

PACS

People Speak



Stories from
PACS
Villages
Madhya
Pradesh
and
Chhatisgarh



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Volume 2,2006

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This manual has been produced by Write Solutions for and behalf of Development Alternatives' Poorest Area Civil Society (PACS) programme in Madhya Pradesh & Chhatisgarh (India).

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People Speak

The Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) Programme, is a non-governmental effort against poverty in India. The PACS Programme is a seven-year (2001-2008) effort to empower millions of poor people living in many of India's most backward districts. It seeks to achieve this by strengthening civil society organisations (CSOs) working for the poor. The programme today covers 14,030 villages in around 87 districts of 6 states through a network of over 529 CSOs.

The PACS Programme stems from the overall aim of the UK's Department For International Development (DFID) to reduce global poverty and promote sustainable development. In particular DFID is committed to achieving the UN Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of people living in extreme poverty in the world by 2015.

In Madhya Pradesh, the PACS Programme is being implemented in 15 districts of the central, southeastern and southwestern regions of the state by over 21 CSOs. Around half of these are working with smaller network partners (over 46 in all). The key issues addressed are governance, livelihood and women's empowerment.

The importance of information in our lives has grown immensely during the twentieth century, as those lives themselves have changed. A large part of the change has itself been driven by films, radio, tel-

evision and, most recently, digital technology, which have proved to be excellent dissemination mechanisms. People have always been engaged by stories, human drama, beauty and wonder and mass communications have made sharing them much easier.

This collection of stories has been compiled as a contribution to this thinking, principally intended for the PACS community at-large, and specifically for those in development.

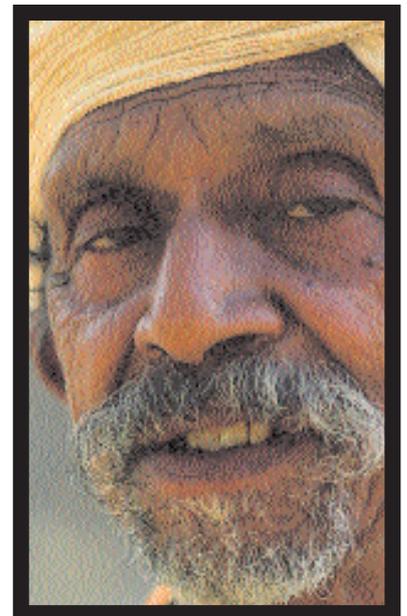
It is intended as a basic introduction to some of the connections between our programme and development, opening up questions and debates rather than providing final answers. The stories, therefore, confine themselves to a broad arguments and major issues, inevitably skirting round the subtleties and complexities.

There are, however, an increasing number of print and digital resources in this area, reflecting a broad range of perspectives and concerns. For anyone wishing to follow up the ideas touched on here, the PACS website www.empower-poor.org, in particular, offers a range of resources and further links.

The stories collected here have always been intended to stand independently of the collection as a whole: they therefore address particular issues which may be of interest or concern to people working in specific situations, and there are natural differences of per-

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spective and tone. These reflect some of the range of approaches which exist to these questions and, while none of the stories is intended as a definitive statement of position, what unites all the contributors is their conviction of the fundamental importance of the contribution of the PACS programme to social and economic life and development in Madhya Pradesh & Chhatisgarh.

This collection has been put together through a partnership which has included the entire State Programme Support Team, including Sanjeev Ranjan, Deepak Dey, Amod & Chitra Khanna and team, and Anwar Jafri and team. We are grateful to each of them for their support of a process which has sometimes been demanding.

In that context, it should be said that the stories represent the individual views of authors rather than those of the CSOs with which they are associated or indeed the bodies - Development Alternatives, Department for International Development (DFID) or the State Based Communications Agency (SBCA), Write Solutions, which have been instrumental in bringing these voices together.

We hope that these stories will provide a useful source of information to everyone in and outside of the PACS programme and we welcome the copying and distribution of material included here.

Finally, we should express

our personal thanks and appreciation to Sushmita, who worked tirelessly to see this work through, sometimes through several iterations.

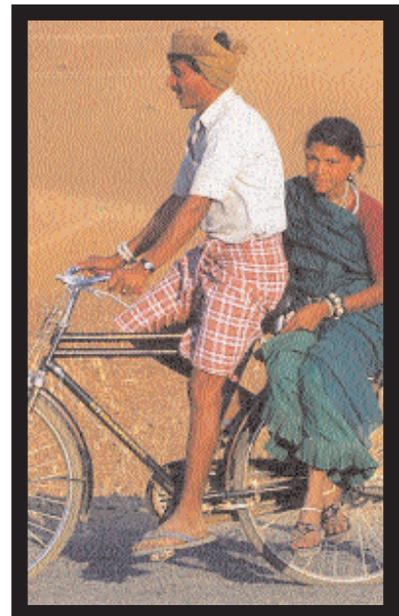
We acknowledge warmly the PACS CSOs who have offered their support and contributed extensively to this enterprise, and particularly, to all those who, in dealing with the often substantial administrative burdens involved, have helped steer this particular exercise to see light of the day!

Sanjeev Ranjan

Aditya Malaviya

Bhopal, March 2006

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RECALLING HER DOUBTS when she filed her nominations to contest the panchayat elections as a panch from the Salwaha gram panchayat ward no 5 in 1999, she says. "After I was elected, I did not know what I was supposed to do. As a woman I always used to think- what is it that I can do?" she says.

“What Is It That I Can Do?”

Sitting at her shop in village Salwaha, janpad member from Ghughri Development block No 6, Mandla district in Madhya Pradesh Savitri Chaudhary is a picture of confidence. Perched on a large swivel chair she combines affairs in the shop along with catching up with what women who come to the shop have to say. The discussions range from village talk to domestic issues.

Married off at the age of 17, until 2000 Savitri was like any woman in the village, looking after home and hearth and bringing up her daughters Dolly and Aarti. This docile woman, who herself admits she was never able to take decisions on her own, began to find her own identity in 2003. This was when she came in touch with Centre for Advanced Research and Development (CARD), which was working on empowering gram panchayats in Ghughri block. Given time, she became a member of the Ekta self-help group in the village. Today as janpad member of villages Patan, Salwaha, Bijora, she says she joined politics because she wanted to help women. "In my village, women have a problem in getting even kerosene," she says.

Recalling her doubts when she filed her nominations to contest the panchayat elections as a panch from the Salwaha gram panchayat ward no 5 in 1999, she says. "After I was elected, I did not know what I was supposed to do. As a woman I always used to think- what is it that I can do?" she says.

Savitri has a point. After all, the earlier sarpanch Hironi Bai stayed away from panchayat activities and Savitri's husband too expected her to do the same. During her tenure as panch from 2000 to 2004, when she began to meet people, especially women, Savitri began to think otherwise. She realised that women from Salwaha were raising very important

issues at the gram sabha and panchayat meetings. "Many women were battling with issues of maternity benefits, widow pension, old age pension and other Government schemes," she explains.

In the January 26, 2004, Gram Sabha, taking active interest in all these issues, Savitri began trying to address the issue of maternity benefits. Apart from this, she also began advocating strongly along with other women who were demanding that the Gram Panchayat building that had been encroached up by Forest Department be used as a training centre to produce sisal products. "Since CARD was organising training and manufacture of sisal products for the self-help groups the women desperately needed the space," says Savitri. On both issues when they did not get a hearing in the village, the women took their demands to the Janpad.

In February 2004, 18 applications for maternity benefits were immediately released. On May 18, the same year another 29 applications for maternity benefits were forward to the janpad. These were cleared on July 17, 2004. These small successes had their spin off's for Savitri as she slowly began to emerge as an influential and popular leader. This motivated her to contest the three-tier panchayat Janpad-level elections in January 2005, and she ultimately emerged victorious from Ward No 6.

With her experiences of the previous years, she began taking up women's issues more aggressively. Women in the neighbouring village, Patan, too were not hesitant to seek her help. They approached her with 14 maternity benefit applications in March 4, 2005. So did women from Churiya. Savitri recalls that the women were also made to run from department to department to collect their money. "When they went to the

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“AS JANPAD MEMBER of Patan, Salwaha & Bijora village, Savitri says she joined politics because she wanted to help women.



AWARE THAT SOCIAL benefits are not reaching the people, Savitri is keen to take up issues and problems that people were facing. She says labourers get only Rs 40-50 against the Government rate of Rs 58. "Often people do not get the amount due to them as corruption abounds".

panchayat they would be told the fund was not available. This forced us to go the Janpad level," she adds. The women faced a similar situation trying to get the panchayat building for their training and meetings. "From the January 2004 Gram Sabha, it was evident that the panchayat was giving us false promises about the getting us the building," she said. In a bid to address their problems the women realised that they would have to make their presence felt at the Gram Sabha. So on May 30, 2004, 20 women reached the Gram Sabha to bring up their demand. However, since there was no quorum, a decision could not be taken. On June 2, 2004 several women of the Ekta Bachat Samoh and Gayatri Bachat Samoh got together and took up the issue at the janpad.

On June 25, 2004, the Forest Department handed over a letter to the women allowing them to use the building, and they proceeded to repair it with money from their savings. Once again, in December 2004 and January 2005, 72 women from three villages in Ward No 6 and adjacent areas had completed formalities of applying for maternity benefits. However, for something that should have taken 15 days, they had to wait for more than four months. Many said they were not getting benefits because officials were looking for commissions.

On April 28, 2005, these women approached Savitri, who took up the issue with concerned authorities. Savitri says, "The women were told that the money had been given to the janpad. The women raised the issue that they as beneficiaries had not received cheques for maternity benefits." On May 30, 2005, she reached Ghughri Janpad office with 53 women who were waiting for

benefits from the scheme. In great detail she presented the women's problems to the CEO and Janpad president. She requested him to distribute the amount immediately, otherwise they would not leave the Janpad office. The Janpad president called for the clerk and questioned him about the problem. The women, themselves accosted the clerk, threatening him with dire consequences if their work was not done. Taking note of the serious situation, the CEO reprimanded the clerk and told him to take action immediately. Panchayat-wise cheques worth Rs 36, 000 were made for 72 women, Rs 500 for each woman. She was successful in solving cases of 29 women from Salwaha panchayat. While 30 women got cheques immediately, the remaining 11 got them the next day.

Back at her shop, her husband, Dalvir Singh Chaudhary, who is the Upper Teacher (UTD) smiles, saying Savitri had studied only up to Class VII level and he helped her complete her higher secondary.

Aware that social benefits are not reaching the people, she is keen to take up issues and problems that people were facing. As president of the Nirman Samiti Savitri she says labourers get only Rs 40-50 against the Government rate of Rs 58. "Often people do not get the amount due to them as corruption abounds," she says. Speaking about her experience in politics she says she has enjoyed the work, but adds that 'there is too much political pressure'. She says her greatest challenge was being a Scheduled Caste woman in a male dominated society, but adds, "I am happy that I had contested the elections and was able to do something for people. I like it when people say that they are happy with the work I have done."

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THE DURGA SWA-SAHAYATA Samooh planned to take up fisheries in the dam which was constructed by the Forest Department. However, it ran into several legal difficulties. It was only after they were able to resolve the legal problem that the Fisheries Farmers' Development Agency, Betul, finally issued a notice that the dam be given to Durga Swa Sahayata Samooh on lease.

Focussing On The Essentials

Faced with impoverished conditions 10 men of village Mangarodi in Chicholi block of Betul district decided to form a group. These men, who belong to Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes and Below Poverty Line (BPL) families, thought by doing so, they would be able to increase their income by tapping Government schemes.

Since the members themselves had an interest and willingness, YUVA supported this group to give them a boost. Yuwa animator, community facilitator, field coordinator and project coordinator gave them an opportunity to develop an aptitude for income generation. This group was made aware about various opportunities, imparted skill training programmes, taken out on field visits and given on-the-spot guidance.

The group named itself Durga Swa Sahayata Samooh, and planned to take up fisheries in the dam which was constructed by the Forest Department and was in Panchayat custody. However, the group ran into several legal difficulties. It was only after they were able to resolve the legal problem that the Fisheries Farmers' Development Agency, Betul, finally issued a notice that the dam be given to Durga Swa Sahayata Samooh on lease.

Enthused the group began work in September 2003. Although the group was graded by the Janpad office Chicholi, even then the group was not able to overcome their battle with poverty. The economics proved to be a handicap because the group had to take the seeds and nets. President of the group Sammulal recalls, "Determined not to give up group members started their activity with their own savings which was roughly Rs 20 per

month."

After having saved regularly for a few months, on April 13 2004, the State Bank of India, Betul, gave the group a loan of Rs 1,55,000 (Rs 15,500 per person). The group purchased seeds and nets and also spent some money on goat rearing activity. The group members paid back the bank amount with interest on June 17 2005.

In the subsequent six to ten months, the group developed their activity in such a manner that they were able to begin fishing and selling fish in the market. Durga Swa Sahayata Samooh secretary: Shivram says, "From October 2004, the group was fishing 90-100 kgs of fish per week till mid June 2005. We were selling at the rate of Rs 60-80 per kg."

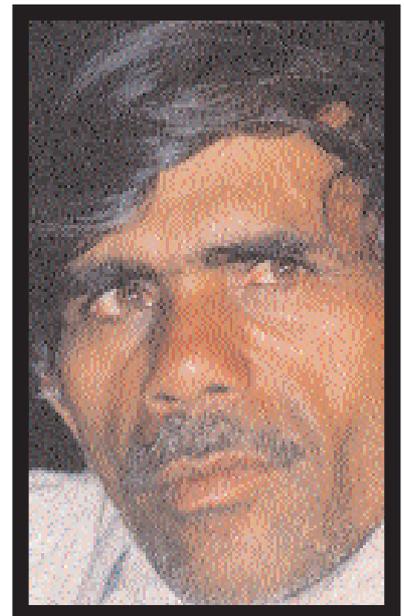
Seeing the progress and commitment of the group, YUVA decided to support this group with Rs 5000. The group used this amount to purchase seeds and nets for further expansion of activity. At that point of time president Sammulal and secretary Shivram bought 9,440 rohu seed and 10,000 katla seed.

Both Sammulal and Shivram say, "The group members are very happy with YUVA's intervention the village. People in general, and group members in particular, are now very enthusiastic about this process and progress and we will continue to work with YUVA."

According to YUVA, this group is presently the best group in the block in terms of activities and commitment.

By: Pawan Soni (CF) & Sera (PC), Yuva Rural, Betul.

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THE GROUP DECIDED to begin fisheries. However, there was lack of skills and hence the group was not very successful in this foray. The group then went back to the basics: it was given fishery training and other vital inputs by the supporting YUVA team. They were able to bag about 45 kgs of fish, which was sold for Rs. 40/- per kg.

“We Are Doing Well, And It Feels Good”.

Work on the Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) programme began in village Munchgohan on July 1 2003. Women, who are mostly daily wage earners in this village with a population of 531 comprising about 45 families, are from below the poverty line (BPL) families.

They were motivated through awareness programmes, training programmes and home visits to come together and form savings groups. Munchgohan is situated on the north of Betul district on the Betul-Athner Road, in Betul block of Betul district. Helped by the YUVA team, 15 such members came together to set up their own savings group. After a series of hectic - and enthusiastic - meetings in a span of two or three months, the Pooja Swa Sahayata Group finally came into being.

The President, Shivrati Bai, and Secretary, Malti, say that they are very happy with the group's activities so far. “We are learning how to work together and support each other in this initial phase. It is a great learning experience for us”, they add.

It started its activity with a monthly savings of Rs. 20/-. After about 8 months, when the group had enough money, it decided to purchase Mahua. The idea was that the Mahua would be sold for a profit and the profit used to buy soyabean.

Meanwhile, the group took a decision to begin fisheries in the month of September, 2004. However, there was lack of skills for undertaking fisheries as a livelihood option, and hence the group was not very successful in this foray.

The group then went back to the

basics: it was given fishery training and other vital inputs by the supporting YUVA team. After this, the group got around to taking up fisheries in earnest. In the beginning, they were able to bag about 45 kgs of fish, which was sold for Rs. 40/- per kg. The profit was used for the purchase of cash crops, which fetched a reasonable income to the group members.

The group has been given a support grant of Rs. 10,000/- by YUVA, which has been used to buy Mahua, soyabean and other cash crops, and these have been stored safely by the members to be sold later at a profit. The wait is now on for a proper price for the sale of the harvest so that they can draw the maximum income and profit.

The President, Shivrati Bai, says that earlier they went about looking for employment opportunities as daily wage earners, leaving their children, cattle and homes behind.

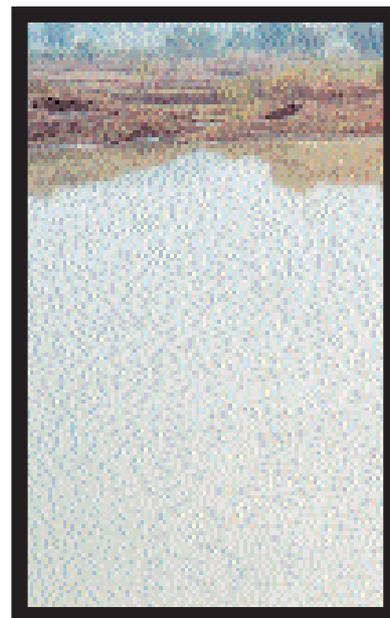
Today, she adds with some satisfaction, they need not go out for earning a living like they did before. This is because they are now able to earn within their own village, and if they do need something urgently, they have their own group from where they can take a loan.

The group sees itself as going a long way in bridging the gap between communities and their access to basic government schemes. With careful and strategic planning, the group sees itself as an empowered group which will, in the coming years, be in a position to undertake similar such initiatives on its own.

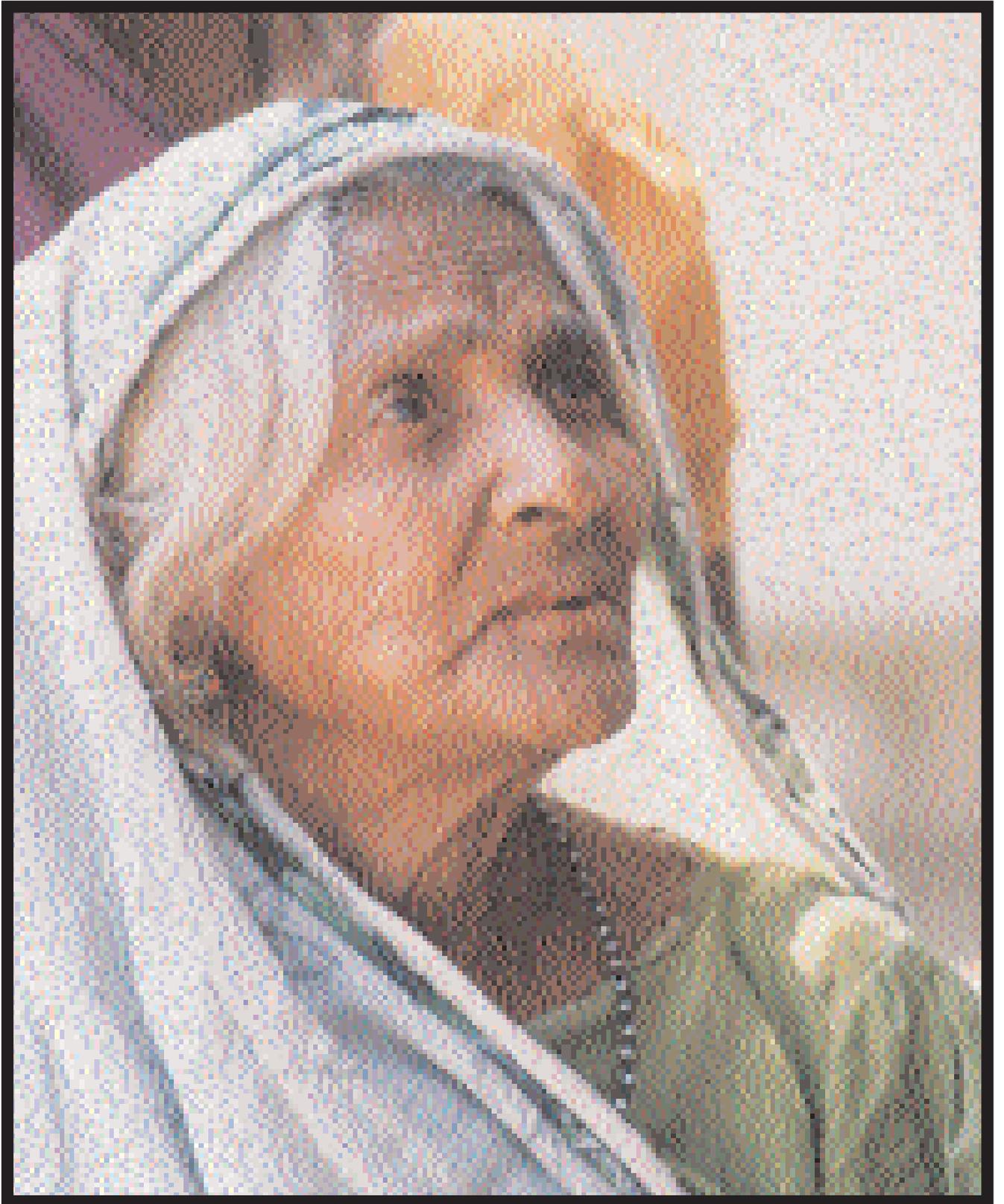
By:
Lakhan Wamankar (CF) and Sera (PC).
Yuva Rural Betul.

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EARLIER, PEOPLE WENT about looking for employment opportunities as daily wage earners, leaving their children, cattle and homes behind.



DURING INTERACTION with the Help Age team, he showed that he was not only a good communicator, but also had interest in working with the aged and empathized with their plight in the villages and hamlets in his Panchayat. He then learnt about the various nuances and pitfalls of working with the elderly.

A Boon For The Elderly.

The Concept of Vridha Mitra: Vridha Mitra, broadly speaking, is someone who is a friend of the elderly or the aged, a concept introduced by HelpAge India. The Vridha Mitra is trained on different aspects of programmes to help the elderly and the aged in his area of work.

Village Bakud of block Ghoradongri, District Betul in Madhya Pradesh is also a Panchayat headquarter. It is one of the remotest and most backward villages in the work area of Society for Rural Upliftment (SRUB). Inhabited predominantly by Gond and Korku tribes, Bakud is situated in the midst of dense forests at a distance of about 35 kilometers by road from block the headquarters.

Dinesh Kumre is associated with SRUB in the Helpage India project since December, 2006. He showed keen interest and commitment in his work with the elderly. During interaction with the Help Age team, he showed that he was not only a good communicator, but also had interest in working with the aged and empathized with their plight in the villages and hamlets in his Panchayat.

Kumre also realized that there is more to his responsibilities than mere interaction with the target group. During his training, he was taught about the various nuances and pitfalls of working with the elderly. He was also put through a refresher programme which enhanced his skills and knowledge with respect to various government schemes for the aged/elderly, benefits accruing to them, and establishing backward and forward linkages in tandem with other governmental and non-governmental agencies, etc.

Armed with enhanced knowledge and requisite skills on his role and responsibilities, he approached the Sarpanch, Secretary, Panch and other leaders of Traditional Social Panchayat in his village to explain the concept and objectives of the Helpage Project - Community Mobilization & Advocacy For The Elderly.

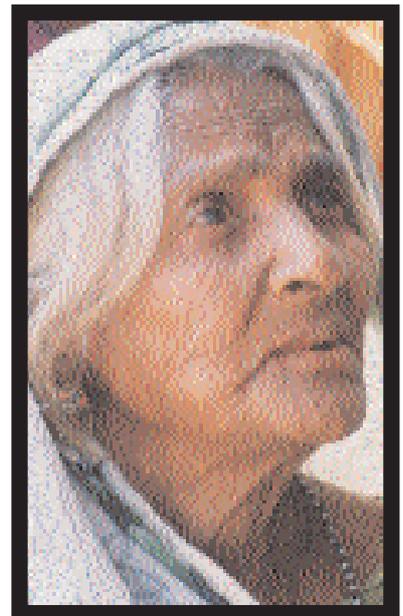
The programme is a development initiative launched by SRUB in partnership with Helpage India and supported by Department for International Development (DFID), UK, under the aegis of the Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) programme.

