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Igniting Change

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Arriving at a Cacophonous Harmony

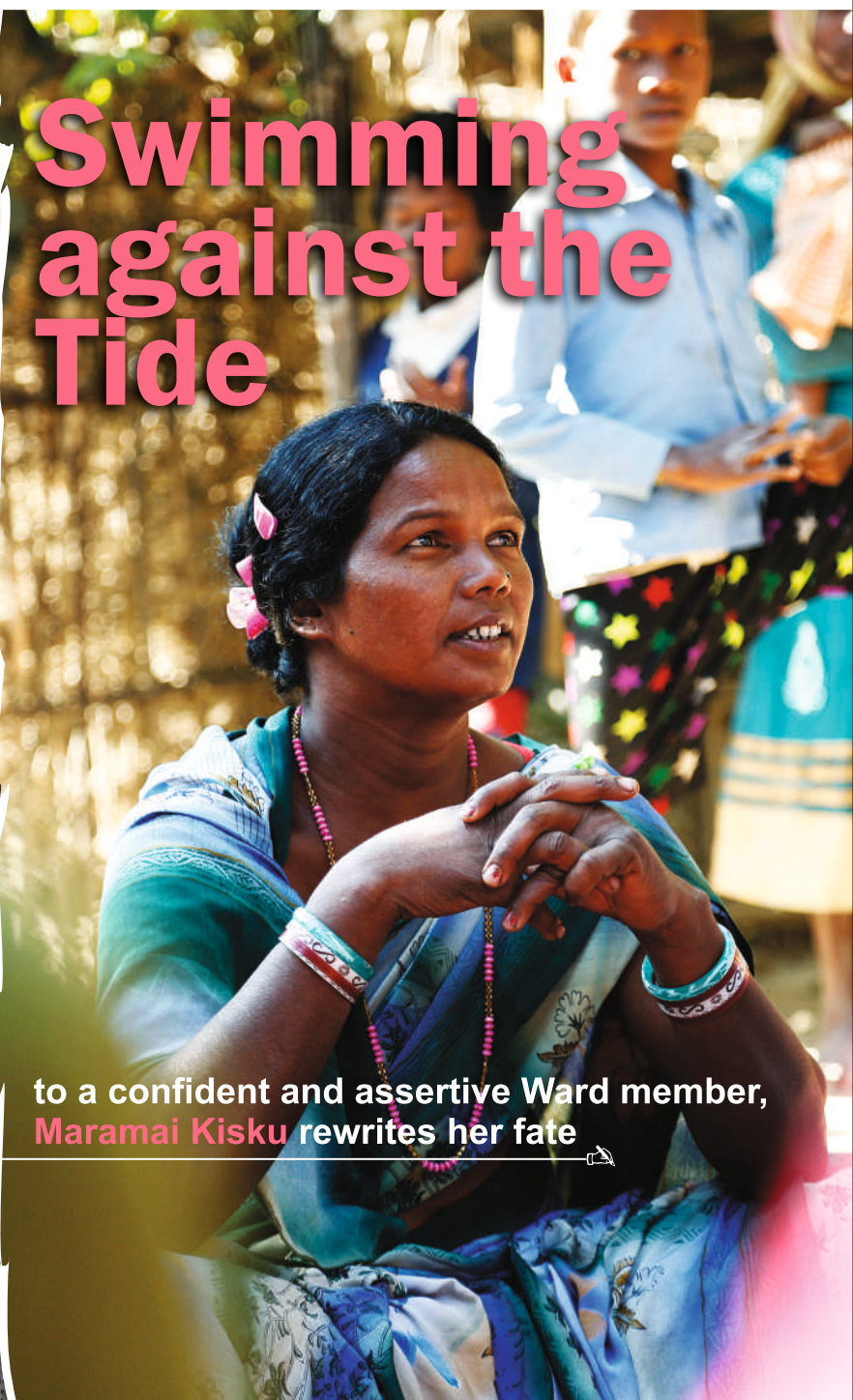
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The Dehuri: In Search
of an Identity



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landless labourer

Swimming against the Tide



to a confident and assertive Ward member,
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AMIT KUMAR THAKUR

SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE: Maramai Kisku

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Tracing the life of Maramai Kisku, a landless Santhal, who progressed from being a 'labourer' to a confident and assertive Ward Member of her *panchayat*, this article touches upon the changes in her attitude and style of functioning once she is a successful farmer, and leaves us with the searing quote, "The oppressed, instead of striving for liberalization, tend to become oppressors."

WHenever anyone visits the Surjapuri community, she/he is offered a cup of tea, some biscuits and *supari* (betel nut). I noticed this unique custom when I started working in Bahadurganj district, northeast Bihar. I rather liked the custom and soon became used to it, and, on some days, I would have endless cups of tea.

Later, when I went to the Santhal hamlet for the first time, I was surprised when I was not offered any tea. I learned that this custom is very typical of the Surjapuri community, comprising Muslim or upper-caste Hindus, and is not practised by the marginalized Santhals and Harijans. The customs and practices of a community tell us about their social and economic status.

Three years later, when I visited Maramai Kisku's (a Santhal and an SHG member) house, I was

There were very few Santhal families; therefore, they stayed together, afraid of being bullied by the majority community. There was always a fear of being chased away by the local people

served the customary tea with biscuits and *supari*. What led to this change? Was this the result of a rise in the social status of Maramai Kisku's family?

Introduction

Let me introduce Maramai Kisku. She was born in the small village of Chauria, located in Jhapa district, Nepal, which is about 35 km from Bahadurganj block town in Bihar. She lived there with her mother, father and brother for the first few years of her life, and also did her basic schooling there. The financial condition of the family was not very good because of the lack of regular livelihood opportunities in the area. The entire family was dependent on her father. He was the only bread winner, working as a daily wage labourer because that was the only available option.

Due to the ease in travel between the two countries, Maramai's father and others moved freely and frequently between India and Nepal, depending on the availability of livelihood options. They gradually began to stay in India for longer periods and finally became citizens of India.

Maramai tells us that her ancestors owned some land but

had gradually sold these off in difficult times. In search of work, these Santhal families were forced to migrate to India; they found work easily and were able to at least get three meals a day.

She was 16 years old in 1996 when she first came to Sameshar, Bahadurganj, in India, with her parents, to work as labourers in agricultural fields. At the age of 17, she was married to Loksha Murmu in Kunjibari, who also lived in Sameshar with his parents and worked as a wage labourer. She soon gave birth to two children and migrated to Sitagachh village in Bahadurganj, with her children and husband.

They lived on a small plot of land provided by the landlord who had nearly 20 acres of land in Sitagachh. The landlord provided them a piece of land in the central part of his property, so that it would be easier for them to access the land they would be working on.

After them, many other Santhali families came to Sitagachh and started living on the same plot of land. The landlord became worried he would find it difficult to get his land back once people began settling on it. He got the land vacated and sent the Santhali families to a piece of

barren land on the banks of the river, which belonged to the government.

There were very few Santhal families; therefore, they stayed together, afraid of being bullied by the majority community. There was always a fear of being chased away by the local people. They lived far away from all settlements and without considerations of settling down near a school, a market or basic facilities. Their main objective was to protect themselves and to get some minimum wage to feed themselves. As the number of labourers increased in that hamlet, they started doing menial work for other people. They soon began to be known as labourers and, as the time passed, the local people began to call the Santhals the 'labour *jan*'. People began to seek out the Santhals for all menial work and the Santhals were happy to get food and remuneration on time. The regular availability of work and on-time payment led many others from Nepal to migrate and settle in India.

Life of Santhals in the hamlet

They named their small hamlet Kachhari Tola. This is in Bhatabari *panchayat* and is 1

Their huts get damaged, the roofs collapse and people lose their lives in the fierce thunderstorms that hit the region. This repeated devastation hampers development

km from Basbari Hat and 7 km from the town of Bahadurganj, the block headquarters. The local people call the Santhals 'Satar' and they call the hamlet Satar Basti. This hamlet remains cut off from nearby villages, markets, schools, the block town and other amenities for six to seven months every year, due to floods. The area is flooded even in the years when there is normal rainfall.

Flash floods are a major setback; people use boats to reach the nearby markets in the rainy season. Water enters their houses every year. Their huts get damaged, the roofs collapse and people lose their lives in the fierce thunderstorms that hit the region. This repeated devastation hampers development because the people spend their time and money recovering from calamity and returning to the same stage as earlier.

The land here gets degraded and eroded every year; this changes the pattern of houses in the hamlet. Since the people are living on government land and do not have a *patta* (registration) in their names, they do not take the risk of investing in the construction of *pucca* houses or work towards making the land fertile for agriculture. They live in fear that the land can be taken away from

them at any point of time. All the houses are made of bamboo and jute sticks and only some of the houses are layered with mud. Most of these temporary houses are in a dilapidated condition and there are no roads in their hamlet, which connects them to schools, Primary Health Centres (PHCs), the *panchayat* and the market. They do not demand any amenities because they fear they may be inviting attention to the fact that they have settled on government land and may be evicted.

In the market and outside their village, the Santhals are known for their labour work. This has proven to be a hindering factor for this community and for their children. Many people treat the children as labourers from childhood and de-motivate them by saying, "*Jitna bhi padh lo, labour hi banoge* (No matter how much you study, you will remain a labourer)." The Surjapuri children treat these children as untouchables and usually do not play with them. People do not touch these little children even if they are crying while the mother is working in the field. The Santhals are not allowed to enter the homes of the Surjapuris and are given food in disposable plates and glasses, outside the premises.

Getting Together

The image of the Santhal community among the majority Muslim or Hindu (upper caste) community and the way they were being treated are very disturbing. The Santhals had accepted that they would not be treated with respect by the people of other communities. I wondered how to work towards the Santhals being accepted as human beings at least. I did not have any solutions; but I hoped that this image would change gradually. I formed an SHG in the hamlet, which became a platform for members to hold discussions.

Once when I was taking the SHG members for an exposure visit, I deliberately stopped the vehicle in the marketplace for lunch. The women were very hesitant to even come out of the vehicle. One of them said, "*Dada hum log gaadi mein hi rahenge; aap sirf biscuit ka packet de dijiye, khana hamaara ho jaayega* (Brother, we'll stay in the vehicle. Please bring us some packets of biscuits; that will be enough for our lunch)."

The women were afraid that the people would scold them for having food with the people of the major community. I insisted. The people around were shocked at how politely I addressed the

The women hesitantly agreed to come into the eatery, hurriedly took the food, wrapped it in a plastic bag and headed back to the vehicle. They were scared that the people would recognize them and would bully them later

didis. The women hesitantly agreed to come into the eatery, but hurriedly took the food, wrapped it in a plastic bag and headed back to the vehicle. They were scared that the people would recognize them and would bully them later.

This incident shocked me. I hadn't expected that the women would feel so intimidated. I could sense how disturbed the women were. Among the women was Maramai Kisku, who later said she felt uncomfortable with the way the people look down upon her community; she would like to change her fate. She shared that she no longer wanted to work as labourer but would like to be a farmer herself. She said that she wanted to build a good image of the Santhals in society. She took the initiative to bring other members from her hamlet to join the SHG and make plans for agriculture.

Maramai Kisku tried to convince the other members from her SHG but they were fearful. They feared that their land would be taken away if they made themselves conspicuous. They also mistrusted PRADAN. They could not understand why anyone would invest time on them and train them. They thought that they would be cheated. When

an agriculture planning meeting was scheduled, none of the members turned up. Maramai, however, was very confident. She kept herself engaged in various activities such as participating in block-level SHG trainings, SHG expansion and agriculture training. In order that she is not cheated, Maramai continuously engaged herself in helping villagers make an informed choice in participating in the SHG, and the SHG meetings continued as usual. Often, when Maramai had to go for meetings and when she had to bring other members in the group, her husband would scold her. Nevertheless, she never gave up.

