages. Ultimately, these women are doing much more than just filling a seat. They are actively reshaping their communities, mentoring the next generation of women, and helping redefine rural leadership.



RESHAPING THE LANDSCAPE OF FREEDOM

Women Mates and the Institutional Transformation of Rural Livelihoods in
Betul, Madhya Pradesh



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“Chaya Kaaki... Chaya Kaaki!”

The excited cry of a child in the Gram Dhansai weekly market marked a profound shift in the social fabric of rural Betul. When Chaya Marskole turned to see Laxmi, a fellow villager, proudly displaying a harvest of shimmering fish, she wasn't just looking at a commodity. She was looking at a living testament to her own leadership.

These fish came from a pond constructed under Chaya's direct technical supervision. For her husband, watching from the sidelines, this public recognition also changed how her technical and leadership role was understood within the household and community. This moment of quiet validation stands in stark contrast to Chaya's life only a few years ago, when her world was bounded by the threshold of her home and the silence of the ghoonghat (veil), rooted in a paralyzing fear of the world outside.



Chaya's journey from limited public participation to a technical leadership role as a Mate shows how skills, collective institutions, and access to MGNREGA can expand women's choices and authority. In Dhansai, women organized through the Saraswati SHG and the Surabhi VO, learned INRM, and helped plan water-conservation and livelihood assets. The change was driven by local planning and women's collectives rather than by top-down decisions.



Dhansai's transformation began with a deliberate strategy of collectivization to build collective agency. One woman like Chaya could not succeed alone; her potential needed the power of the group. The starting point in the case of Dhansai was the Saraswati Aajeevika SHG. PRADAN saw SHGs as spaces for affiliation, a way of living and acting with others. For Chaya, it was her first place beyond domestic roles, giving her a legitimate reason to step outside her domestic boundaries. While weekly savings and loans opened the economic door, solidarity changed her life. When in-laws opposed her, the group's collective strength became her shield. *"Connecting with the group gave me a lot of benefits,"* Chaya says. *"I became aware."*

Women's individual empowerment scaled up through the Surabhi Gram Sangathan (VO), which federated six SHGs across Dhansai. This shifted focus from private household struggles to wider community needs and issues, allowing the VO to negotiate directly with the Panchayat. Chaya's selection as Mate came from this collective. *"The women selected me,"* she explains. *"Seeing my capabilities, they said we will make her the Mate."* This democratic endorsement protected her from backlash, as she represented the entire village rather than just herself. PRADAN catalyzed the entire collectivization while delivering continuous capacity building, which helped convert resources into lasting well-being. They provided technical literacy, demystifying the state's development machinery so women could navigate it confidently. Most importantly, by acting as facilitators rather than directors, PRADAN kept agency with the

women, handing them the tools of participatory planning to shape their own future.

BUILDING WOMEN LEADERS THROUGH SKILLS AND PRACTICE

The role of the Mate in the MGNREGA structure is critical and has historically been a man's job. Chaya Marskole's appointment disrupted that gendered division, but it was rigorous technical training that truly armed her with authority. Chaya didn't just get a title; she acquired specific, hard skills that demanded respect. First, she mastered volumetric measurement, knowledge that women in rural villages often do not hold. She learned standard excavation pit measurements to calculate wage payments accurately. This technical knowledge helped prevent underpayment and improve wage transparency, ensuring workers understood the direct link between their output and their pay. Second, she gained expertise in INRM planning based on the Ridge-to-Valley principle, learning to read the land to identify exactly where a stop dam was needed versus a contour trench.

Additionally, she took charge of worksite management, standing as a visible leader on the ground. Finally, she mastered documentation through muster roll maintenance, creating the paper trail that holds the bureaucracy accountable. Acquiring these skills shifted Chaya from a state of fear to deep confidence. She developed bureaucratic literacy, mastering the rules of the state machinery. Now, when officials cite budget constraints or technical difficulties to deny work, Chaya doesn't back down. She counters them with facts and the legal mandates of MGNREGA, backed by the support of the

women's collectives of the village.

These skills laid the foundation for collaborative problem-solving at scale, giving the community the power to plan their own future. This was realized through the IPPE, also known as *Yojna Banao Abhiyaan*. Chaya describes a structured, three-day planning event led entirely by women. On the first day, they conducted social and resource mapping, which functioned as a participatory assessment. The group identified the poorest and most vulnerable households and mapped out the village's undulating lands to see where help was needed most. On the second day, they conducted a transect walk and technical survey. The collective moved out of the meeting room and onto the land itself. As they walked, they identified specific sites for intervention. *"We decided on the land, where the slope is, where the water flows,"* Chaya explains. It was planning based on reality, not theory. Finally, on the third day, they moved to prioritization and Gram Sabha ratification. They consolidated these needs into a unified village plan. This process successfully wrested control of the development agenda, as the community shifted from passively receiving work to actively deciding work, directly linking water conservation to their vision of a stronger future economy.

TURNING PLANS INTO ASSETS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The true test of Chaya's capability was turning the plans on papers and maps into reality. Under her supervision, Gram Dhansai saw a construction boom rooted in INRM principles. Following the ridge-to-valley approach, Chaya oversaw the construction of two earthen dams and two stop dams. These were significant engineering feats that captured surface runoff in local streams, creating reservoirs and allowing water to percolate underground. Simultaneously, contour trenches and boulder checks were built on the ridges to stop fertile topsoil from washing



away. A major priority was creating individual assets, specifically the farm pond. These dugout ponds on private land became lifelines, providing critical irrigation during Kharif dry spells and supporting a second Rabi crop.

Yet, the most visceral proof of collective power was the road to the village. Dhansai had long been isolated by a stream and rough terrain. Despite repeated rejections from the Panchayat, the VO persisted. They argued not just for infrastructure, but for bodily integrity and health access. On their fourth submission, the proposal was approved. A road and culvert were constructed, finally integrating the village into the regional economy. This material reshaping created economic freedom and served as an investment in sustainable livelihoods, evidenced by the end of distress migration.

“

"Now no one goes out, everyone works here within the Panchayat," Chaya asserts.

The availability of 100 days of local work provides a safety net, while the new assets have made agriculture viable again. Water from the earthen dams and farm ponds enabled a shift to double cropping. Farmers saw better Kharif yields and

began cultivating wheat and gram in Rabi, crops that were previously impossible.

The farm ponds also opened an entirely new economic sector: fisheries. An initial investment of ₹10,000-15,000 in fish seeds now yields a return of ₹25,000-30,000. Production is so significant that traders now come directly to the village to buy, reversing the traditional power dynamic. Across the village, the shift to double cropping and fisheries has raised household incomes significantly, with some families earning ₹40,000-45,000 seasonally from these assets. This surplus is no longer just for survival; it is being invested in education, health, motorcycles, tractors, and better housing, ultimately leading to improved well-being.

WOMEN NEGOTIATING POWER AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Development is always a negotiation of power. Chaya's journey shows exactly how marginalized women can face the state and secure their

rights. The relationship between the VO and the Panchayat started off as adversarial. A vocal group of women disrupted the comfort zone of officials who were used to a passive, silent population. When officials delayed muster rolls, the women used their collective strength and their civic literacy as a form of resistance. Greater transparency reduced opportunities for irregularities. By conducting daily roll calls and managing the muster roll herself, Chaya ensured that ghost workers were eliminated and that real workers were paid for the exact 10X10 volume of earth they dug. This restored trust in a system that had faced concerns about irregularities. Moreover, the presence of women in these roles has led to gender sensitization in governance. Women Mates are simply more accessible; they understand household constraints and offer the flexibility that women workers need. In the Gram Sabha, the SHG federation now ensures that women's priorities, water, health, sanitation, take precedence over the contractor-driven projects of the past.



CONCLUSION

The intervention's most enduring effect is the change in women's public role and technical authority. Chaya identifies *maan-samman*, or respect and dignity, as a central outcome. Women now contribute to household decisions, advise on technical works, and mobilize collectively around village priorities. The case also shows that infrastructure is more sustainable when communities plan it, understand the technical standards, and regard the assets as their own. Technical training, local convergence, and women's collective institutions together enabled water structures to support cropping, fisheries, and local employment.”