Says Shahab Syed, Chief Functionary, SRUB: "The desire of every elderly person is to be valued as a useful human being. In every aspect of our Help Age programme, we have tried to reinvigorate, reaffirm and, in most cases, expand on the role that any Vridha Mitra has had in the success of the whole. We were then able to show how these roles work in concert with each other to tremendous effect. The idea is to implement various aspects of our programme by customising it to suit the specific needs and prevailing situation at the community level." He adds that this approach is proving to be effective in gaining buy-in, collaboration, camaraderie and increased commitment. And, most importantly, the approach is fast becoming a part of his organisation's culture, now and in the many years to come.

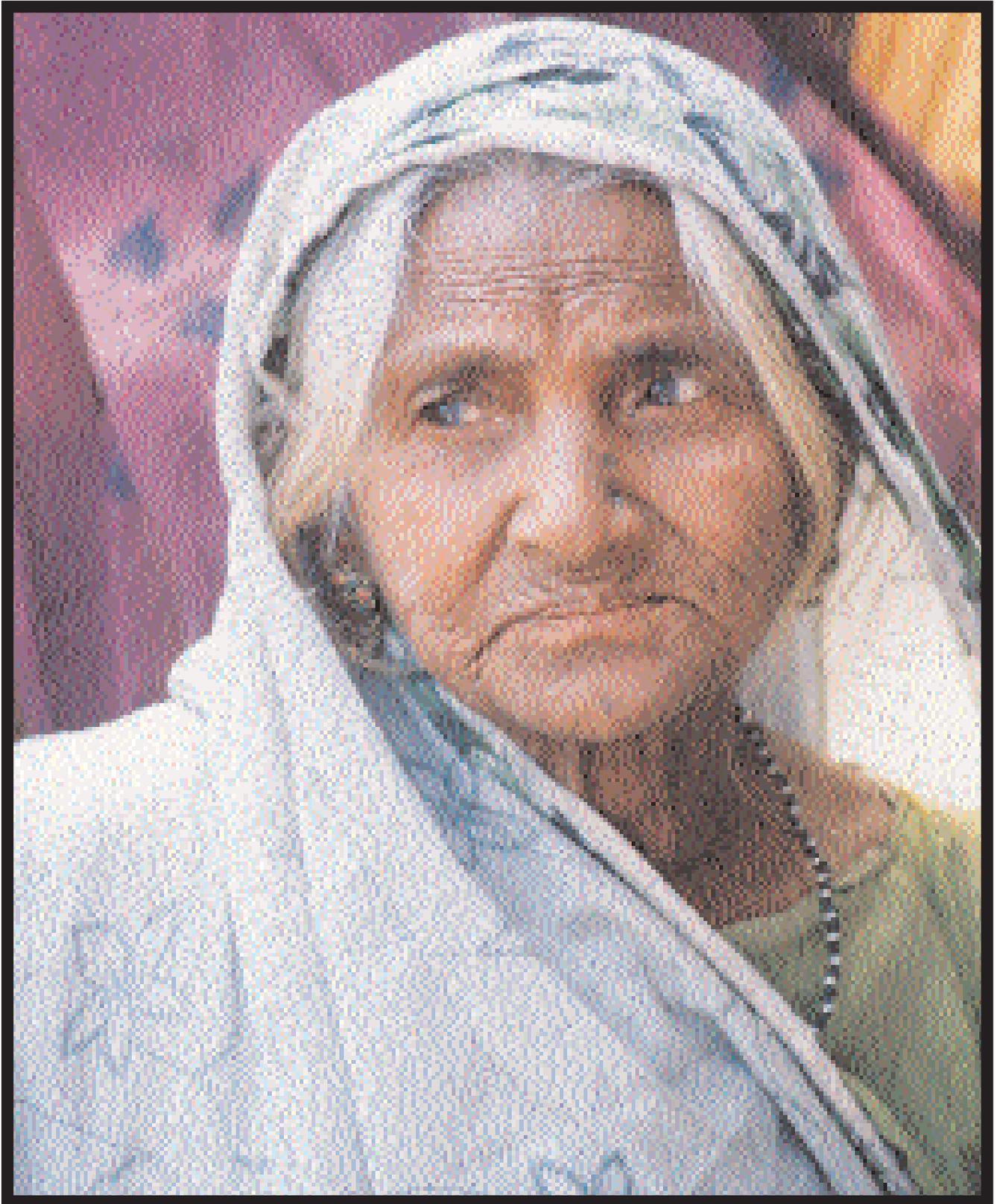
During his visit to the village, Kumre inquired about the status of different government programmes being implemented in Bakud, viz. IAY, Antyodaya and Old Age Pension schemes from Panchayat representatives.

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HOWEVER, THE PRESSURE of Kumre's visit began to tell on the Secretary and sensing trouble for himself, Kumre was informed by the beneficiaries that the Secretary had finally released their pensions after two days of his last meeting with him. Interestingly enough, the Secretary then himself included 18 new names of beneficiaries in the list and informed Kumre about it personally!

He also tried to find out about the number and names of persons who were benefiting from these schemes, and about those who were eligible but had not accessed these benefits so far.

The results of these interactions were very encouraging: out of 47 identified elderly persons, 9 said they had applied to the Panchayat about a year-and-a-half ago for the OAP but no action had been taken so far by the Panchayat. Similarly, Kumre also learnt that Disability Pension for 9 persons had also been pending at the Panchayat level for very long.

As a humanitarian gesture, Kumre decided to advocate for the pension of not only the elderly but also for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). Kumre realized that he could help resolve these issues as a trained Vridh Mitra. He approached the Sarpanch, who in turn, directed him to contact the Panchayat Secretary, Rooplal Bhannare.

When contacted, the Secretary was evasive in his answers and asked Kumre to call him the next day. When Kumre arrived at Bhannare's office the next day, he again postponed the issue for yet another day.

However, the pressure of Kumre's visit began to tell on the Secretary and sensing trouble for himself, Kumre was informed by the beneficiaries that the Secretary had finally released their pensions after two days of his last meeting with him.

An interesting fall out of Kumre's effort was that the Secretary himself included 18 new names of beneficiaries in the list and informed Kumre about it personally!

In the entire episode, the moot question is why schemes meant for the elderly and the disabled are not reaching the beneficiaries in the village? According to rules, if a village does not have a Post Office or a Bank within a ten kilometers radius, then the pension has to be disbursed in cash by the Gram Panchayat.

Kumre's action set a precedent not only for fellow Vridh Mitras but also for the villagers, who are now more aware of their rights and entitlements and have begun to demand their due.

"I have found Kumre to be both inspiring and professional in his approach to his work. His unique techniques and excellent people skills have helped him bridge the age divide that we otherwise face in our interaction with the elderly", says Shahab Syed.

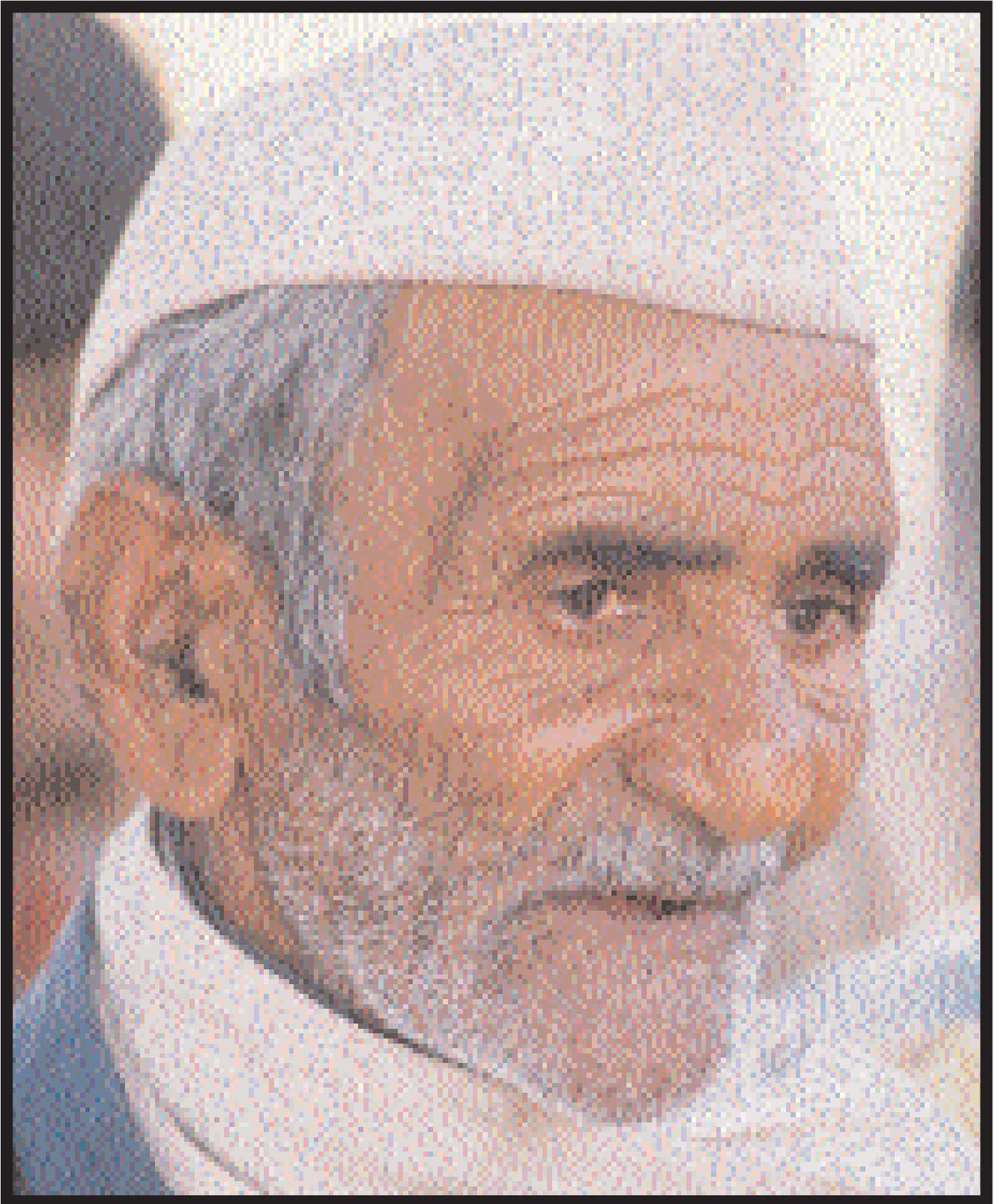
"He is also good in helping other people in the community understand how we each operate from different perspectives. I think Kumre can engage a diverse group of people to work together effectively. I am quite impressed by his level of organisation and professionalism".

SRUB & Help Age are working towards highlighting people's strengths within the programme and therefore, the role they are best suited for. The staff is, for the most part, a relatively hard-nosed, pragmatic group who are not working so much for pay as for what they value and believe in. This simple methodology has allowed the community to 'see' its value in the big picture and the importance of a collaborative approach.

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DURING A community mobilization visit to her village, Junia met Anil Khiradkar, who is a Vridha Mitra for that area.

At the end of the meeting, she narrated her woes to Khiradkar, who assured her that he would follow-up her problem with the concerned Sarpanch and Secretary.

Working With A Helping Hand

Ardh Adiwasi Vikas Sangh (AAVS) is an CSO working in Chhindwara District of Madhya Pradesh with HelpAge India to implement the Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) programme on "Community Mobilization and Advocacy for the Rights of the Elderly".

AAVS seeks to improve awareness and access to social welfare programmes and build the capacity of the elderly to advocate for their rights.

Vridha Mitra is a key resource in the programme strategy, playing a pivotal role in the life of the elderly. Though the project is still in its infancy, the effort of Vridha Mitra's have begun to show interesting results.

Junia Somaji is a 85-year-old woman of village Madkasur of Bichhua block. Economically weak, she made several attempts to follow-up her old age pension with the local Sarpanch and Secretary. But apart from assurances, no progress was made in this regard. Ultimately she gave up.

During a community mobilization visit to her village, she met Anil Khiradkar, who is a Vridha Mitra for that area. At the end of the meeting, she narrated her woes to Khiradkar, who assured her that he would follow-up her problem with the concerned Sarpanch and Secretary.

Khiradkar met both the Sarpanch and the Secretary, and during conversation with them, explained to them not only about the Helpage programme but also the case of Smt. Junia Somaji.

Several follow-up visits and dia-

logue finally paid off: not only were the Sarpanch & Secretary appreciative of his sincere effort, but they also ensured that Smt. Junai Somaji receive her pension in the soonest possible time frame.

A few months later, Junai Somaji began to receive her pension (of Rs 150/-) and, needless to add, is a very satisfied soul!

Similarly, others like Sonay Chitram, Dinba Tukaram, Samoli Ram Das & Lal Singh have also started receiving Old Age Pension under the initiative and the vigorous follow-up of several concerned Vridha Mitra's.

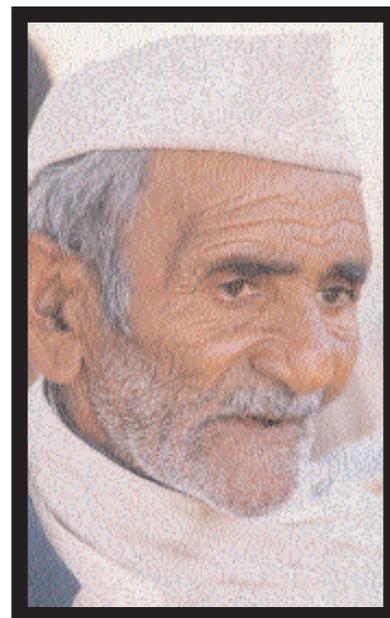
75-year-old Bansi Gedlal from village Kapurkheda under Bichhua block was a very hard worker. But growing old meant that he no longer had the strength that he once had as a young man. Despite failing health, he had decided that he would not be a burden to his family, and he spoke to local panchyat representatives in his village about pension and other benefits, but all his entreaties went unnoticed.

However, he refused to give up and followed-up his case (of linkage with the Antodaya Anna Yojana) with the help of Gajanan Mahale, Chief Functionary of Ardh Adiwasi Vikas Sangh, and Gajanan Madavi, a Vridha Mitra of that area.

With regular follow-up's at different fora, the issue was finally resolved and he began to receive his allocated quota of grain under the scheme.

Junia Somaji is a 85-year-old woman of village Madkasur of Bichhua block. She made several attempts to follow-up her old age pension with the local Sarpanch and Secretary. But apart from assurances, no progress was made in this regard.

Ultimately she gave up.



VRIDHA MITRA is a key resource in the programme. Though the project is still in its infancy, Vridha Mitra's have begun to show interesting results.



EXTRACTING HONEY in this manner had other disadvantages as the wax in the hive would drain into the honey. If they either break or burn the hive, it would mean killing 40,000 -75,000 bees. "Should the queen bee live in that hive, then the whole family was destroyed. Kuram says, "When we went to sell the honey, buyers would say it was sugar syrup or sugarcane juice and would pay nothing."

Honey: Sweetening Rural Life!

From above, a honey hunter descends the rock harnessed to a rope. As his mates secure the rope from the top and ferry tools up down as required, the honey hunter fights territorial bees as he cuts out chunks of honey from the comb.

For hundreds of years, the skills required to perform this treacherous task have been passed down through the generations. But now both the bees and traditional honey hunters are in short supply, the shortages stemming from the overzealous harvests of non-traditional honey hunters and downbeat conditions for honey production.

In the tribal belt of Mandla, collecting honey, till only a few years ago, was a dangerous way to earn a livelihood. But for some, it was the only way to earn to survive. Many honey collectors would be bitten by bees, and the more unfortunate ones would fall from trees in case of bee attack. Till recently, two deaths were reported in the district from injury sustained either from falling off a tree or from bee venom.

President of the Chhinmay group of honey collectors, Mangal Singh Kuram in Ghughri block recalls, "We were always scared so we would cut the branch where the hive was and then burn it out to get the honey."

Since July 1, 2001, Centre for Advanced Research and Development (CARD) has been working with 220 families in Mandla district training honey collectors in the process that is ecologically sustainable and allows collection of honey more than once from same honeycomb. Project officer Nisar Qureshi says, "Apart from harming themselves, people caused close to 80 per cent loss in honey

collection." This was mainly because they would either break or burn the hive killing nearly 40,000 to 75,000 bees. "Should the queen bee live in that hive, then the whole family was destroyed," he explains.

Extracting honey in this manner had other disadvantages as the wax in the hive would drain into the honey. Kuram says, "When we would go to sell the honey, the buyers would say that it was sugar syrup or sugarcane juice and they would offer us a pittance."

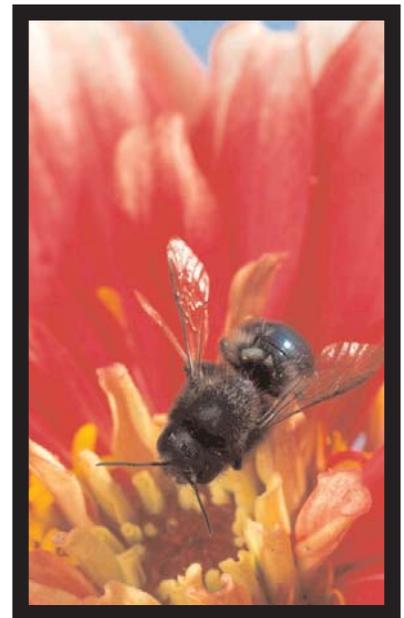
As part of the United Nations Development Project (UNDP) aimed to set up Training Resource Centres in 10 places in India, CARD conducted household surveys through village meetings focusing on available local resources, farming practices, and what natural resources people depended upon. The survey threw up the need and activities of local people. It was found that while honey, NTFP, trifala, churna awala were available there was tremendous scope for value addition of these products.

CARD's interventions in the block began with a UNDP support for Technology Resource Centre (TRC) in collaboration with the district administration. Now honey collectors like Kalar Paraste, Anup Singh Bhagat, Lal Bahadur Parte, Mohal Lal Saiyam and others use this small measure to improve their honey collection. Some of them wear canvas gear, head to toe, and use ladders to cut a part of honey chamber and bring it down.

"Taking all these little measures have not only made collection safer, honey that used to be sold at Rs 30 is now being sold at Rs 60. This also allows the hive to return to its full honey potential in two months

Honey (madhu) is produced by bees from the nectar collected from flowers, and stored in their hives as food.

Honey is classified according to origin as blossom and honeydew-honey and by processing mode as comb, extracted or pressed-honey.



THE COLOUR, taste and odour of honey depend on the type of nectar the bees collect. The main chemicals in honey are fructose and dextrose.



UNDER THE PACS programmatic intervention, CARD covers 30 villages in 15 Gram Panchayats. CARD through its interventions collects natural honey through its SHGs and makes a higher payment. This honey is processed and sold through a brand name in the open market.

time," explains Quershi. Now collection ranges from anything between 2 to 13 kgs against the average collection in Mandla that was 5 to 7 kgs. Says 26-year-old Anup Singh Bhagat of the Gondwana Swayamsahayata Samoh, "Over the last four years, I have been wearing protective gear, and have been able to increase my honey collection from 50 kg in three seasons, to one quintal." Apart from this the honey collectors are now able to sell clear honey as pollen and wax do not get mixed in it any more, they agree.

UNDP and DRDA, Zila Panchayat also jointly funded a small processing unit and a community building to encourage training people. The organisation also began providing some honey collectors protective canvas gear.

All this was set up with help from the Canadian Fund for Local Initiative (CFLI). Today women from other villages like Selwara too have begun to use the common facility centre at Ghughri. "Here the women are encouraged to add value to their forest products, like making salted awla, pickles etc," so that they are able to sell them at better prices says Quershi.

The women are supported not only with training, they are allowed to use the machines and their marketing too is routed through CARD. Today it is the biggest honey unit in Madhya Pradesh!

"Self help groups Khermai, Gita and Swarna Jayanta Grameen Swarojar Yojana BPL groups have also been given their first grading and with Rs 10,000 which is around 4 times of their saving they bought Amla," he adds. Apart from this the organisation is being supported by two DFID funded projects, the

Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) Programme managed by Development Alternatives, New Delhi and the Government of Madhya Pradesh's Rural Livelihood Project (MPRLP) in the block.

Under the PACS programmatic intervention, the organisation covers 30 villages in 15 Gram Panchayats. CARD through its interventions collects natural honey through its SHGs and makes a higher payment. This honey is processed and sold through a brand name in the open market.

The honey collectors also get a share in the profit after the sales are conducted. Says PACS community development officer Chanda Yadav, "Earlier, the rates for honey were not fixed. And since the honey looked cloudy they were forced to sell at less." CARD's Chief Functionary in Bhopal, Vivek Sharma is now faced with another challenge, "This region is faced with a threat of Apiculture as against natural honey collection."

He explains honey is collected in two ways: one is from the hives that exist in the natural form and the second through the process of apiculture. He argues that while the collection of natural honey is carried out by tribals in and around forest the sale is conducted through the local trader and if apiculture is introduced it will adversely affect the livelihood of the honey collectors. It will also introduce foreign bees that are likely to replace local indigenous species adversely affecting the local bio-diversity.

This is an issue that will have wide spread impact in neighbouring areas of Dindori, Betul, Chhindwara and Balaghat and he says that his organization will be advocating for standardization in honey to inform

Says 26-year-old Anup Singh Bhagat of the Gondwana Swayamsahayata Samoh, "Over the last four years, I have been wearing protective gear. This has now allowed me to substantially increase my honey collection from 50 kg in three seasons, to one quintal."



"Self help groups Khermai, Gita and Swarna Jayanta Grameen Swarojar Yojana BPL groups have also been given their first grading.



SHARMA POINTS OUT there is a difference in the quality of honey as collected from nature and as developed during apiculture which is not known to consumers as there is no standardisation of honey in a legal framework. "Epiculture is more suited in areas that are agriculturally prosperous and that take crop more than once a year. In forested areas like Mandla, natural honey has a niche market," he says.

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In forested areas, like that of Mandla, natural honey has a niche market and great marketing potential," he says.

The organisation has geared itself up to deal with this situation by educating Gram Sabhas and facilitate formation of their opinion, holding block level workshops to appraise Janpad members of the issue to be followed by a district level workshop.

With this done, the organisation will move towards interacting with the media on the need for standardisation in honey retail market so that the consumers are better informed and consultations and workshops with experts to form an opinion at the national and state level so that an appropriate policy an legal framework can emerge.

With the UNDP support now over, CARD has established the Makail Suta Sahad Vikas Samiti (Society registered under M.P. Registration Act) that will function as a federation to help honey collectors with networking, liaisoning and advocacy.

As of now the elections for the Samiti have been held and in an effort to give a fair representation of the area, Kalar Singh, of village Harra tola of Mawai block has been elected co-secretary and Heera

Singh of Kisli village, Bichiya block has been elected president. CARD will play the role of the secretary. Qureshi says the elections were democratically held without any outside interference.

Gope Swayam-sahayata Samoh member Purshottam Uike says now the honey collectors know how to collect pure and clear honey scientifically and they bring it to the centre. Here, depending on orders on hand from customers, the honey is processed and packed for selling.

For these men, coming together has had other advantages too. "Earlier, the Forest Department used to trouble us saying that if we entered the forest, we should not touch anything but honey," Purshottam Uike adds.