Venturing into Agriculture

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In this area, more than 80 per cent of the land (the cultivated and the uncultivated) is owned by the Sadgop, Surjapuri Muslim, Gangai and Rajbanshi communities. Some of the land is on the banks of the river; it is sandy and has been barren for years. For the landlords, it becomes difficult to access these lands in the rainy season, the production is low, and managing it after the monsoon season is tough; they prefer, therefore, to give these lands on lease to the Santhals. However, because they

are poorly informed about the farming system and do not have the initial capital required for starting agriculture on their own land or the land they lease, the Santhals are reluctant to take up farming.

If they do venture into agriculture, they usually select crops that have either a low input cost or one that is less risky such as a variety of jute (locally named as *chana patua*). Because the Santhals have been working on fields of their landlords, they have learned how to transplant paddy but are unaware of how to manage the crop. Less production and an onslaught of diseases were also de-motivating factors; many abandoned farming, and thought that working as wage labour was the best and least risky option.

The Santhals, however, were not happy with the way they were treated by the landowners. In an SHG meeting, a *didi* said, "During the labour work, people treat us like machines and they want the maximum output with minimum wages. They do not even allow anyone to rest for a second and always keep an eye on us."

Maramai Kisku had a similar experience; she was looking for a source of livelihood other than labour. In a meeting, she

She announced that she was going to stop working as a daily wage labourer and instead farm on her own field with the limited resources available to her, and that she would earn money with respect

announced that she was going to stop working as a daily wage labourer and instead farm on her own field with the limited resources available to her, and that she would earn money with respect. She admitted that she had tried to plant many things in her own field but due to lack of knowledge and awareness, she had failed.

She shared, *“Ek baar hamein koi dawa aur tareeka ke bare mein bata dega to hum karlenge* (If someone tells me just once about the method and practice of cultivation, I can do it on my own).”

In one of the SHG meetings I proposed a one-day training session on agriculture in the Bahadurganj office. I invited almost all the members of the SHG to attend the meeting. Some of the members showed interest in farming, even though they didn't have land. They were taken for an exposure visit to Chapati village in Thakurganj block to see Lalita Devi's vegetable farm. Maramai Kisku was interested and asked many questions about tomato cultivation by the rain shelter method. On her return, she made plans to cultivate tomato and brinjal for the first time on her two-decimal plot of homestead land.

Other members did not have their own fields so they decided to work with Maramai and learn in her field. Manju Hembram, one of her fellow SHG members, shared, *“Inke khet mein ek baar fasal lagakar sikhenge, uske baad aadhi mein lekar sabji lagayenge* (We will learn cultivation practices in Maramai's field this time; next season onwards, we will take land on lease to cultivate vegetables).”

Some of the members had homestead land and space in their courtyard, where they could plant a few saplings. Some others decided to cultivate together and divide the profits among themselves equally, after selling the produce. A common group farming system was proposed and it was finalized that all the members would do farming collectively on a plot of 3.75 decimals, owned by Maramai, and would each take away their respective share after sale.

Maramai was happy to share her land with everyone. All the 35 members of that hamlet came out with their tools—their *kudal*, *khurpi* and *tokri*—and began work in their fields. Some dug the land, others helped pick grass and some engaged in preparing manure.

The active engagement of the women did not sit well with the men. They were very angry to see

the women working in the fields on their own. Some men took their wives away from the field by force. As many as 15 members went back in fear of their husbands. The others, somehow, convinced their husbands. Maramai Kisku cheered the women again saying that these obstacles would certainly block their way; they must continue, however, to move forward undeterred by all this. One day, they would find meaning in their efforts. Taking heart, the women prepared the raised nursery for brinjal and tomato.

After a few days, when the saplings grew bigger, Maramai Kisku's husband, who till now had not supported her, became interested. He had earlier worked in Himachal Pradesh and had some experience of tomato cultivation. He started engaging with Maramai Kisku and, together, they planned to prepare a rain shelter for tomato cultivation. They asked me about the expenses for developing the rain shelter. I told them that it would cost Rs 1200.

I was apprehensive that because they did not have enough money they would not invest this amount. But to my surprise, the next time when I reached the village, they were ready with the

Maramai Kisku stood like a rock, however, defending her decision. She had the conviction that positive change would come soon. She told the detractors that she had control over everything that she was doing, so no one could fool her.

construction material. With the use of locally arranged bamboo, plastic and ropes, they made the rain shelter. The shining rain shelter could be seen from a distance. It became the centre of attraction in their hamlet and soon the news spread widely in the Surjapuri community as well.

This raised the curiosity of the Surjapuri community; some came to visit the plot and were amazed by what they saw. Whereas some were all praise for them, there were others who laughed at them and said that they were wasting their time and money. They taunted them by saying that whoever was supporting them would take all the money from them at the end of harvesting. Some said that the PRADAN people were making a fool of them, to not waste their time and get back to doing what they were doing earlier.

Maramai Kisku stood like a rock, however, defending her decision. She had the conviction that positive change would come soon. She told the detractors that she had control over everything that she was doing, so no one could fool her.

She later said, "*Bahar se koi log aate hain to inko jalan hota hai,*

inko darr hai ki sikhne ke baad, unko log puchhna chhor denge (Whenever someone comes from outside, they feel jealous because they fear that after learning something new, we will not depend on them)."

She transplanted the tomato plants under the shelter without listening to the unwanted suggestions and advice given by the Surjapuris. After a few days, the flowers and fruits blossomed in the field and almost all the members of her hamlet went to see the sight. I saw the happiness on her face when she was sharing with the other members the experience of her struggles and challenges when she took the decision and during the cultivation. I was there in her field when she was harvesting tomato for the first time. It was *kharif* season and the prices of tomato was high. In the local market, people were surprised to see tomato being sold by a Santhali woman in that season. She got higher value for her produce, bolstering her confidence.

Next, she took 100 decimals of land on lease and asked for my support in planning crops that would give her a higher return. It was time to plan a brinjal nursery and plant ginger in the field.

Maramai, and her husband, were engaged in farming now. Soon, a lonely green field appeared amidst the brown barren field, seeming no less than a dream.

Seeing that Maramai Kisku was able to reap good benefits, the landlord increased the lease rate from Rs 3,000 per *bigha* to Rs 5,000 per *bigha* the next year. She knew that no one else would take this land for the amount that the landowner was proposing, so she was quite calm and left the decision to the landlord. She told him, "*Dada, is se jyaada koi deta hai to unko de dijiye, hum itna daam mein nahi le paayenge* (If someone gives you more than what I am offering for the land, give it to them. I cannot take the land at such a high rate)."

The landlord did not expect a Santhal woman to speak to him with such confidence. He had no choice but to agree to her terms. She took 200 decimals of land on lease and earned Rs 70,00 from selling maize and Rs 1.2 lakh from ginger. She said, "*Hum apna kheti karke bahut khush hain; kisi ke khet mein kam nahi karna par raha hai* (I am happy farming my own fields for myself; I no longer have to work in another's field as labour)."

Maramai Kisku was slowly becoming a known face in the area. She would regularly touch base with other farmers and had developed a good rapport with some traders. She became a key figure in the SHG promotion drive in the area.

New Opportunities

Maramai Kisku's story did not end with her becoming a self-sufficient farmer; farming became a turning point in her life. During an SHG meeting, a discussion was held on the challenges faced by the members in their day-to-day life. The members came out with a list of difficulties they faced. They then prioritized the issues that could be solved through the group's efforts. The two issues that were brought up were the lack of roads and the non-availability of electricity facilities in the hamlet. They planned to raise these issues with the *mukhiya*.

The members approached the *mukhiya* many times but they were always ignored. The SHG members became despondent. In an SHG meeting, Maramai Kisku said that they needed to get together and meet the *mukhiya* as a group in spite of the not-so-good experiences they had had with him. Maramai Kisku and some other members approached the *panchayat* representative and gave him a written application.

The first time, all the 26 members of the SHG went to meet the *mukhiya*; gradually, this number decreased and finally only eight members, including Maramai,

continued the struggle. Although the issues they raised were not resolved, Maramai Kisku got to know many PRI members and block officials in the process.

Maramai Kisku was slowly becoming a known face in the area. She would regularly touch base with other farmers and had developed a good rapport with some traders. She became a key figure in the SHG promotion drive in the area. The movement by the group for promoting SHGs and availing of the basic facilities in the *panchayat* made her known in the community. Her increased confidence also helped in promoting the SHGs in the Muslim and other Hindu communities in the area.

In the same year (2016), a member from the Scheduled Tribes (STs) had to be selected for the post of Ward Member in the Bhabari *panchayat* elections. The villagers found Maramai Kisku to be the best person from the ST community to lead the ward. In her hamlet, all the members insisted that she file her nomination.

There were two other members from two hamlets fighting for the same seat. However, Maramai won the seat in the election with an unexpected number of votes

and became the Ward Member. I met her in the market and she expressed her gratitude for our support and invited me to a tea shop. She and three other women of the SHG sat on the bench and ordered five plates of snacks. I recalled how conscious these women had been some two years before. I realized that they had reached a position of power, which was respected in society, and they no longer faced any discrimination.

The first thing Maramai did after becoming the Ward Member was to raise the issue of electricity and roads for her hamlet, with the help of the SHG members. She said that the electricity connection had not been provided by PRI members and they needed to go to the block and the Electricity Department for the same. She submitted an application to the block officials and the Electricity Department and followed up regularly.

If someone was to go to the hamlet now, they would find electricity in the homes and the roads being constructed. These achievements have boosted her self-confidence. She is now planning to get the patta of the land on which they have been living for a long time without any identification. She said that

No effort has been made by the block to preserve traditional food crops or to probe the declining interest in traditional food-growing habits. No market has been created for the traditional Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP), especially edibles

if the homestead land could be transferred to their name, the next task for her would be to buy some land for agriculture.

Becoming 'Mainstream'

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Today, Maramai owns land in her name. As Ward Member, she conducts transactions with various institutions daily. She is busy with various tasks of the block and the *panchayat*, and addresses the issues of the people. Besides these engagements and changes, still goes to every house in her village before the SHG meeting and attends every Village Organization (VO) meeting in the village. She has now become an example for other Santhal families in the hamlet.

However, there have also been some marked changes in her personality and her attitude. She is slowly becoming part of the system. I have seen her talk with the people in the same way as the earlier representatives used to. One day, as I was in her house, a Santhal woman of her own hamlet came to her house to apply for an old age pension. Maramai's response shocked me; she said, "*Tumko block mein arji jama karna hoga aur thode bahut paise kharch karne honge, tabhi hoga* (You will have to go to the

block to apply and you will also have to spend some amount of money; only then will it get done)."

I also heard that the Ward Members were taking Rs 1000 as a bribe to register the names of the households for flood relief from the government; she did not share that with me. Recently, Maramai's husband bought a new bike and told me, "*Ab toh kamai ho raha hai, toh bike kharid liye* (Now we are earning, so I bought a new bike)." In the PRI system, apparently, every person is forced to follow certain norms made for each section and department.

During *rabi* planning, she announced that everyone should cultivate vegetables in at least two decimals of homestead land. There is a change in her expression from the earlier period. Earlier, she used to discuss the issues in her SHG and with the community to arrive at a decision; now, she directs people to act and doesn't hesitate to put forth her final say in her hamlet without consulting the others. People, however, are accepting her views and decisions today. They look forward to hearing her views.

There are changes in her appearance as well. Her house,

her children's clothing, their food patterns have all become almost similar to that of the Surjapuri Muslim community. Her way of welcoming guests is quite similar to theirs and she follows the norms of the Surjapuri because many people come to her home for various tasks.

Of course, one cannot judge her for following the majority community but her actions are similar to theirs. Interestingly, within her own community, Maramai Kisku and her family now enjoy the same privileged position that she had earlier disliked about the Surjapuris when she was venturing into independent farming. Her husband once told me, "We don't make liquor now, but people in my hamlet are still backward. They make liquor and don't stop their children from drinking and that is why our children don't mingle much with their children."

While I am happy with the rise in the social position of Maramai Kisku and her family, I also remember the quote from Paulo Freire, "The oppressed, instead of striving for liberalization, tend to become oppressors."