Five key insights emerge from this transformation. Agency serves as the engine, where infrastructure is the result of development rather than the cause. Technical training acts as empowerment, giving women the vocabulary of power needed to command authority. Furthermore, conflict is necessary; Chaya's friction with social norms and the Panchayat wasn't a failure, but the signal of a necessary redistribution of power. Convergence is local, as planning grounded in local knowledge turned simple earthworks into livelihood assets like fisheries. Finally, sustainability is ownership, ensuring the assets in Dhansai endure because the community views the road and dams as theirs.

In the end, Chaya Marskole's story is a narrative of freedom. It is the story of how a woman, utilizing the platforms and the mandate of MGNREGA, dismantled the barriers around her to construct a life of value.





DEVELOPMENT AS DIGNITY

The Expansion of Capabilities in the Drylands of Mandla, Madhya Pradesh



Scan the QR to experience the film

As the jeep bumped along the dusty track winding through the undulating hills of Mohgaon, Kirti Patel gazed out at the verdant patches of Rabi crops defying the dry season. A wave of emotion, sudden and sharp, caught in her throat. She wasn't just seeing fields; she was seeing faces, the faces of women with whom she was now inextricably linked across a dozen villages. But the memory that surfaced wasn't of their smiling faces today. It was a visceral memory from thirteen years ago: the sound of a door being slammed, a man's gruff voice warning her to stay away, and the terrifying silence of women hiding behind veils. She had been afraid then, labeled a 'wandering woman', an outcast for daring to cross the threshold. Yet, as the vehicle slowed and she saw a group of women waiting for her at the Panchayat building, not with veils, but with registers and technical plans in hand, the old fear dissolved into a profound realization. The villages had changed, but only because Kirti and the women within them had changed first. This is the story of their shared journey, not a miracle, but a revolution of the soil and the soul led by a woman who refused to leave her sisters behind.



For generations, Mandla's land was rich, but its people were starving. The women did the hardest farm work, yet owned nothing. Society simply called them 'helpers'.

But Kirti and her neighbors were done asking for permission. Armed with spirit levels, measuring tapes, and a quiet refusal to be ignored, they didn't just rebuild their broken soil. They reclaimed their dignity.



Before change began, women in Mandla district lived with both ecological and social challenges. Although the region receives rainfall, much of the water quickly runs off the hilly terrain, washing away fertile soil and leaving fields dry for much of the year. Farming was largely rain-fed and limited to a single crop, providing food and income for only a few months. During the lean season, many families depended on migration for survival.

Women bore a disproportionate share of this uncertainty. They carried out most farming activities, from sowing and weeding to harvesting, yet were rarely recognized as farmers. Land titles were usually held by men, leaving women with little control over farming decisions or household income.

Their exclusion extended beyond agriculture. Most women had no independent income, savings, or access to formal institutions. Public spaces such as the Gram Sabha were largely dominated by men, and women's participation in decision-making remained limited.

A new opportunity emerged with the Tejaswini Rural Women's Empowerment Program, supported by the IFAD and MVVN, in partnership with PRADAN. The program created a platform for women to organize, build confidence, and access resources, laying the foundation for greater economic and social participation.

'POWER WITHIN

The transformation began with a change in how women saw themselves and their place in society. For Kirti, this realization came while working as a health worker. She witnessed how women were often denied control over even basic health decisions and understood that without economic independence, rights remained out of reach.

Through regular discussions and collective reflection, women began connecting their everyday struggles such as lack of income, dependence on others, and domestic violence to deeper issues of unequal access to resources and decision-making power. These conversations helped them see that their challenges were not individual problems but shared realities.

The first step toward change was the formation of SHGs. This was not easy. Many men viewed women's gatherings with suspicion and resisted their participation. To overcome this resistance, the initiative began with a simple and practical focus on savings and credit, addressing immediate household needs while creating a space for women to meet and learn together.

For women like Kirti, saving even ₹5 a week became much more than a financial activity. It was an expression of confidence, self-worth, and collective strength. Over time, these small acts helped women build trust in themselves and each other, laying the foundation for greater participation, leadership, and action in their communities.



POWER WITH

Moving from individual awareness to collective action, the intervention focused on building strong community institutions. A three-tier structure was created: SHGs for savings and credit, VOs for community-level decision-making, and Cluster Federations for advocacy and engagement with government systems. This structure ensured that women's voices could travel from the village to the district level.

A key part of this process was the ToT model. Kirti's journey from an SHG member to a CSP reflects this approach. She helped build a local cadre of CRPs and MGNREGA Mates, enabling knowledge and leadership to remain within the community. This 'Power With' was vividly operationalized in the collective response to gender-based violence. The strength of this collective was most visible in its response to gender-based violence. Women came together

to intervene in cases of domestic abuse, using collective pressure and community dialogue. Women report that collective intervention reduced incidents of domestic violence, demonstrating how organized women's groups can become a powerful force for social change.

TECHNICAL AGENCY

The intervention challenged the belief that women could only be laborers by helping them become skilled practitioners of INRM. Kirti led women from Mohgaon on exposure visits to learn from successful examples and participated in trainings on MGNREGA, INRM, and participatory planning tools such as social and resource mapping. These skills enabled women to understand their landscape and identify local development needs.

To address water scarcity, Kirti promoted the 30X40 model, which uses pits and bunds to

reduce runoff and improve groundwater recharge. Women Mates were trained in basic surveying, land measurement, and estimation of earthwork, allowing them to participate in technical planning and implementation. This knowledge gave women new confidence and credibility in their communities. Building on improved water availability, Kirti also promoted sustainable farming practices such as the SRI, promoting line sowing and nursery management to increase yields from 2-3 quintals to 8-10 quintals per acre. Simultaneously, they introduced Seed Treatment, launching campaigns to treat seeds with bio-inputs to reduce crop failure.

Kirti also focused on Bio-Inputs by establishing local production units for Vermicompost, *Agniastra*, and *Brahmastra* to reduce dependency on chemical inputs. Furthermore, they implemented Nutrition Gardens (*Poshan Vatikas*) to ensure household dietary diversity. This technical mastery led to a profound identity shift: Kirti and her peers transitioned from identifying as 'farm wives' to 'Farmers', claiming ownership over the production process.

POLITICAL AGENCY

The strongest sign of empowerment was the growth of women's political agency, the confidence and ability to engage with government systems and claim their rights. Kirti and other women began participating actively in Gram Sabhas, turning them into spaces for discussion and accountability rather than mere formalities.

A key moment came during a campaign to correct land records. When some local leaders tried to silence the women and questioned their right to demand official records, Kirti and the collective stood firm. Their persistence, supported by sympathetic officials, ensured that their concerns were heard. This marked an important

shift: women were no longer seen as passive beneficiaries but as citizens with legitimate rights and claims. The women also linked their village development plans with MGNREGA, ensuring that public investments created both productive assets and local employment. Through this process, they strengthened water security, generated wage opportunities, and demonstrated the power of collective action in shaping local development.

TRANSFORMING LIVELIHOODS AND SOCIAL STATUS

The intervention led by Kirti and the women's collectives has brought visible changes to livelihoods, social relations, and local governance. Improved water conservation and natural resource management have enabled farmers to cultivate a second crop in the Rabi season, increasing cropping intensity and reducing dependence on rain-fed agriculture. Water availability has extended from about four months to nearly ten months, significantly reducing distress migration. As farming became more productive, household incomes increased, with many families earning an additional ₹25,000-50,000 per agricultural season.

The social changes have been equally significant. With greater economic contribution and collective strength, women report increased respect within their households and communities. Women report a decline in domestic violence following collective intervention, while women now have greater freedom to spend on health, education, and household needs. Their growing confidence has also translated into political participation, with many SHG members taking active roles in Gram Sabhas and successfully contesting Panchayat elections.



CONCLUSION

The story of Kirti Patel and the women of Mandla shows how lasting change begins when communities gain the confidence, skills, and institutions needed to shape their own future. What was once a landscape marked by water scarcity, seasonal migration, and limited opportunities has been transformed through collective action and local leadership. By organizing themselves, building technical knowledge, and engaging with government systems, women moved from the margins of development to its center. They did not simply create water structures or improve agricultural production; they strengthened their voice, expanded their choices, and gained recognition as farmers, planners, and leaders.