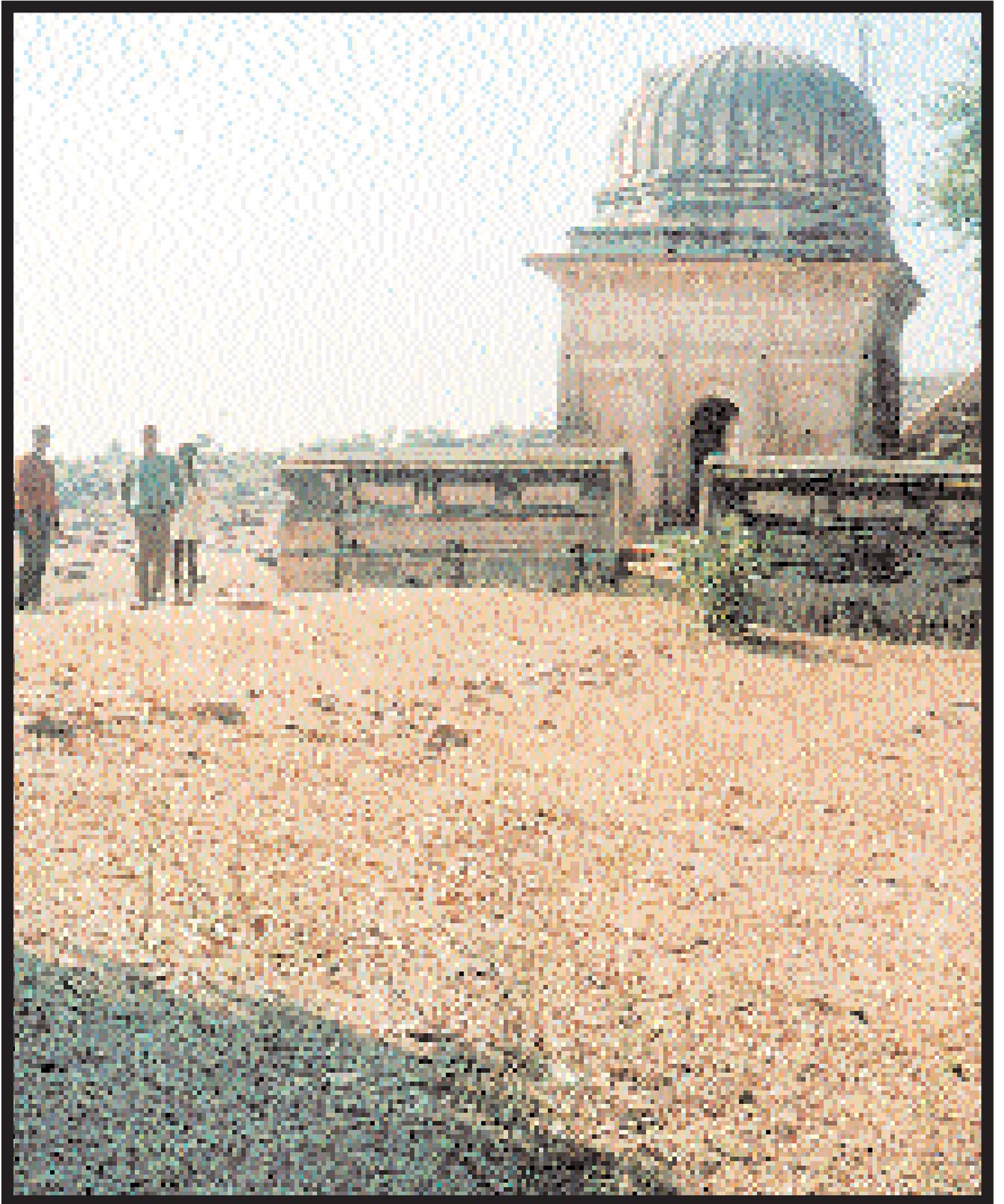
CARD arranged to get its self-help group member's identity cards stating that they had been trained in non-destructive method of honey harvesting and this helps the honey collectors deal with forest officials, saving them from the daily harassment that they used to face earlier.

Many of the men's groups are keen to start up small businesses. While the men of the Gondwana Self Help Group want to buy and sell mahua Mohan Lal Sayan of the Chinnmay group says that his group wants to take the honey collection business further.

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JATARA WATER RESOURCES Department (WRD) Sub-Engineer ML Kori gives you another take. He says the tanks were built by the Chandela kings for entertainment like boating.

"More importantly, the tanks supported fisheries and since animals used to come there to quench their thirst - royalty

Reviving Chandela Tanks

India's rich history hits you as you step into the Bundelkhand region to trace the progress of a group of professionals dealing with one of the country's crying problems- water. History because the country had a legacy of how water resources were managed prior to Independence in 1947. In the Central Indian State of Madhya Pradesh, (will give a link to MP), feudal landlords built the Chandeli tanks 1,000 years ago, which today after several years of neglect and disrepair, may emerge as a life line for farmers in the area.

Says SRIJAN Jatara team leader Raj Kumar, "Traditionally in this area, there has been a dependency on tanks. Historically, there were around 2,000 tanks in Bundelkhand (link of map of region) region of Madhya Pradesh, today many of these are defunct."

Jatara Water Resources Department (WRD) Sub-Engineer ML Kori gives you another take. He says the tanks were built by the Chandela kings for entertainment like boating "More importantly, the tanks supported fisheries and since animals used to come there to quench their thirst - royalty would hunt there!"

From 1950s the Government's Water Resources Department (WRD) began converting these tanks to service areas desperate for water over the years. Since then, these badly managed resources left many functional tanks in a state of neglect. Since SRIJAN was already working in the water sector we were invited to work in this area."

The Community Management of Chandela Taals project took off in March 2003 with support from India Canada Cooperation Office (ICCO),

now known as the Canadian High Commission aimed at rehabilitation of five traditional Chandela taals in Tikamgarh District of Madhya Pradesh. SRIJAN identified taals where beneficiaries demanded repair and were willing to organise themselves into Tank User Groups (TUGs), and develop a set of norms and rules for post-rehabilitation maintenance. The physical rehabilitation was also to be carried out by SRIJAN.

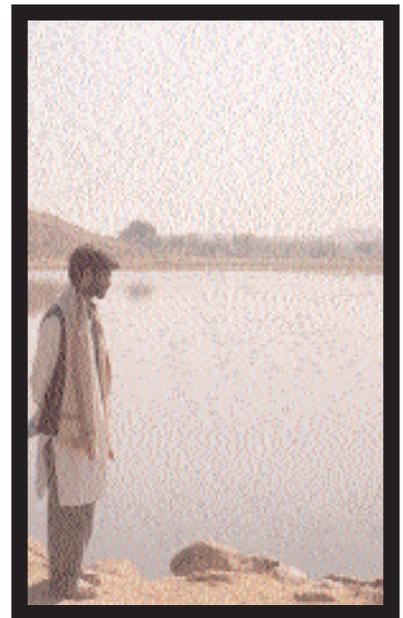
Under the project five informal tank user groups, in Shahpura (see box), Toriya Suklan, Kharon, Fateh Ka Khirak and Kadwa were promoted by SRIJAN to catalyze the process of rehabilitating these tanks built by the Chandela rulers. The tanks that have survived the ravages of time play a crucial role in the economy of this region. This is reflected in the high proportion (57 per cent) of cultivated area that is irrigated in the Tikamgarh district (link to map) as compared to the State average of only 23 per cent.

Social issues plaguing the tank irrigation system have been found to be more challenging given the feudal socio-economics of the region. Disproportionate distribution of resources (land and water) causes other tank-based livelihoods such as fisheries and livestock to have an unequal share in the benefits derived from tanks. This further complicates the process of bringing people together as equal stakeholders and evolve strategies for pro poor tank institutions.

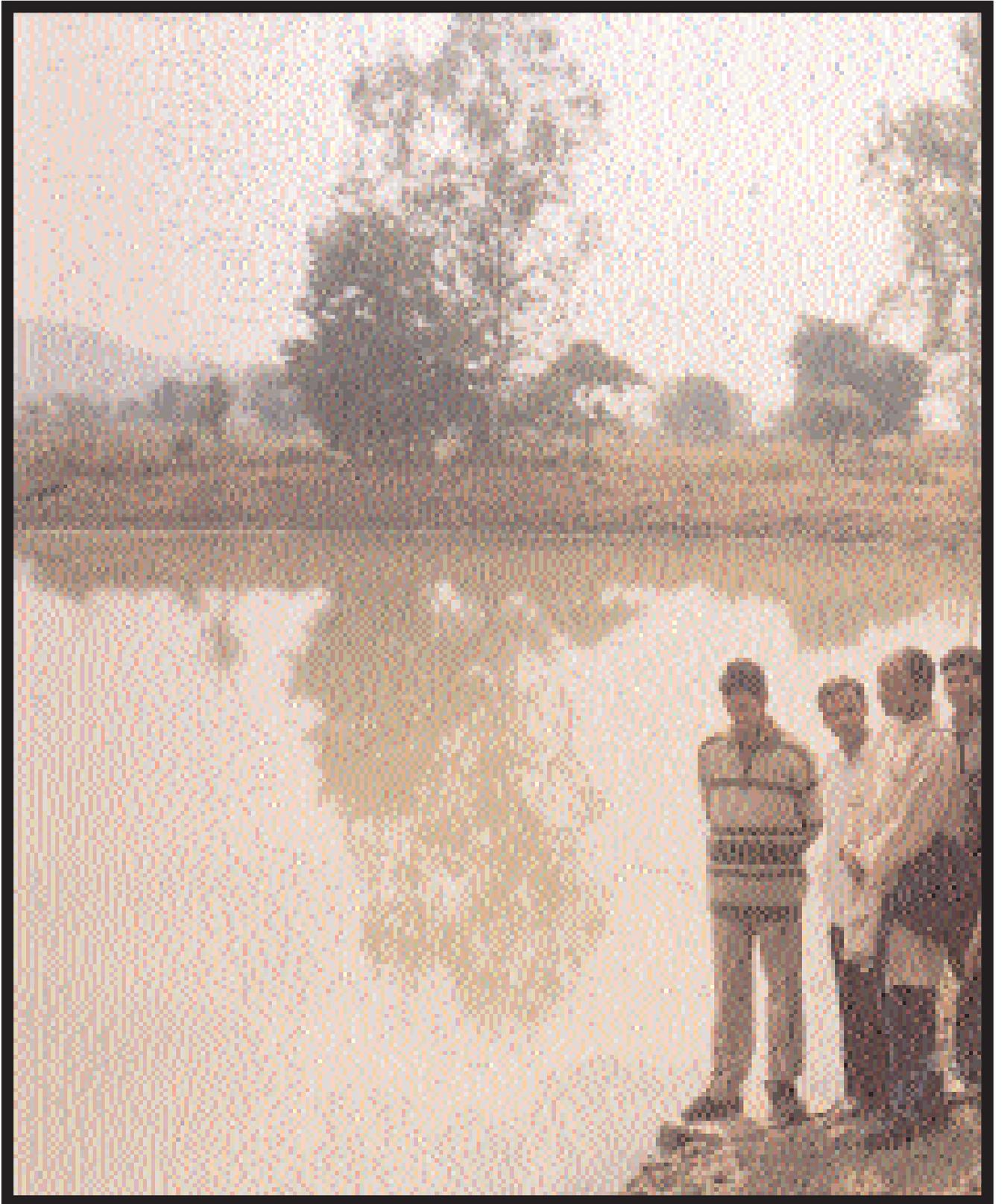
With support from the Canadian High Commission, SRIJAN began working directly with the tank user community of five tanks. About 400 families are direct stakeholders in these tanks and they have organised themselves into informal Tank User

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From 1950s, the Government's Water Resources Department (WRD) began converting these tanks to service areas desperate for water over the years.



ABOUT FOUR HUNDRED FAMILIES are direct stakeholders in these tanks and they have organised themselves into informal Tank User Groups (TUGs) to undertake rehabilitation of their tanks. Raj Kumar says, "The issues that we had to address were too much seepage, canal repair, there were no clear cut responsibilities of the management of the tanks."

Groups (TUGs) to undertake rehabilitation of their tanks. Raj Kumar says, "The issues that we had to address were too much seepage, canal repair, there were no clear cut responsibilities of the management of the tanks." One of the biggest hurdles that the project faced was that since the Government had taken over the tanks, there was no people's ownership.

Speaking about the Government facilitated Water User Associations (WUA) which have traditionally been responsible for the management of these water bodies, Raj Kumar explains that the body had to oversee 5 to 6 tanks and their stakes were not defined. "Since there were always limited funds functionaries of the Association tended to focus any work taken up in their village only." For the man on the ground, Kori says, "The election of the president of the WUA has always been a controversial one. It is a fight of might and it has been in the hands of the wealthiest or those who can wield force." The other issue that has always plagued the WUA was corruption and counter accusations.

Government says people do not pay taxes and people reply "if there is no water why should we pay". In this whole situation, it was the resource-less- marginalised farmers that suffered the most. There were other issues. The tanks were a resource for the Dhimars (fishing community) and those who would raise a seasonal crop in the tank bed.

In this background, SRIJAN Project Executive Purshottam Dhakar says, "We had to tread very carefully. Our entry to the areas were only to understand the caste dynamics, what the possibilities could be, the status of marginal and poor farmers their stake in the entire

issue, the politics of the command area, and irrigation tanks- the entire intricate scenario."

Giving one typical illustration, Dhakar says in village Kadwa, the tussle between farmers and fishermen was particularly stiff. Farmers wanted sluice gates opened and the fishermen wanted the dead storage so that they could let their fingerlings grow to their optimum which would fetch them a good price.

In 2003, he says, the contractor did not allow the sluice gates to be opened and the Sub Divisional Officer (SDO) was called in to help the farmers. Since the SDO was familiar with politics of the area, he hired labourers and not villagers, to open the sluice gates. The minute the SDO turned his back, the contractor's people closed the sluice gates!

Equity in Bundelkhand (poor people's access to resources) is not as burning an issue as in tribal areas where land alienation is prevalent. In case of Toriya, the size of the land holdings is small as 24 out of 33 farmers have land less than 1 hectare in command.

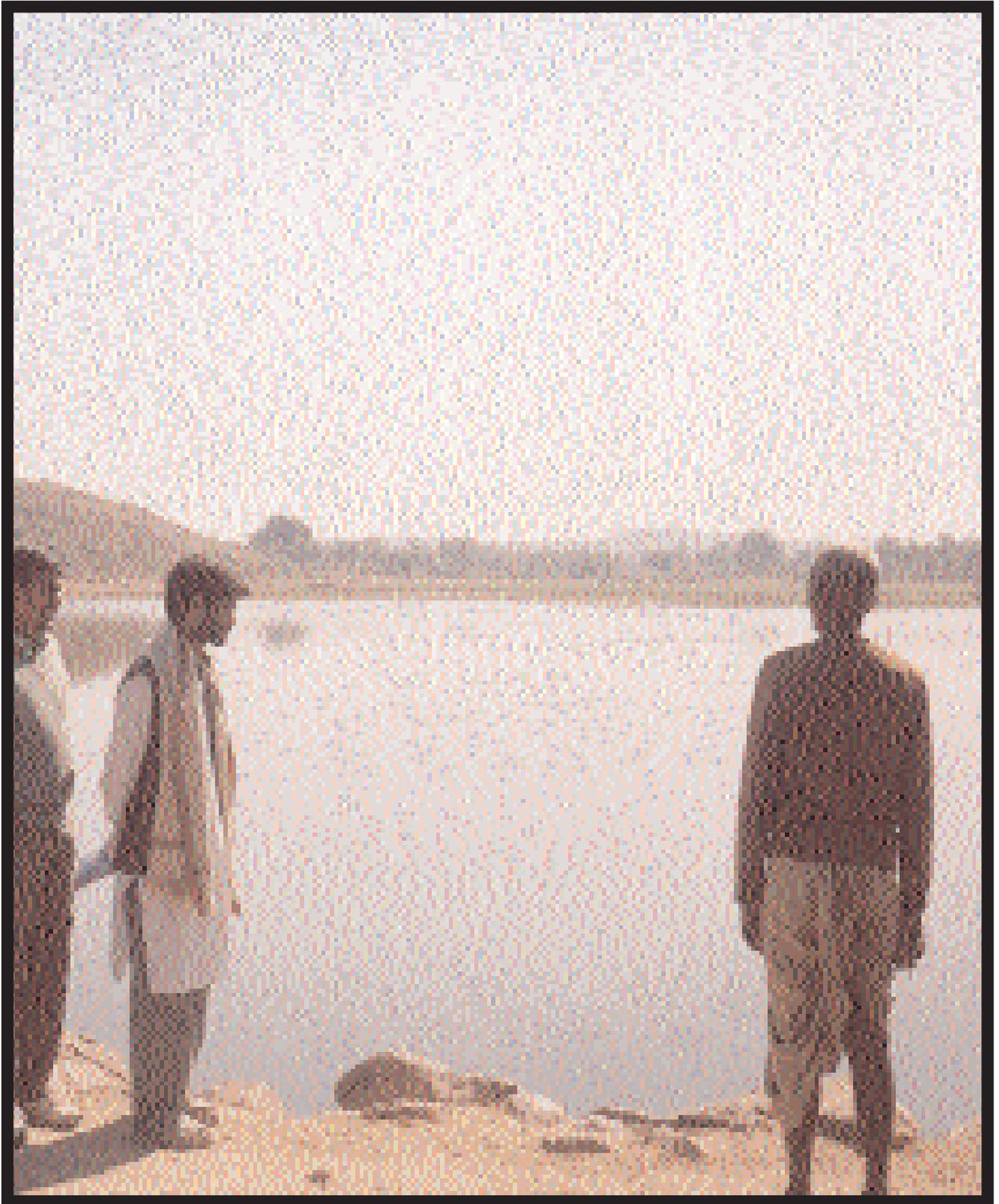
This signifies the overall poverty of the area. Nonetheless given the feudal set up of Bundelkhand, agriculture dependence of Ahirwars (OBCs) is 30 per cent and that of Brahmins (higher castes) is 68 per cent which clearly indicates the stakes of the two communities in the tank and here emerges the need to focus on needs of particular community.

In land based work, inequity is entrenched. Dhakar adds that the formation of the TUGs was only to promote such groups that would focus on the tank of that village

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The Government says people do not pay taxes and people reply "if there is no water why should we pay?". There were other issues, too.



DHAKAR RECOLLECTS: "Setting up TUGs was not an easy process. There were that many leaders, that many caste equations. But finally the groups were formed." Dhakar adds: "The desperation of the people was apparent, because they were willing to overcome traditional friction to get things moving. They even ensured that rates paid during the work were at market rates!"

only. "Thus, the selection process of this group too had to be done with a lot of care. The groups were formed only after a lot of consultation and several rounds of meetings in the village." After this group was formed, it was matter of prioritising, surveying, making estimates, and collecting the one time membership of Rs 100. People in the villages contributed in cash, kind and shramdan (in India when people wish to contribute and do not have the means, they give man hours).

Dhakar recollects, "This was not an easy process. There were that many leaders, that many caste equations. All of this had to be dealt with. But finally the groups were formed and the executive committee too was formed." Dhakar adds, "The desperation of the people was apparent, because they were willing to overcome traditional friction to get things moving. They even ensured that rates paid during the work were at market rates!"

There is little doubt that the present project is just a beginning and there is a need for greater mobilisation and thinking required before taking the initiative to scale.

Some of the issues the work has certainly thrown up is the recognition of TUGs for each tank as a distinct legal entity by the Government, vesting of all rights of management of tanks by the Government with the respective TUGs, belief of the community in their ability to manage tank systems, efficacy of TUG in ensuring equitable share of water for the depressed communities, such as the Dhimars and Ahirwars, centre-staging women as stakeholders in tank based livelihoods, diversifying tank based livelihoods to benefit the poor, such as livestock that is not based only on land. Integrating

watershed development with tank rehabilitation to arrive at a livelihood model for tank users.

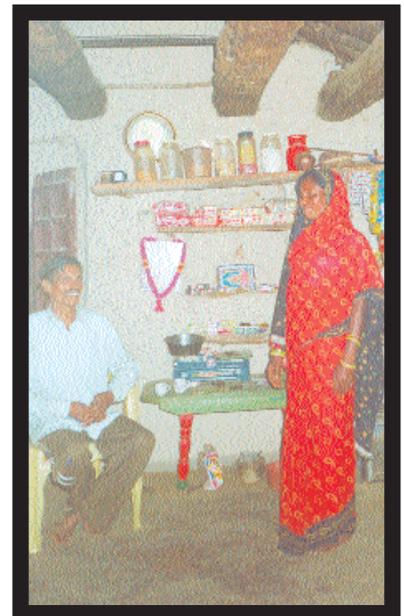
According to SRIJAN, identification of common interest and stakeholder identification and how do these things be tackled in scale up phase. According to Kori while the work that has been done has been of a good quality, "There is still a lot of ground that needs to be covered. I am not sure how much SRIJAN was supposed to do, but more tracks of canal remain to be done. But the Government of Madhya Pradesh is now negotiating with the World Bank to work on more those tanks?"

Driving through one of the most backward States of India, the road to Jatara is a long one. From the State Capital of the Central Indian State of Madhya Pradesh, Bhopal, to Jhansi and then the two-hour long drive to Tikamgarh. The historical importance of the region grows on you with every moment, and when you make your way to Jatara, you know everything you are about to see is steeped in the magnificent history of Bundelkhand.

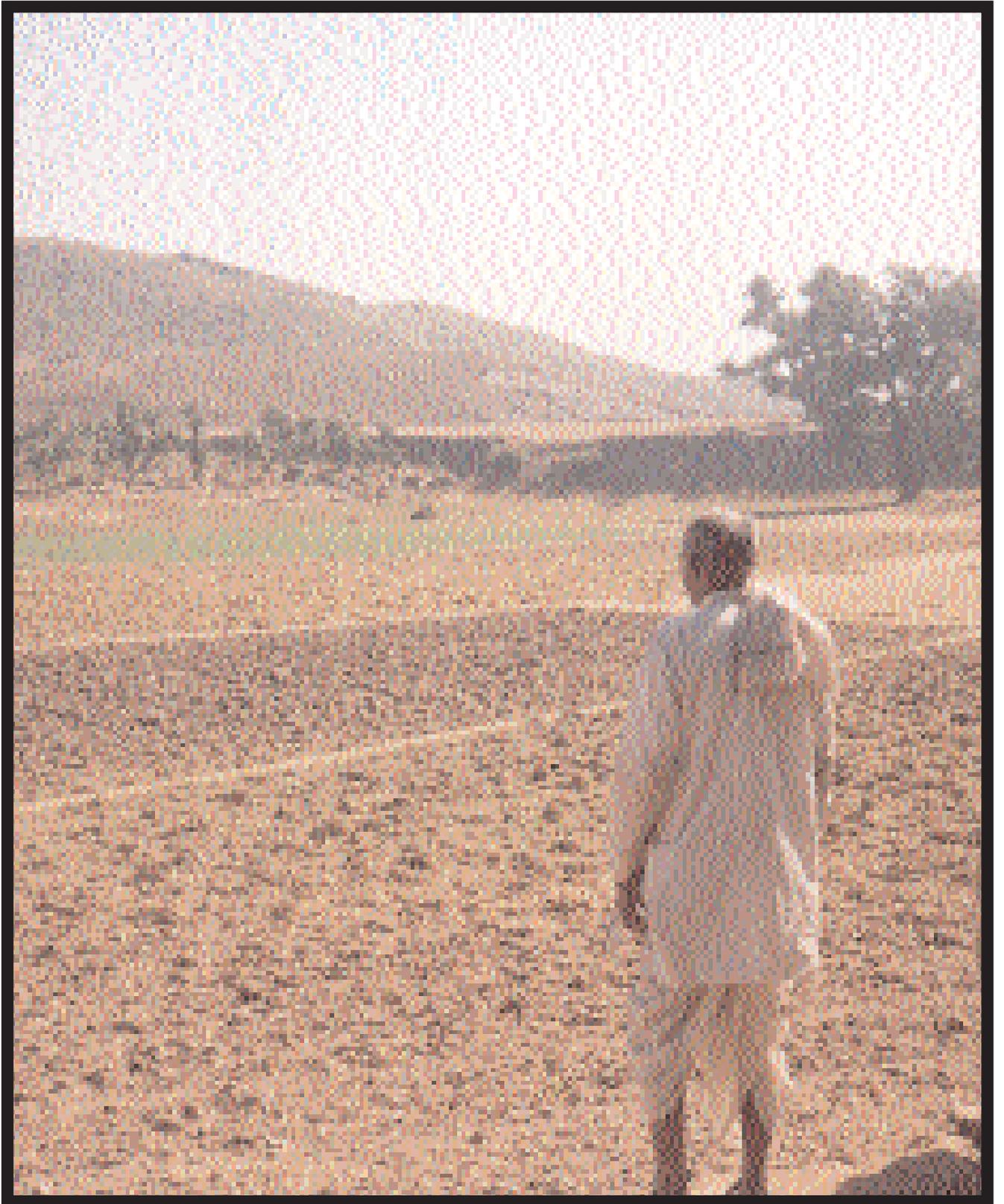
What a group of enthusiastic professionals are doing has left farmers totally indebted to them and the Government machinery happy that somebody has been able to take up the Herculean task of renovating the historical legacy of the Bundela kings- the Chandela tanks.