—
Amit Kumar Thakur is based in Bahadurganj, Bihar

The Dehuri: In Search of an Identity

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Calling itself the 'Dehuri', the Hill Khadia tribe, the hero of this tale, is in search of a space for itself in agrarian settings. Their confusions, struggles, perceptions of society and the desired role of intervention agencies constitute the body of the narration.

Introduction

The Khadias belong to the Munda sub-group of the Austro-Asiatic languages-based ethnic group classification. They are sub-divided into three groups—the Hill Khadia, the Delki Khadia and the Dudh Khadia.

The Hill Khadias are also called the Pahari (meaning hill) Khadias, Savara/Sabar, they live in a forest and depend upon forest produce for their primary livelihood. They are listed as PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups).

These traditional hunter-gatherers were displaced from the Similipal biosphere after it was declared a Tiger Reserve in 1973. The Hill Khadias are very few in number compared to other the tribes living in and around the biosphere. The dedicated development agency (formed by the government) named Khadia Mankdia Development Agency (KMDA), in 2010, placed their population at 1908. Jashipur block of Panchspeed sub-division has the highest population of Hill Khadias.

There are about six villages in the periphery of the Similipal biosphere, where the Hill Khadias have been rehabilitated. Earlier before being rehabilitated they used to live in caves or huts made out of *sal*

The other villagers (Ho, Bathudi and Santhal), gram panchayat officials and KMDA all say that the Khadias are not civilized, live like savages and the money spent on them is a waste

(sorea robusta) branches; today, their chicken-coop, like-houses, constructed for them by the government), are more like ghettos.

The government has planned and implemented many development schemes for them, directly through the block the *panchayat* and KMDA. No project, however, has ever yielded the envisaged outcome. For example, the plans to involve the Khadias in agriculture or livestock-rearing have failed miserably because the people never adopted the practices taught to them by the officials of the various departments. Of course, the departments were also responsible for the failure because they did not supply material on time.

There were attempts to form women's Self-Help Groups (SHG); the women of the tribe, however, never attended meetings regularly. The tribals go into the forest for five to six months each year regularly; they dig tubers and collect honey for their own consumption and sale. The rest of the time they work for the villagers and the *gram panchayat* as manual labour. The only successful intervention by KMDA is the Hill Khadia residential

school. The school has brought education into the hamlet and now most of the young people can read and write. Not all the children enrolled in school attend school; however, they are now very familiar with television and other technologies.

The other villagers (Ho, Bathudi and Santhal), *gram panchayat* officials and KMDA all say that the Khadias are not civilized, live like savages and the money spent on them is a waste. The general sentiment is that they are people who have failed the government and the *panchayat*. Is that really so? Or is it that we lack the perspective to understand them and to support them in their idea of development? What does development really mean to them? To understand the question of development for them, one needs to first understand them and try to figure out their ideological stance and identity.

It is important to understand the fluidity of their identities, and to acknowledge their struggle as they search to position themselves in the new context of a tribal and mixed agrarian village, the balancing of their traditional life and livelihoods with the new opportunities,

and their attempts at creating a new identity while holding on to traditional values and ethics.

The new identity will emerge from the resistances (resistance, is the act of standing against power) of the Hill Khadia. They will first have to rekindle the fire of what it once meant to be a Dehuri (their old and much-revered identity). This phoenix-like reincarnation of a Dehuri is like the old riddle of the Ship of Theseus. If all the material used in the ship is changed, would it still remain the same ship? If the values, ethics, life and livelihood choices of these people are altered, would they still be Dehuri? Or would a political organization be required to assume the desired, evolving identity?

That might have its own constraints. History is never written for or by people in the present. It has its own version of truth and truth is layered with memories. Memory itself is as morphed as cultures are fluid. The interaction of the community with other societies and the introduction of education have brought new flavours and fluidity/mobility into play; all these have their own sets of merits and demerits. The phoenix, therefore, that is going

Every time a reconstruction of this identity is attempted, a new Dehuri will emerge, different from the previous Dehuri and, yet, the same

to emerge from the ashes will most probably be a new one. Every time a reconstruction of this identity is attempted, a new Dehuri will emerge, different from the previous Dehuri and, yet, the same.

A quest needs to be undertaken to identify the sameness and the criticality of the commonality. This requires facilitation and an exploration of the world along with the community. It will mean first understanding its world-view and, then, looking at the changes in the villagers' lives from their perspective. This exploration of identity is not just an idea or a superficial exercise; it requires a deep engagement with the people, questioning their current realities, rummaging histories and deconstructing existing notions to arrive at a reality that will predominantly define their lives, livelihoods and be in congruence with their identity.

The exploration and support for this reconstruction is important for a facilitator or a development practitioner. The criticality of engagement as a facilitator is to navigate towards a 'singularity-agency' while valuing the multiple points of view. The subjective history they have narrated

remains largely uncontested but the current identity and the future they aspire to is very complex, and the multiplicity is very high. The individual agencies and the collective agency run parallel. ("The margins at which disciplinary discourses break down and enter the world of political agency," Spivak Reader).

The first and foremost task is to listen to them, identify their central argument and understand and accept their idea of themselves. This may have the potential to become their political stance and their political voice. With this understanding, we attempted to listen to the subaltern and we observed their resistances so as to give shape to their identity. (In postcolonial theory, the term subaltern describes the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margins of a society: a subaltern is a person rendered without agency by social status.)

"Aame kichhi kahibu, aamaku Khadia kuha nahin; aame 'dehuri'," (We will say something,, do not call us Khadia, we are 'Dehuri') said 20 people of the Hill Khadia tribe, Kumudabadi village, Jashipur block, Mayurbhanj, Odisha.

We will say something (*Aame kichhi kahibu*)

—
One summer morning of 2016, I went to Kumudabadi village with my colleague Soubhagya. The Hill Khadia hamlet is at the extreme end of the village, near the jungle on the most unproductive hillock of the village.

PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) and KMDA had tried to form SHGs with the people here but these groups never functioned for more than three months. KMDA had also given loans to the women, which has not been repaid for the last five years. Five people (three women and two men) attended the meeting and told us to come the next day.

The next day, almost 20 people gathered for the meeting. Most of them were women, who did not go to the forest that day in order to attend the meeting. This was contrary to what the villagers said about the Khadias never attending a meeting. We started to talk about their village, their livelihood and what they generally do in a day. We told them about ourselves. After an hour of interaction, they told us that they wanted to go to the

This was very significant for me because I was hearing the voice of the subaltern. I was listening to their view about themselves. I was enthralled to be bestowed with a glimpse of 'resistance' by the oppressed.

jungle meet us again the following Friday.

They said, "You are one of the first people, who did not come and tell us to make a group, take a loan, or insurance, or do some livelihood although we are disappointed that you will not give us any grant. You talked to us like we are *manisha* (human beings); you wanted to know about us and told us about yourselves. We felt free and happy being with you, so we would like to meet again."

One old woman held our hands and said, "We are 'Dehuri' not 'Hill Khadia'. During the discussion, you said we are Khadia; but we are not Khadia." She added, "We are worshippers of the forest and nature, and that's why we are Dehuri. But the government and the people have named us Hill Khadia, which we do not like to be called."

This was very significant for me because I was hearing the voice of the subaltern. I was listening to their view about themselves. I was enthralled to be bestowed with a glimpse of 'resistance' by the oppressed.

Do not call us 'Khadia' (*Aamaku khadia kuha nahin*)

Our discussion and exploration resulted in multiple meetings with them. One of the mythic stories (subjective history) that they narrated in the subsequent meetings is relevant in understanding how they became Khadia and why they despise being called Khadia.

Jamuna Dehuri narrated the legend: "Long ago, there was a territorial meeting conducted by all the tribes. Several instruments were placed in a row and each tribe was to select one instrument to determine their lives and livelihood. The Kolho selected the plough, the Santhal selected the bow, and the Khadia selected the axe, which can only be used to cut trees. Our elders were wise because they knew it is important to live in harmony with the forest, our mother nature, as Dehuri. The other tribes thought we were fools not to select an instrument that could have provided us land. From that day, we, Dehuris, have depended upon the forest. The forest is everything to us."

According to them, they are peaceful people and have never wanted any fight because their practices of being Dehuri restrain them from any violence. They substantiate this with the following story:

"More than 100 years ago, they used to live across the Similipal biosphere, where they found plenty of natural flora and fauna. Then the Kolho and the Santhal came there and forcefully evicted them from their lands. They used brute force to evict the Dehuris and converted their land into agriculture lands. This compelled the Dehuris to migrate farther into the deep core zones of Similipal. People interpreted their innocence as foolishness and their understanding of nature as a shortcoming. They started calling them Khadia and their identity as Dehuri gradually diminished. With the evolution of villages with multiple tribes in the buffer zone of Similipal, the Bathudi tribe took the responsibility of nature worshipping because the Khadias had migrated into the deep forest. Now, the Bathudi tribe (Naik) is known as Dehuri, or the worshipper of the village

The older people say, "Our Dehuri soul is dying and our forefathers who shared the same roots of nature as those of the trees are no more. We've lost the skills and ability of the Dehuris, who could worship 'Athar Deuli (the forest God)' and the forest"

sacred groves, and the real Dehuris have become Khadias."

The term 'gentrification' was first introduced by sociologist Ruth Glass in the 1960s to describe a trend that was transforming urban spaces in reference to the 'invasion' of a working class neighbourhood by wealthier 'gentry'. I find here, that the establishment of agrarian villages and the coerced migration of the Dehuri people into the deep forest may be seen as 'rural gentrification'; an invasion of agrarian tribes into the habitat of the hunter-gatherers.

We are 'Dehuri' (*Aame Dehuri*)

"Who is a Dehuri and what does it mean to be a Dehuri?" These were the two questions that we started exploring. In a tribe that no longer practices and owns the rights to worship, and in which the last worshippers died some 20 years ago, how can this question be answered by the existing generation?

The older people say, "Our Dehuri soul is dying and our forefathers who shared the same roots of nature as those of the trees are no more. We've lost the skills and ability of the Dehuris, who could worship 'Athar Deuli (the forest God)' and the forest."

We, in PRADAN, relied heavily on their narrations for information about their lives and history. They used to collect forest produce after worshipping and never harvested more than what was needed. Sometimes, they sold the produce and from that money managed their households. A Dehuri has the right to and knowledge of worshipping the Similpal forest and Athara Deuli. The wife of a Dehuri is usually called Dehuriani and her role is to assist her husband to arrange the items and the material required to worship Athara Deuli.



Equipment a Dehuri uses: Bow and arrow, axe, climbing hook, and container.

Traditionally, a Dehuri has a bow and arrow, an axe and a *gandra* (bag), required to collect forest produce. The Dehuris live off the income from the produce. Visiting the forest every day and protecting the forest is their duty. Saving the forest from fire is another responsibility. A Dehuri village has a worship place called the Jahira, where their Almighty lives and listens to all

the Dehuris. Trust and worship are their key ingredients to living a meaningful life.

The Bathudi now worship the forest and the Forest Department calls the Dehuri thieves and does not let them into their beloved forest. The Dehuri now have restricted entry into the forest. They feel like aliens in their new settlements and have no work to do. According to them, they do not fit here. They ask, "How can a fish survive without water and how can a Dehuri survive without Similpal?"

They are trapped and they oscillate like a pendulum between government facilities and schemes and their traditional beliefs. They are now slowly and inexorably taking on the identity of beneficiaries of government schemes and grants.

Exploring their skills and the needs of the village, I found that neither do they own the lands, nor do they know how to cultivate. They are not even skilled to practice any livelihood in agrarian villages. They work in the lands of the Kolho and the Bathudi, as agriculture labourers or as unskilled workers under MGNREGA to fill their stomach. When I look at them from the perspective of their rights as

Deprived of their rights and denied access
to their own forest, there is a revolt of
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human beings, their right to livelihood, access and control over forest, their constitutional rights and government entitlements, I find them far away from the desired scenario. The apathy of the government in involving them in governance and their own resistance have created a complex sub-optimal existence. They are the first beneficiaries of all egalitarian schemes; yet, they do not know what to expect from these entitlements (for example, Rastriya Swasthya Bima Yojana, Indira Awas Yojana, Atal Pension Yojana, drinking water project, Old Age Pension) or how to influence the system.