The experience of Mandla demonstrates that sustainable development is not only about creating assets but also about building people's capabilities. As the land became more productive and resilient, women became more confident and influential. Natural-resource regeneration was accompanied by greater dignity, agency, and participation, showing how community institutions can strengthen both livelihoods and local governance.



MAPPING THE INVISIBLE ASSETS

Asset-Based Community Development and Gender Transformation in Narharpur, Chhattisgarh

For Livelihoods: <https://www.livelihoods.org/>



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Shiv Kunwar stands at the edge of her farm pond, the evening sun casting a golden glow over the water. A sudden splash breaks the silence, a rohu surfacing for feed. A short distance away, the steady, reassuring clucking from her poultry shed filters through the air. She looks from the water to the coop with quiet satisfaction, seeing them as the twin pillars of her family's resilience. Where once there was only risk-prone paddy, there is now a diversified safety net: the pond secures the water table and yields fish, while the separate shed houses the birds that ensure a steady cash flow. It is a robust system. The water feeds the land, the birds provide income, and the surplus fills her purse.

But as the ripples settle, her mind drifts back to a time when this same land was nothing but parched, cracked earth, as dry as her own hope. She remembers the crushing weight of those years when her husband was a ghost in his own home, forced to roam distant towns for manual labor while she shouldered the burden of the household alone. Survival was a daily calculation of grain and coin. But the memory that lingers most sharply is not of her own hunger, but of her daughter's quiet rebellion. She recalls the morning her little girl refused to take her tiffin to school, tears streaming down her face. "I don't want to take this tiffin, Ma," she had sobbed. "All the other children bring different vegetables every day. When I open my box, it is always the same: rice, watery dal, and potato. I feel ashamed." Shiv Kunwar had stood silent then, the pain of being unable to provide even a dignified meal cutting deeper than poverty itself.



Today, that silence has been replaced by the bustle of her thriving integrated farm and the confidence of a woman who plans her family's nutrition as carefully as her business finances. Her daughter now carries a tiffin packed with variety and pride, a small but powerful symbol of a household transformed. Shiv Kunwar's journey from vulnerability to agency is not an anomaly. Her experience reflects a wider structural shift in Narharpur.



The transformation in Narharpur began with a deep shift in social mindset. Women who joined SHGs initially faced isolation and low confidence. Shashikala Markam describes this as ‘social inertia.’ In early meetings, women were extremely shy and often avoided eye contact, showing how they had internalized the idea that they were not decision-makers.

SHGs under the Bihan program (SRLM), supported by PRADAN, were first met with doubt. Kachri Bai recalls that early meetings were mostly transactional, women met once a month to save small amounts of money or grain, but there was little trust or collective purpose.

Savings existed, but empowerment had not yet begun.

The real change came through consistent facilitation. SRLM and PRADAN teams acted as catalysts, engaging frequently and patiently, even while facing resistance and suspicion from some men in the village. Over time, this regular engagement created a safe space for women. Meetings slowly shifted from financial transactions to open conversations, where women began speaking, debating, and sharing personal experiences.

As Ravindra Singh Thakur, Block Project Manager (SRLM), explains, the focus was



not only on accounting skills but on building awareness of entitlements and decision-making rights.

The movement was structured through a tiered system: SHGs at the village level, VOs, and CLFs at the block level, which handled larger financial and governance roles. Women also took on roles such as MGNREGA Mates and CRPs, strengthening peer networks and leadership.

Savitri Sandanvatti, a Zila Panchayat member, describes her journey from SHG member to cluster leader and then district representative. This ladder of leadership helped women move from managing small savings to influencing public funds and development planning.

NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND ASSET CREATION

Water was the main challenge in Narharpur. Despite rivers like the Mahanadi and Doodh nearby, villages faced severe scarcity because rainwater quickly ran off instead of being stored. As Hemlata Kashyap explains, the issue was not lack of rainfall, but failure to conserve it. This kept farmers dependent on risky mono-cropping of paddy, which often failed when monsoons were weak.

Through social and resource mapping, women mapped every household and land type, upland, midland, and lowland. This exercise changed how they saw their surroundings. They were no longer passive residents, but planners using INRM principles to understand and manage water flow.

The mapping helped women identify where water structures like farm ponds should be built, especially along ridge-to-valley runoff paths. However, implementation required negotiation, as men were initially reluctant to give up cultivable land. With clear maps and collective

strength, women successfully negotiated and selected sites, strengthening their agency and decision-making power.

These plans were then implemented through convergence with MGNREGA. As Rahul Tarak, MGNREGA Program Officer notes that after 2013, the program expanded beyond wage employment to include livelihood asset creation. Plans from women collectives became the basis for identifying works under MGNREGA.

He adds, *“We began prioritizing women’s plans and small water-conservation structures and reviewed implementation monthly with PRADAN’s support. Our staff, including technical assistants and Gram Rozgar Sahayaks, also received regular training”*

Farm ponds created dual benefits: 100–150 days of wage employment (about ₹20,000–25,000 per household) and long-term water assets that improved groundwater levels. The ecological impact was also visible: many structures that previously dried up retained water for 8–10 months, and some held water year-round. With water availability improving, households were finally able to diversify their livelihoods.

LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION THROUGH CONVERGENT INTERVENTIONS

With water constraints reduced, SHGs in Narharpur began moving beyond subsistence farming and building a diversified livelihood portfolio to reduce risk. Three key areas emerged: fisheries, livestock (poultry, quail, duck), and horticulture.

The experience of Shiv Kunwar Koreti shows the path. She began poultry farming with hesitation and faced repeated losses as birds kept dying, which shook her confidence. However, training from the Livestock Development Department, Government of Chhattisgarh became a turning



point. She learned vaccination schedules, F1 after 5 days, lasota after 7 days, and boosters after 18 days, and how to treat common diseases using a mix of home remedies and medicines. With this knowledge, she scaled up from 20 birds to 200–300 birds per batch and earned ₹1.2–1.3 lakh annually from poultry, moving her household from subsistence to stable income generation.

She started rearing fishes in MGNREGA-supported farm ponds. Women reduced costs by using locally available inputs like mustard oil cake and rice bran instead of commercial feed, and learned to manage water quality by maintaining pH levels between 7–8 using lime. Improved water availability also made Rabi cultivation possible. With support from CREDA, solar pumps were installed, enabling vegetable cultivation such as tomatoes, which generated ₹15,000–16,000 per crop, along with pulses and oilseeds that improved both nutrition and income diversity.

Together, these convergent interventions created a resilient livelihood system. Poultry now provides ₹1.2–1.3 lakh per household annually, fisheries contribute ₹8,000–15,000, horticulture adds ₹15,000–16,000 per crop, and MGNREGA wage work during asset creation contributes about ₹22,000 per household, forming a diversified rural economy.



WOMEN RECLAIMING THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Empowerment in Narharpur gradually extended into political participation. A key step was ensuring SHG members regularly attended Gram Sabha meetings, giving women a structured entry into local governance and public decision-making.

The experiences of Kachri Bai, Kanchan Ratyasalam, and Savitri Sandanvatti show different pathways to leadership. Kachri Bai represents community-backed leadership. Despite no formal education, she was encouraged by her SHG to contest for Sarpanch and won against more educated candidates, mainly through trust and strong social connections built within the group. Kanchan Ratyasalam's leadership emerged through service. As a *Pashu Sakhi*, she provided doorstep livestock care, building trust through consistent and visible work. Her authority came from her contribution rather than formal position.

Savitri Sandanvatti reflects the federated leadership pathway. Moving from SHG to VO to CLF and finally to Zila Panchayat, she shows how NRLM structures support leadership development through experience in governance, public speaking, and financial management. Women's participation also changed the culture of local administration. Kachri Bai recalls an early symbolic shift; women initially sat on mats while men used chairs in the Panchayat office. She ensured chairs were bought for everyone

and the office was cleaned, challenging visible hierarchies of caste and gender.

Over time, women's collective voices strengthened. They began questioning poorly executed work and demanding accountability. This political empowerment was further strengthened when women's plans were integrated into the GPDP, aligning public funds with priorities like water security, sanitation, and livelihoods, and reducing contractor-driven planning.