In village Shahpura, there is a palpable excitement among the people gathered to tell us how they have tried to change their destiny with the renovation of the tank in their area. Sixty-five year old, member of the TUG managing committee Harcharan Rajput says many years ago, when the tanks were functional, water used to go 2.5 kms far. "In

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65-year old member of TUG managing committee Harcharan Rajput says many years ago, when the tanks were functional, water used to go 2.5 kms.



IN FEBRUARY 2004 farmers got together to form a committee. With a contribution of Rs 6,000 from the village, and 1,25, 000 from CHC funds through SRIJAN, work on the Shahpura village tank began. For a man who has been fighting against the vagaries of water for as long as he can remember, Rajput laughs when he says, "They cannot take out the money without my thumb imprint!"

the 70s the Water Resource Department converted the tanks for irrigation purposes. The plug that earlier used to let water out was replaced with a sluice gate that went half way across the 'bund' and left the other half open letting loose soil be washed away with rainwater. This led to continuous water flowing out."

Over the years, TUG Managing Committee member Karanju Pal says they would lose a lot of water because of seepage and severe water logging in the adjacent command area. "Apart from the loss that people faced, fisheries and livestock too have been hit by this loss of precious water," he adds.

After sitting a while the group begins to urge you visit the tanks, "Come and try to understand the work we have done," say the elders of the village. A short drive to the area, they walk you through the area stopping to explain at every stage- the areas that were giving them problems and the corrections that have been made. As the group shows you around, they repeatedly mention that while 'a lot of good work has been done the Gods have not heard our prayers'. The region is facing its second year without the monsoons.

The pride that these men have in their work manifests in little ways as they proudly show you water logged areas that have never been cultivated. "This area of roughly 80 acres or so used to be submerged through out the year because of seepage from the tank. After cultivating the rice crop there was very little that we could do. That land was a waste for us," they say. Today the entire stretch has neat plots of various crops. "This has been made possible only because water does

not leak anymore."

Harcharan Rajput, Karanju Pal and Punno Ahirwar laugh away the initial impression that they had formed of the SRIJAN team - that the group had come to collect contributions and would ultimately loot them.

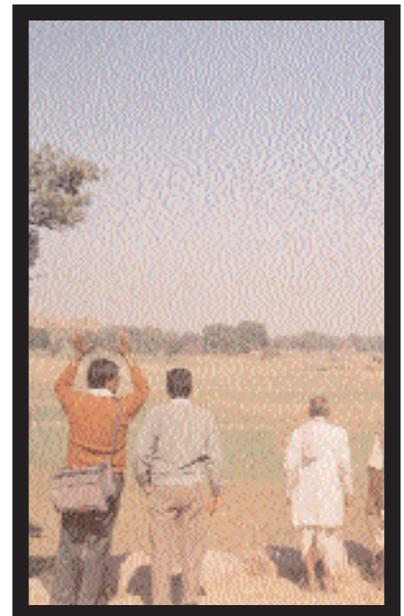
Working in the village since 2004, bringing about the change was not easy. SRIJAN had to work very hard to convince people to trust them. An exposure to Jaisinagar in neighbouring Sagar district where SRIJAN has another project, helped TUG office-bearers realise that they could change the future course of their village.

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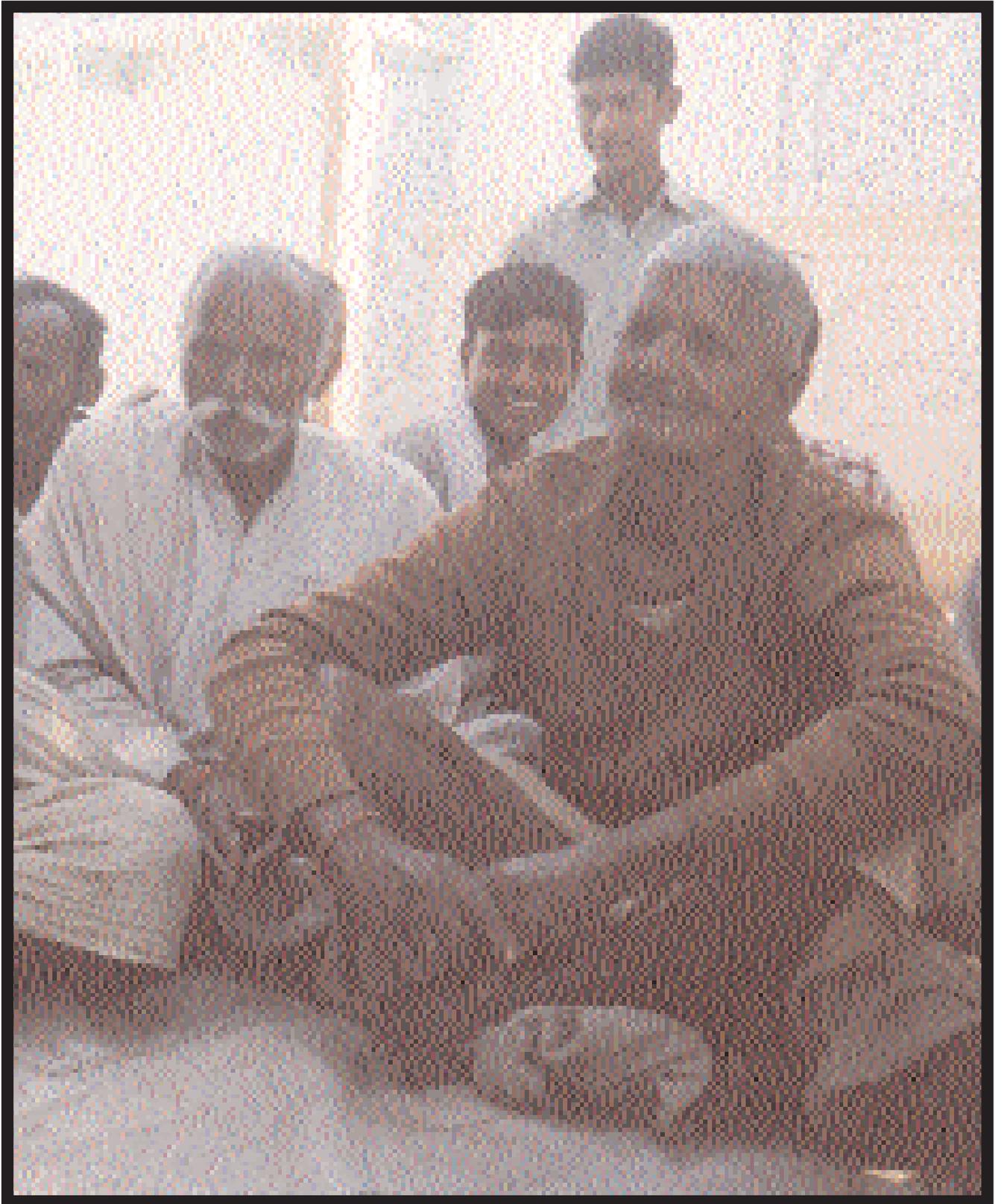
In the future, the men have their work chalked out for themselves. "We have some money out of our earlier contribution in our account and work for the outlets remains to be done." However, Rajput chips in, "We will probably be asking for a contribution from people who want the outlets for themselves."

During a recent community workshop organised in Toriya Suklan TUG members shared their experience of working in their respective tanks and the issues faced by them. They expressed the need of desiltation and take up fisheries and livestock promotion in future.

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During a recent community workshop TUG members expressed the need of desiltation and take up fisheries and livestock promotion in the future.



IT IS JATARA WRD Sub-Engineer ML Kori when asked what he had to say about the whole experience, pointed out that while the work carried out was good, "People do not want to pay for the water. Night after night Government officials have spent time in these villages, convincing people about the need to pay their taxes, but the farmers say they do not have any money!"

However, the major issue that came up in discussion was tax collection.

Panchayat tanks have an advantage over the WRD tanks in this regard, because users of panchayat tanks are open and have taken initiatives to develop a system of water charges, which have not taken effect for want of rains though. However, users of tanks under Water Resource Department are reluctant as there is already a system of water tax in place and they face the issue of the tax collected from the farmers going to the department and no fund is available to them for O & M ?.

There was discussion to decide the rate of tax keeping in mind the water in the tank, tax collection based on percentage of production in the field and paying water charges in terms of grain bags.

It is Jatara WRD Sub-Engineer ML Kori who brings a tinge of reality to the whole situation. When asked what he had to say about the whole experience, he pointed out that while the work carried out was good, "People do not want to pay for the water.

Night after night Government officials have spent time in these villages, convincing people about the need to pay their taxes, but we have been stone-walled at every instance. The farmers say they do not have any money!"

About the setting up of the TUGs Kori is very clear, "The user groups are always a good idea. The point is that the users will take interest only if they see a benefit. If the water in the tank is controlled and managed properly and the user groups are able to pull in 100 per cent taxes the exercise will be worth it." Will this happen?

Given that the region has not recorded good monsoons over the last two years, Kori says, "There is no water in the tanks right now. When there is water that is the time to see what will happen."

Although farmer Rajput's stake in Shahpura was the highest, because his land was affected, his enthusiastic ownership of the TUG is backed by people around him. Malkhan Ahirwar says, "There is no denying he has always worked the hardest. He used to carry stones and mud to try to save his fields during the rains.

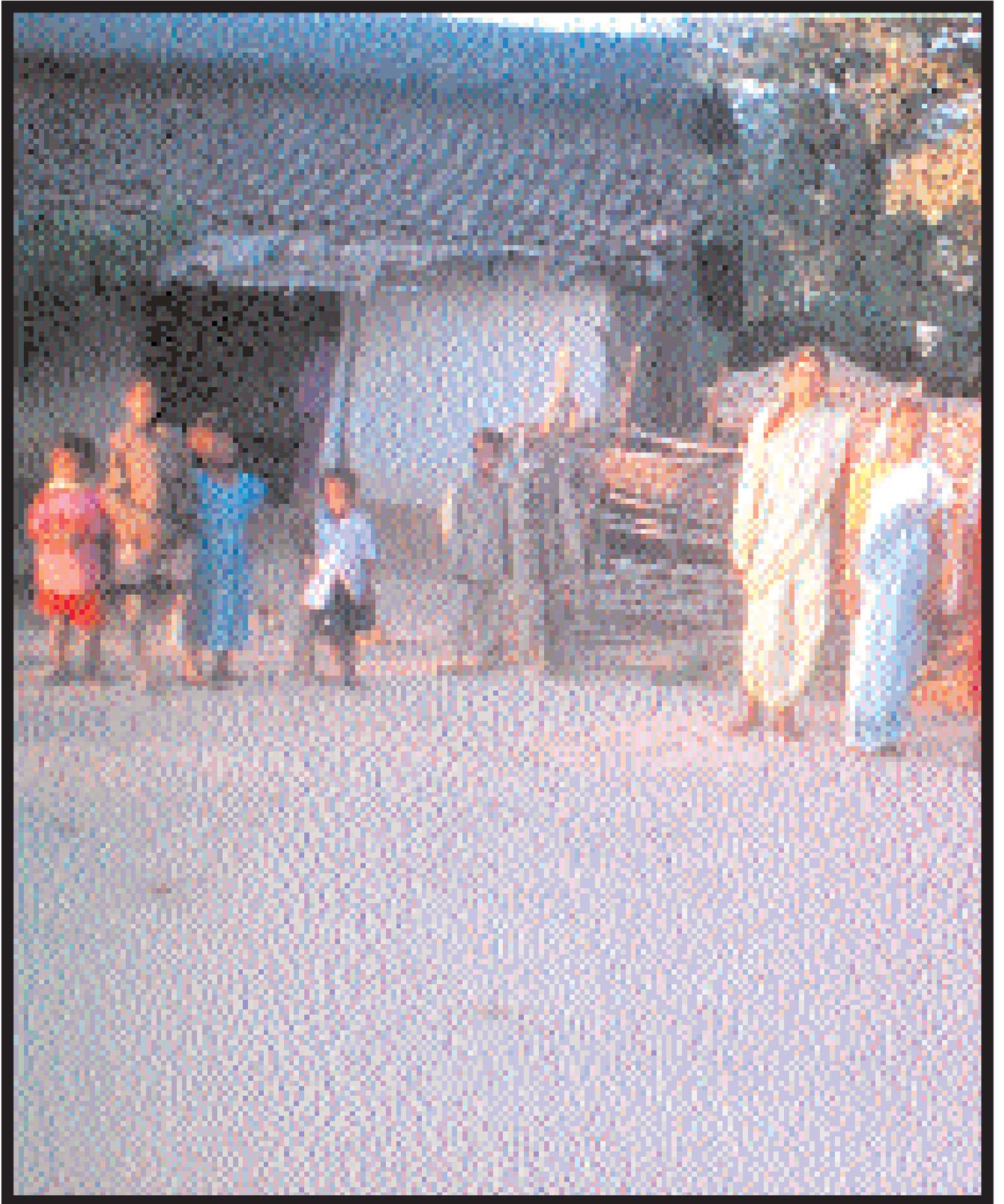
The story was the same every year, the temporary barrage made of stones and mud would just be washed away." With it would go all the aspirations of the farmers, which would only mean debts and misery.

The plight of helpless farmers who still relive the task of trying to stop torrential flow of water on a rainy day from destroying their crops, today only look heavenward for a little sign from the Almighty to launch what they have worked so hard for- strengthened bunds, repaired sluice, a seep free tank, repaired canals etc. All these efforts only for - water.

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VILLAGE ELDER Shankar explains why many of them have many have decided to stay here "I have seven fertile acres here where I have been growing jawar, maize, kutti, samah and bajra. The administration is giving me five acres somewhere between Babai and Semri and compensation for the remaining two acres. But there is no legal patta for the land."

Paradise Lost - To Eviction.

Tribesmen, facing eviction from the Pachmarhi Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh, are apprehensive and unsure about their future.

ONLY a few years ago, 35-year-old Hari Bai recalls, she and her husband were able to make Rs 500 a week selling lac, brooms, mahua, tendupatta, donga and beedi leaves without having to move out of their village, Tendukheda, in Madhya Pradesh. On any day, like other women in the village, she could also take a headload of dry wood and sell it 8 km away for a kilo of kanki (broken rice), which is worth Rs 10.

Today, all this has come to an end. Most of the other 35 Gond tribal families in the village, as many others in the Pachmarhi Tiger Reserve area, 171 km from Bhopal, are likely to be evicted as early as summer next year. Hari Bai's father-in-law explains, "In 1998, we were informed that we would be evacuated." While those affected have been promised rehabilitation and compensation, many have decided to stay here.

Village elder Shankar explains why many of them have taken this decision. "I have seven fertile acres here where I have been growing jawar, maize, kutti, samah and bajra. The administration is giving me five acres somewhere between Babai and Semri and compensation for the remaining two acres. But there is no legal patta for the land."

Deepak Ekka, programme coordinator for the Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS), which has been working in the area for the last few years, says, "People, rangers, and guards all know that the eviction is due. There has been talk about making arrangements for the people to be transported to their allotted areas

and being allowed to sow in both places - where they are living now and where they will be rehabilitated. But nothing has happened so far." One reason Ekka attributes to people not wanting to move is that the land being provided is wasteland. "People will have to put in a lot of effort to get that land to a productive standard," he said.

Since things have not moved over the years, there has been an impasse. However, this year, the signs have been clear. That the situation will be taking a harsh turn became obvious from the fact that forest officials did not allow these villagers to sow crops on the small bits of land that they have. Left with no option, many of the families are surviving only on the produce of the kitchen garden that they have.

The court stay on access to forest produce is set to bring more misery to the populace of the entire Pachmarhi area as well as the Itarsi side of Tawa.

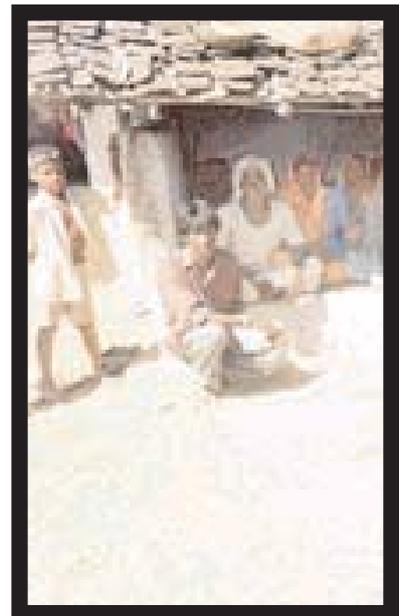
Apart from being cut off, people here have no access to health facilities. Besides serious diseases such as tuberculosis, leprosy and malaria, common diseases among tribal communities are parasitic infections, diarrhoea, dysentery, skin diseases, respiratory infections, whooping cough and measles.

Health facilities do not reach them because the norms prescribed by the state governments for establishing primary health centres and health subcentres are inappropriate for a dispersed population in small settlements in inaccessible areas.

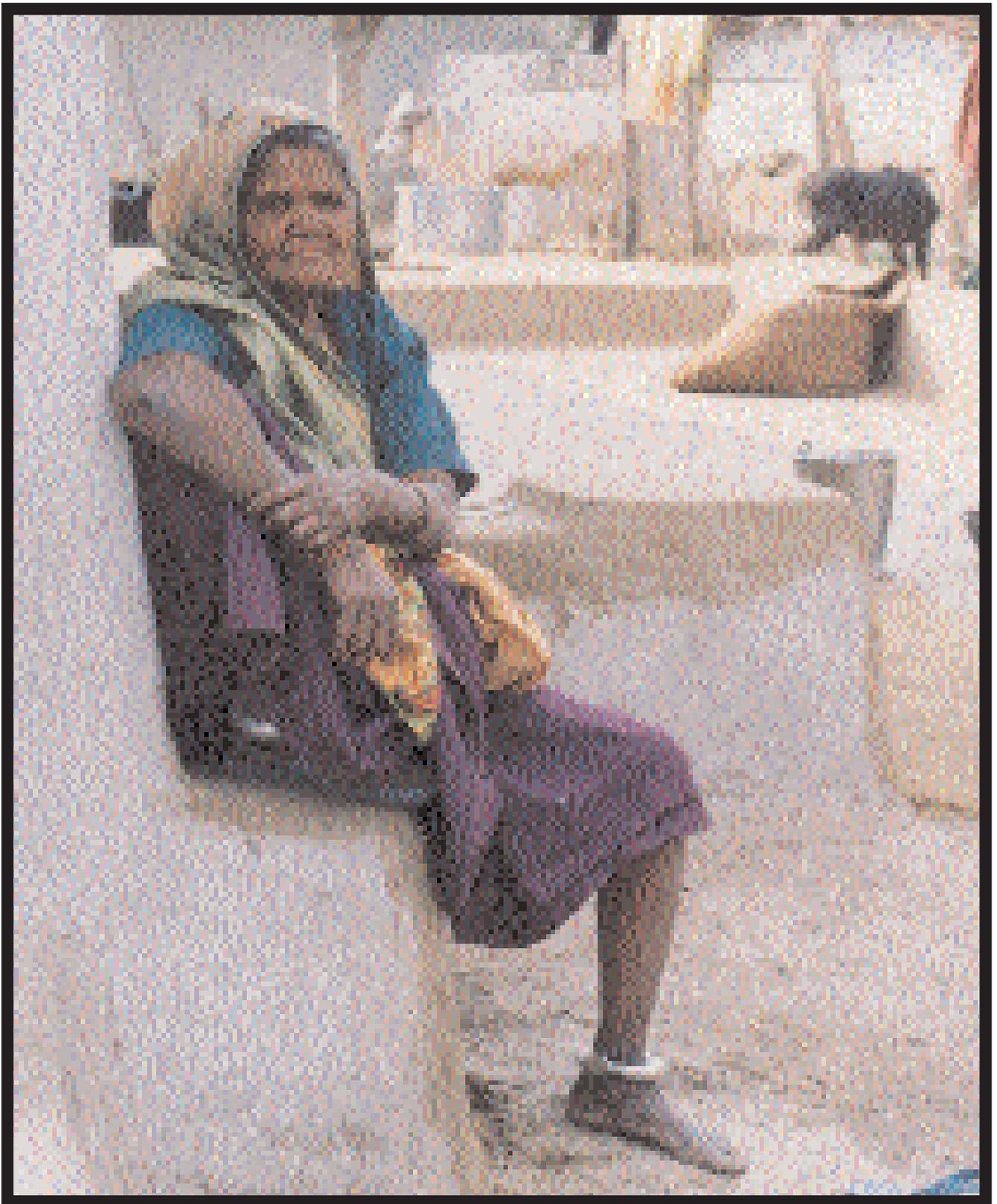
When health facilities happen to be available, most tribesmen can neither afford the fee of the doctor nor the cost of medicines. Tribal

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SAYS PACS animator Lallan Singh Chauhan, who works among these people, "These people are very simple and they believe anything the government says. They have no work, no jobs."

Self-Help Groups (SHGs), formed with the help of PACS, are doing all they can for these tribesmen.

women's health is often at risk during their reproductive years. Says PACS animator Lallan Singh Chauhan, who works among these people, "These people are very simple and they believe anything the government says. They have no work, no jobs." Self-Help Groups (SHGs), which have been formed with the help of PACS, are doing all they can for these tribesmen.

How are these villagers going to earn a livelihood is a matter of concern and is being tackled by programme implementers.

About changes brought in by the PACS programme, Father Soosai, Director of the Asha Niketan Welfare Centre (ANWC), which is implementing the PACS programme, explains, "After field visits, trainings and exposures, there has been a change in the mindset of people. Earlier, they never came forward to meet us. Now they come to talk to us and express their happiness at being associated with us."

Villagers are now keen to try out other livelihood options. Village elder Shankar Singh says there was a time when he used to sell 16 kg of honey at Rs 80. "Today people have been trying to suck life out of the forest," he says, referring to man's greed for commercial endeavour. Since the question of livelihood has become the most important one, the ANWC is focusing on training women.

PACS block coordinator Pushpalata Samuel says, "Despite the sword of eviction dangling over their heads, the women are planning to take land on lease so that can cultivate wheat and channa. Since the health of women and children is a concern too, they want an anganwadi."

So what do the men in the village think of these activities taken up by women? Shankar Singh says, "Should the day come when we have to confront those who want to evict us, at least we would have strength in numbers."

Should his estimate be accurate, Shankar is referring to the 50 SHGs that have been formed in the two blocks, each with 13 to 14 women and their helpless families with them. Shankar adds that he supports his wife's endeavour, "Because, if people are helping her then we also can move ahead."

Father Soosai hopes that people will be prepared to plan for their own development and the development of the region. As for the imminent eviction, he says it is too early to comment, but says this will in fact be not only the people's first major struggle but the "struggle for my workers too".

- Grassroots Features

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Mamta Bias, Vandana Bisen, Meenkashi Katre, Darasingh Ragandale, Chaya Rahangadal and Anand Bhardwaj excitedly pore over a chart paper. While some of them finish their writing, Anand clips a picture to paste it on the chart paper. Today the group is closing their latest edition of Tanore Express - a wall paper of Grameen Vikas Mandal's network in Balaghat district.

Tanore Express!

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For this group of grassroots organisations, which cover a range of issues from local self-governance, women's empowerment to drinking water and sanitation, their communication strategies are based on the local situation and the resources available to them.

Anand says the need for Tanore Express emerged, mainly because, "We knew what we were doing under the PACS program, but others, especially the villagers did not know." For every issue of the paper, all six animators put together their thoughts and with the help of pictures and photographs from the project they put up the wall newspaper in their information centre in the field office of Bhanderi.

Even as the group has been able to bring out regular issues of the wall papers over the last few months, its endeavour to computerise the effort has not made much headway. They say the main reason, why they are unable to do so is because they simply do not have the additional manpower and are very pressed for time.