The oppression and coercion by external agencies for adopting established agrarian livelihoods, disallowing the histories of the tribals to be included in their children's education, the cutting off of ties with forest-based livelihoods in the name of conservation, the silencing of their views in the matter of forest and village, in one way or the other, forces the remaining hope in the governance to fade away.

Although in the first interaction they seemed content with the facilities they get from the government, 35 kg of subsidized rice per month does not seem enough food for the

hungry bellies and also does not compensate for the soul of the people whose strong heritage is marred and coerced to denounce their right as worshippers and protectors of the forest.

Deprived of their rights and denied access to their own forest, there is a revolt of unfathomable magnitude simmering deep within their hearts although they are bound by their principle of non-violence.

Is it possible for a Khadia to be Dehuri today?

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“An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being. If they did not coexist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity. Entrenched in this indispensable relation is a second set of tendencies ...to congeal established identities into fixed forms, thought and lived as if their structure expressed the true order of things...Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts differences into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty. (Identity/Difference, 64, William E. Connolly)

The quest of redefining and reinventing Dehuri with the new-age Khadia, who are now educated in government schools, and have now migrated and are living across India and are differently skilled (not as worshippers and protectors), as manual labourers is an uphill journey but a journey worth taking. The journey of carving a life of dignity, a movement for reforming the identity, enriched with past wisdom is very essential for this tribe. This is the much-needed intervention for their development; the essence of true development.

For now, the only solace that they are drawing and we can offer is:

“Tume ajithu amaku Dehuri kahiba, amku val nagiba, tume val loka, ama katha tike bujha. (From today onwards, call us Dehuri. We will feel good. You are a good human being and you will understand us),” says Amila Dehuri, Hill Khadia Hamlet, Kumudabadi village.

Approach to Change

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As Freud argues, “The importance of free association is that the patients spoke for themselves, rather than repeating the ideas

The style of facilitation we adopted was to engage with and support this group of people, who were struggling to be identified as Dehuri once again

of the analyst; they work through their own material, rather than parroting another's suggestions." The approach of the facilitator is also based upon free association, where the subject needs to identify his/her current reality, based upon his/her own history and pan out the future course of action rather than parroting the ideas of the facilitator and that of the various intervening agencies. The path can only be sustainable if it is based upon open exploration and attempts to equality by making a collage of different realities.

The style of facilitation we adopted was to engage with and support this group of people, who were struggling to be identified as Dehuri once again, and to collectivize them into a group, creating, amalgamating, and critiquing the new identity of the Dehuri.

As facilitators, we were clear that we would not work like KMDA or the government because they were already doing their bit to provide door-step services to the people. The only aspect we tried to engage the people with was to form a political identity of the new Dehuri through awareness and consciousness. Through this, a group that would learn and

support each other to establish an identity would also emerge.

The first step was to understand their history and the story of their existing identity. The subaltern history as a space of difference is very important in understanding the violence and the struggles entangled in the creation of the existing identity. The relationship between a Dehuri and Dehuriani is very important because during rituals both have to perform specific tasks; if they do not perform these, nature would be angry that year. The result of such anger would be animal attack, poor rain, malaria and so on. These ritualistic practices are very important for the new age Dehuri.

Along with this, the call for modernization is also evident. The thin lines between greed and need are gradually becoming blurred. Traditional practices and the compulsions of being civilized denizens of an agrarian village run parallel and the modern Dehuri, each day, resists and negotiates these while creating her/his own identity.

The premises for exploration solidified into three aspects: a) the culture and practices of the

Dehuri in the past and now, along with efforts of the government in their development; b) how can cultures be reshaped and core values identified and kept intact, with education and modernization, and; c) the different gender roles and their evolution in this context.

The narratives of the subjects, from their own frames of reference, revolve around a few cornerstones that shape their identity, and which they would like to sharpen and bolster to establish a new identity.

Cornerstones

—
The cornerstones identified and prioritized by people (primarily, the second and third generations after rehabilitation) in reconstructing their identity as Dehuri are:

- a) Their relationship with the forest (Similipal)
- b) The opportunity to assert their rights and get the deserved entitlements
- c) Sustainable livelihoods
- d) Freedom to practice their tradition

The new Dehuri will live among the forests of Similipal where they will worship the Athara Deuli, will look for livelihoods out of the jungle, protect the forest from the timber mafia and check jungle fires

a) *Their relationship with the forest (Similipal):* The Dehuri is the steward of nature, who worships nature, protects it and harvests it in a way that nature rejuvenates easily (they do not kill all the bees of a bee hive because they know the remaining bees will make hives again for harvest). The new Dehuri will live among the forests of Similipal where they will worship the Athara Deuli, will look for livelihoods out of the jungle, protect the forest from the timber mafia and check jungle fires (The animals and plants are food for many big carnivores such as human

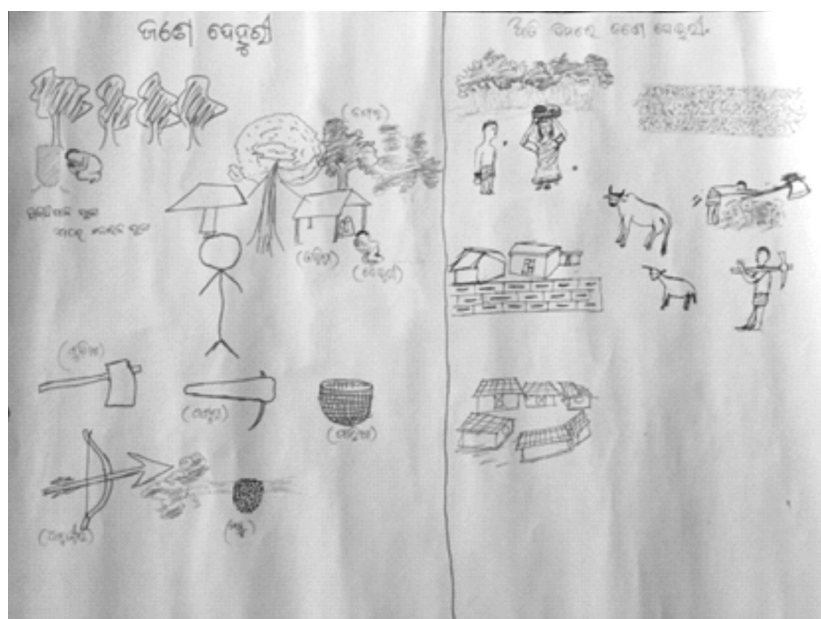
beings and they need to be protected from fire, so they can live and reproduce).

b) *The opportunity to assert their right and get their deserved entitlements:* As they are rehabilitated in the nearby agrarian villages, they want basic healthcare and timely food from the Public Distribution System (PDS). They have their land rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA); although they have the land *Sironama* (official record), their land is not demarcated because of which they are unable to till or convert it into

plantations. Their homes were constructed in 1976, during the time of their rehabilitation. Despite many promises by the government, these are still not renovated. Their houses need repair. They want work under MGNREGA because this is the best wage-earning opportunity for them. They would also like their children to learn about the values and practices of the Dehuri in school.

c) *Sustainable livelihoods:* The new Dehuri would like to earn wages from MGNREGA, have some livestock and land for cultivation and learn the skills to grow crops (in their new identity, they visualize themselves as marginal farmers). Along with this, they would like to go to the jungle to collect Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) and want to live the life of farmers in their village. They see it as an integrated identity.

d) *Freedom to practice their traditions:* The new Dehuri would like to continue to visit the *Gunia* (village druid) and understand the medicines and practices of the druid; worship the forest for good rain; pay reverence to the jungle God before entering into the jungle and would like to be in nature



Left: What it means to be a Dehuri. Right: The new identity of the Dehuri.

Counter hegemony is only possible when the wishful idea of reconstructing the identity of Dehuri becomes a political force, fueled by collective agency, based on the existence of a collective, a political movement resisting and negotiating for the new identity

always. They would like to restrain their intake of liquor but not abstain totally because it is part of their culture. They want all the stakeholders and their neighbours to respect this.

Counter hegemony of cornerstones

It is noteworthy to assimilate: “We must have a strategy of ‘counter-power.’ We, the social movements and political movements, must be able to move into spaces of power at the local, national and regional level.” (quoted in Bello and Malig, 2006).

Counter hegemony is only possible when the wishful idea of reconstructing the identity of Dehuri becomes a political force, fueled by collective agency, based on the existence of a collective, a political movement resisting and negotiating for the new identity. The collective may not be a pre-requisite but may evolve along with the counter hegemony of identity whereby the movement will form the collective and the collective will enrich the movement. This process of becoming conscious requires

constant engagement with the Dehuris and understanding the structural causes of their oppression; to address them and thereby help them create their own identity. The historic and existing collectives and their action need to be explored for further engagement. The people are eager to form a new form of collective, which may be the platform to discuss, sharpen the central argument and start the creation of the new identity of the Dehuri, rising as a Phoenix.

This is a long-term investment and I have no idea how we can move towards it with so much other work to do and so much influence from other agencies. The existing mandate for us, in terms of volume and nature, is very different from what this engagement requires.

Although I personally see great alignment of this kind of work with our vision statement of a just and equal society, I fail to understand how, with all our other work, we will be able to channelize our energies for the much-coveted transformation. This may require a different kind of group formation because SHGs

may not be a suitable medium. These are yet to arrive at their own identity and are not yet ready to influence others about their political motives, which requires an incubation period; as we know, this incubation is a very time- and energy-consuming process whereas we are so tied up with external commitments and the zeal to grow big. The Dehuris constitute a very small population among the poor. Although their issues are unique, in terms of numbers, they are very few and I wonder if working with them will ever satisfy our aspirations of growth and expansion.

This puts forward new challenges and opportunities to work differently and to have a meaningful engagement with the community. Engagement with the Dehuris will sharpen us more as professionals and help us understand the different sections in the rural set-up and help us guide the community to address discriminations.

I am left with many questions and in search of some glimmer of hope.

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Integrated Soil Fertility Management: Converting Subsistence Farming to Productive Farming

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Maintaining or improving soil health is essential for sustainable and productive agriculture. ISFM strategies assist farmers in following a scientific process for cultivation without eroding the soil's inherent capacity to produce more by maintaining its fertility level.

DETERIORATION IN THE FERTILITY OF THE SOIL is a major concern for the sustainability of Indian agriculture. For centuries, the farmers of India have practised an agricultural system that ensures modest but stable yields and, yet, have maintained optimum soil fertility. This balance was interrupted by the widespread push for increased production with the introduction of high-yielding varieties of seeds, intensive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and extensive tillage. This shift has now raised concerns about whether the Green Revolution in agriculture is sustainable and is it leading to a green economy?

In terms of land degradation, India is one of the most highly affected countries. Rain-fed areas have been seriously affected by land degradation. The agricultural community is of the view that, after the

The soil of the district has, over the years, become highly degraded due to the injudicious use of chemical fertilizers

creation of access to fresh water, measures to curb soil degradation is the key factor in making agriculture viable for small landholders. There is no single, simple and unique solution to address the problem of soil degradation universally. A local, integrated and action-oriented soil fertility management strategy is essential.

The Integrated Soil Fertility Management (ISFM) adopts the maximization of efficiency of nutrients and water to improve land productivity. ISFM strategies include the combined use of chemical fertilizers (both macro and micronutrients) and organic matter (crop residue, compost and green manure), followed by the use of appropriate crop rotation and inter-cropping with legumes (a crop that fixes atmospheric nitrogen).

The Sehgal Foundation adopted the ISFM approach in Nuh



A collection of soil samples for testing

district, a rain-fed district of Haryana. The soil of the district has, over the years, become highly degraded due to the injudicious use of chemical fertilizers. The traditional practices of leaving no crop residue on the farmland and decreasing the supply of organic manure have adversely affected the physical, chemical and biological properties of the soil. As a result, the average productivity of major crops such as wheat, mustard and millet are lower than the state average. To revitalize the soil of small landholders, the Sehgal Foundation encourages the farmers to adopt several interventions such as crop-specific soil nutrient management, the cultivation

of legume crops (pigeon pea and chickpea), new methods to prepare organic manure quickly, green manuring, and the adoption of crop rotation.