THE RIPPLE EFFECTS

Economic gains in Narharpur have reshaped decision-making within households. As Hemlata Kashyap notes, women now independently decide on purchases such as saris, gold, and other assets using their own income. Mobility has also increased, two-wheelers owned by women like Shiv Kunwar and Hemlata symbolize new freedom of movement and easier access to markets, banks, and government offices.

Changes are also visible in everyday life. Shiv Kunwar recalls that earlier women ate last and had little choice in food. Now she decides the household menu. Preparing nutritious meals for her daughter reflects not just better nutrition, but a deeper shift in priorities and agency.

Women's income is increasingly invested in human capital, especially education. Many, including Shiv Kunwar, are sending their children, particularly daughters to better schools. Health outcomes have also improved, with more diverse diets and reduced dependence on debt for medical care. Importantly, men's attitudes are also changing. While initial resistance was strong, many now support.

CONCLUSION

The transformation in Narharpur can be understood across four interconnected domains. In social mobilization, sustained engagement helped overcome isolation and patriarchal norms by building trust, collective identity, and safe spaces for women's participation. In resource management, participatory mapping and convergence with government schemes converted water scarcity into durable assets like farm ponds, improving groundwater and enabling multiple cropping cycles. In livelihoods, technical training and better resource use enabled diversification into poultry, fisheries, and horticulture, reducing dependence on mono-cropping and strengthening household incomes. In governance, structured participation through SHGs and federations built leadership pathways for women and shifted planning toward demand-driven, community-led priorities.

Narharpur demonstrates the strength of livelihood based asset creation when rooted in women's collective action. By combining local knowledge with public programs, women created both ecological and economic foundations for change. Economic empowerment, in turn, strengthened political participation, creating a reinforcing cycle of agency and leadership. Ultimately, Narharpur shows that rural transformation becomes most sustainable when marginalized communities are not just beneficiaries, but active architects of development.



DRIVING TRANSFORMATION THROUGH COLLABORATION



Driving Transformation Through Collaboration shows that lasting rural change happens when women's collectives, government systems, CSOs, and Panchayats work together. Instead of isolated schemes, collaboration helps align resources, planning, and community priorities. The stories highlight women managing water user associations, securing fishing rights, influencing GDP investments, leasing ponds, and participating in larger movements for chemical-free farming. These partnerships strengthen livelihoods, natural resource management, and women's public authority. The theme emphasizes that resilient rural landscapes are built through trust, shared responsibility, and sustained collaboration, where marginalized women are recognized as equal partners in development.





LEADING THE FLOW OF CHANGE

The Story of Hari Hariyali Water User Association, Bankura, West Bengal



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By 11:00 AM, the rhythmic drumbeats of the village messenger announced the convening of the monthly meeting of the Hari Hariyali WUA. The sun shone brightly over Dakshinkendbana as Ujwala hurriedly finished her chores, feeding the fish before preparing for an urgent commitment. Sulochana, abandoning her plan to visit the Indpur market, also rushed toward the Akhra (community meeting place). Ujwala and Sulochana, both active members of the Hari Hariyali WUA, joined 22 other women and a few men who had gathered in anticipation. The atmosphere buzzed with conversation as the meeting commenced, setting the stage for critical deliberations.



A few years earlier, Dakshinkendbana faced dry hand pumps, underused fields, and seasonal migration. Women who once walked several kilometers for water now participate as decision-makers in managing a community pond and planning crops, helping strengthen water security and local livelihoods.



Dakshinkendbana is a small hamlet located in the Hatagram Gram Panchayat of Indpur Block, home to 24 families belonging to the Santhal and Munda tribal communities. The village encompasses 48.37 hectares, with 65% of the land classified as mid-upland. Surrounded by dense forest, the village is connected only by an unpaved road, rendering it inaccessible during the monsoon season. The community grappled with acute water scarcity, relying on four hand pumps that frequently dried up during the summer months. Women were compelled to trek 3 kilometers daily to fetch water, while agriculture was restricted to rain-fed paddy cultivation, resulting in severe economic instability. These systemic challenges forced nearly all families into seasonal distress migration, disrupting children's education and perpetuating economic hardship.

BRINGING TOGETHER A CORE GROUP

Jaleswari, a key stakeholder in the Hari Hariyali WUA, recounted the institution's journey. Collaborative efforts with PRADAN began with the formation of a SHG within the village. Witnessing the SHG's consistency in meetings, savings mobilization, and livelihood activities, both the community and PRADAN recognized the potential to leverage natural assets for sustainable livelihood opportunities.

PRADAN under Usharmukti Initiative facilitated convergence with the WBADMIP and MGNREGA. This convergence led to the formal constitution of the Hari Hariyali WUA, locally known as the '*Jal Vyavaharkari Samiti*,' comprising 24 active women members.

It functions as a formally registered body established to address water related issues and management of the assets. As WUAs are registered under the West Bengal Societies Registration Act, 1961, this legal framework empowers the association to function as a community-based institution.

WUAs play a pivotal role through the operation and maintenance (O&M) of irrigation schemes. Their core mandates include equitable water distribution, maintenance of minor irrigation infrastructure, conflict resolution, and the collection of service charges for water usage. Furthermore, these associations facilitate improved water management practices, crop planning to maximize the command area, and the integration of agricultural support services.

MAPPING ASSETS, PLANNING, AND IMPLEMENTATION

Following the formation of the Hari Hariyali WUA, PRADAN facilitated the process under the WBADMIP. A strong, cadre-based network was established through the selection and capacity building of community mobilizers. These mobilizers were trained in planning processes using PRA tools, such as social mapping, resource mapping, and transect walks, and subsequently facilitated these processes within the villages.

The trajectory of the Hari Hariyali WUA exemplifies the efficacy of community driven and women collective led development in natural resource management. The intervention commenced with participatory asset mapping, which proved to be a transformative experience



for the women involved. Nilmuni, another Hari Hariyali WUA member, noted that creating a detailed, color-coded map of their revenue village deepened their understanding of local geography and resources, the knowledge previously concentrated among older men. Through PRA tools, women cataloged community assets, effectively disseminating the information.

Nilmuni Tudu highlighted that this visualization made information accessible and engaging, enabling women to actively participate in strategic planning and decision-making.

The implementation phase began with the excavation of a pond on community land, repurposing a defunct pit into a productive asset. This intervention enhanced the village's landscape and created a critical resource base. Subsequently, water-harvesting structures and

social forestry initiatives were implemented in line with the community plan, which further strengthened women's leadership in resource management and planning.

Throughout this process, PRADAN focused on institutional strengthening and fostering values of solidarity, conservation, trust, and transparency within the association. To ensure the sustainable management of water resources, specific bylaws and regulations were drafted. To strengthen financial sustainability, the association developed a revenue model. They mobilized a solar-operated micro-irrigation system, providing irrigation facilities to farmers for a nominal user fee. Additionally, the association follows a practice of monthly savings to maintain a corpus for community needs.

The association's commitment to collectivization is visible in its inclusive approach of allocating cultivation access to landless farmers, enabling them to cultivate it and earn a livelihood alongside other villagers. To optimize water

resource utilization for livelihoods, a women-led PG was constituted. This collective, with PRADAN's technical support, undertakes crop and fish planning, input management, the development of marketing strategies and linkages with external vendors and market agents.

This comprehensive development paradigm, focused on resource management, local governance, and integrated livelihoods, showcases the transformative potential of participatory planning and collectivization.

LEVERAGE EXTERNAL RESOURCES

A primary objective of the Hari Hariyali WUA is to enhance water management, determine appropriate crop patterns, and leverage water resources for livelihood maximization. As the Hari Hariyali WUA progressed with regular convenings, members recognized that while women performed the majority of fishery activities, they lacked formal recognition through the FRC. While local resources and needs were identified through the collective efforts of the WUA, PRADAN, and government initiatives, the association began strategically pursuing external entitlements.

Although women were deeply involved in pisciculture, the association sought to access entitlements and identified the government's FRC scheme. Historically, this card was allocated exclusively to men due to land ownership norms. However, given women's active engagement in fishery activities, the association resolved to secure these cards in the women's names. With support of PRADAN, they engaged with the local administration and department for issuance of cards in their names.