At the Bhanderi information centre, these young people have begun

this initiative to try and give people in the village more information and hope to get community more involved. Says Mamata, "The ones in the village who take the most interest in the wall paper are young girls and women." For the past few months, Tanore Express has been covering stories of violence, health panchayat and the public distribution system.

Since its inception, over the last few months the wall newspaper has been updated and caused quite a flutter in the village and adjoining villages too. The women's groups that the GVM network has formed, make it a point to visit the information centre. Mamata smiles and recalls, "When a 'Leadership Profile' was put up on the wall paper, other women wanted to know why their photographs and profiles had not been put up!"

Explains Bhardwaj, "The information centre is frequented by people not only from Bhanderi, but from other villages too. On Mondays at the weekly markets, women from all villages come to the information centre in hoards."

For the gutsy group of youngsters, their only bouquets come when they receive favorable feedback from the community, "When people say it is very good we feel good." Darasingh says, "Producing the wall paper has been a learning experience for us as field workers as well."

A Communication Need Assessment recently carried out by the Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) Communication Resources agency, has underlined the complexity of the communication challenge that grassroots organisations face. The study illustrates the impossibili-

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PACS STATE ANCHOR Sanjeev Ranjan lists the areas of CSOs intervention. "It is a comprehensive range of issues from improved local self-governance, women's empowerment, social cohesion, education, information dissemination, advocacy and networking, tribal rights, capacity building of community groups and CSOs, community empowerment, poverty alleviation & drinking water & sanitation."

ty of using one communication approach, even in two adjoining districts and raises questions about whose voices are heard in public debates, whose issues are addressed.

PACS State Anchor Sanjeev Ranjan lists the areas of CSOs intervention. "It is a comprehensive range of issues from improved local self-governance, women's empowerment, social cohesion, policy advocacy, self-help, livelihood, health and nutrition, education, NRM, land rights, research and documentation, information dissemination, advocacy and networking, dalit and tribal rights, capacity building of community groups and CSOs, community empowerment, child rights, poverty alleviation, and drinking water and sanitation."

The CSOs address these issues with various communication strategies by participating in meetings of Self Help Groups (SHGs), Village Development Committee (VDC), panchayat, gram sabhas, youth mandals, kishori balika mandals, and mahila mandals.

Awareness is also generated through rallies, posters, wall-writing, flip charts, brochures, pamphlets, pocket books, folk songs, cartoons/caricatures, information centers, exposure visits, cultural programs, folk dances, competitions, role plays, street theatre and audio and video cassettes/ CDs.

The printed material is either developed by the CSOs themselves or acquired from other organisations. In some cases, the communication material for localised use such as slogans and songs, and sometimes charts, in the CSOs at all levels are made by the field workers, making these messages more effective.

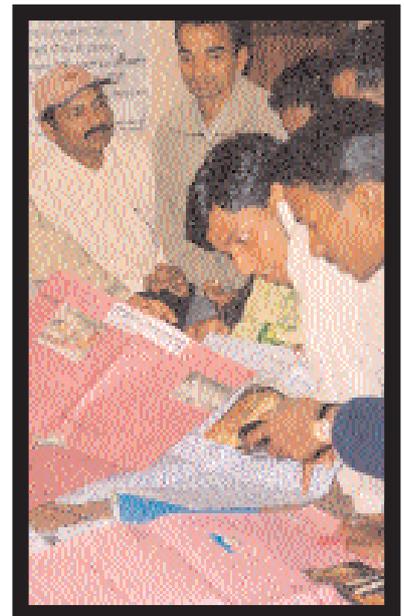
Some CSOs also publish newsletters in which they raise advocacy issues pertinent to their area. National Institute of Women, Children, Youth and Development, a lead CSO, which networks with 10 CBOs, publishes a newsletter dealing only with issues related to PACS, to which its network CSOs contribute. While some CSOs have a good relationship with the media, both print and electronic, at the district level, this varies at the block level from CSO to CSO.

The study found a majority of CSOs also possess inherent strengths such as presence of a strong, committed, well-coordinated group of volunteers with skills in song and slogan writing, script writing, poster making, wall writing as well as street theatre and folk dances. They also regularly compile success/human interest stories. Most them have strong linkages with government departments.

However, the study revealed that in almost all CSOs, there has been no formal or regular evaluation of communication activities, but an idea is obtained from seeing change at the community level, particularly as the community becomes aware of their rights and demands the same. It is also felt that if yardsticks were set, then progress could be better measured in concrete terms.

Furthermore, there is lack of literature on good practices in communication and/or documentation, and little access to existing literature. There are inadequate funds to develop communication material, and there are no funds especially earmarked for communications; so much so that in most CSOs, staff is not trained in communication strategies and neither is there any manpower deployment or clearly demar-

At the Bhanderi information centre, these young people have begun this initiative to try and give people in the village more information and hope to get community more involved. Says Mamata, "The ones in the village who take the most interest in the wall paper are young girls and women."



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cated person in-charge of communications per se. As a result, CSOs have little incentive to scale up activities - the paper work for garnering budgetary support and resources is time consuming and are not always guaranteed. This has also led to an excessive dependence on lead CSOs for communication material. There is no experimentation on using radio as a communication medium, and a focussed communication strategy needs to be formulated.

Overall, there being lack of a well-coordinated institutional structure on communication and advocacy. The role of lead CSOs is ill-defined and not well understood by partner CSO/s, which leads to not only inter-CSO communication constraints, but also impedes deployment of a mutually acceptable and implement-able communication strategy in their work areas.

A number of felt needs with regard to communication interventions also emerged from this assessment. The strongest felt need is training on documentation and reporting, particularly in process documentation, project proposal development, compilation of case studies and writing media briefs.

Another training need is in the use of local or folk media, such as puppetry and street theatre, designing IEC material and evaluating these activities/strategies.

Other felt needs included capacity building in communications, training techniques, strategic planning and policy development, capacity building in advocacy skills, deployment and use of AV equipment and the need to clearly understand the Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEAL) formats.

In order to facilitate better communication processes so that output is more effective, CSOs need equipment and material, such as computers, printers, Internet and fax, AV aids, as also facilities to produce and edit small, local-level films and documentaries.

Says PACS national coordinator Kiran Sharma, "The communications effort is directed to make CSOs strategically plan their communication endeavour." She adds, "PACS CSOs are thus likely to be more effective in getting their voice in the mass media."

While many CSOs may need significantly more learning in this area, their work is already beginning to show greater results from the use of communication strategies in very challenging circumstances.

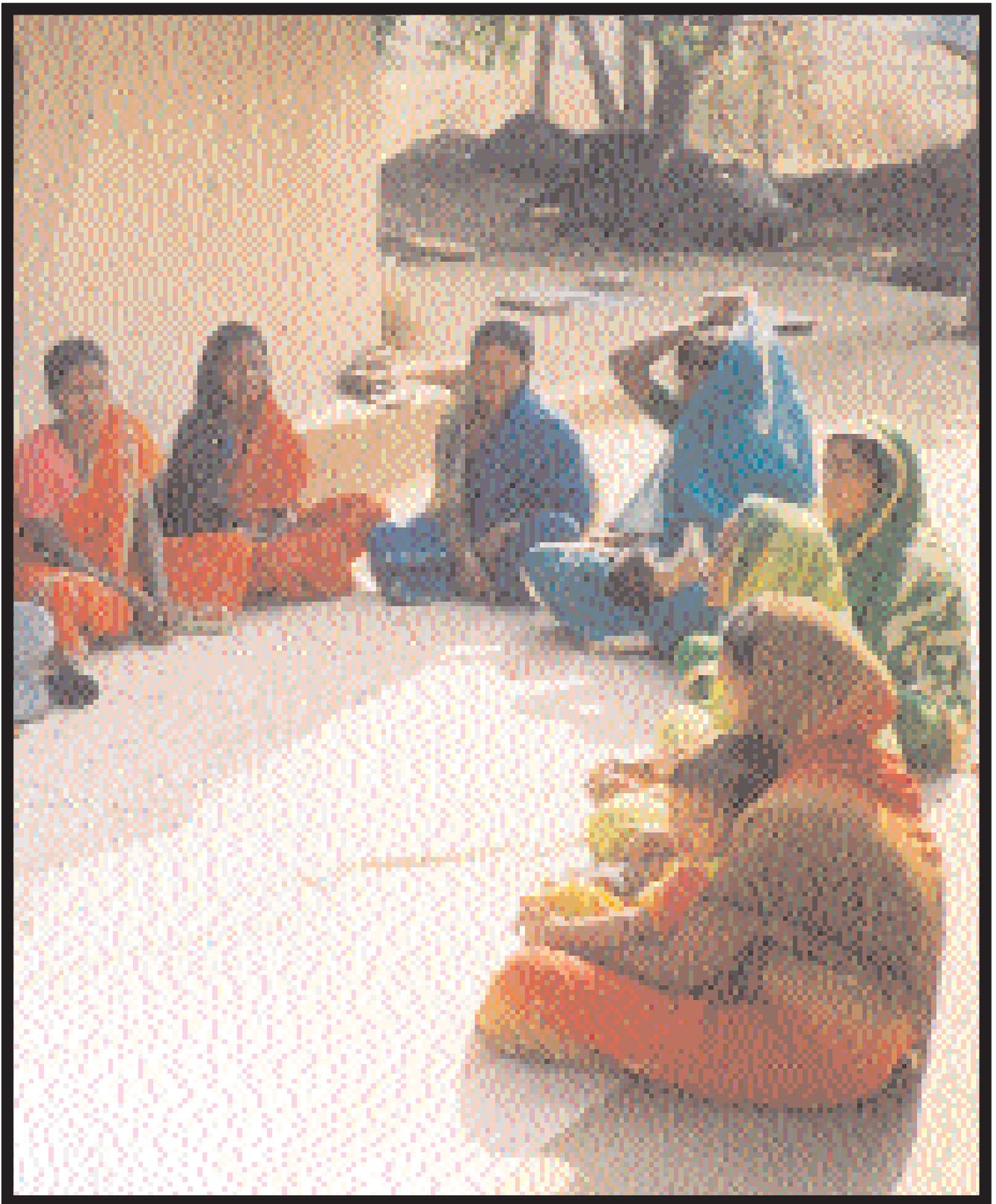
Advocacy issues in this area particularly pertain to informing the community of their rights with regard to Government schemes and the role of the panchayat in these. It has been found that there is a tremendous need to create awareness among people about their entitlement of benefits being made available by the State.

Advocacy issues particularly largely focus on Government schemes for the poorest of the poor, gender and gender violence, land rights, SHGs, governance/ PRIs, social issues like child marriages, livelihood, education, health, migration. The aim of the CSOs is to make the beneficiaries aware of Government schemes, create a demand for utilisation by the beneficiaries of Government schemes and help them to avail of these schemes.

The needs of the staff pertaining to these issues also emerged strong-

The work of many CSOs has already begun to show results from the use of communication strategies in very challenging circumstances. Says PACS national coordinator Kiran Sharma: "The communications effort is to make CSOs strategically plan their communication endeavour".





THE CSOs are now faced with the challenge to take up more holistic, nuanced & diverse approach which involves communication, learning, monitoring and evaluation. Says Kavita Bhagat, "The task ahead has been chalked out. Communication plans need to be well researched and developed, because the stronger the foundation of knowledge, the more persuasive the communication effort."

ly in the assessment. They felt that they need information on the schemes of various Government departments so that they can create awareness about these in the community whereby the people can benefit from them. There is a felt need for capacity building on advocacy tools and techniques for staff at programme level.

The CSOs need to be supported in their endeavour to deploy communication process as instrumental in bringing about social change. This is also significant because the organisations believe that rapidly increased awareness of rights and the possibility to bring about change through collective action will not occur without people communicating with each other, exchanging information and engaging with new knowledge.

In this context, it may be beneficial for CSOs, particularly lead CSOs, to forge linkages with state and national level media and also undertake policy analysis from the standpoint of the poor and vulnerable.

The CSOs are now faced with the challenge to take up a more holistic, a more nuanced, a more diverse approach which involves communication, learning and monitoring and evaluation. And it is continuous, at its best, an iterative process for which the final outcome is impossible to predict.

Says leader of the communication need assessment Kavita Bhagat, "The task ahead has been chalked out. The CSOs' communication plans need to be well researched and developed, because the stronger the foundation of knowledge, the more persuasive the communication and advocacy effort can be."

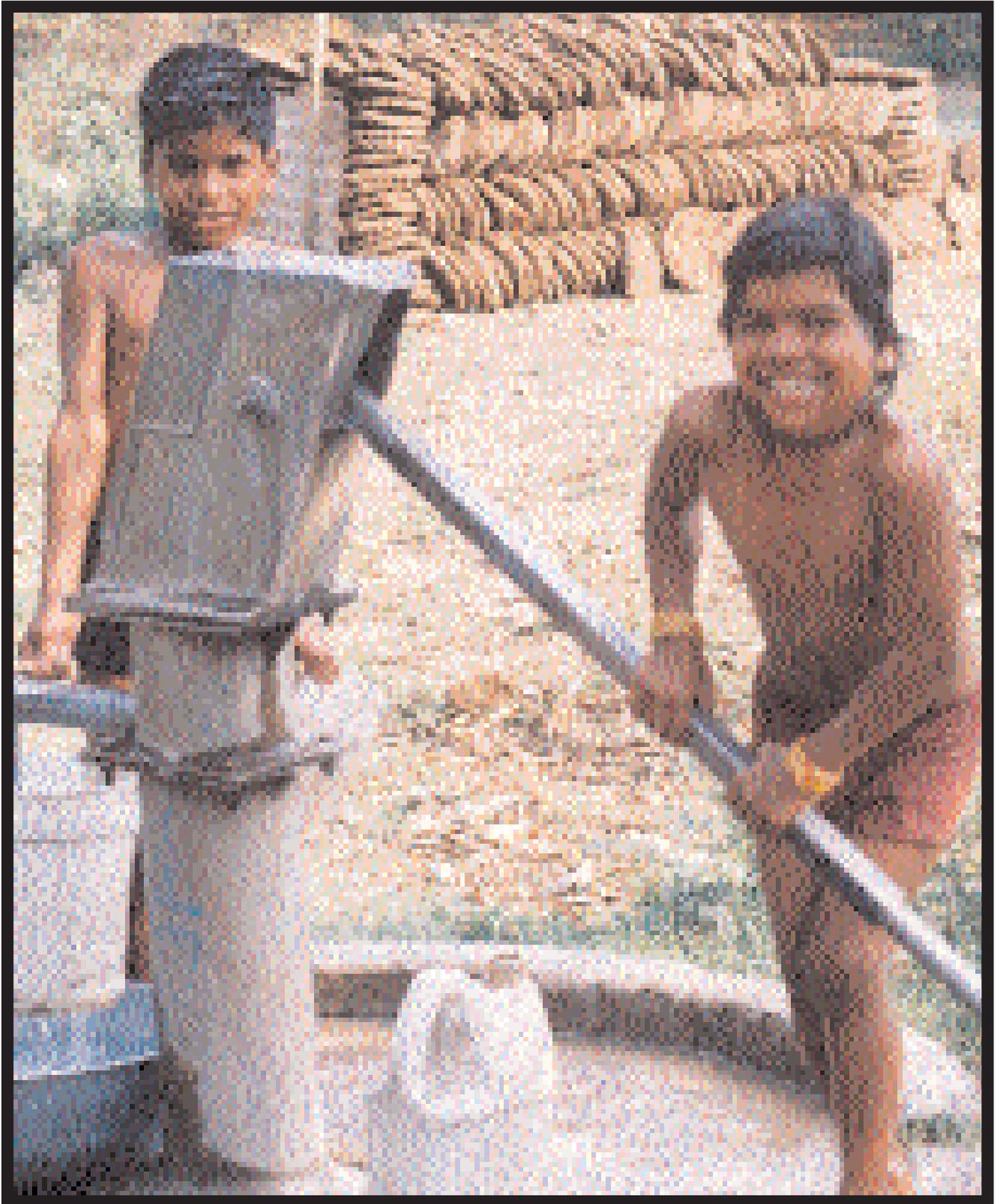
Ranjan speaking about the communication initiative that PACS has put in place over six States, says, "The strategy now is to plan communications in conjunction with our partners over multiple channels of communication, like alternative and mass media, or new age technologies like the internet or web publishing."

As for the enthusiastic group of animators in Balaghat, they are on to their next task. They are currently documenting their work in a daily diary. The basic guideline given to this group is that they knew their village better than anybody else and are the only ones in a position to reflect on signs of change. Given their enterprise, it will be interesting to see what they come up with.

As for the enthusiastic group of animators in Balaghat, they are on to their next task. They are currently documenting their work in a daily diary. For they know their village best and are the only ones in a position to reflect on signs of change. Given their enterprise, it will be interesting to see what they come up with.



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THE PADYATRA would span 6 days, starting from February 24th, 2006 to March 1, 2006. On the last day, a memorandum to the District Collector on local issues like PDS and right to food would be submitted. The idea was that a memorandum be given directly to District Collector for immediate action.

Padyatra For Thwarted Justice

Jan Sangthan Manch is a community-based organization working in 123 villages of Prithvipur block. The CBO has 1200 members, mostly from Harijan and adiwasi communities, with about Rupees 2400 in deposit.

The manch organizes its meetings on a monthly basis to discuss common problems. The objective is to mobilize the community for collective action on problems as varied as rations, drinking water, land rights, gender violence and socio-economic discrimination.

Frequently, applications are also submitted by the manch to block and district-level functionaries for appropriate action.

Jan Sangthan Manch organised a Padyatra in 30 villages of Block Prithvipur, Prithvipur, from February 24, 2006 to March 1, 2006.

Why a Padyatra?

On February 15, 2006, a meeting of Jan Sangthan Manch in Prithvipur was held to contemplate a line of action on applications where no action had yet been taken by the administration with regard to their issues. After discussion with both Manch and Sambhav members, it was decided to hold a Padyatra in 30 villages of the block covering about one third population.

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Padyatra Issues

The Padyatra would revolve around one major problem: Public Distribution System. In the villages of Prithvipur, BPL families were not getting their ration from PDS shops; instead, people from upper castes were monopolizing the PDS. Ration was sold at market rates to those who needed it the most. Instead of 35 kgs, ration was being limited 25-30 kgs only.

Moreover, the orders of the Supreme Court were also not being adhered to by the shop owners. Another problem was the migration of SC and ST families and lack of local employment opportunities. Thus it was decided that the Padyatra would also serve to make people aware about various government schemes, NREG Act and other schemes related to Right to Food.

What Did the Padyatra Achieve?

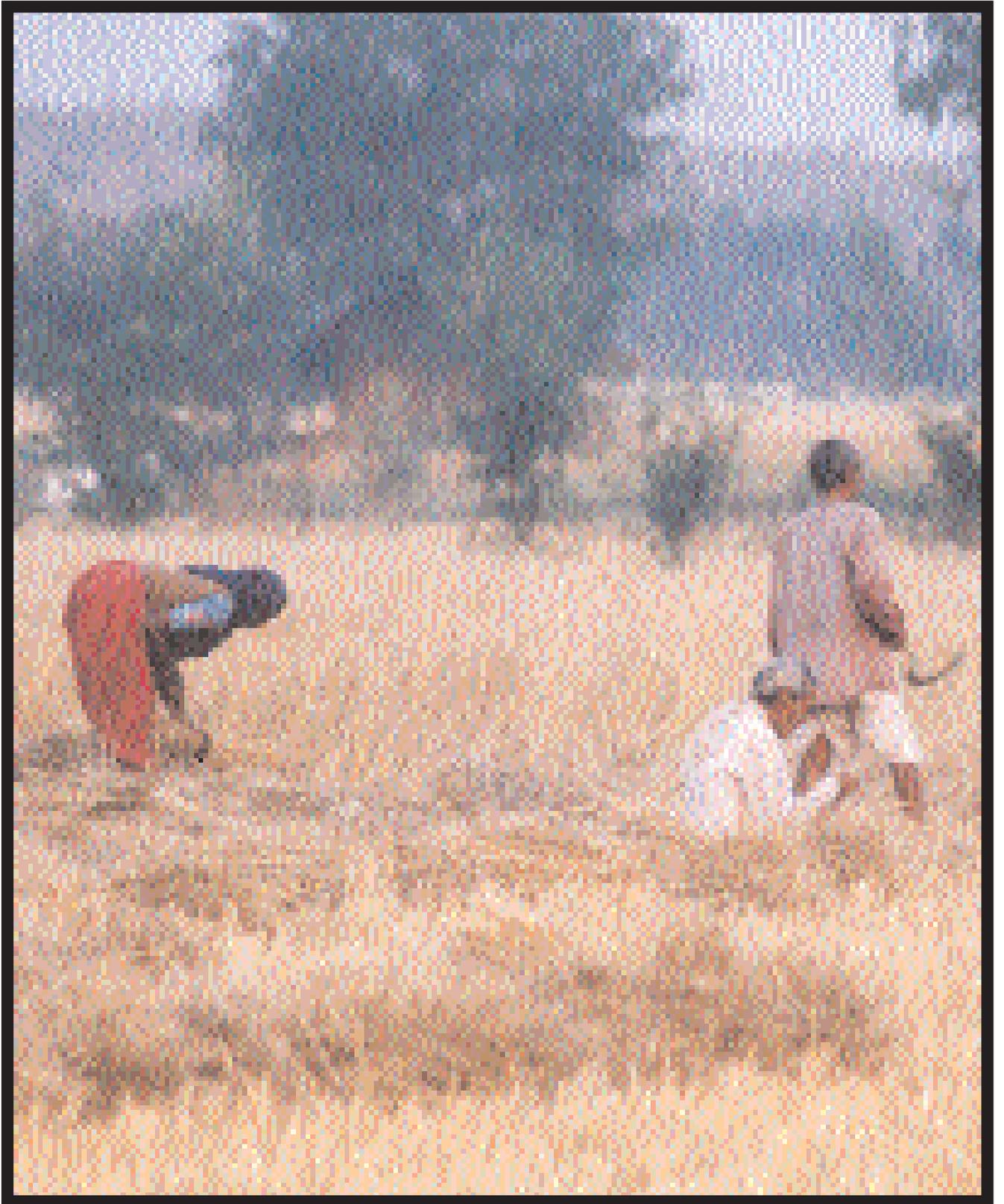
The Padyatra brought to the fore problems like:

1. 80% of villages are effected by migration: families have migrated for 6-7-months together to distant places in search of food and work;
2. The issue of PDS is the same in all villages- persons with Antodaya card are getting 20 to 25 kgs of rations against the stipulated 35 kgs; rations on BPL card is restricted to only 10 - 20 kgs; wheat is sold at the rate of Rs 7/kg instead of Rs 4.65/kg to BPL families;
3. In villages like Urdora, Sarsora, Baniyani, Chandrapura and Pahari Bakshi, the location of PDS

On February 15, 2006, a meeting of Jan Sangthan Manch in Prithvipur was held to contemplate a line of action against administrative inaction on several issues. Both the Manch and Sambhav members decided to hold a Padyatra in 30 villages of the block covering about one third population.



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IN VILLAGE Sakera Khurd, it came during discussions with Adiwasi families that the behavior of salesperson's of the ration shop is not good with the beneficiaries. When people go to him, he demands money from them and gives them a slip of paper. He then asks them to come again later to collect their ration. If the slip of paper is lost, then the beneficiary is not given his or her ration.

shops is not fixed, as also the time and day/s of the shop opening.

4. In villages Urdora, Sujanpura, Banjaripura, Sorka and Khiston, for example, sugar has not been distributed for the last 1 to 2 years!
5. In villages Tatarpura, Kakavni, Urdora, Banjaripura, Gora, Sorka and Baniyani, for example, any amount from Rs 50 to Rs 500 is demanded by the Sarpanch and Secretary to prepare Antodaya cards!
6. In villages Sakera Bhadanan, Panihari, Dhorra, Gora, Sorka, Banjaripura and Urdora, for example, kerosene has not been distributed for the last 6-8 months. Instead, it is black-marketed through the shop owner's salespersons.
7. In some villages, no ration has been distributed to beneficiaries from 3 months at a stretch although it is being shown as given on beneficiaries' and shop owner's cards.
8. When ration is weighed, it is always less than the quantity fixed. There is always a big difference in actual amount distributed and the weighed quantity of ration.
9. In village Sakera Khurd, it came during discussions with Adiwasi families that the behavior of salesperson's of the ration shop is not good with the benefici-

aries. When people go to him, he demands money from them and gives them a slip of paper. He then asks them to come again later to collect their ration. If the slip of paper is lost, then the beneficiary is not given his or her ration.