Providing the solution locally, in 2012, the Sehgal Foundation, in collaboration with the state Agriculture Department, developed a soil fertility map of the district of Nuh, which covered 432 villages. One sample represented one square kilometre area. GPS was used to mark the location of each sample. Samples were tested at the Haryana government's soil testing laboratory in Karnal. The images in Figure 1 show the presence of different nutrients in the soil of Nuh district.

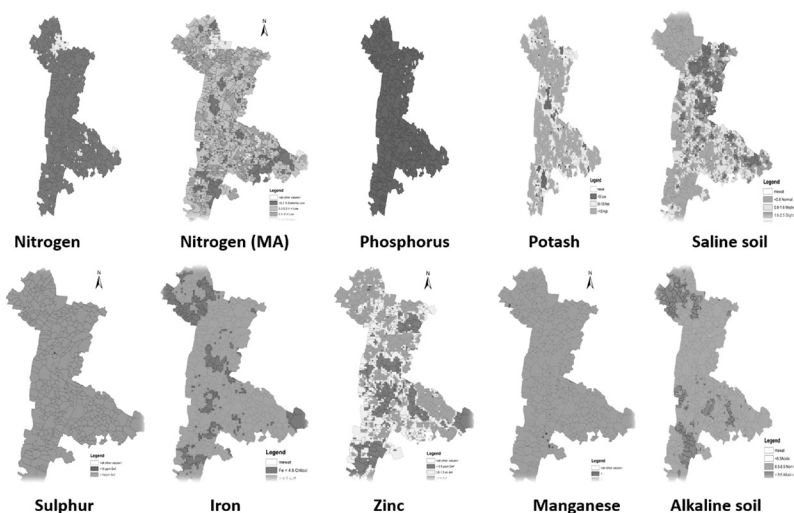


Figure 1: Soil Fertility Map of Nuh District

The district Agriculture Department and the Sehgal Foundation launched a campaign to bring about awareness of the importance of soil health management.

The following are the major findings from the soil analysis.

- The samples were found deficient in nitrogen, phosphorus, potash, zinc and iron.
- Nitrogen was found to be low in 87 per cent of the samples and phosphorus in 97 per cent of the samples.
- Zinc was critically low in 40 per cent of the samples.
- Except for a few pockets in Taoru, the percentage of iron in the district was normal.
- Approximately 60 per cent of the samples had soil salinity.
- Soil alkalinity was normal in most samples.

The district Agriculture Department and the Sehgal Foundation launched a campaign to bring about awareness of the importance of soil health management. In village meetings, farmers were trained on the use of crop-specific fertilizer recommendations and were motivated to increase the supply of good quality organic matter in their soil. In consultation with a researcher and plant nutritionist, a crop-specific Package of Practices (PoP) was developed. The PoP was demonstrated on a one-acre plot, wherein farmers were given all the essential

nutrients, fertilizers and seeds for half an acre, (named the demo plot); they were instructed to follow their traditional practices on the remaining half acre, (named the control plot). Seeds were provided for the entire one acre of land so that the difference in crop growth and the yields between the demo and the control plot could not be attributed to the difference in the seed variety.

The results showed that using balanced fertilizers reduced cultivation costs and increased productivity. In addition, the use of micro-nutrients improved the quality of the grains and enhanced the tolerance of plants to stress. With support from corporate donors, the Sehgal Foundation initiated various related projects that provided these benefits to more than 10,000 farmers. The application of crop-specific PoP resulted in increased productivity of wheat

by 20 per cent, mustard by 19 per cent, cotton by 25 per cent, onion by 27 per cent and millet by 24 per cent.

Jakir from Shishwana village says, “For many years, we have only been using urea and DAP. I had never heard the names of boron, potash, magnesium, zinc, etc. Since the Sehgal Foundation taught us the value of these inputs and showed us how to use them in the field, I used all the inputs in half an acre of land and saw a big difference in the crop. In the new practice, the germination was uniform, the root was well-developed and the sprouting was huge. I got approximately 2.5 quintals more wheat. The most important benefit that I saw, after using all these nutrients, was that my crop did not feel any dryness, even when the irrigation was late by 15 days. I, therefore, started using all the nutrients for all crops.”



ISFM Practice in Millet (Left) and Wheat (Right)

The application of well-decomposed manure increases the moisture-holding capacity, soil aeration and microbial activity in the soil. Fifty farmers adopted this technology and produced very good quality manure

The organic matter in soil plays a key role in improving the physical, chemical and biological properties of the soil. Over the years, due to a decline in the animal population, the supply of organic matter to farmlands has reduced considerably. In current practices, farmers are using smaller amounts of poorer quality (partially decomposed) manure. The application of the poorly decomposed organic matter invites termite attacks in the field. The Sehgal Foundation introduced compost beds to prepare good-quality manure for 40–45 days in summer and 80–90 days in winter whereas in traditional practices, it took 180–270 days. The compost bed

is made of 430 gsm HDPE sheet and its size is 12 ft x 4 ft x 2 ft. This can be used through the year and farmers can prepare compost three times a year. The capacity of one bed is 18–20 quintals per unit. The application of well-decomposed manure increases the moisture-holding capacity, soil aeration and microbial activity in the soil. Fifty farmers adopted this technology and produced very good quality manure.

Dinesh, a farmer from Mandikhera village, says, “I used the compost bed for the first time. In the village, we used to put all the cow dung on the side of the road. After seven or

eight months, we would use this manure in the field. It was not completely decomposed. I saw an increase in termite incidence because of using the half-decomposed material. This bag of compost made in this new way is very useful and gives us black, fully decomposed ‘*khad* (manure)’ in less time. Another advantage of this method is that it stops the supply of plastic, glass and other items that do not decompose in our fields. We get a sponge-like *khad*, which holds water, and the crop growth is very good.”

Pulses are legume crops and are considered to be climate-resilient in a rain-fed farming system. Pulses require less water, improve the organic content and fix the atmospheric nitrogen in the soil. The high market value of pulses brings a high return. In 2016, the Sehgal Foundation introduced a Short-Duration Pigeon Pea (SDPP) variety, the ICPL 88039 (released by ICRISAT) with the existing crop rotation in Nuh district. This variety matures in 150–160 days and allows farmers to grow the winter crop in time.

In addition to 209 farmers growing SDPP in the district, the Sehgal Foundation has extended their technical support to promote SDPP to 490 farmers in Alwar and Udaipur districts



Compost bed prepared by farmers after training

The adoption of this multi-pronged approach has helped more than 10,000 farmers and has increased the productivity of the major crops of the region.

of Rajasthan and Ranchi district of Jharkhand. In addition, 163 women farmers grew SDPP in Pratapgarh and Umrain blocks in Alwar district, Rajasthan. This has led to an improvement in the income and in the nutritional security of women farmers. The crop economic analysis shows that the cultivation of short-duration pigeon pea provides an additional income of Rs 14,338 per acre as compared to millet, the traditional alternative *kharif* crop of Nuh district.

Sahabuddin from Naseerbaas village explains that he is growing pigeon pea after 10 years. He had stopped growing pigeon pea because it used to take a long time to mature and because he could not grow wheat in the rabi season then. The Sehgal Foundation gave him the SDPP variety, which matures in 150–160 days. Sahabuddin



Dhaincha cultivation to improve soil health

said growing this variety gave him enough time to prepare the field for wheat. This year, he got almost double the income from his pigeon pea crop than from the millet crop. Pigeon pea is good crop because it requires very little water and fertilizers. Its leaves add humus to the soil, which benefit the rabi crop.

Usually, *dhaincha* (*Sesbania Bispinosa*) is grown for green manure. It improves the soil's physical and chemical properties. In Nuh district, soil salinity affects more than two-thirds of the cultivable area and the use of saline water for irrigation constantly increases soil salinity. Therefore, *dhaincha* cultivation is of utmost importance in this region. As a practice, the farmers grow *dhaincha* every alternate year in the fields. For green manuring, the crop is mixed with the soil through a harrow or a cultivator once it is 45–60 days old and reaches a height of 120–150 cm. A 60-day crop provides 23.2 tonnes of dry matter per ha and accumulates 133 kg of nitrogen per ha. The Sehgal Foundation advises farmers to grow *dhaincha* either on the field's bund or as a pure plantation. The farmers endorse that mixing of

green manure reduces soil salinity and improves soil moisture.

Conclusion

Maintaining or improving soil health is essential for sustainable and productive agriculture in the semi-arid region. Healthy soil helps increase agricultural productivity. ISFM strategies assist farmers in following a scientific process for cultivation without eroding the soil's inherent capacity to produce more by maintaining its fertility level. The Sehgal Foundation adopted the ISFM approach in Nuh district and used multiple tools such as soil mapping, techniques for producing quality manure, developing a customised PoP, conducting field demonstrations and field days, promoting green manuring and following a legume-based crop rotation. The adoption of this multi-pronged approach has helped more than 10,000 farmers and has increased the productivity of the major crops of the region. The increased level of awareness and the adoption of these tools can help turn the current subsistence farming into productive farming.

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From the Field Diary of a Development-*wallah*: Arriving at a Cacophonous Harmony

...

Struggling to make inroads into a new community, the development practitioner swings between despair and hope, optimism and pessimism, enthusiasm and self-doubts, till perseverance pays off. Three years on, as many as 2000 women have been impacted by these efforts

RAIN CLOUDS ARE HOVERING IN THE SKIES and a heavy downpour is expected soon. The thunder showers and the flashes of lightning set the ambience, spelling out that the monsoon is about to hit the grounds of Bahadurganj. Within days, the dry soil will be perforated by millions of tiny droplets falling from the sky. The continuous rainfall will soon fill the fields with water and the surroundings will become greener and darker.

Sulemaan will be busy in *dhaan ropai* (rice transplantation) in his paddy field, along with Talamai and a group of labourers (locally known as *jan*). His *biwi* (wife), Shehzaadi, and six of their children contribute by bringing food for their *ba* (father) and for the *jan*.

I can hear the cry of the children of the village in the distance, alerting their mothers and others to assemble. For the SHG members of Dulali village, their 'agent' has arrived

The scenario was something like this: It is afternoon time and the food train is arriving. One is holding a jug of water, while the other is carrying the *handi* of *daal* and *ammi* (Shehzaadi) with the new-born, is carrying the *handi* of rice on her head, draped tightly with a cloth. The other children are following their mother through the *aal* (a narrow bund) within the field that connects one with the other. The last one (generally without any piece of clothing on his body) deliberately slips through the *aal* and falls in the mud so that he can have a *chaska* (taste) of the *kichardh* (mud) in the form of a mud-bath.

Amidst these mundane-yet-lively happenings, somewhere by the side of a road, a bike stops. A cigarette is lit. With a deep drag of the first puff, I gaze upon these heartening stimuli for quite some time. Through the artificial cloud of smoke that has just been exhaled, I see these kids and their mothers form the shape of a small train traversing upon a narrow bund in water-filled surroundings. I gaze and gaze. Time does not permit me to stay for long. This small train is soon to reach its destination, and mine is still far. I have to traverse another 7 km to reach my destination (Dulali village). The engine is thus...ignited again!

Webbing up the tale

—
“*Os os Didi, Agent ose gell!*”

I can hear the cry of the children of the village in the distance, alerting their mothers and others to assemble. For the SHG members of Dulali village, their 'agent' has arrived!

This has become a regular scene for me. As soon as my bike stops in a corner of any village, I hear the familiar call. Although I don't like myself to be referred to as an 'agent', I can't stop the vox populis...Can I?

Welcome to Surjapur!

—
It is a place where the plains, its people and its rivers have a tale to tell. I also have a story to tell, a small chapter to add to this bigger story. Let me walk you through a journey...a journey without the description of the picturesque, magnificent hills and the beautiful rivulets that sometimes break down and become mesmerising springs...a journey that has no tranquil woods that make you feel spiritual. No, I am not going to talk about that at all! Neither am I going to talk about some fantastic and some marvellous happenings out here,

which the world has not seen or heard of before!