“

“We realised that while the men had traditionally been the ones in charge of land-related matters, it was equally important for women to have this knowledge. This realization led to enhanced confidence of women in leading the fishery activities, participating in different forums and developing their linkage with the department.”

Ultimately, the women of Dakshinkendbana secured the FRCs, gaining legal recognition and access to government schemes designated for fisherfolk. This legal documentation strengthened access to input procurement, credit services, and life insurance, thereby elevating their socioeconomic status.

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Jaleswari narrated the community dynamics, “Our strength lies in our unity. When we decided to have the cards issued in our names, the men offered no objection. Even if they push back in the future, we will stand our ground. Unlike other places where women simply submit, here we have a different dynamic: we listen to the men, but they follow our lead. They support our growth and have fully agreed to our ownership of the cards.”

She further noted that in regions where women lack these cards, they often lack a voice in fish cultivation. In Dakshinkendbana, women now have a voice in both aquaculture and agriculture.

MOVING TOWARD PROSPERITY

Women's collectivization through the Hari Hariyali WUA has been instrumental in strengthening women-led processes and capacity building. The transformation in Dakshinkendbana has been driven by women's active participation in decision-making and sustainable agricultural practices. The average annual household income has risen to ₹69,000, largely attributed to the successful cultivation of watermelon and pisciculture. Currently, all 24 households are engaged in agriculture, marking a significant reduction in distress migration. Notably, five women have earned over ₹1 lakh annually in the past year, achieving the status of *'Lakhpati Didi.'*



CONCLUSION

Women's empowerment has been a catalyst in this transformation, with women's involvement in decision-making proving crucial for the effective identification and utilization of local assets. The strategic focus on internal resources and capacities has resulted in sustainable, resilient development outcomes characterized by crop diversification and increased income. Furthermore, women's involvement in traditionally male-dominated activities, such as netting and harvesting fish, has challenged and reshaped traditional gender norms and power relations.



SYNERGIZING GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY

PRI- CBO Convergence in Sirohi and Udaipur, Rajasthan



Scan the QR to experience the film

Bhanwari Bai, a resident of Hathni Village in Gogunda, vividly recalls the silence that used to descend upon her village after the rains failed. For years, she watched the men of her community pack their bags and migrate to the cities of Gujarat. Independent farmers, proud of their lineage, were reduced to flipping rotis as cooks in roadside dhabas or carrying heavy loads as construction laborers in alien cities. Recently, however, standing amidst her green fields, she notes a profound shift. “Earlier, we were laborers working outside our village,” she says with quiet pride, “but now we are no longer laborers. We are farmers, and we are working on our own farms.”



This improvement in local livelihoods is linked to the PRI-CBO Convergence Framework. The framework brings elected authority and women's collective institutions together to map needs, shape Gram Sabha decisions, and coordinate funds for water and livelihood assets.



Southern Rajasthan's rugged Aravalli terrain and semi-arid climate have long posed development challenges, pushing many tribal families to migrate for survival. Despite devolved powers to Gram Panchayats, development remained supply-driven, with limited attention to local realities like water scarcity. While PRIs are enablers of local decision-making and women collectives and CBOs offered local insight and inclusion, they often worked in silos, leading to mismatched priorities and limited impact.

The PRI-CBO collaboration model breaks these silos by fostering a formal partnership between Gram Panchayats and women's collectives. It is rooted in a simple idea: inclusivity leads to better governance. Gram Panchayats become more responsive and demand-driven, while SHGs strengthen local, integrated, need-based and informed planning. By combining elected authority with the organized voice of women like Bhanwari, development becomes community-led and owned, rather than simply delivered.

The model rests on four pillars: Institutional Architecture, where coordination committees and resource groups link PRIs and women collectives; Participatory Planning, where community priorities feed into GPDP through VPRP; Financial Synergy, where MGNREGA, CSR funds, and community savings support large-scale asset creation; and Citizen Entitlement, where Gram Sabha participation ensures access to schemes and rights.

Bhimana Gram Panchayat (Pindwara block), focused on natural resource management and pasture land development, and Padawali Kalan

Gram Panchayat (Gogunda block), where solar lift irrigation and innovation transformed farming in Hathni village, are the examples of this collaboration.

BUILDING A COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT

PRADAN has established a strong PRI-CBO collaboration model in Bhimana Gram Panchayat through a formal MoU with the Panchayat. At the district and block levels, active engagement with the Executive Engineer MGNREGA, the Watershed Development and Soil Conservation Department, Government of Rajasthan, and the BDO has enabled technical approvals, funding convergence, and integration with GPDP. PRADAN also facilitates joint field visits with departments such as Agriculture and Forest to build a shared understanding of innovations.

At the grassroots, VOs have been strengthened as planning institutions, while PRI members have been sensitized on natural resource management and participatory governance. Focused efforts on exposure and leadership development have enhanced women's participation in decision-making.

In Hathni, the Jal Mata group evolved from a small savings group into a PG managing shared assets like a solar irrigation system, focusing on collective income and asset management. In Bhimana, the Baba Ramdev VO federated SHGs into a larger platform where women discuss key issues and present clear proposals to the Panchayat. As Bhanwari Devi from Hathni recalls, *"Ten years ago, we couldn't speak up. We didn't even know what a Gram Sabha*

was.” Through continuous training, PRADAN supported women in building confidence and awareness, while also providing practical tools that enable communities to present clear and well-prepared proposals.

The perspective of Panchayat leaders has also evolved. With the involvement of women’s collectives, they recognize that collaboration improves the quality and ease of implementation. As CBOs became active, Sarpanchs and Deputy Sarpanchs observed greater community ownership, reduced corruption, and improved transparency and accountability. The Panchayat has thus shifted from being the sole provider to a true partner, relying on CBOs for beneficiary selection and on-ground supervision of works.

PARTICIPATORY PLANNING IN PRACTICE

At the core of this model is the integration of VPRP into the GPDP, replacing ad hoc decisions with structured, community-led planning.

In Bhimana, regular VO meetings, especially before the annual planning cycle, help women

resolve issues early and present a unified plan in the Gram Sabha, unlike earlier low-participation meetings.

Manisha Bai from Bhimana describes the process which follows three steps. First, vulnerability assessments through household surveys identify real needs, prioritizing the poorest based on current data. Unlike outdated census data, this captures current realities, such as income sources, assets and needs like goat sheds, poultry units, or farm ponds. As a result, the poorest households, widows, and landless families are prioritized based on need rather than favoritism.

Second, participatory planning using tools like resource mapping and transect walks turns community inputs into clear, visual plans. On big charts, women sketch the village’s physical layout, marking ponds, school buildings, roads, eroded slopes, water runoff zones, and unirrigated fields. Then they identify gaps and propose solutions, such as bunding or a 30X40 model structure in a runoff-prone area. This turns spoken needs into a visual, technical blueprint that community members and officials can read and discuss.



Third, these plans are formally integrated into the GPDP through the Gram Sabha. In Bhimana, this led to a proposal of nearly 200 works, with over 100 approved, showing how community-driven planning can translate into actionable outcomes.

WATER, SOIL, AND TECHNICAL INNOVATION

What sets the convergence model in southern Rajasthan apart is its focus on asset creation that strengthens the natural resource base. Rather than temporary relief work, the emphasis is on productive assets that capture and store water.

In the Aravalli region, managing soil erosion is as critical as harvesting rainwater. The community adopted a 30X40 model, where land is divided into small plots with pits and bunds that slow runoff and improve water absorption. In Bhimana, this, along with field bunding, significantly improved soil moisture and enabled farming even during dry periods.

In Hathni, the Jal Mata PG tackled the challenge differently, water nearby but out of reach. The river held water, but elevated fields made gravity flow impossible. In Hathni, the group addressed water access through a solar-powered lift irrigation system, pumping river water to fields via sprinklers. Running on free solar energy, it replaced costly diesel pumps and unreliable electricity, ensuring regular irrigation.

In Bhimana, the Panchayat regenerated common pastureland through Integrated Pasture Development. Around 50 *bighas* of degraded land were fenced using state support to prevent overgrazing and seeded with quality fodder grass. The area was closed during the monsoon to allow regeneration, and a pasture committee now manages fair use.