10. In village Sorka, about a year ago a road was constructed employing 30 Adiwasi's as labourers. Till date, these people have not received their wages. A payment of rupees Rs 38,000 is still to be paid to these workers.
11. The ICDS centre of village Banjaripura is used as a cattle pen! In village Manetha, the ICDS centre is closed since the worker deputed here stays 23-kms away from the village in Prithvipur.

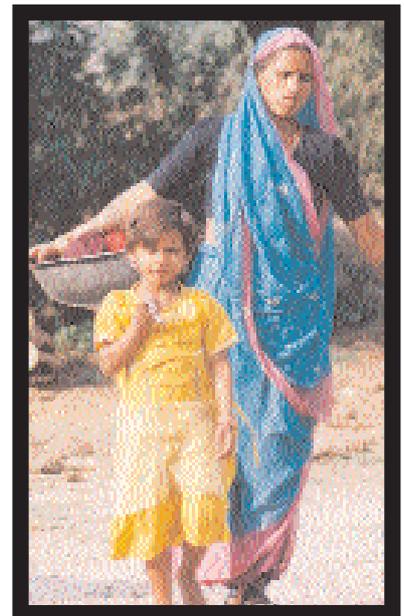
In almost all villages, problems were more or less the same.

Applications were collected from villagers and on March 1, 2006, a memorandum was submitted to the District Collector, Manish Shrivastav, through representatives of the Jan Sangthan Manch. The response of the Collector was very positive and he assured the members to look into the issues and initiate necessary action immediately.

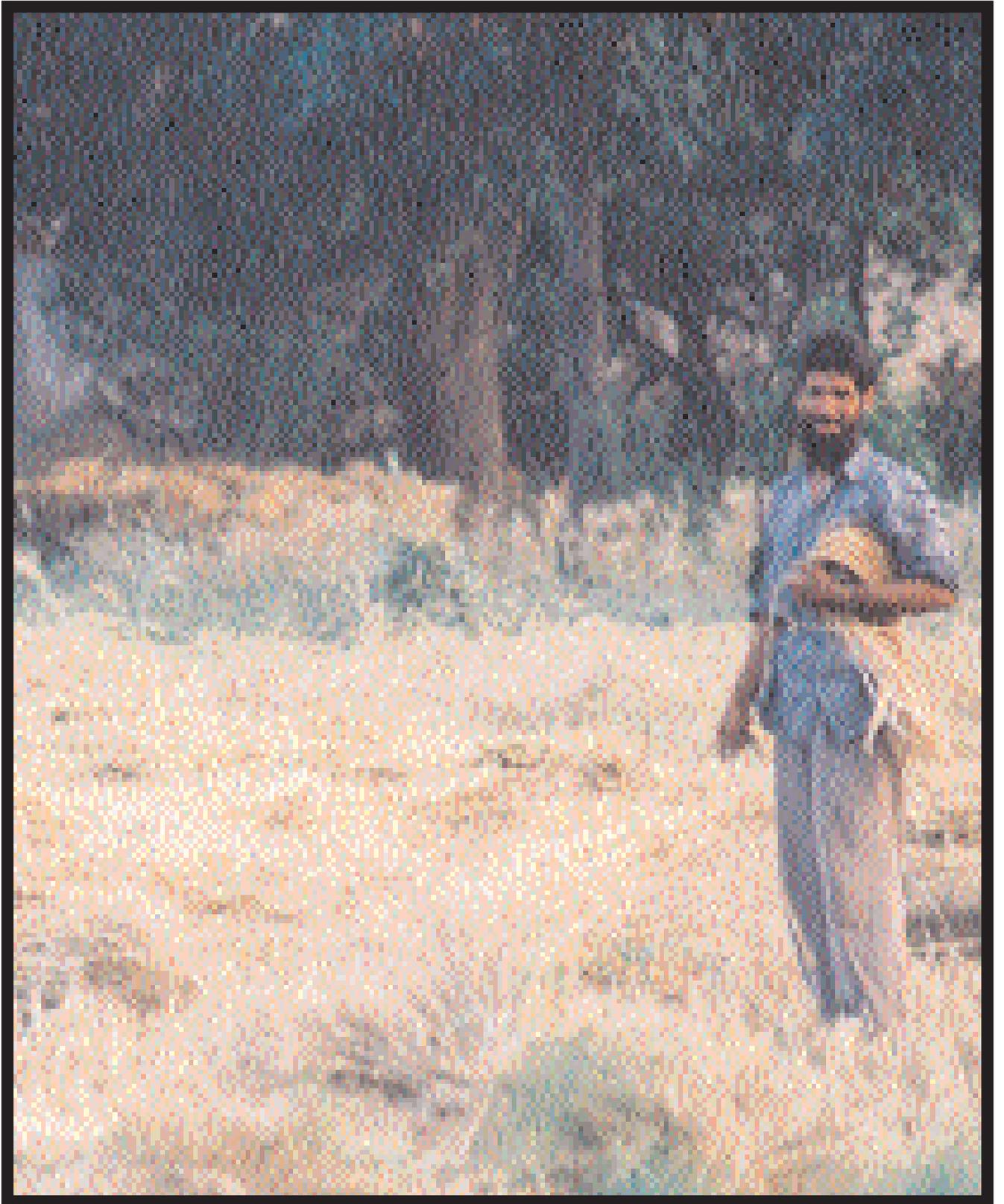
Padyatra: Some Touching Moments

- When this Padyatra reached village Sarsora there was a jeep standing near the Adiwasi basti with about 50 to 60 people around it. These people were being trans-

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IN VILLAGE Kashipura, adiwasi families have decided to return land given to them back to the government. This is because the land allotted is on a small hill where cultivation is impossible. They say they can still hope for some Government support as landless labourers, but not if they have been given this land. Today, as 'landowners', they do not get even rations from the TPDS.

ported for labour (chait) to Samthar (Jhansi). Some were going alone and some were taking their families with them. They said they would return after 6-7 months, it at all. When asked why they were going, the answer was: "Na khane ko hai na hi majdoori hai, isliye apna ghar chhod kar jaana padega pata nahi vapas aate hain ya nahi". The Jeep was ready to go and the person who was taking them was shouting to hurry up. The Jeep left in front of our eyes.

- In Adiwasi basti of village Gora, a 3-year-old boy died while his parents had migrated in search of work. The "Panchu" said the boy was very weak and was thus left behind by his parents in the village, but he died after some days due to hunger and loneliness.

- In Banjaripura, the Sarpanch said he did not know when the Antodaya cards were prepared. He said all this work is done by the Secretary and Block officer, because he was an adiwasi and thus not taken into confidence.

- In village Kashipura, adiwasi families have decided to return land given to them during the reign of the then-Congress Government led by Digvijay Singh, back to the government. This is because the land allotted to them is on a small hill where cultivation is impossible. They say they can still hope for some Government support as landless labourers, but not if they have been given this land. Today, as 'landowners', they do not get even rations from the TPDS.

- In 70% of schools visited during the padyatra, teachers were not present.

- In village Sarsora and Sorka, labour was done by adiwasis

but till date, no wages paid to them or their families. In spite of complaints to the Sarpanch even the SDM, no action has yet been taken.

- In village Sorka Sarsora, Gora, Panihari, Chandrapura, Sujanpura, Bhelsa and Sunoniya Purvi, the Sarpanch and Secretary demanded a bribe for allocation of houses under the Indira Awas Yojana.

Did We Get What We Set Out For? Yes, Of Course...

- People from villages, especially the disadvantaged communities, have now gathered some strength from this show of solidarity and have begun to speak more freely about their problems in front of Government officials.

- After receiving the memorandum from the people, the Collector immediately set up a 3-member enquiry committee to look into the matter of corruption in PDS in villages.

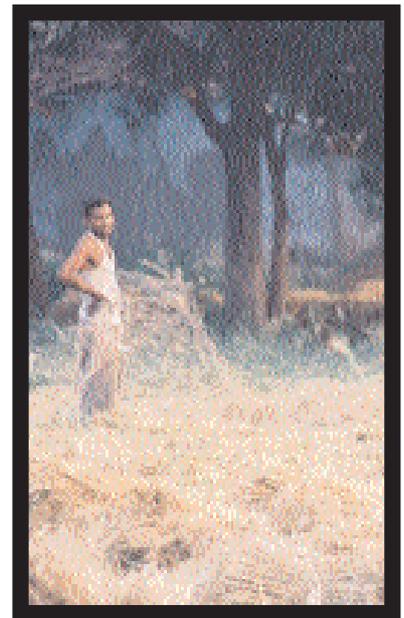
- The media has highlighted issues that came to the fore during the padyatra on a regular basis; this has had a sobering effect on the local administration and they have become more responsive.

- The Collector has ordered the SDM to distribute rations in front of him in villages where complaints were received.

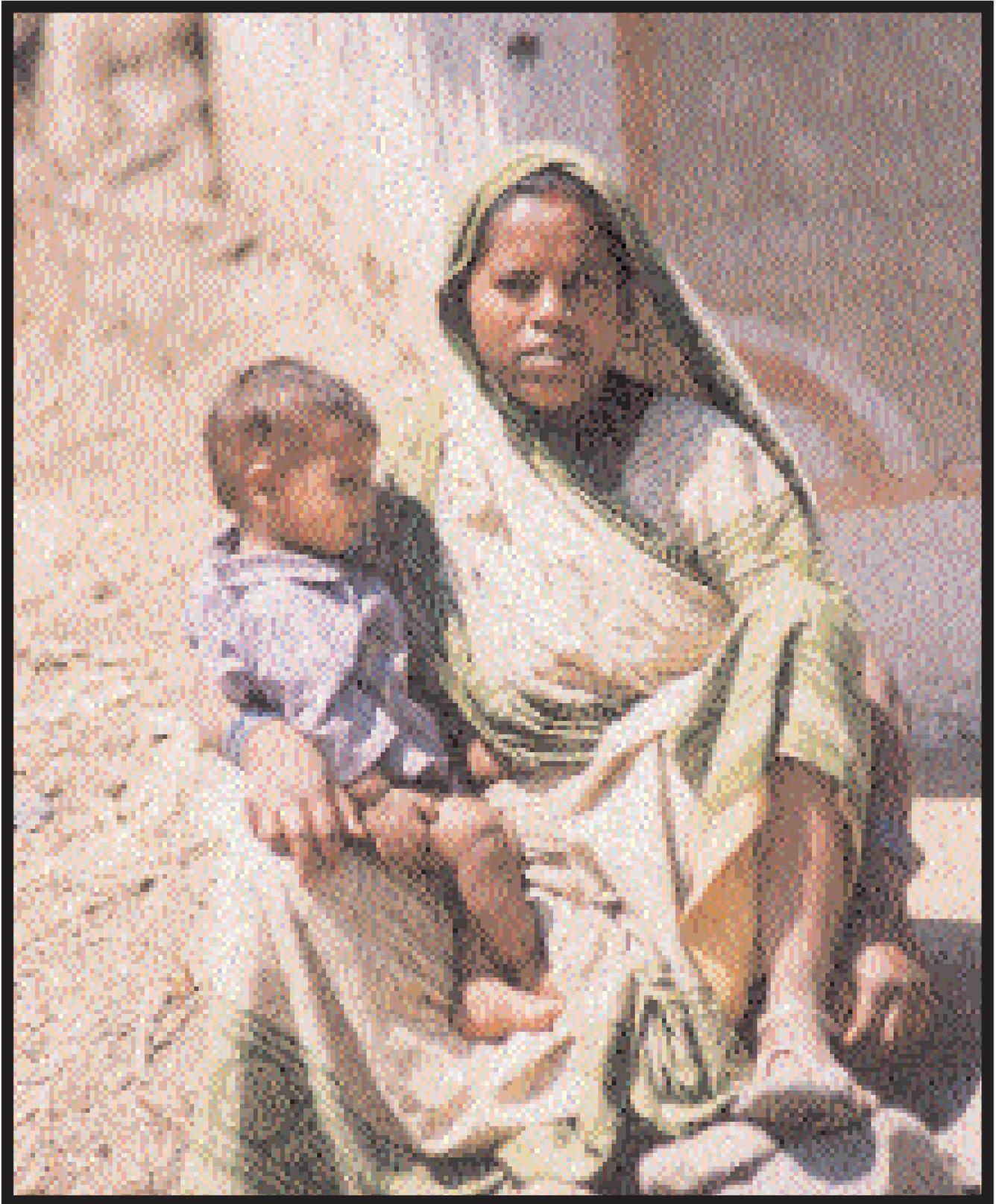
The issue of inequitable access to resources and the denial of human rights and basic necessities is an issue of great relevance in Madhya Pradesh & Chhatisgarh; indeed, across the country. The padyatra only sought to highlight the urgency of the need to speak out about and take action on the growing gap between the haves and have-nots, and take remedial action while time was still on our side.

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In remote villages like Sorka Sarsora, the Sarpanch and Secretary demanded a bribe for allocation of houses under the Indira Awas Yojana.



WITH THE gradual formation of several groups in the village, people began to feel empowered and realized that a whole new vista of opportunity had opened up for them. With the support of these groups, people began organizing themselves and, as a result, Dhoguan is now seeing a new trend - applications being filed on irregularities in the village.

A Story Of Development

Dhoguan is a small village in Rajnagar Block of Chhatarpur district in Madhya Pradesh, inhabited completely by Adivasi families. The village has 40 households, of which only one family are Brahmins, the rest being Adivasi.

Dhoguan is located in a remote area amidst dense forests and scenic waterfalls. The people, in keeping with most adivasi culture, are very courteous and have largely managed to steer clear of most pitfalls that dog modern society. But there is nevertheless a prevalent feeling in the people of Dhoguan of having being left behind in the process of development.

The predominant feeling was that the local administration was partial towards development of their village, but the people did not have the wherewithal or the voice to raise their issues and concerns.

The PACS projects made the people of Dhoguan stir themselves and gather at meetings to listen to the Sambhav team outline programmes interventions and developmental issues during their contact visits.

With the gradual formation of several groups in the village, like the Jan Shakti Samooh, thrift and credit group and adolescent group, people began to feel empowered and realized that a whole new vista of opportunity had opened up for them.

With the support of these groups, people began organizing themselves and, as a result, Dhoguan is now seeing a new trend - applications being filed on irregularities in the village, which have been forwarded to respective block and district-level functionaries.

A Village Information Center, part of the project intervention, is playing a pivotal role in linking people with the latest around them. People are happy going through informative books; charts, posters and magazines kept at the center, and, for starters, have begun to keep their environs clean and hygienic.

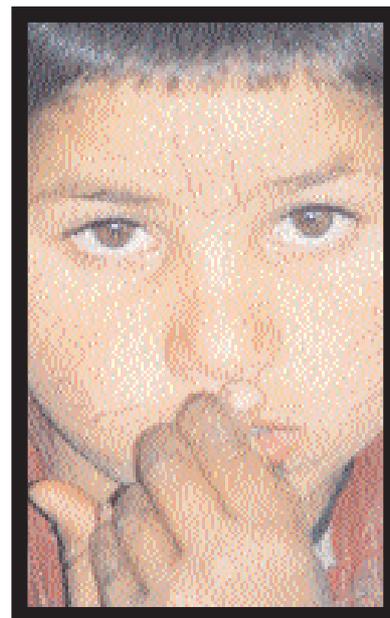
A major role is being played by women of this village. They take keen part in almost all activities and put in a fair participation. With the support of women's groups, immunization coverage in the village has significantly improved. The women now freely interact with health workers on issues like RTI/STI and illnesses afflicting their children. Smt.Heera bai, a representative of one such women's group, is a case in point.

During a training program for VDC's held under PACS, she had the courage to stand up in front of gathered Sarpanch's and Secretaries and say: "Hamare gaon mein koi gram Sabha nahi hoti hai; pichhle mahine hui thi lekin logo ko aate dekh kar ghar ke darwaje band kar diye gaye the aur band darwaje ke peeche hi baithak ho gayi thi".

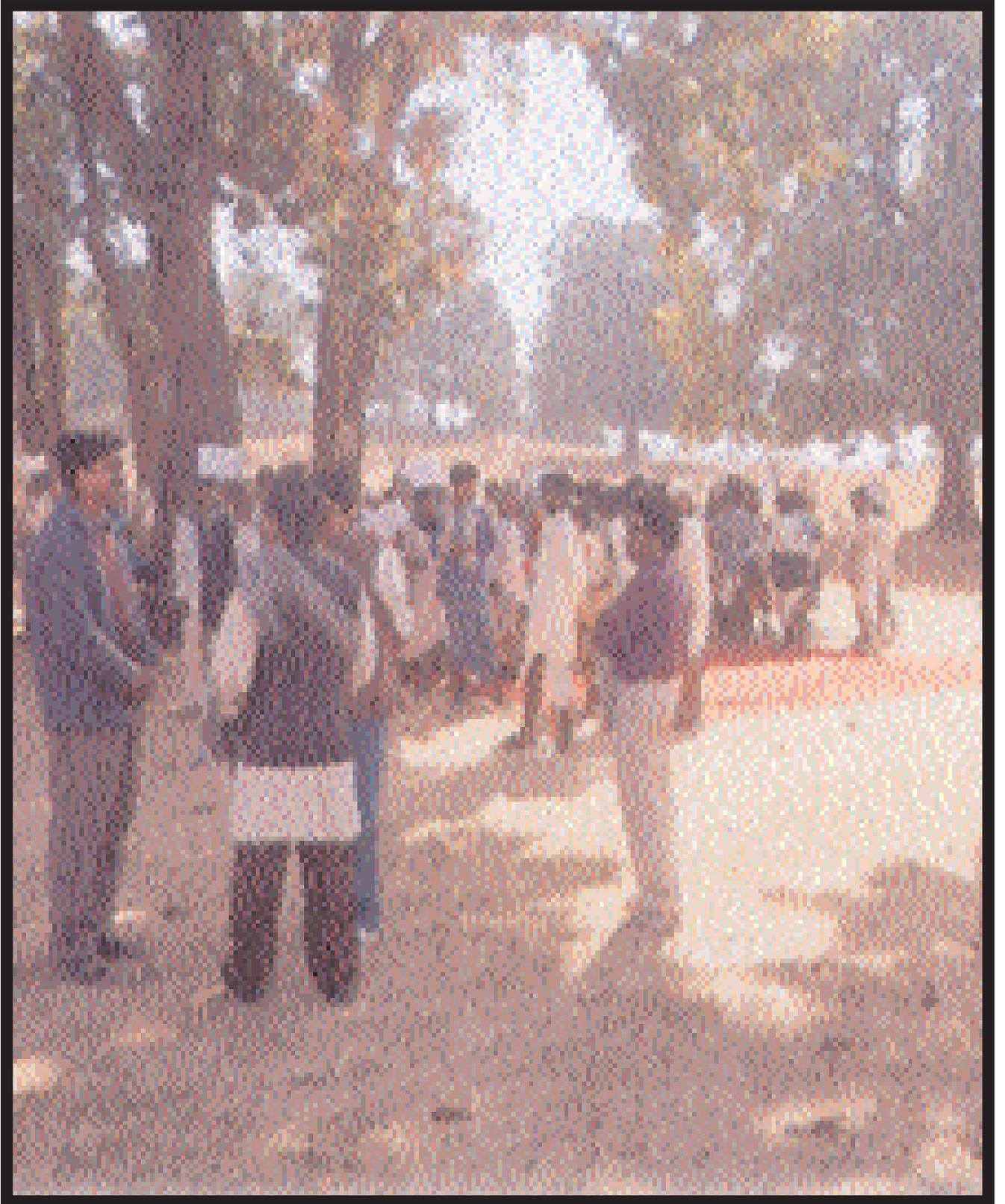
This statement, being the truth, created quite a stir and has become a matter great pride that a Adivasi woman spoke her mind in front of panchayat representatives. Similarly, the groups have managed to exert pressure on teachers of the local school, with the result that enrollment of girls in the school has increased.

However, the road ahead is still very difficult, but with the effort that the people of Dhoguan have begun to put in, there is now a air of hope in the village.

The predominant feeling was that the local administration was partial towards development of their village, but the people did not have the voice to raise their issues. The PACS project made them stir themselves and gather at meetings to listen to Sambhav on its developmental agenda for the village.



The village has 40 households, of which only one family are Brahmins, the rest being Adivasi.



IT IS THE way the administration and the IFFCO management has dealt their quarries that made Kalam more concerned than the fear of displacement.

And the frustration of not getting the basic quarries addressed has made these tribal people adamant of not leaving their villages at any cost.

The Case of IFFCO Powerplant

"We will not leave this land, come what may," declares Kalam Sai, a tribal and resident of Chandan Nagar near Prem Nagal block of Sarguja district in Chhattisgarh. Father of four, Sai is a concerned man since the news of IFFCO-CSEB power plant in Prem Nagar has reached. He is concerned as people of other several nearby villages who are facing the threat of displacement.

It is the way the administration and the IFFCO management has dealt their quarries that made Kalam more concerned than the fear of displacement. And the frustration of not getting the basic quarries addressed has made these tribal people adamant of not leaving their villages at any cost.

To put their grievances in the public fora and to declare that they were not ready to give an inch land for the project at the present arrangement under which the IFFCO proposing to compensate them with money and a job to one member of the family, tribal from village Chandan Nagar, Raghunathpur, Namnar etc., reached the block headquarters, Prem Nagar, on Monday, Jan 30, 2006, the death anniversary of father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi, took out a huge rally and public meeting and declared that they were not yielding to the compensation proposal pushed forward by IFFCO.

With their traditional attire, bows and arrows in their hand, these people reached Prem Nagar and raised slogans demanding the state government to shift the plant elsewhere.

"We do not want the development that would displace us from the land that has developed to the

present level by our forefather. Besides, the government's R&R policy has not spoken any thing about land availability against acquired land," declared Tulsi Yadav, Panchayat Member, Chandan Nagar.

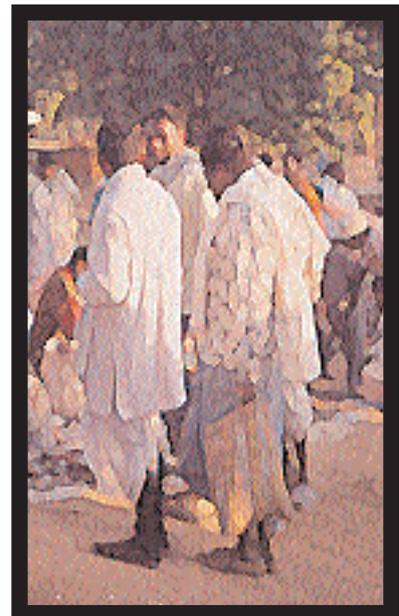
Prior to coming out open against the plant, Gram Sabha of almost all affected villages namely Chandan Nagar, Kotareli, Prem Nagar, Maheshpur, Hariharpur, Rameshwar Nagar etc., have passes resolutions against the power plant in their respective meetings (Aug 20, Oct 02-2005, Jan 27-2006) during the last several months and have handed over the copies of the Gram Sabha decisions to the district collectors. And copies have also been sent to the Governor for prompt action.

Given the Panchayati Raj Act provisions that any industry to come up in tribal land needs a no-objection certificate from the respective Gram Sabha, the tribals are using their Gram Sabhas to defend their village from being acquired. The non provision of 'land for land' in the compensation provisions and meager compensation package being offered to the tribal by the company has made matters worse.