Instead, here, the land is plain with numerous streams, tributaries and rivers meandering on its surface like long pieces of swirling thread lying on the ground of a tailor's shop, unnoticed. The monsoon heralds many hues of greenery in the area, with the land being coloured in shades of green in the form of crops. This mostly follows a pattern of paddy cultivation after the jute, and the land is impregnated with maize during winter when the clouds shelter the ground in a fog. Downstream plays a crucial part in this as if a paint brush has been taken to a canvas. And, sometimes, the hues painted on the landscape are washed away by flash floods that take place during the monsoon.

Now, to be factual, the Surjapur of which I am talking does not exist geographically. However, it is an area where a majority of the population likes to address themselves as Surjapuris and, therefore, I suppose it would not be an offence to refer to the land where they live as Surjapur.

So, where is the Surjapur that I am talking about actually located? Who are the people that live there? What do they do?

Surjapuri is not one particular community. As the local people explain, it is a homogenous term which denotes a conglomeration of multiple communities and religions

You probably have heard of a region named ‘Chicken’s neck of India’. If you zoom into a political map of India, you will see a region sandwiched between two international boundaries from the north-west and the south-east directions to be precise (Nepal to the north-west and Bangladesh to the south-east). Geographically, this is called the Terai region of the Great Himalayas. In the early morning, if the sky is clear, and with a bit of luck, you can get a glimpse of the mighty Kanchenjunga from the terrace of our office building. The region is popularly known as Seemanchal, which means ‘end of the boundary’. The name of the region denotes the end of Bihar’s political boundary.

Surjapuri is not one particular community. As the local people explain, it is a homogenous term, which denotes a conglomeration of multiple communities and religions. The Sheikhs, the Gangais, the Sadgops, the Rajbanshis, the Mushars, the Santhals, the Shershawadis and many more are the people who live here. They practice various religions, traditions, customs and ways of livelihood, but what unites them is a common thread—‘the Surjapuri dialect’.

Looking at this region through the development perspective, the area has its own set of challenges. It fares poorly on almost all the indicators of development. It is one of the most backward regions of India, with high political chaos, shocking HDI figures of maternal mortality rate (MMR), infant mortality rate (IMR), education, health, basic infrastructure, etc. These are a few among the many reference points that are used to define the area. It is an area riddled with vulnerabilities and the uncertainty of livelihood, and fares negatively on several other development indicators.

Amidst these diversities and complexities, PRADAN began operations in Bahadurganj (one of the seven blocks of Kishanganj district of Bihar) in 2013. Soon after I graduated as a Development Professional from Koderma, Jharkhand, in 2014, I was posted to this location. Seriously speaking, I had never heard of Kishanganj or Bahadurganj. I assumed it was some place near Nepal, because I associated the term ‘Bahadur’ with Nepal and the Nepalese. Talk of stereotyping!

Things have changed quite a bit since then! Recalling when it all

started, I see my younger self being desperately gloomy about being posted here, on being separated from my colleagues. On my last day in Koderma, with a heavy heart and tearful eyes, I bid adieu to the beautiful hills, the *galis*, *chacha* (the *chaiwala*) my friend, with whom I chatted over a glass of tea and a cigarette in the evenings, the energetic people I met and, most important, the birthplace of my career in development, which had been my home for a year. I had come to love my dear ‘Jhumri Talaiya’.

On a foggy wintery afternoon, carrying with me a bagful of stuff and old memories, I reached this place called Bahadurganj.

Kathaakar and the Manch

Over time, these villages have become my *manch* (stage). The community and I are the characters, and the plot is Surjapur, of course! I had never thought that a theatre and film loving person like me would start off trying to be a ‘development-wallah’. Now, as four years have gone by, at times, I feel like Kamal Hassan (the famous actor, known for playing multiple characters in a single

Now, at this juncture, it seems that I have come a long way. In the beginning, however, the emotions were raw, the experiences fresh, the hurdles innumerable, the perceptions building and the assumptions varied. Over the years, it has been a process of 'learn to de-learn' and 'de-learn to learn'

film) having different ways of greeting different communities. It is 'Assaalam-waleiqum' for a Muslim community, 'Johar-Johar' for a Santhali and 'Pranaam' for a Hindu community. Versatile, isn't it?

To me, these greetings are my assets. These are not merely an offering from the community; rather they are a hard-earned gift! A lot of blood, sweat, tears and, of course, money has been shed for it.

Why?

Initially, upon my arrival, I worried that there would be no one who would greet me with a 'Bhaiyya, pranaam' and there would be no one to whom I could greet with a 'pranaam, didi' in return."

Now, at this juncture, it seems that I have come a long way. In the beginning, however, the emotions were raw, the experiences fresh, the hurdles innumerable, the perceptions building and the assumptions varied. Over the years, it has been a process of 'learn to de-learn' and 'de-learn to learn'.

The early days

Carrying the memories of having worked with a much older team, I landed in a location where I knew no one. There were no hills, no forests and the community that nurtured me as a development professional was no longer with me. The PRADAN Bahadurganj team was, at that time, a new-born. It was the offspring of the organization's re-structuring process, which was only a few months old. As I recollect, sipping a hot cup of tea and eating some *pakodas* with the nine team members (Abhishek Gaurav, Abhishek Kumar, Amit, Arindom, Anup, Arshad, Illora, Sudarshan and myself) on a wintery afternoon was always an event for us.

What struck me, at first, about the new place was the dialect. It was neither Bengali nor Nepali and not Maithili or Angika. At times, I would hear it as a form of Bengali, at times as Nepali and, to some extent, Maithili. Later, I found out that the Surjapuri dialect had its origins in the Rajbanshi dialect and sounded very similar to it. This, for me, was a matter of immense pleasure because I found that the dialect

had a link with my mother tongue—Assamese.

There was no real team base. Our area of work was concentrated in a few tiny pockets, stretching roughly up to 20 to 30 km in length and breadth, in a few villages that largely bordered Nepal. Our main work was to explore the areas in and around the 15-km radius from Bahadurganj town, keeping in mind the new re-structuring policy of working close to the office.

Thus, 'professionals roaming around and doing absolutely nothing (PRADAN)' would be an apt description of our work during those days (recalling how Deep Joshi shared about the initial years of PRADAN and how the PRADAN people were being referred to). I was desperately missing the huge community base of PRADAN in Koderma, the established functioning system in community mobilization in the form of Federations, Clusters, Village Organisations (VOs), SHGs, women leaders, Community Resource Persons (CRPs), etc. And here...there was no one. All we had was a shared dream of building this team.

To be honest, I also questioned why we were working there. My mind was constantly comparing my past experience with PRADAN with what we were doing now and arriving at a judgmental analysis and creating a 'chemical-*locha*' in my brain. I had to consciously put that aside to be able to focus on my work

We would sit every evening and plan for the next day on who would transact which area and who would accompany whom. At the end of the day, we would again sit and discuss and reflect upon what had happened during the day and plan for the next day. I still laugh when I recall the series of incidents that occurred during those days. Whenever we would stop in a village and start a discussion with the villagers, they would take us to be some Inspecting Officers of NREGA or the 'Vridhdha Pension' and start complaining about what was not happening in their areas.

In some places, out of curiosity or even suspicion, people would ask us to show our identity cards to validate who we were. To their innumerable questions, we would sometimes humbly reply, "Dada... we also don't know what we do! Now, we have come to you people to know what we should do!" Poor fellows, not finding any answers, they would vanish one-by-one never to be seen again! Such was the situation of us 'dare-devil' development-*wallahs*!

To be honest, I also questioned why we were working there. My mind was constantly comparing my past experience with PRADAN with what we were doing now and

arriving at a judgmental analysis and creating a 'chemical-*locha*' in my brain. I had to consciously put that aside to be able to focus on my work.

At times, I was compelled to think that I didn't know anything about the development sector. What I had learnt during my Development Apprentice (DA) programme and the experiences that I had had in my previous team were hardly working to my advantage. The distance, and the big difference from the other work areas of PRADAN, was also adding to my struggles. Moreover, the community and the set-up were totally different from rest of the work areas where PRADAN had so far been basically engaged.

Working with a predominantly Muslim community was also a new experience, not only for me but also for PRADAN. The organization's prime focus had always been the indigenous communities (tribals) belonging to the poorest pockets of mainland India. This made for a more challenging situation, leaving us handicapped as far as formulating and rolling out tested and proven strategies was concerned. We were not sure how this community would receive these initiatives of PRADAN.

Well, the nut had to be searched for, and found, so that we could try out ways to crack it! We kept up a constant thrust to build a rapport with the community. We tried out multiple ways to get an inch closer. Some of us tried the tested and proven technique of 'exposures' to older areas like Hazaribagh whereas others tried to rely on their own, that is, 'let-me-toil-on-my-own' strategy. I relied on the second one. Most certainly, no one in my team was as disappointed as I when attempting to implement this strategy in the field. One failure after another almost devastated my morale. As all attempts, based on the previous learning experiences did not work; out of frustration, I was plagued by questions such as, "*karein toh karein kya?* (What to do?)"

Tangled in these doldrums, the team kept on trying something or the other. Most of them ended in failure. However, the nut had to be cracked! The dire need to deliver was the only burning passion alive during those times. All else was silent. I would often wonder whether the same struggles plagued the process of establishing PRADAN's work area, perhaps a little bit less—perhaps a little bit more.

I would often question, why we were working here? Why am I here? What change will I bring here, where things are already in a certain stage of development? Is there a real need for us to work here?

The Good Old Bad Days

It was 2015. Probably the toughest year in my life till now. After an unsettling period of transacts and area exploration, the team and I needed to settle down somewhere. Thus, various patches were demarcated, keeping in mind the proximity of within a radius of 15 km, with Bahadurganj town as its centre. We named these patches 'Development Patch (DP)'. Each patch comprised four to five *panchayats*. Accordingly, four patches were identified per professional and I was allotted the fourth—DP 4, comprising four *panchayats* connected to each other. This is where my tough phase began!

Each day I would go on a field-visit and each day would be a disappointment. As I traversed through the small roads crossing one village after another, not knowing where to stop, I would often end up in a nearby *hatiya* sipping a glass of *chai* with a cigarette in my hand, thinking about what was happening to me!

My experiences were not the same as my earlier experiences in Koderma and I did not have the same feeling of accomplishment. In Koderma, I had to cross

multiple hills with no roads (literally) to reach a village. The remoteness of the villages was the adventurous and the fun part in working there. I saw how people toiled to make a living and the dependence on the forest as their resource. In comparison, in Bahadurganj, the houses were better built; the settlement was dense, the roads were inter-connected, the land was favourable for cultivation with very scarce forest cover (in fact, no forest at all).

I would often question, why we were working here? Why am I here? What change will I bring here, where things are already in a certain stage of development? Is there a real need for us to work here? My answer to myself was often 'no'. Most of the discourse that I had with myself would either end up with negativity inside me or would leave me more troubled and disturbed. Truly speaking, those days were really 'bad-bad days'!

My enthusiasm and energy levels dipped and I was not able to see any long-term strategy. I just worked at what came my way at that moment and acted accordingly. All the reasons and rationales stemmed from the negative corner of my brain,

leaving me more pessimistic towards the stimuli that I was experiencing on a day-to-day basis. I did not utter a word about this to my team. They had no hint of what was happening to me! The team and the members were all new to me and we didn't really know each other well. So, I decided to just carry on in my own way. Other than the struggles outside, every day I was fighting my own war with myself without anyone noticing it!

Quite often, I would look in the mirror and ask, "Do I really look like a Nepali?" This was a situation I faced on a daily basis. I would stop by the roadside or stop for a tea in a *chaiwala's* shop or would stop by in a village trying to make a conversation with the villagers and the first thing the people around would do is to scan me from top to bottom. Why wouldn't they? A kurta-clad oriental-looking lad, with a *jhola* on his shoulder and a motorbike with a Jharkhand registration number and speaking Hindi?