CONVERGENCE AND LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION

The convergence framework creates a strong multiplier effect by pooling funds from multiple sources into a hybrid financing model, ensuring both scale and community ownership. Capital-intensive assets like solar pumps and pipelines are largely funded through CSR support, with a community contribution, which builds a sense of ownership and ensures long-term maintenance.

Labor-intensive works such as trenches and bunding are financed through MGNREGA, turning wage employment into durable assets. Materials like fencing and saplings are supported through convergence with line departments.

The economic impact is most visible in changing farming patterns, the shift to a third crop. Earlier, farmers relied mainly on kharif crops, with limited rabi cultivation and no summer cropping due to lack of water. With solar irrigation, farmers now grow wheat and summer vegetables, improving food security and incomes.



GENDER, POWER, AND PUBLIC SPACE

A key impact of PRI–CBO convergence has been the shift in gender dynamics, bringing villages closer to the vision of women-friendly Gram Panchayats under LSDGs. Earlier excluded from Gram Sabhas, they gained confidence through SHG platforms, as reflected in Bhanwari Devi’s words: *“We are no longer afraid. We go to the Panchayat and speak strongly.”*

This shift is visible in action, women now question poor-quality work, as seen in Hathni where they ensured a faulty road was repaired. They have become active monitors, strengthening accountability. The convergence has institutionalized this change by recognizing VOs as planning partners, with women regularly participating in Panchayat spaces.

Women have also expanded the idea of development beyond infrastructure. In Bhimana, they prioritized initiatives like Pink Toilets for girls and an Anganwadi center, addressing education and childcare needs alongside livelihoods.

CONCLUSION

Bhimana and Padawali Kalan demonstrate that the PRI–CBO convergence framework can drive real change on the ground. Sustainable rural development requires institutional partnership, where state systems and communities work together.

In these villages, women transformed the Gram Sabha by presenting evidence-based plans using maps, surveys, and vulnerability data. With PRADAN’s support, they emerged as credible planners and decision-makers. Community contributions, such as the 10% share in solar irrigation systems, strengthened ownership, ensuring assets are maintained over time. CSOs such as PRADAN played a key role in bridging the gap between communities and government systems.

To scale this model, two steps are critical: institutionalizing pre-Gram Sabha planning under leadership of VOs and integrating watershed works in GPDP. The experience shows that when community priorities align with public resources, development becomes more inclusive, accountable, and truly democratic.



THE ECONOMICS OF DIGNITY

The Fisherwomen of Simni, Purulia, West Bengal



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Under the wide branches of the old banyan tree in Simni village (Jhalda-2 Block), everyone sat quietly, the air heavy with unease. The village council meeting had turned into a battleground of ideologies. On one side sat the elders, guarding the gates of tradition; on the other, a determined group of Adivasi women, fish farmers who had already rewritten the story of their village economy. They had revived silted ponds, built a thriving fish enterprise, and brought in lakhs of rupees. Yet their demand that afternoon sounded deceptively simple: recognition through a FRC in their own names.

“A FRC is for those who own the land,” argued an elder, echoing generations of patriarchal norms. “In our society, women do not hold land titles. How can you claim a professional identity when the soil itself isn’t yours?”

The silence that followed was broken by Patamuni Murmu and her peers, women who had walked miles from forest to market for years, and who now walked with the quiet confidence of entrepreneurs. “Land may be yours,” she replied, “but the labor is ours.” Their demand was not for charity or favor; it was for an identity that matched the work they were already doing and the value they were already creating.



For years, the women of Simni lived in a landscape where their labor was visible but their formal occupational identity remained unrecognized. They collected firewood from nearby forests, managed livestock, tended fields, and kept families going while men migrated for wage work. Yet their names rarely appeared in land records, bank documents, or public registers.

With the intervention of PRADAN and other partners, women began forming SHGs and later a fish farming PG. Through these collectives, they opened bank accounts and began saving regularly. However, their official documents still did not recognize them as fisherwomen, even when they were the ones managing ponds, stocking fish, overseeing feed, and handling sales.



The journey from firewood gatherers to recognized fish farmers was not easy. Women had to overcome multiple barriers, as Adivasi communities in a remote region, as small farmers with limited resources, and as women navigating deeply patriarchal households and institutions.

When women spoke about fish farming, many laughed. Men questioned why water should be used for ponds and doubted women's ability to manage fisheries. *"What will women know about fish?"* they said. Such comments were common and often discouraged younger women from participating.

Access to opportunities was another challenge. Most women had never entered a bank, visited a government office, or interacted with technical departments. They were unfamiliar with procedures, forms, and official systems. As a result, schemes, credit, and extension services remained out of reach, even when they were meant to support them.

Overcoming these barriers required much more than technical skills. It demanded confidence, and the courage to step into unfamiliar spaces and claim opportunities that had long been denied to them.

WATER, INSTITUTIONS, AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES

A turning point came when government programs and the efforts of CSOs began working together. Initiatives such as Usharmukti Watershed Program, WBADMI Project, and

Matir Srishti invested in check dams, ponds, recharge pits, and land development. These investments created a stronger water base for year-round livelihoods.

But the real change was not just in the structures, it was in the institutions that grew around them.

WUAs, SHGs, and PGs became spaces where women took on leadership roles. They chaired meetings, approved budgets, and helped decide how water resources would be managed. Women were no longer passive participants; they became decision-makers.

In Simni, large investments revived dozens of ponds and turned them into productive assets. Wherever reliable water and strong community institutions came together, fish farming became a viable livelihood option.

For the first time, women did not have to wait for permission. They had access to water, supportive institutions, and leadership roles that enabled them to act. The opportunity was there, the next step was theirs to take.

THE FISH FARMING PG

Guided by PRADAN and block-level line departments, a group of 15 women from Simni came together to form a fish farming PG. They started with small weekly savings of ₹10–20, opened a joint bank account, and built internal systems of credit and mutual support.

Through repeated training and exposure visits, they learned technical skills such as pond preparation, water-quality testing, feed

management, disease control, and harvesting practices. The group moved from subsistence-level fish rearing to organized commercial fish farming, gradually scaling up to a business volume of around ₹5 lakh, with aspirations to reach ₹20-50 lakh while diversifying into vegetables and pulses.

CLAIMING RECOGNITION AND RIGHTS

As fish farming succeeded, incomes rose and neighboring villages took notice. Women from Simni earned a new identity as the ‘fish-farming women of Simni’, a title that carried growing respect. Yet their success revealed a deeper challenge: while women were running fisheries, the system still failed to recognize them as fishers.

They leased ponds, invested their own savings from SHGs, managed stocking and feeding, negotiated with buyers, and bore the risks of loss, flood damage, or poor harvests. In every practical sense, they were professional fish farmers.

Yet the fisheries system didn’t name them. Most lacked FRCs, which limited access to government benefits such as subsidies, insurance, and training. The system largely assumed that fishers were men. Even where women managed the ponds, registration cards were often issued in the names of husbands or fathers. This created a striking contradiction. Women carried the responsibility, investment, labor, and risk, but the official identity and entitlements of a ‘fisher’ remained with men. They were recognized for the work they did, yet denied formal recognition for who they had become.

NEGOTIATING RECOGNITION

The turning point came when women, encouraged by Fisheries Extension Officers and block-level officials, decided to claim recognition through the ponds they managed. What appeared to be a simple administrative step soon exposed deeper social tensions.

Many men argued that since the land and water bodies were registered in their names, any official



identity linked to those assets including FRCs, should also belong to them.

Women faced difficult questions at home and in community meetings. How could they apply for a fisher's card when they did not formally own the pond?

Some men feared that putting women's names on official documents would weaken their control over household assets and shift decision-making power within the family.

As a result, women had to navigate more than paperwork. They negotiated resistance, skepticism, and, at times, outright opposition from family and community members. Their struggle was not only for a registration card, but for recognition as legitimate economic actors in their own right.

PROOF OF OWNERSHIP

To overcome this barrier, the PG and supporting institutions adopted a practical solution: ponds were formally leased in women's names. Women pooled their savings to lease ponds from male owners including, in some cases, their own husbands, through written agreements that clearly defined their rights to use and manage the ponds for fish farming.

This was more than a legal arrangement. It was a powerful assertion that investment, management, and use of a resource are valid grounds for recognition. The lease documents provided women with the proof needed to claim an identity that had long been denied to them.