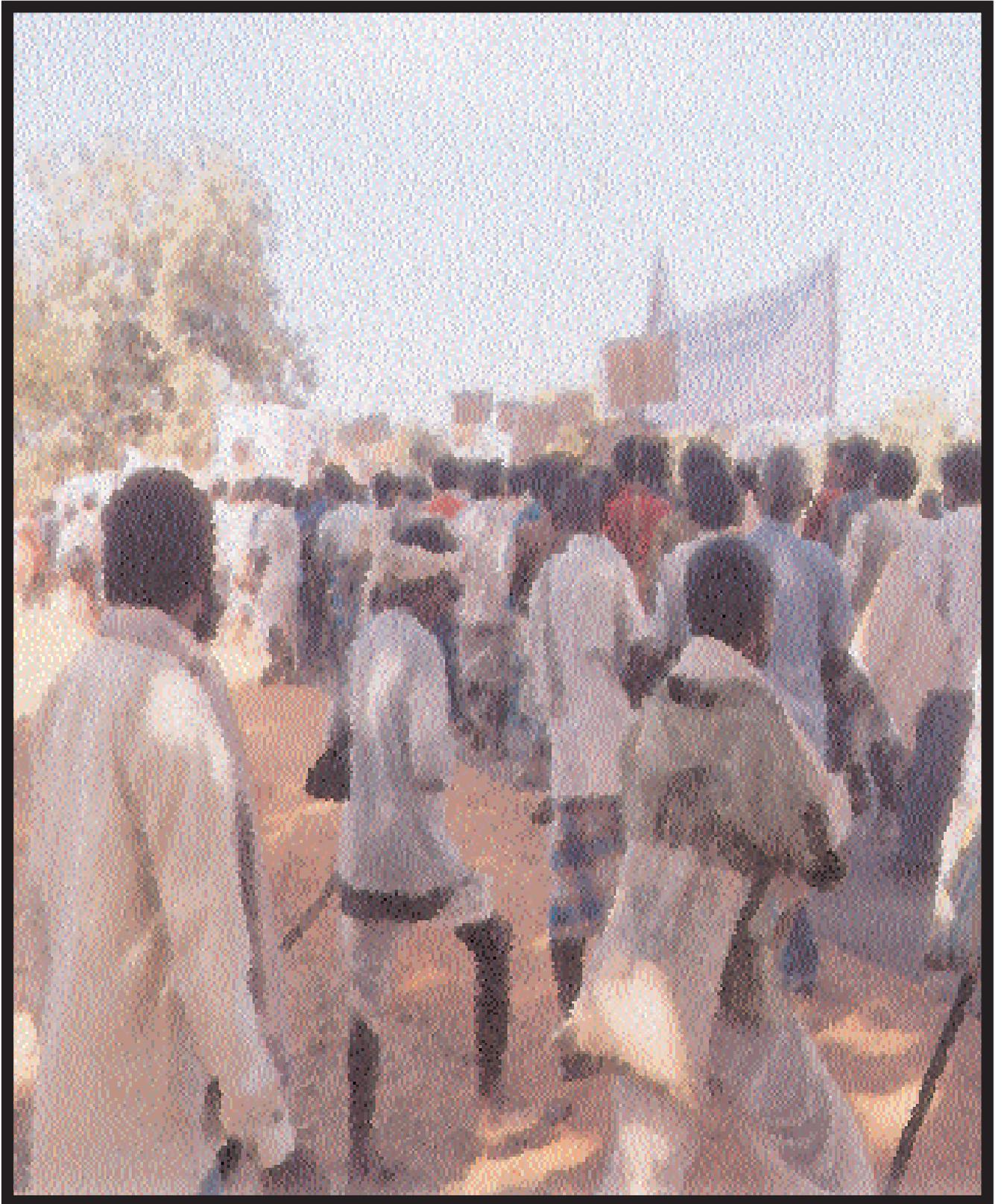
As if this was not enough, the one-to-one interaction of some villagers with displaced people of Phoolpur (Uttar Pradesh) has convinced these people that the plant is not in their interest.

To show the activities undertaken by IFFCO for the displaced people in Phoolpur, some people were taken there by IFFCO. But on seeing that the displaced were either doing menial chores or are yet to get the promised benefits, the visitors were convinced where their fate lay with IFFCO.

"We will not leave this land, come what may," declares Kalam Sai, a tribal. Father of four, Sai is a concerned man since the news of IFFCO-CSEB power plant in Prem Nagar has reached. He is concerned as people of other several nearby villages who are facing the threat of displacement.



With their traditional attire, bows and arrows, people reached Prem Nagar and raised slogans demanding the government to shift the plant.



PARAMJIT SINGH, a 12th pass youth of Chandan Nagar questions " Why should we be displaced. So far the government has not able to provide the basic facilities to us like medical and potable water. And now in the name of development and employment, local people are asked to shift. And we know neither we would get any land nor employment once we vacate our land."

Activities of PACS programme partners in the area have been concentrated on advocacy related matters. And the effective use of Gram Sabha by the villagers for safeguarding their villages has proved that people have at least risen to the occasion.

This was visible from the memorandum submitted to the Governor under the banner 'Gram Seva Parishad' in which several village Panchayat representatives submitted the resolution passed by them against the plant and urged the Governor to intervene in the matter.

The 1000 MW Rs.4000-odd crore thermal power plant to be developed by IFFCO-CSEB combine needs at least 4200 hectares of land affecting at least 31 villages. As the thermal power plant is to come up along with captive coalmine, several villages are to be displaced and thousands of forestland is to be cleared.

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People got suspicious some six-seven months ago when the Patwari started collecting land data activities in the village land without even being called by any-one.

Upon asked no clear answer came forth. This made the village Panchayat to discuss the matter and collect the data.

Convinced that the process was a prelude to the land acquisition for the power plant, villagers felt ditched, mis-guided. With they (people) not being taken into confidence by the administration and IFFCO management in the whole process, the suspicion of forceful eviction gathered ground. And all the Gram Sabhas took unanimous decision not to give their consent for the proposed plant.

Along with their possible eviction, tribals are equally concerned with the possible large scale cutting of trees for the project and during subsequent coal-mining. "How can we allow any-body to take our land and cut trees? Our lives are so interwoven with forests that we will not be able to live properly without forests," adds Surajlal Yadav.

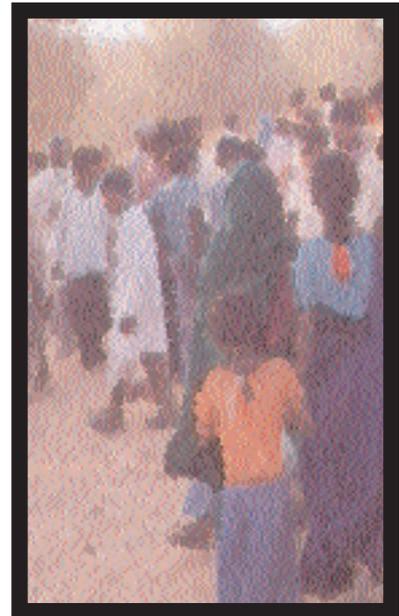
It was perhaps the effect of the pro-active stand taken by tribals that IFFCO is treading cautiously. To ensure that every one displaced gets actual benefit of compensation and is rehabilitated properly, the co-operative giant has decided to verify land records. Besides, the R&R is being planned out before the project is actually started so that there is no problem when project work begins.

As against the public perception that they will be paid Rs.40,000-50,000 an acre for their land, the compensation package of IFFCO is about Rs.One lakh an acre on an average. Besides, IFFCO is also contemplating on 'land for land' concept, which could also be implemented if the state government provides the land. The price for land would, of course, be paid by IFFCO.

The Sarguja district collector, Manoj Pingua, said all displaced would be sufficiently compensated as per the new compensation policy

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ON THE OTHER hand, S.R. Maurya, Manager, IFFCO, said he has asked local revenue officials to re-check land records and the status of land holding, so that the right persons could be compensated. On 'land for land' Mayura said the company was ready to pay the price of land subject to condition that the state government make land available for re-settlement of the displaced.

of the state government. "It is the company which will have to pay the package but we would ensure that not a single person is left behind," he added.

On the tribal demand of 'land for land' the collector said no such proposal has yet been considered. He however added that the government might consider this aspect also in the coming days.

In the backdrop of 'Kalinga Nagar' incident at Orissa, which turned into a major issue, the Sarguja district administration is also treading cautiously in dealing with the people.

According to Pingua, steps are being taken to ensure that the tribals are compensated well in return of their land. The district Collector, however, alleged certain unscrupulous people of inciting public sentiment.

On the memorandum by the tribal to the Governor and the tribal rally on Jan 30 at Prem Nagar, the Collector said all these things are being looked into and appropriate action would be taken.

On the otherhand, S.R. Maurya, Manager, IFFCO, who is assigned the job to prepare the groundwork for the IFFCO plant said, he has asked local revenue officials to re-check land records and the status of the land holding so that the right persons could be compensated.

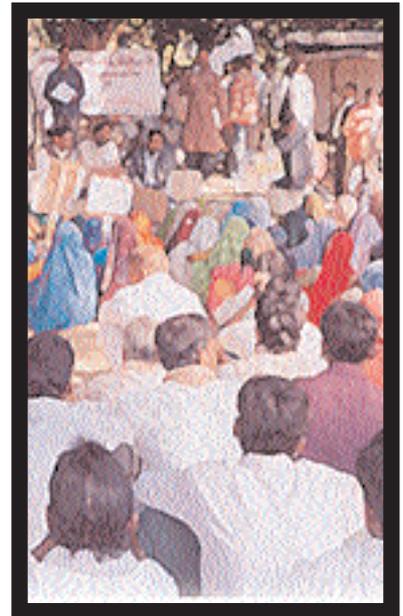
On 'land for land' Mayura said the company was ready to pay the price of land subject to condition that the state government make land available for re-settlement of the displaced.

The IFFCO manager further

informed that the compensation package was in accordance with state policy. "We are offering a much better price to the people than the market price. Besides, there is also provision for jobs to each family member of the displaced and we would be honouring this," he added.

On public movement against the plant, Maurya said, talks are on with the people and all possible steps would be taken to sort out the problem amicably.

In the backdrop of 'Kalinga Nagar' incident at Orissa, which turned into a major issue, the Sarguja district administration is treading cautiously. According to Pingua, steps are being taken to ensure tribals are compensated well in return of their land.



On the movement against IFFCO, talks are on with the people and all possible steps are being taken to sort out the problem amicably, says Maurya.



A Small Victory But A Big Step Forward

A fine example of PESA (Panchayat Extension in Scheduled Area) at work has been reported in a non-descript Chotekalkasa Panchayat in Chauki developmental block of Rajnandgaon district. Villagers under the Panchayat, that comprises of people from Chotekalkasa and Kumli, by passing a resolution in the Gram Sabha have stopped the 'illegal' stone mining in their area. They also took the decision not to use the resources for commercial purposes and save the resource for the future generation's use as well as for the developmental purposes in the Panchayat limit.

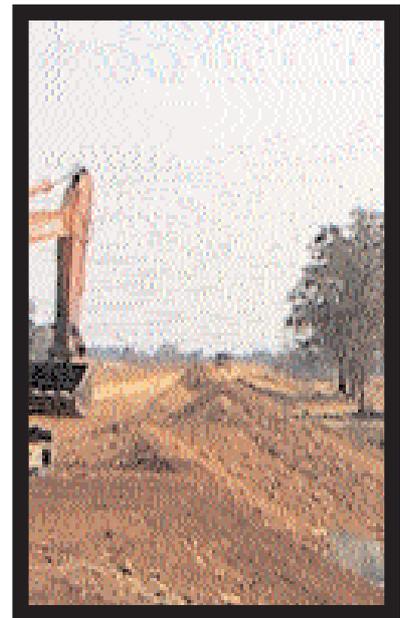
After the resolution was passed in the Gram Sabha on Jan 28 this year, the Contractor was informed about it and asked not to continue his activities. "We took the decision as the contractor had not paid the royalty to the Panchayat for last three years during which he mined stones. Besides, in the greater interest of the Panchayat we have also decided not to exploit the resource for commercial purpose. We are saving it for our future generation as well as for the development purpose of our own Panchayat," said Puranlal Jureshiya, the Sarpanch.

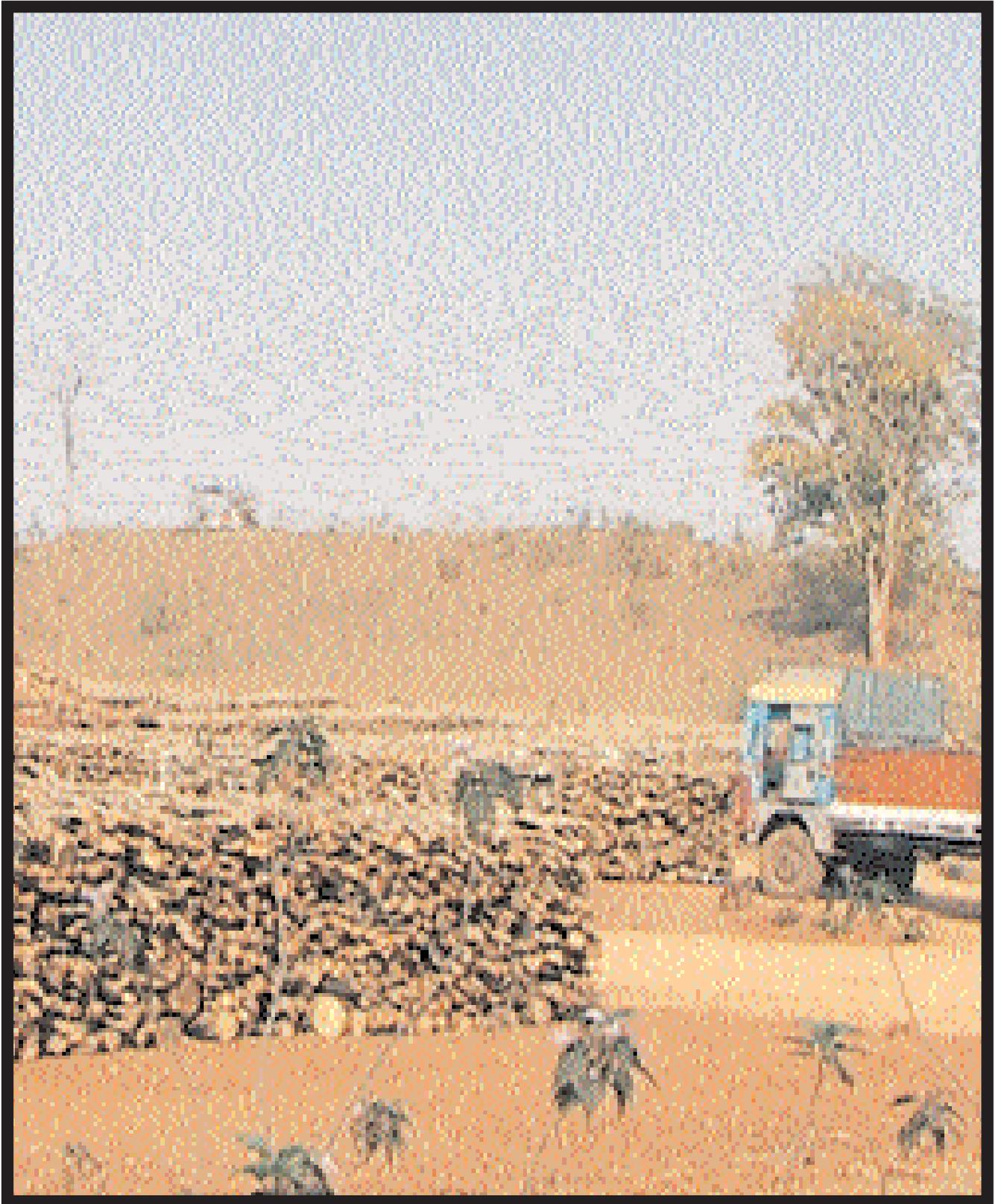
The contractor was mining stones from the area without any public interference. Nor anybody had given a damn to his activities. However this was changed- as per his own admission by the Sarpanch, a well-qualified tribal having a B.Tech in mechanical engineering under his belt- got in contact with the representatives of JSS, a PACS partner NGO working in the area of awareness generation and capacity building. Getting to know about the finer points of Panchayat Act as well as the special provisions of PESA that allowed the villagers take decision as per their convenience to sus-

tain their livelihood, Jureshiya checked the financials of the Panchayat to know whether the Contractor has given any royalty to the Panchayat for the mining activities he has done for the last three years.

"I personally checked all the files and spoke to previous Panchayat representatives. After much deliberation it came out that the permission for mining was given by the previous Sarpanch, there was no sight of royalty deposited with the Panchayat, though. Then the matter was circulated to the villagers," Jureshiya added. The matter was taken up at the Gram Sabha on Jan 28 this year where all the villagers were unanimous on issuing a blanket ban on the mining activities at the site. The decision was later passed on to the contractor. The way the matter was dealt with had no scope for it being scuttled by the contractor or other vested interests. Copies of the resolution citing as to how and why it was passed were forwarded to the concerned state government officials.

Will not this decision affect the earnings of the local people who were working under the contractor for long? Pat came the reply: "We will do other work. If possible we will ask the Sarpanch to arrange works for us. But the decision was taken in the greater interests of the Panchayat and we stand by it," said Rein Singh, a villager of Kumli. Other villagers also expressed their view in the same manner. With the villagers using the Gram Sabha for safeguarding their own and the Panchayat's election, this could well be a small victory but a big leap forward in strengthening PRIs & making them vigorous and effective. It is also a step forward in establishing resident's right on local resources.





Tribals Save Their Own Jungle

A large number of rivers originate from the central highlands, comprising the hills of Vindhyas, Satpudas and Sahyadris. Most flowing through Madhya Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, and Andhra Pradesh and ultimately empty into the Bay of Bengal. A majority of adivasi populations live in these parts, who, for ages have been dependant on these rivers and forests to eke out a sustainable livelihood.

Today, development means construction of big dams, mega power projects and mining projects in this belt. Consequently, vast areas of forests, habitations of a great number of indigenous people and a number of species of flora and fauna, are being destroyed or displaced. Construction of these dams means that most water is siphoned away. Though some people in the command area of dams may benefit from irrigation and electricity, thousands of indigenous people are displaced from their homes. Usually, they are displaced and resettled in new areas, which have comparatively less fertile soil & other resources.

Some are given money in the name of compensation by undervaluation of their properties, but many others are left uncared for, only to migrate as labour or rickshaw-pullers. Ironically, these dams have also failed in controlling floods or providing irrigation. Due to reckless destruction of forest in the catchments or watershed areas, there is increasing siltation, which has lowered the expected life and productive capacity of these big dams.

In addition, many industrial units have come up on the shores of these rivers. Although these industrial units draw water from these

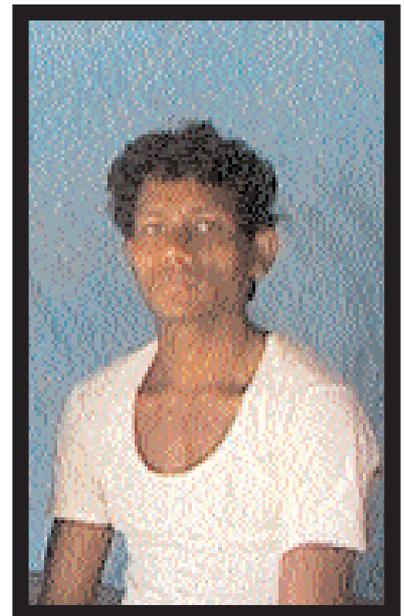
rivers, they have no checks for treating waste & effluents, which adds to pollution water resources. This is one such story...

A wind of change is flowing in this part of Rajnandgaon district. Selected as the poorest part of the country, where awareness generation and leadership quality development was said to be the toughest part, people of these villages are now ready to teach a lesson or two to the others by displaying their organizational ability, cohesive decision making and using the law to their benefit.

Foreseeing the need of jungles for their as well as their cattle folks' sustainance, villagers of Jeeratola, Goplingchua and Bagnara have formed Van Suraksha Samities to guard the jungle these three villages bordering with. Van Samities from each village takes care of the part that borders their village. And no body is allowed, not even the forest officials to take any thing from the jungles.

As per the arrangement, groups consisting of four persons (including both male and female) assigned the responsibility of guarding the jungle every day. This arrangement holds true for all the three villages. These people keep a close watch on the jungle so that nothing could be taken away by anybody. If somebody falls ill on the assigned day, he got it adjusted the next time. There are all kinds of tress namely Sal, Mahua, Teak, Bamboo and many more that provides support to the tribal population to live with.

Ever wonder what made these villagers form such groups for guarding the forest ? "It was because forest was depleting at an unprecedented speed threatening the life-





IT WAS DECIDED that Van Suraksha Samities would guard the jungles instead of leaving it to the forest department's. And where would they get fire wood & other requirements from ? "It is from the same jungle but once in every year," pat came the reply from Sonkanwar Bai. "One day was fixed in a year when all the villagers go to the jungle, collect fire wood and other basic necessities and return.

style and existence of the people living nearby, said Khairat Kunjam, a former Panch member.

"We found that the jungle was depleting fast and the forest department officials were doing nothing. We know the importance of jungles in our lives and to safeguard jungles for our own sustenance, we took the decision to guard the jungles by ourselves," he added. Accordingly the Gram Sabha was convened where the issue was thoroughly discussed.

Then it was decided that Van Suraksha Samities of the village people would guard the jungles instead of leaving the matter for forest department's mercy. And where the villagers would get their necessary fire wood as well as other requirements from ? "It is from the same jungle but once in every year," pat came the reply from Sonkanwar Bai. "One day was fixed in a year when all the villagers enter the Jungle, collect dry fire wood and other basic necessities and return back. Nobody is allowed to cut any tree. We fulfil our wood requirement for other domestic purposes from the market," she, added.

Sonkanwar Bai, an illiterate woman does her share of 'Van Suraksha' and takes active interest in the Gram Sabha proceedings also.

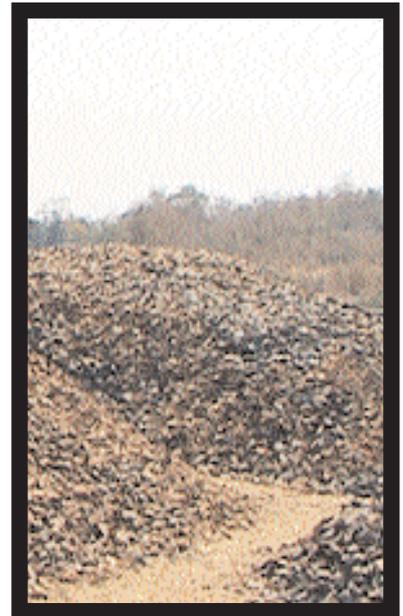
Though it was not a new concept for the villagers as in past also they have formed such groups to save forest, it was certainly a new experiment in doing things through collective approach of all the villagers and involving 'gram sabha.'