After the scanning, they would begin whispering among themselves. Then...then what? The question and answer round would begin! First question, "...Are you a Nepali?" or "How is everyone there in Nepal?" To

I don't clearly remember when I first started discussions with the women members of the village about their lives, the work they did (as I became clear that the women of the village worked as agriculture labourers), and the lives they led. I also shared with them my purpose

their humble, and intriguingly innocent questions, I would reply, "I am not a Nepali! I am from Assam."

The obvious second question would follow, "Assam! Guwahati! *Itna dur se hain* (From so far away)? What do you do here?"

I would often reply, "I work in an NGO named PRADAN. We work in the villages."

The third question in their beautiful minds would be, "Is it a government enterprise or a private company? How much do you get? Is it enough for you to run your life?"

By this time, I would begin to get irritated. How do I make them understand that there is another sector known as *gair sarkari* (non-profit). I would reply a little irritated, "*Paintees hazaar* (Rs 35,000)."

They would get a look of shock on their faces and with a mocking smile on their face, "*Kya baat karte hain? Itna toh master* (teacher) *logon ko bhi nahin milta hain, aapko kyun itna paisa dega gaon mein kaam karne ke liye?* (What are you saying? Even a teacher doesn't get so much. Why would you get so much money to work in a village?)"

They would usually end their querying at this point and return to their work or continue their own gossip. Sometimes, someone would ask, "*Isme kaisa kaam hota hain?* (What work do you have to do?)" This would be my opening. I would give an elaborate description of the work that PRADAN has been doing for such a long time!

A couple of months passed without clearly understanding how I should approach the community and what could be the entry point activity for the community. It might have been out of desperation or an inclination to a certain community that I ended up in a Santhali village called Hasanganj, situated in a less accessible area than the others that were all inter-connected to each other. As usual, I was trying to communicate with the villagers, but they were communicating in Santhali among themselves and I didn't know a word of it.

Suddenly, a person among them, with the same tone and pattern of the 'question-and-answer round' that I usually faced, asked me where I was from. After I answered, he asked me if there were any books on 'Ol-chiki scripture'. As I had no idea whether there was something

available around his interest area, I apologetically replied that I didn't know whether there was any book available, and I could surely search on the Internet and provide him the information. Hearing this, he made a request that I come another day along with this specific information. During this discussion, he took me to his home and offered me a hot glass of tea. It was after months that someone had invited me into their home.

Accordingly, I went. Not only this once; he invited me multiple times subsequently. Through him, I met the other villagers. They gradually started inquiring about me. The kids started peeping from their homes and began to rush towards me as soon as my bike would stop. We would giggle, make faces and, at times, would play together. Through them, I was introduced to their mothers. I don't clearly remember when I first started discussions with the women members of the village about their lives, the work they did (as I became clear that the women of the village worked as agriculture labourers), and the lives they led. I also shared with them my purpose. I explained to them why we worked in the villages and how we worked with the women.

Time flies by very fast but teaches you something every single minute. It has been more than two years since the above series of events occurred. Bit by bit, the foundation of the team's work was laid and I saw it grow in front of my own eyes, felt the pain and toil that we had to undertake for the cause

After multiple visits, dozens of hours of discussions and facilitations, a few women hesitatingly shared that they also wanted to be in one such type of group, at least to understand what it was that I was talking about. It took me four long months to form the first formal group—my, or you say, 'our' (along with the community) first SHG. It was like, *doobte ko tinke ka sahara milna* (A drowning man clutching at straws). Thus, an SHG of Santhali women was formed in an area where the 'minority is the majority' and Santhals only comprise roughly five per cent of the total population of the district!

The Beginning

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Time flies by very fast but teaches you something every single minute. It has been more than two years since the above series of events occurred. Bit by bit, the foundation of the team's work was laid and I saw it grow in front of my own eyes, felt the pain and toil that we had to undertake for the cause. It is just like a new-born baby growing up to be an infant then growing into childhood and arriving at adolescence. The growth continues from one SHG

to more than 200 SHGs. From a 'no community base' to a base of more than 2000 women, from 'agent' to 'manager' to 'Sir' to '*bhaiyya*' and much more.

With the good lies the bad. How can I forget the good-old-bad days! I remember the incidents of neglect and the many rebukes by the same community, which now accepts me as well as my work. I remember the tears of utter desperation, frustration and agony of not being able to do what I desired and aspired to do. I remember the times when I was called a fraud, when my team members shared that I was biased towards a certain community, when I was called a Dharm Parivartak (Religion converter) and broke four SHGs for singing the song, "*Mandir, Masjid, Girjaghar ne baant diya insaan ko, dharti baanti ambar baanta mat baanto insaan ko.*"

Today, when I am go to a village that once shunned me and see that there is a VO, don't I have cause to be filled with a sense of internal bliss? Has the nut finally been broken? I say, "Yes!" partially.

A long way has been traversed on a road that we have never travelled before, in the land where the plains, its people, its rivers

all have a tale to tell. It's only the beginning. The project is just like a child who has gradually stepped into his/her adolescence. And adolescence, we all know, is a time for more stress. It will be a time for more growth, more enterprise, more adventure and more rebellion.

Let us pause and not discuss the present discourse around community engagement and other numerous nuances stirring in the PRADAN ideology today. Frankly speaking, I have just penetrated skin-deep in the process of becoming a Surjapuri. Amidst the cacophony of struggle, pain, grief, happiness, sorrows, aspirations, dignity, morality, rigidity, a Surjapuri tends to survive.

"*Surjapuri'r bichhot rohbe toh, tuk surjapuri'ei toh bonua hobe* (If you are with the Surjapuris, you will have to be one among them)!" These words of Domni *didi* are a reminder of how 'Us' and 'They' can become 'We' one day. The question lurking in my mind is ...

Can there be cacophonous harmony?

—
Juba Pratim Gogoi is based in Bahadurganj, Bihar

SOUBHAGYA R RATHA

CULTIVATING WATERMELONS, IGNITING CHANGE

...

Moving away from the predictable traditional crop, eight Jaheraya SHG women's decision to cultivate watermelons sprung from an attempt to prove their worth as independent farmers, who could take vital decisions regarding farming and marketing produce; it was a subtle defiance of patriarchy, of the annihilation of men farmer's beliefs about a cash crop and of a small example of change that is unstoppable now.

Introduction

DURDURA IS LIKE ANY quintessential Santhal village—on the fringes of a forest, with a small stream flowing through it. A big board saying 'Welcome to the Similipal Tiger Reserve' greets visitors as they enter the village from National Highway 49. As the wheels of my bike move towards the village of Durdura, big hills begin to appear on the slowly and gradually changing landscape. A cool breeze touches my face

as I travel over hectares of land, eyes soaking in the serenity of the view.

Every spring, the smell of mahua flowers reminds the tribals of the impending agriculture season. All the men and women get busy, preparing their agricultural lands to grow paddy. Paddy cultivation is practised across Durdura village during the rainy season. The village has 319 families belonging largely to the Santhal tribe, who reside across six hamlets.

Of the nine Self Help Groups (SHGs) operating in the village, one of them is the Jaheraya SHG which has 10 members. This SHG has taken an exemplary

There are very few moments when a PRADANite is left speechless in front of the community. This was one of them. It was my first experience, and I was just amazed by the conviction of the eight Santhal women, who wanted to experiment with watermelon cultivation

step in agriculture, bringing about a change in their lives that is engraved in the history of Durdura village. The change is a blow to the patriarchal thinking of society that constantly presents men as great farmers and the women as mere labourers.

Brief History

—

November 2016. I invited three committee members from each of the SHGs of Durdura *gram panchayat* (GP) to discuss their upcoming half-year plans around their livelihood and the support they required. Normally, our working methodology with the community is through detailed discussions at the village level or the panchayat level, which generate the future course of action. About 80 women from 30 SHGs participated in the meeting held in Jashipur, one of PRADAN's location offices in Mayurbhanj district.

The main discussion point was the following summer's crops. The crops they were planning to grow, the input linkage, the cost economics calculation, the labour requirement, etc., were some of the points on the agenda. Creepers such as bitter gourd and the cash crop watermelon

were the two focal points of the meeting in the planning for the *rabi* segment. Some of the SHGs preferred to have creepers whereas some shared that they would like to grow vegetables using the kitchen garden model.

The members of Jaheraya SHG remained silent that day and did not discuss their plan of action for the summer crop. A few days later, I got a call from Sudam Charan Marandi, Sakra Marandi's (Jaheraya SHG member) husband, inviting me to hold a meeting at Durdura village. He said, "The Jaheraya SHG members want to cultivate watermelon this year, and they want your support."

Watermelon: Initiation and Process

—

The first question I asked them during the village-level meeting was, "Why do you want to cultivate watermelon? You have never grown this crop before?"

I vividly remember the powerful lines of Sakra Marandi and Sumitra Tudu that day. Sakra Marandi replied, "You only said in that meeting the other day that watermelon is a less labour-intensive crop and gives a good market return. How come you are now asking us why we want to

cultivate watermelon? We have already decided that we want to grow watermelon and we have taken a loan of Rs 15,000 from the bank in the name of our SHG. Now, you have to tell us what we should do next."

There are very few moments when a PRADANite is left speechless in front of the community. This was one of them. It was my first experience, and I was just amazed by the conviction of the eight Santhal women, who wanted to experiment with watermelon cultivation.

It was November-end and the women of Jaheraya SHG decided to start digging a pit with the help of their husbands. By that time, they had also found out about the dimensions of the pit and done the required calculations for it. The pit-digging process started and 1000 pits were ready in five days of hard work.

The villagers were surprised! There was a sense of disbelief that someone would take a risk of growing such an alien crop. And that too on a barren piece of land that had not been cultivated on for the last three years. Apart from paddy cultivation in the rainy season, the villagers had never seen any other crop grown on such a scale and, that

Our villagers told us many things about watermelon. They said that the soil was not right and that it would not be possible to grow watermelon here. They said sarcastically, 'Now, the women will become farmers like us!' We did not pay any heed to their statements.

too, in the winter season. The most shocking part for the men farmers was that the women were preparing the field to grow this watermelon crop, which had never been grown by any farmer in the history of the entire Durdura *panchayat*. This was the first time that an SHG was growing a cash crop in an area where people do not even allow the women to step out of their homes. This move of the SHG members was bound to raise many eyebrows.

Social aspects

Sakra Marandi says, "Our villagers told us many things about watermelon. They said that the soil was not right and that it would not be possible to grow watermelon here. They said sarcastically, 'Now, the women will become farmers like us!' We did not pay any heed to their statements. We went on with our plan and started cultivating watermelon."

Singa Marandi added, "We used to get frustrated by these statements. We started becoming afraid. We began to doubt ourselves. We wondered if we could do it."

Through many such crests and troughs, the SHG persisted with its plans to cultivate watermelon. Each woman was assigned to look after 125 pits. Altogether there were 1000 pits across one acre of land and each 125-foot pit had a different owner. The nurturing and caring of the respective pits was carried out by the respective owners and the inputs required would be purchased centrally by the SHG.

I clearly remember it was already the end of January when they started venturing into the 'doubtful' job of watermelon cultivation. According to a market study, January-end was too late to start this cultivation and could have hazardous results in terms of pricing of the produce at the time of harvest. My heart beat faster whenever I thought of the consequences if the activity were to fail. The entire loss would have to be borne by the farmers.

Keeping this high risk in mind and with renewed energy, I continued to work with the women. I had taken up the challenge and did not want to keep the possibility of loss in my mind; I was expecting the growing of this crop to impact farmers of other villages too. They would want to upscale to this cash crop as well. But at that point of

time, this was a distant prospect because the activity was already in the risk zone due to a delayed beginning.

We followed the processes as per the Package of Practices (PoP) although there was lack of clarity because different experts were giving different opinions. We explored several permutations and combinations for maximum efficacy, starting from maintaining a five-foot distance between pits to keeping a one-and-a-half foot depth of pit. We were trying to follow all advice.

Here, the important thing to share is that the nearly one acre of land which was being converted into a watermelon patch was not land that belonged to these women. The SHG members had requested the landowner of another village to lend it to them for one season to grow watermelon. This land was barren upland and had not been used for three years for any cultivation. Probably, that was why the owner had agreed to give it to them.