FRC: THE TURNING POINT

With lease agreements in hand and support from FEO, and local Panchayats, women applied for FRCs. Leaders such as Patamuni and Urmila consistently argued that the cards should recognize the people who actually managed the ponds and carried the risks of fish farming. Their efforts paid off. A total of 42 women from Simni and nearby villages obtained FRCs in their own names, each linked to the fishery activities they managed.

In a sector where such cards were almost always issued to men, this was a significant breakthrough. For these women, the card was not just an official document, it was recognition of their work, their expertise, and their status as independent fish farmers.

RECOGNITION BEYOND THE POND

Obtaining FRCs transformed how women related to their work. For the first time, they were officially recognized not as helpers to male farmers but as fisherwomen in their own right, with a documented livelihood and a legitimate claim over the enterprise they managed. For many, it was the first official document that identified them as primary economic actors rather than as dependents.

Over time, the card became a gateway to new opportunities. It improved women's credibility with government departments, banks, and market players, making it easier to access inputs, benefit from government schemes, and participate in training programs and exposure visits. Their identity shifted from being known as someone's wife or daughter to being recognized as the fish-farming women of Simni.

BEYOND BENEFITS: A SHIFT IN STATUS AND VOICE

The card's most significant impact extended beyond access to schemes and services. It changed how women saw themselves and how they were viewed by others. Women reported greater confidence in speaking at public meetings, visiting block offices, and negotiating with traders and officials. They engaged with institutions not as dependents seeking support but as recognized professionals with a stake in the local economy. In PG meetings, women discussed production, prices, and investments with greater authority, drawing confidence from their identity as registered fisherwomen. At home, their growing economic visibility increased their influence over decisions related to education, household spending, and social concerns. Their voices began to carry greater weight within both the family and the community.

ECONOMIC SECURITY

Fish farming has brought significant financial gains for women in Simni. Members of the PG now earn around ₹85,000–90,000 annually from fish farming, while the collective business has grown to nearly ₹5 lakh and continues to expand. The FRC has further improved access to subsidized inputs, government support, and accident insurance coverage of up to ₹2 lakh. Together, these benefits have reduced dependence on firewood collection, provided a safety net during difficult times, and enabled women to support one another through loans for education, healthcare, and family needs.

FROM BENEFICIARIES TO LEADERS

Perhaps the most remarkable change is the emergence of women as leaders within the local fisheries sector. Today, farmers from neighboring villages visit Simni to learn fish-farming practices, purchase fingerlings and feed,

and hear directly from the women who built these enterprises.



CONCLUSION

Women leaders from Simni now participate in meetings with block officials, serve as peer trainers, and are introduced with pride as fish farmers. The transformation is visible in everyday life. Under the banyan tree where people once questioned whether women could ever be fish farmers, women now gather with registers, lease agreements, and FRC to plan production, manage new ponds, and mentor younger women.

At the heart of this change is a simple document that acknowledges what they had long proven through their work: they are fish farmers, entrepreneurs, and leaders in their own right.



FROM SILOS TO A STATEWIDE SOIL MOVEMENT

Rajasthan Coalition for Natural Farming (RCNF)

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a shared vision for regenerative agriculture began to emerge in Rajasthan. Rather than relying on isolated projects, a group of organizations came together to explore how change could be achieved at a larger, system-wide scale.

This led to the formation of the RCNF in 2021 as the state chapter of the NCNF. The coalition was born during the pandemic, when lockdowns limited physical interaction but created opportunities for collaboration through virtual platforms. More than 20 organizations began working together around a common belief: that local, chemical-free food production is essential for community health, resilient livelihoods, and long-term food security.

This shared purpose helped overcome traditional organizational boundaries and created a collective vision that extended beyond individual mandates. Over time, the coalition expanded significantly. Today, RCNF brings together more than 32 CSOs working across 28 districts of Rajasthan.



By creating a platform for collaboration and learning the coalition has helped accelerate the adoption of natural farming practices, particularly in the arid and tribal regions of western and southern Rajasthan. Its experience demonstrates the power of collective action in supporting wider adoption of natural farming and stronger coordination across organizations.



A defining feature of the RCNF is its commitment to moving beyond fragmented, organization-specific approaches. Instead of working in isolation, member organizations pool their knowledge, experience, and resources to create a stronger collective platform capable of influencing both farming practices and the broader agricultural ecosystem. This collaboration allows the coalition to achieve a scale and impact that individual organizations would find difficult to accomplish on their own.

RCNF functions as a network of CSOs working on agriculture, livelihoods, and rural enterprise development. The coalition is guided by a General Body that meets annually and operates through thematic working groups focused on key areas such as capacity building, resource mobilization, gender inclusion, and local governance. Being CSO-led allows the coalition to remain flexible, responsive, and independent while adapting its strategies to the diverse realities of tribal and non-tribal regions across Rajasthan.

The coalition's overall goal is to promote natural farming through a combination of community-level action and system-level change. At the community level, it focuses on strengthening livelihoods, building local capacities, and improving access to resources, grooming a cadre of master trainers and champion farmers. At the systems level, it works to influence policies, strengthen institutional support, and create an enabling environment for natural farming.

Its work is anchored around four strategic pillars:

- **Capacity Building:** Strengthening the skills of member organizations, farmers, and community leaders through trainings, exposure visits, and knowledge-sharing platforms.
- **Resource Mobilization:** Securing financial and technical support to sustain and expand natural farming initiatives.
- **Gender Inclusion:** Established as a dedicated working group in 2023, this pillar promotes women's participation through research, capacity building, and gender-responsive approaches.
- **Local Governance and GPDP Integration:** Working to embed agriculture and natural resource management within GPDPs. Pilot initiatives in 36 Gram Panchayats have demonstrated how local governance institutions can support natural farming and sustainable development.

Together, these pillars provide the strategic coherence that enables RCNF to function not merely as a network of organizations, but as a coordinated movement for ecological agriculture and rural transformation in Rajasthan.

CAPACITY BUILDING AND RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

A strong focus on capacity building lies at the heart of RCNF's strategy. In its early phase, the coalition organized online training on regenerative agriculture and natural farming practices, helping member organizations build a common understanding of key concepts and the POP. To strengthen learning, RCNF drew on the experience of states where natural farming was already well established, including Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Punjab. Through the wider NCNF network, experts from these states shared practical lessons and field experiences, enriching the coalition's knowledge base.

A key component of this approach is the Master Trainer program. Member organizations nominate staff for intensive, phase-based residential training designed to build a cadre of skilled trainers who can support farmers and community institutions at the grassroots level. This creates a multiplier effect, allowing knowledge and skills to spread across districts and organizations. In the initial years, coalition activities were largely supported through the contributions and resources of member organizations. A major milestone came in 2024 when RCNF secured a grant of approximately ₹45 lakh from the Global Greengrants Fund. Hosted by PRADAN until 2025, this support strengthened the coalition's ability to invest in training, knowledge generation, and field-level leadership development.

The grant has enabled the development of field workers, master trainers, and champion farmers, while also supporting pilot initiatives that demonstrate the value of natural farming. More importantly, it has helped bridge the gap between grassroots innovation and policy engagement, allowing successful field experiences to inform broader discussions on sustainable agriculture in Rajasthan.

MAINSTREAMING GENDER IN NATURAL FARMING

The creation of a dedicated Gender Working Group in 2023 marked an important shift in RCNF's approach. The coalition recognized a long-standing reality: although women contribute a major share of agricultural labor, their work often remains invisible, with limited recognition, ownership, or decision-making power. Farming is frequently viewed as a male activity, while women's contributions are treated as an extension of household responsibilities.

In response, RCNF adopted gender inclusion not as a separate program, but as a perspective integrated across all its activities. Formally launched during a General Body meeting, the initiative aimed to build a shared understanding of gender among member organizations and develop leaders who could champion more equitable agricultural systems.

With support from the MAKAAAM, the group began by strengthening members' understanding of gender issues and revisiting existing case studies through a gender lens. This process helped uncover contributions by women that had often been overlooked in earlier narratives and program assessments.

A major outcome of this effort has been the Gender Study in Agriculture, designed to create a baseline for understanding how natural farming affects women. The study has completed data collection across 22 districts and combines quantitative data with qualitative insights, including perspectives from both women and men.

The study focuses on five key dimensions:

- **Drudgery and Health:** Examining the physical workload involved in natural farming practices and their impact on women's health.
- **Access to Resources:** Assessing women's access to and control over land, seeds, tools, water, and financial resources.
- **Role and Recognition:** Understanding whether women's agricultural knowledge and contributions are acknowledged and valued.
- **Decision-Making:** Exploring who makes decisions related to farming practices, production, and the use of income.
- **Food and Nutrition:** Examining how natural farming influences household nutrition and whether women benefit from improved food availability and diversity.

By generating evidence across these areas, RCNF is helping ensure that natural farming is evaluated not only in terms of ecological and economic outcomes, but also through the lens of gender equity.

BUILDING LOCAL CAPACITY AND INTEGRATING NATURAL FARMING INTO GOVERNANCE

A key pillar of RCNF's work is the development of local leadership and technical capacity. To support this, the coalition selected 35 Master Trainers from 18 member organizations and provided intensive residential training. These trainings focused not only on natural farming practices but also on gender-inclusive approaches.

The coalition has also worked to move beyond pilot initiatives by embedding natural farming within local governance systems. In partnership with the Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Department, Government of Rajasthan RCNF supported the integration of natural farming priorities into GPDPs across 36 panchayats. This has led to practical interventions such as the establishment of BRCs, construction of compost pits, and the expansion of regenerative agriculture practices at the village level.

Field experiences indicate that these efforts are strengthening both technical knowledge and confidence among farmers, particularly women. Training programs have enabled women to engage more actively in farming decisions and adopt new practices. An interesting insight from the field is that many women prioritize naturally farmed produce for household consumption while continuing conventional cultivation for some market crops. This reflects a thoughtful balancing of health, food security, and income considerations rather than a simple acceptance or rejection of farming methods.

The growing role of women in natural farming has also received wider recognition. Farmers such as Sugna Bai and Rekha Devi were honored with the Mati Mitra Award, highlighting the contributions of women leaders in advancing sustainable agriculture.

POLICY ENGAGEMENT AND SYSTEMIC INFLUENCE

RCNF views the GPDP as a key pathway for institutionalizing natural farming within local governance. By piloting the integration of natural farming activities in 36 panchayats, the coalition is generating practical evidence that can support wider inclusion of these practices in government programs, budgets, and development plans. This approach focuses on embedding natural farming within existing governance systems.

The coalition also works closely with government institutions, including KVKs and the Department of Agriculture, Government of Rajasthan, to strengthen technical support and policy alignment. Previous government directives have encouraged district departments to collaborate with RCNF clusters, and ongoing engagement aims to formalize successful innovations such as BRCs within state-supported frameworks.

A key strategy is its Gender Study in Agriculture. By generating evidence on issues such as women's workload, access to resources, recognition, decision-making, and nutrition, the study provides a strong foundation for policy dialogue. The objective is to ensure that women's contributions to agriculture are recognized and reflected in future programs and planning processes.

Alongside evidence generation, RCNF actively documents and shares field experiences to build wider awareness and support for natural farming. This combination of data and lived experiences helps translate local successes into policy recommendations with long-term relevance.

CONCLUSION

RCNF has evolved from a platform promoting natural farming into a broader movement addressing institutional coordination, local governance, and gender equity. While challenges remain—including sustaining collaboration among diverse organizations and addressing entrenched social norms—the coalition has established itself as a dynamic learning network capable of adapting and growing.

Looking ahead, the analysis and application of findings from the Gender Study will be critical for shaping future interventions and influencing policy. Expanding the Master Trainer program will help deepen grassroots capacity, while stronger partnerships with government institutions can support the integration of successful models into state programs and systems.

Through capacity building, local planning, evidence generation, and institutional convergence, RCNF is demonstrating how natural farming can move beyond a technical agricultural practice and become a community-led movement embedded within local governance and rural development processes.

ANNEXURES

**MAPPING HOPE,
BUILDING ASSETS**
A Paradigm of
Participatory Rural
Development in
Banka, Bihar



**ENGINEERING FROM
BELOW**
Community-Led
Water Resource
Regeneration in
Kumharra, Mandla,
Madhya Pradesh



**CULTIVATING
POSSIBILITY**
Reframing the Rural
from Deficiency
to Capacity in
Bhanupratappur,
Chhattisgarh



**PUTTING THE LAST
FIRST**
Inclusive GPDP
in Lohardaga,
Jharkhand



**SOVEREIGN
LANDSCAPES**
Women's Agency
Rewrote the Village
Economy in
Bargarh, Odisha



**NO LONGER WAITING
OUTSIDE**

The New Defense
of the Dalmadal
Women, Bankura.
West Bengal



**THE ENTREPRENEURS
OF MOTHER EARTH**
A Fertile Pathway
Adopted In
Begusarai, Bihar



**COUNTING THE
UNCOUNTED**
The Institutional
Evolution of Aamon
Mahila Chaasi FPC,
Jhargram, West
Bengal



**BRANDING THE BIO-
ECONOMY**
Women-Led BRCs
in Lohardaga,
Jharkhand



**TAKING BACK THE
VALUE CHAIN**
Cultivating a New
Legacy of Women-
Led Enterprise and
Economic Resilience
in Koraput, Odisha



**PONDS OF PLENTY,
BUNDS OF HOPE**
Sustainable
livelihoods
and ecological
restoration in
waterlogged regions,
Begusarai, Bihar



**THE NEW AGRARIAN
ARCHITECTURE**
Rise of Women-Led
FPOs in Katihar,
Nawada, Jamui and
Begusarai, Bihar



FUELING FREEDOM
Women at the
Forefront of the
Green Energy
Revolution, Udaipur,
Rajasthan



**LEDGERS OF
LIBERATION**
Women Owning
the Enterprises in
Sirohi, Rajasthan



**STREAMS OF
LEADERSHIP**
Women Rewriting
the Script of Scarcity
in Kalahandi,
Odisha



**SURFACING THE
ICEBERG**
Making Visible The
Productive Power
Of The Kamhar
In Dhamtari,
Chhattisgarh



**DEVELOPMENT AS
DIGNITY**
The Expansion of
Capabilities in the
Drylands of Mandla,
Madhya Pradesh



**CLAIMING THE
COMMONS, CLAIMING
THE PLAN**
Women's
Institutionalization
in BHGY, Godda,
Jharkhand



**MAPPING THE
INVISIBLE ASSETS**
Asset-Based
Community
Development
and Gender
Transformation
in Narharpur,
Chhattisgarh



**FROM FRAGMENTED
SCHEMES TO
INTEGRATED
LANDSCAPES**
Convergence
Approach in Banka,
Bihar



**LEADING THE FLOW
OF CHANGE**
The Story of Hari
Hariyali Water
User Association,
Bankura, West
Bengal



MORE THAN A SEAT
Elected Women
Representatives
from Godda,
Jharkhand



**SYNERGIZING
GRASSROOTS
DEMOCRACY**
PRI- CBO
Convergence in
Sirohi and Udaipur,
Rajasthan

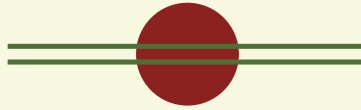


**RESHAPING THE
LANDSCAPE OF
FREEDOM**
Women Mates and
the Institutional
Transformation of
Rural Livelihoods
in Betul, Madhya
Pradesh



**THE ECONOMICS OF
DIGNITY**
The Fisherwomen of
Simni, Purulia, West
Bengal





Access to Water for Rejuvenating Rural Economy (AWARE) is a systems change initiative designed to foster an ecosystem that supports women in leadership roles in agriculture-water governance, aiming for improved socioeconomic and environmental outcomes by building a wide-ranging coalition, including government, women collectives, CSOs, the private sector, philanthropies, and academia. AWARE and complementary initiatives aim to support women farmers by enhancing their recognition and access to water and agricultural resources across villages in the Central Indian Tribal Region.



ग्रामीण विकास मंत्रालय
भारत सरकार
**MINISTRY OF RURAL
DEVELOPMENT**
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA



प्रदान
Pradan
PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE
FOR DEVELOPMENT ACTION