The SHG members developed a system to look after the patch. Each woman of the SHG would give one day in order to watch

For the first time, men were not in charge of the cultivation with women playing a supporting role; instead women were the drivers of this enterprise, with their men supporting them

the plants and protect them from animals. If anyone fell sick or was otherwise not able to visit the patch, she would assign another person to take her place.

PRADAN supported them by providing a pump-set and pipe to irrigate the patch, from the nearby stream. The women gave the responsibility to irrigate the patch at regular intervals to their husbands. Introducing an expert, Jairaam Mahanta from Syngenta (a seed company), was another calculated measure we took. The expert's job was to visit the patch every Sunday, identify the deficiencies and suggest measures so that the fruit gains a marketable size.

For the first time, men were not in charge of the cultivation with women playing a supporting role; instead women were the drivers of this enterprise, with their men supporting them. This was the satisfaction I experienced when I sat with the members of the Jaheraya SHG and their husbands and mapped the progress of the watermelon cultivation.

BDO's Visit

Time flew. The plants grew and the watermelon fruit became

visible in every pit. The people of the village and the nearby villages started coming to see the patch. It was a treat to see the watermelons spread across the one-acre patch from afar.

Everyone who saw the patch said, "I will also cultivate watermelon next year." In March, the Jashipur Block BDO, Mr Dharmendra Mallik, visited the patch when he came to know about the efforts and the diligence of the Jaheraya SHG. He was so happy to see the patch that he committed to fence the entire acre of land. The SHG women told him that it was not their land and that they had taken it on lease. The BDO then appreciated the intervention even more and recognized the hard work that the women had put in and the support that they had received from PRADAN. He congratulated them on creating a breakthrough in cash crop cultivation in that GP.

Struggles and Hurdles

Some conditions were a given and could not be altered. The land was not very nutrient-rich because it had never been ploughed. The patch was far from the village and took the women around 10–12 minutes to reach. The water

depleting in the nearby stream for around 15 days became a major cause for concern. The women did not have the knowledge about the technical dimensions such as boron deficiency, so immediate measures could not be taken. The marriage season and some death rituals kept women farmers from attending to the patch because they had to be present at the ceremonies. The melon patch got neglected for some time during the fruiting period; heavy boron deficiency resulted in the breaking of some of the fruit. This was the lowest phase of the entire initiative. Things were not okay, technically.

I suggested to the SHG members that we should meet in the evenings, if it was difficult to find time during the day. They readily agreed and we held meetings regarding the issues they were facing. This motivated them to continue with renewed energy. We discussed what sort of technical knowledge was needed and arranged for an expert to guide the women. These meetings would mostly end late at night. I will never forget those nights. One such night could have been my last night on earth but probably I had to work to complete, so I survived the road accident that took place.

With expert advice, technical problems were controlled and, fortunately, it rained heavily resulting in the stream getting full again. The smiles returned to the faces of the women farmers

Bouncing Back

“When you give your heart and soul to a work, it automatically manifests in the result.”

“Wish I could be the Midas touch,
Wish I could be the rain,
Wish I could fill all the colors...
In their hopes again and again.
Wish they could frolic
Wish they could fly high...
Wish their vicious cycle would die
And
They emerge as butterflies from
their chrysalis

Irrespective of every odd setback explained earlier, the second phase of the activity began full of divine energy. With expert advice, technical problems were controlled and, fortunately, it rained heavily resulting in the stream getting full again. The smiles returned to the faces of the women farmers. To aid the growth of the plants, fertilizers were applied. Things were back on track. The patch filled with new, healthy watermelons. Soon it was time to sell the fruit.

The SHG's focus shifted to finding a market for selling watermelons despite there being 25 per cent fruit damage. Here, both PRADAN and the Jaheraya SHG women faced a big challenge.

Market...The real game-changer

By the time their crop was ready to be sold, other market players and businessmen had captured the market with the cheapest prices. The coastal belts of Odisha produce huge quantities of watermelon and the fruit reaches the market by February and March and fetches the maximum price. The price automatically falls as more vendors bring fruits. The fruit from Jaheraya reached the market in April, by which time the price was at its lowest—Rs 4 per kg. The Jaheraya SHG's production was not so much that it could supply big vegetable vendors. And Rs 4 per kg was very minimal. The women were disappointed because they had expected much higher returns. They were expecting a minimum of Rs 6 per kg.

Here, the knowledge of the market and the pricing of bulk-selling was a great learning, for me as well as for the SHG. One member of the SHG shared, “If we sell in bulk, we get around 50-60 per cent of the market price, next time we will keep this in mind before selling our produce.” After selling one pick-up of watermelon (which came to around 3 tonnes) at Rs 4 per kg, they decided to sell

their produce in the open market on a per kilogramme system. They started selling watermelons directly to consumers in the local haats and at road-side gatherings. It took them some time to sell all their produce. They did not accept the bulk-sale system and I wondered why not.” Probably, because they were first-time growers, and had already experienced the market price, but did not have any idea about the bulk-selling price of watermelon. They wanted to sell it by the per piece system. Even though their produce was ripening, they did not want to sell it at a lower price. They also preferred to distribute the left-over fruit among their relatives, which was the social dimension of the activity. I saw sacks of watermelon being taken to relatives.

What the Analysis Says

After selling the produce, the SHG members met during the day to analyze their investment versus returns (Table 1 and 2). They mentioned that they were happy to earn goodwill by distributing watermelons to their relatives and neighbours. Damayati Marandi, Manaka Majhi, Sumitra Tudu and Salma Majhi distributed watermelons to their relatives

This was the first time the women had got involved in selling the produce; they found that grading of the fruit is very important in a competitive market. Good size and fair price are the two mantras of this kind of cash crop

and neighbours rather than selling all their produce.

However, they had not kept a record of the produce sold. Six of them did not know how to read and write and their family members did not help them maintain records. The amount of profit was very tentative, and was based on the per-fruit selling price and the number of sacks they had sold. After calculating the profits earned by each woman, they realized that those who had given more time to their crop and had taken proper care of their respective pits had earned the maximum income. Those who did not or could not give enough time and energy to care for their plants did not make much profit.

While analyzing the data with the SHG members, a few learnings emerged. It was realized that the best time to initiate the activity is November-end and it should be completed by January or February because the chance of getting a fair price decreases when more produce comes into the market. This was the first time the women had got involved in selling the produce; they found that grading of the fruit is very important in a competitive market. Good size and fair price are the two mantras of this kind

of cash crop. It needs to look good and round, to catch the vendor's eye. They also figured out that the size of the fruit should not exceed 5 kg. If it is between 3 and 5 kg, the vendors are interested in purchasing it because Rs 15 to 20

per fruit is the ideal price in the watermelon market.

The members said that earlier they had thought that they could sell the watermelons at the available market rates, that is, the rates at which they buy; in bulk

Table 1: Expenditure Incurred by the Women (Excluding Labour Costs)

Ingredients	Cost (Rs)
Watermelon seed (4 packets) @Rs 800	3200
Fertilizers (Urea, DAP, Potash)	3040
Boron (2 packets) @Rs 350	700
Isabion (natural biological activator, activates plant potency, vegetable growth and induces flowering)	1200
Insecticide	1000
Fungicide	390
Total cost	9530

**SHG members prepared organic manure (Pranamrit, Agneyastra, Mahulastra) and applied as per the need.*

Table 2: Member-wise Cost Economics

Name of the SHG Member	Total Investment	Total Selling Amount	Total Profit
Sumitra Tudu	1191.25	1700	508.75
Sakra Marandi	1191.25	12000	10808.75
Damayati Marandi	1191.25	2000	808.75
Malati Marandi	1191.25	8500	7308.75
Manaka Majhi	1191.25	3500	2308.75
Jhanmani Hembrum	1191.25	4000	2808.75
Salma Majhi	1191.25	3000	1808.75
Singa Marandi	1191.25	9000	7808.25
TOTAL	Rs. 9530/-	Rs. 43700/-	Rs. 34170/-

Irrespective of the negative statements of the villagers, the Jaheraya SHG forged ahead to cultivate such a rare cash crop and successfully established that women have the potential to be farmers if they are given the chance to prove themselves

selling, however, the prices are much less. For them, it was 60 per cent of the market price. An important factor was that they needed to maintain a log book, to record their investment and the revenue generated, for better analysis.

The After-effects

—

Irrespective of the negative statements of the villagers, the Jaheraya SHG forged ahead to cultivate such a rare cash crop and successfully established that women have the potential to be farmers if they are given the chance to prove themselves. These eight women of Jaheraya SHG are planning to cultivate watermelon in a bigger area this year, and this time they are very confident of getting a good price. They want to ensure that they apply everything that they have learned from this intervention. Regarding the marketing of the bulk production, they have established contact with three vendors and November will be the month of initiation of the activity—a learning from

the previous year. About 20 to 30 women farmers in the *panchayat* are now planning to grow watermelons this year, which in itself is a small ignition of change, inspired by the challenge that the Jaheraya SHG took on for itself.

Conclusion

—

There is always a story behind every successful venture. What makes a story interesting and worth narrating are the pushes and pulls experienced by the people, the challenges posed to them by circumstances and society, and their dedicated and diligent efforts at overcoming these hurdles and emerging victorious.

This case study does not highlight a great movement of cultivation of watermelon on a large scale, nor does it tell the story of any great economic benefits reaped by the women, who cultivated the fruit. It is a tale of the several small success stories of the women of Jaheraya SHG. There are stories of subtle defiance of patriarchy, of the annihilation

of men farmers' belief system about a cash crop and of a small example of change that is unstoppable now.

I believe this is just the beginning of change, in which the so-called illiterate tribal women clearly took a stance and proved they could carry it out. Watermelon cultivation was just a means to depict and convey the fact that

“Change begins from self...”

Few moons ago...

They ignited the change!

Today, there is a vibration.

In the entire habitation of that geographic periphery.

From 8 Santhal women,

To about 50 SHG women,

Will defy patriarchy and take on the challenge

Of cultivating watermelon, this year.

Few more moons to come...,

This will certainly happen

Change is the only constant,

Now that the mind is without fear.

—

Soubhagya R Ratha is based in Jashipur, Odisha

Ambadahara: A Story of Transformation

...

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

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

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

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

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

Agriculture, so far, has been at the mercy of the monsoon and practised only in the *kharif* season. The availability of food for the family from agricultural land was for not more than three to five months a year

homestead land. The major land types here are the uplands and the medium uplands.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the discussions that followed, some SHG members disclosed that they were afraid that some of the villagers may harm them and their crop through black magic and that would cause huge losses

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

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

In the discussions that followed, some SHG members disclosed that they were afraid that some of the villagers may harm them and their crop through black magic and that would cause huge

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

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

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

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

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

The eagerness of the women created an excitement in the Agriculture Department, and other line departments also came to hear about the success of the demonstration. The line departments sent their representatives to the village for more information and created more schemes for the beneficiaries

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

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

PRADAN also played an important role in institution

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

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

interface between the village and the Agriculture Department.

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

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

Their success boosted the women's energy and confidence. A vision-building exercise was carried out with SHG members, followed by a session on norm-setting for the Cluster. The Cluster decided to meet every month

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—
Subhashree Priyadarshini is based in Jhinkpani, Jharkhand

Members of Jaheraya SHG with the Block Development Officer, Mr Dharmendra Mallik, of Jashipur block, Odisha in their watermelon fields. (p. 35)



PRADAN is a non-governmental organization registered in Delhi under the Societies Registration Act. Working with small teams of professionals in several poverty clusters in seven states across central and eastern India, PRADAN builds and strengthens collectives of rural women, in order to stimulate their sense of agency and help them occupy space as equals in society. PRADAN professionals work through these collectives, to enhance the livelihoods and overall well-being of women, thereby striving for a just and equitable society.

Newsreach is an endeavour by PRADAN to reach out to the world by sharing stories of the struggles and the hopes of the rural poor, and inspiring friends and well-wishers to get involved and participate in bettering the lives of marginalized and vulnerable village women.

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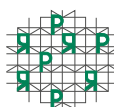
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