The realization of collective approach of surrounding villages was needed to put an effective check on tree falling, brought by Jagriti

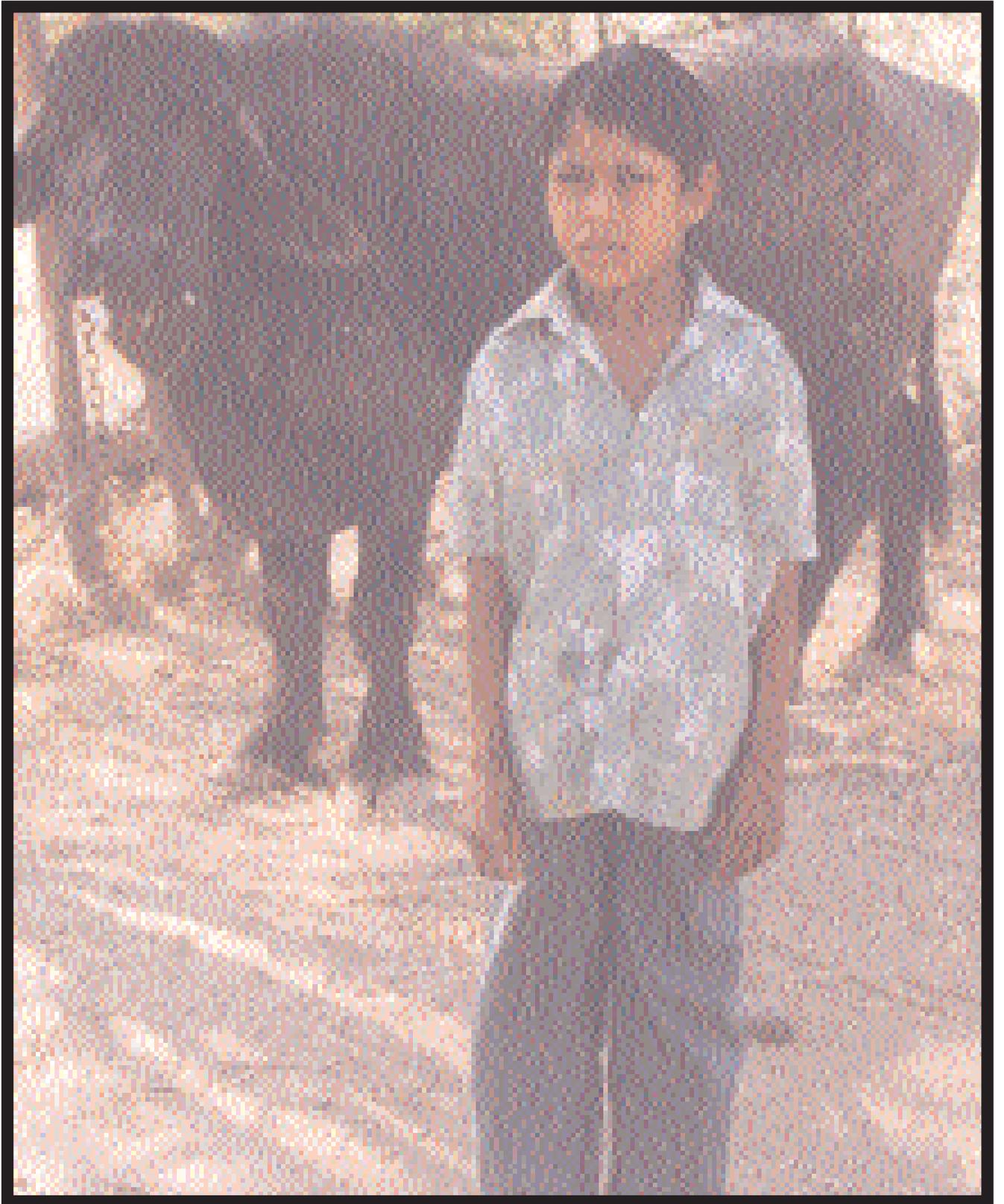
Seva Sansthan (JSS), a PACS CSO, made all the difference. And when the villagers slowly got to know the powers and functions of Gram Sabha, and how could this forum help them in saving the jungles, they marched forward.

And the result is evident. For the last one year no tree falling in the jungles have been reported. All decisions taken by the gram sabhas have so far not been questioned by any state government officials, perhaps recognizing the fact that these villages come under PESA regulations.

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TODAY, COUNTLESS persons with major handicaps and who were wasting their lives are living a self-respecting and fruitful life. Persons with serious mental disorders who were earlier looked at with contempt, and who could be found wandering aimlessly on roads, braving stones pelted by children, are today living a respectable life.

New Ways To Think About Old Diseases

Ashagram Trust has been working in West Nimad for the last 25 years. It all began with the rehabilitation of lepers, and today, the Trust is working with all kinds of people with handicaps (physically and mentally challenged), including the deaf and dumb and the blind through community-based rehabilitation programmes.

The organization gets assistance from the Government of India, ActionAid India and Tata Trust, amongst others. In the last few months, Ashagram has been implementing a project under the PACS programme for the rehabilitation of handicapped persons.

Ashagram has given new life to many through its work with the disabled. Today, countless persons with major handicaps and who were wasting their lives are living a self-respecting and fruitful life. Persons with serious mental disorders who were earlier looked at with contempt, and who could be found wandering aimlessly on roads, bravely stones pelted by children, are today living a respectable life.

We share here two such stories of fortitude and courage, the story of Khushhaal and the story of Gela.

Khushhaal got married at the age of 17. He lived with his family, comprising his wife and two children in Dervalia village. He was a dedicated family man and wanted to move ahead in life. About 10 years back, an incident changed his life altogether. Says Khushhaal's father Bhanga: "My son has been sick for the last 10 years. One night, Khushhaal had gone to the riverbank to irrigate his field. There, he saw something that so scared him that he came back screaming and panting. According to Khushhaal, he had

heard several female voices weeping and wailing by the river.

His wife gave birth to three children during this period, when he was mentally unstable. The first two children are alive but the third, born a little weak, died two days after birth. This disturbed an already mentally unstable Khushhaal further, and he became near-paranoid. He would talk to himself, abuse and throw stones at passers-by, and began to suffer from insomnia.

Mental tension was making him lose his health and gradually, he was totally insane.

Fearing he was under the control of some evil spirit, his family visited several 'Badwas' in the village and for two years, he was at their mercy and deprived of all modern medical intervention. They tried to treat him with Badwa mantras and jadibuti but to no avail. His father took him to Banganga (Indore), Rajpur and Pati for treatment. He was administered injections, saline bottles and medicines. This did help him for about a year. Doctors said he could not be given electric shocks because he was weak and would not be able to take the punishment.

They returned to the 'treatment' of the Badwas and were totally helpless. For his treatment, they had to sell 2 acres of land for Rs 10,000, took Rs 15,000 as loan against their field, borrowed another Rs 3,000 from a sahuakar at Pati, Rs 5,500 from another Sahuakar at Badwani and Rs 2,500 from yet another at Badwani. Despite having spent several lakhs on his treatment, Khushhaal was still not improving.

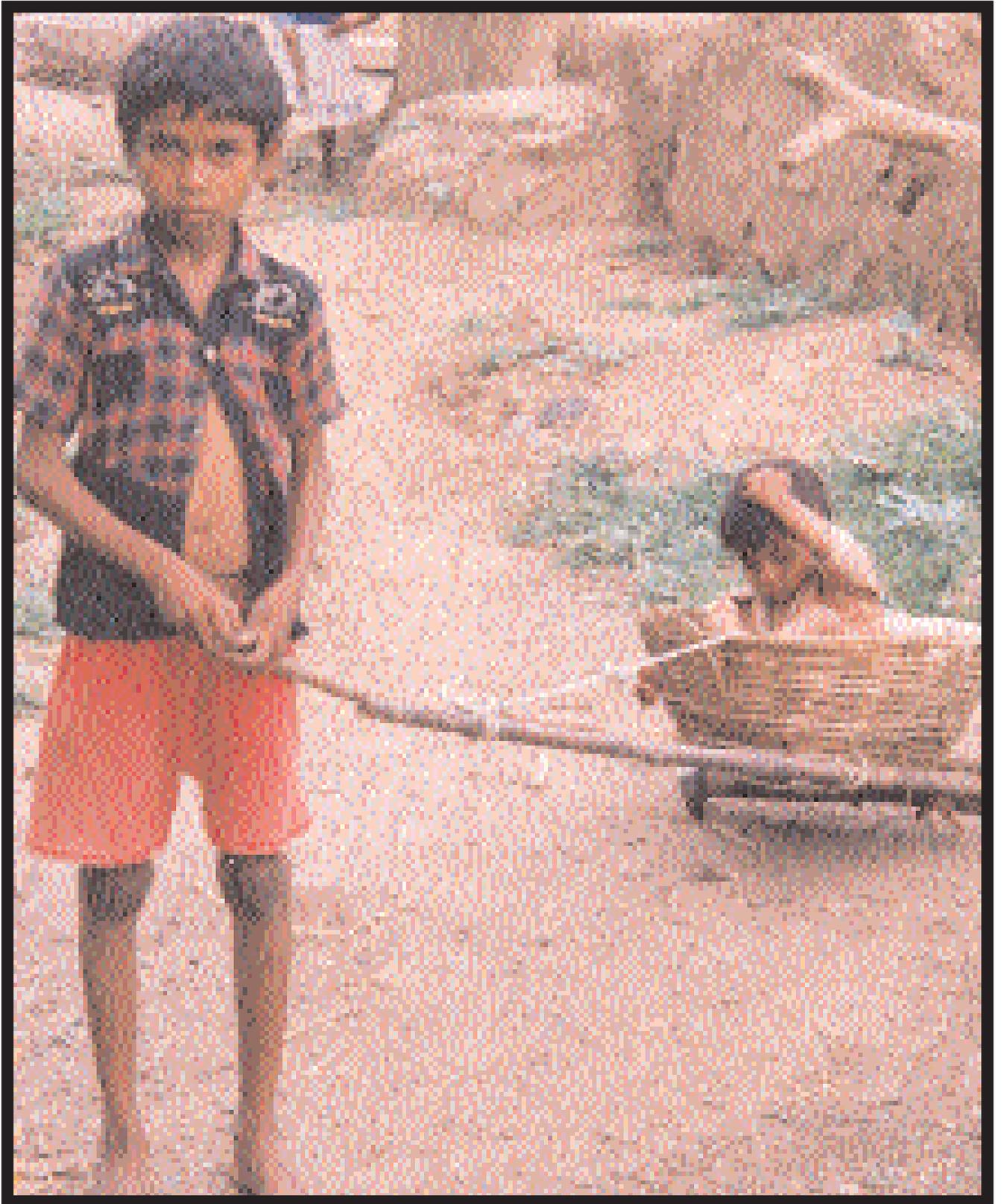
Then one day, two years back, someone told the family that Ashagram was working for such

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The doctor gave him an injection and prescribed some medicines, and asked him to come for a follow up after a month.

They spent Rs 1000, but no change was noticeable in Gela. They also took him to a Baba at Rehguna, where they sacrificed a goat for his sake, but to no avail.

persons. So they brought Khushaal to a camp organized by Ashagram.

His treatment began almost immediately. He took medicines and, very soon, started doing his own chores. He has started working in the field and has returned to a life of near-normalcy.

If not for Ashagram and the timely support from his family members, Khushaal would not recuperated so fast.

The Story of Gela

Gela was born to Buta, 45 years back at Baragya Falya in Rosar village, 20 kms away in Pati development block of Badwani district. Gela began lending a helping hand to his parents at the tender age of 5-years, when he was in school.

He was married to Rahaliya from Limbi village when he was 15.

After two years of eing married to Gela, Rahaliya became pregnant. Gela's father purchased land in Bhurwani village and constructed a house. While Gela was busy working in his field, Rahaliya gave birth to a baby boy at home, an dthey called him Ramesh. Two years latre came Pratap, then Kirsan, Gul Singh and finally, Sama. Sama was blind by birth.

Gela was worried because he thought no one would marry his blind daughter. His worries became the cause for his mental illness, as he frenetically and obsessively feared the fate of his blind daughter, Sama, and if someone would marry her.

He would often suffer from hallucinations. When he failed to sleep at night, people asked him the cause and he would say he was dreaming

about 'Badwai' and he wanted to be one, too. He said that that he was learning the tricks of the trade.

He did start working as a Badwai, and wherever he went, he would ask for liquor in return. He soon became an addict. He stopped eating, and sleeping eluded him on most days. He would start beating people, accusing them of imaginative faults. His family members suspected he had become mad (chakrayala). His family took him to a doctor at Rajpur, 60 kms from their village. Another boy named Falya had become a 'chakralaya' and the doctor had treated him successfully.

The doctor gave him an injection and prescribed some medicines, and asked him to come for a follow up after a month. They spent Rs 1000, but no change was noticeable in Gela. They also took him to a Baba at Rehguna, where they sacrificed a goat for his sake, but to no avail.

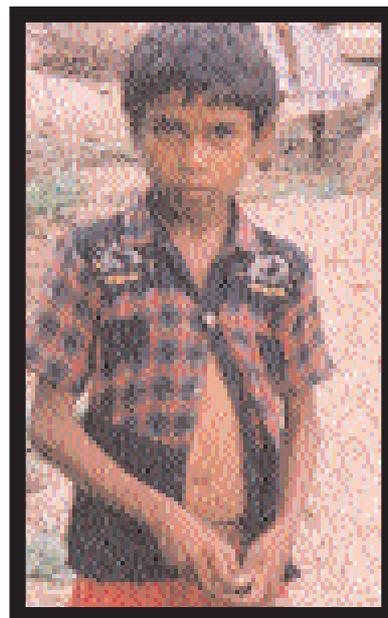
A year back, Ashagram identified mental patients and Gela was asked to come to a camp organized at Rosar. The doctor there gave Gela medicines for a month and asked him to meet him again after a month. He was given medicines again for a month. But when Gela developed fever, he stopped taking the medicines and his condition began to deteriorate. Gela was persuaded to visit the doctor again and get treated at the camp in Rosar. He was again given medicines and injection. Gela was asked to take medicines regularly. His family gave him medicines mixed in tea and even his food!

Today, Gela has definitely improved and works both in the field and at home normally.

The Baigas, known for their

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His worries became the cause for his mental illness, as he frenetically and obsessively feared the fate of his blind daughter, Sama, and if someone would marry her.



He was married to Rahaliya from Limbi village when he was 15.



A GENERAL BELIEF has been propagated - and presented very cleverly - that the Baigas do not like to work, are destroying the jungle and can never form groups. If a group is formed, they are incapable of saving anything.

These are nothing but a myth.

The Baigas

unique culture, stay close to the jungles and away from other communities.

After numerous rounds of talking to these women, a self help group from Gogatola village under Parsatola panchayat was formed. Once this group began to work well, a revolving fund of Rs 2,000 was given to them, which they used for pig farming. Within a year's time, the group decided to do some more work to generate more income. After much thought, they decided that they would collect 'Ketaki ka resha' from the jungles, where it was available in abundance. Also, the forest department extends support and purchases the Ketaki resha from the Baigas. The group contacted the forest department and the forest range officer gave approval for the ketaki machine to be made available to them. He asked them to decide where they would install the machine, ensure electric supply and train women to do the job.

At first, the women did not agree to it. They feared that it was a sort of government loan, but when they were convinced that the department would make the machine available in the group's name and that they would have to pick ketaki leaves from the jungle and wheedle out resha from it, they finally relented. The forest department also agreed to purchase the resha from them at a fixed rate.

Their applications and contract letters were routed through the Centre for Community Development (CDC), Balaghat, and given to the forest range officer. Meanwhile, the women took up a rented house to install the machine and ensure power supply.

When the forest range officer

was given the application, he came up with a new condition which was agreeable to neither the group nor CDC. The department now demanded a guarantee of Rs 1-lakh from the women! For women who lived below the poverty line and earning Rs 10 after a day's hard labour, giving a guarantee of Rs 1-lakh was next to impossible.

The Baigas mostly own no land and those who do, have very small holdings. The forest department also demanded that if the group could not furnish a guarantee of Rs 1-lakh, they will then have to come to work at the forest department campus situated at Baihar, atleast 20 kms from their village, Gogatola. To reach there, the women would have to spend at least Rs 7 to Rs 9! Now, hardly 2-3 kg of resha can be obtained from 100 kg ketaki leaves which the forest department purchases @Rs 19-22 per kilogram.

These conditions thus ensure that there is no change in the living standards of the Baigas, while a lot of money meant and sanctioned for the development of Baigas in the district is never spent on them. Government schemes are at the whim of unwilling officials. A general belief has been propagated - and presented very cleverly - that the Baigas do not like to work, are destroying the jungle and can never form groups. If a group is formed, they are incapable of saving anything. These are nothing but a myth.

Today the Baigas are fearful of Government schemes. And when they want to lead a better life on their own steam, they are not extended any support or encouragement.

By: Ameen Charles, CDC, Balaghat

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Today the Baigas are fearful of Government schemes. When they want to lead a better life on their own, there is no support or encouragement.



AS DECIDED in the Gram Sabha, the Sarpanch approached the block and got the work sanctioned. As it was very clear from the beginning that all those who need work would be working, there was no competition. People selected by the villagers themselves went to the pond and started work under personal supervision of the Sarpanch, Puralal Juresiya, a qualified Engineer.

Seeds Of Change

Can you expect people (predominantly tribal) in one of the remotest part of Chhattisgarh to suo moto ask the village Sarpanch to provide work under Food-for-Work or, for that matter, determined to seek work during this off-season under the recently introduced 'Chhattisgarh Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme' ?

Then you must visit the village of Kumli under Goplingchua Panchayat in Chauki block of Rajnandgaon district to see this happening. With agriculture related work drying up, villagers of Jeeratola village under the same Panchayat decided not to move nearby cities or towns for work, and instead seek work in the village or its vicinity.

They then raised the matter in the Gram Sabha and asked the Sarpanch to do the needful. In fact, they specifically asked the Sarpanch to ask for work related to deepening of the pond in their village under the Food for Work project. The reason being that the work not only gainfully employ them, but also ensure that the village pond would be ready to hold sufficient water to support the villagers as well as domestic animals of Kumli during next summer.

As decided in the Gram Sabha, the Sarpanch approached the block and got the work sanctioned. As it was clear from the beginning that all those who need work to sustain themselves would be working, there was no competition. People selected by the villagers themselves went to the pond and started work under personal supervision of the Sarpanch, Puralal Juresiya, a qualified Engineer.

After this what?

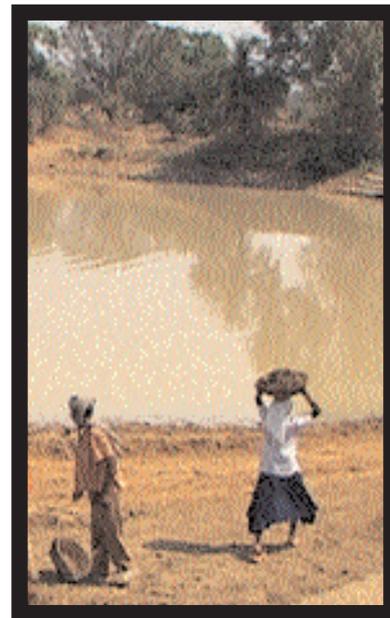
The villagers are ready with the answer, it seemed. "We will ask for work under CGREGS," said Heeralal, and several others including women working at the Pond site.

And how do they know about the REGS, which is yet to be implemented in the state ? Thanks to the efforts of Jagriti Seva Sansthan (JSS), a PACS CSO working in the area, these tribal people have not only more than just an idea about the scheme, but they are well versed in writing applications and other formalities seeking work under the scheme.

This proactiveness of the villagers has made the Sarpanch quite happy. "I am enjoying the task these people have been assigning me. Besides, I some times wonder how they can grasp such tricky issues," Puralal adds with a smile. He also admitted to the contribution of JSS in creating awareness about several issues as well as capacity building of the villagers on various government schemes and programmes.

Given the fact that the government will have to ensure at least 100 day's work under the CGREGS, these people are already on the way to complete their work well before the rainy season, so that they are free to work in their fields during the rains.

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MORE THAN 75 per cent of the tribal population of the district is engaged in collection of mahuwa (*Madhuca indica*) flower and gully. People collect flower and gullies from nearby forest and their own trees. Mahuwa flower works as currency in these areas and has a significant social and economic significance on people's lives. But, collection of mahuwa flower is a time consuming activity.

The Mahuwa Initiative

The forest district of Mandla in south Madhya Pradesh has rich natural resources and is also the State's tribal belt of Gonds and Baigas. In the State, Mandla leads with respect to production of NTFP. Out of all NTFPs, mahuwa is found in abundance in the district. The region is also rich in surtali, palash, hara (balhara) Viayviding and amla and for centuries tribals have survived on the natural resources in these lush forests for their livelihood.

More than 75 per cent of the tribal population of the district is engaged in collection of mahuwa (*Madhuca indica*) flower and gully. People collect flower and gullies from nearby forest and their own trees. Mahuwa flower works as currency in these areas and has a significant social and economic significance on people's lives. But, collection of mahuwa flower is a time consuming activity and often, all members of a family of all ages, are involved in its collection- from 3 am!

The production cycle is about 15 to 21 days. Hard labour is spent collecting the flower from forest or own fields daily from March last to mid April. A family of five members collects three quintal mahuwa approximately. The flowers are dried in the sun for four to six days and sold to local trader on local haat day. On an average, a household of five members earns about Rs 1,000-1,200, that is Rs 54-66 daily in this 15 to 21 day effort. The income varies with the number of working hands in a household. However, in the market, traders govern the trade and collectors have no stake in the trade though they are producer and consumer both.

The Udyogini team's intervention is to improve the income of mahuwa collectors. This they did

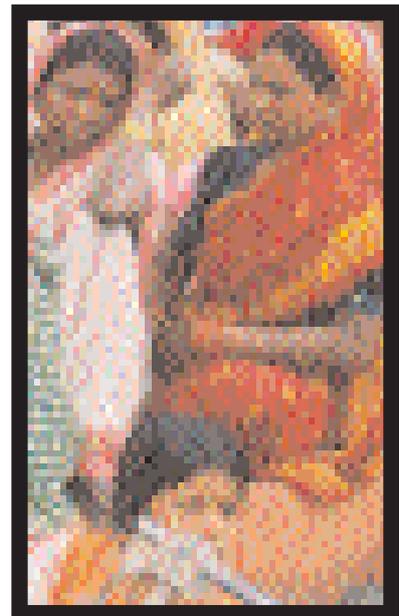
by way of collecting data about production, month-wise sale price, selling period, total consumption in the area, purchasing period and the place accorded to mahuwa in tribal life. After a comprehensive market research of Mandla, Bichiya and Shahdol mandis, the data showed an average selling price of Rs 4 to 5; sometimes mahuwa was sold in lieu of onion or salt.

Analysis of last three years data showed that prices peaked around Diwali and mid-March, and the total consumption of Mandla district was about 50,000-quintals per year, with only 80 per cent being supplied by the district itself and the remaining 20 per cent coming mainly from Raipur and Shadhol.

The Udyogini team planned trading in mahuwa flowers through existing women self-help groups. The plan was simple: store the mahuwa flower and sell it at Diwali time, when rates peaked. Although group women were aware that they were buying their own mahuwa at a high rate, their needs forced them to sell. Out of eight groups, 66 women (all were mahuwa collectors) from six groups were involved in saving and credit activity and had a little amount in their bank account. The team, thus, opted for bank loans. Although the groups were new, after meetings with NABARD and RRB bank officers, bankers were ready to provide loan worth Rs 10,000 each for two groups. Udyogini supported the remain four groups.

The operation in mahuwa storage started with 107 quintal in April (according to availability of mahuwa). In fact, 2005 was a competitive year for mahuwa traders because in the last two years, production had decreased so every

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HOWEVER, HAVING gained confidence, the women bought 2 quintals and experimented with the price: while they sold for Rs 10, they bought for Rs 11, and stored it in one quintal drums with wheat straw and sagun leaves, made airtight with mud. The two quintals went up by seven more kilos because mahuwa swells, and the women sold it at Rs 14!

trader who's business was dependent on a strong network at the village level planned to store mahua. This resulted in a price war, and from an expected Rs 4 to 6, the price went up to Rs 8 at production time. Some group members who planned to buy mahua at Rs 4 to 5 could not achieve their fixed target. Information about different storage practices and market rates at different mandis was also recorded and shared with every group.

However, in July, with the coming of the monsoon, the flowers began to retain moisture because the storage huts had mud roofs and earthen floors. Though precautions had been taken and the flowers were packed in jute bags and kept on a base of plastic sheets and kusum leaves, heavy rains gave everyone sleepless nights. The team & group members, as well as local field workers, were not ready to take a risk at any cost. So, after discussion, all stakeholders decided to sell 60 per cent of their mahua. Since the rate was good, it was decided to sell all the mahua and keep five quintals with two groups on an experimental basis.

PACS coordinator Amrat Singh says, "The marketing strategy for mahua was prepared on a comprehensive analysis of the last five years. We found the rate was the highest during Diwali." In April 2004, they collected and bought 24 quintals/ 81 kg of mahua and stored it. Each woman in the group would keep collecting small amounts of mahua, buying seven to eight kilos from other markets. To buy 2,500 kg they took a loan of Rs 1,00,000 and Udyogini gave them Rs 61,000. However, since they did not know how to store the mahua, they were forced to sell it for Rs 14. "We were able to keep it only in sacks, and we

knew that the cold and damp would mean that the mahua would be infested with fungus (*illi*)."

Singh says, "If mahua is not dried properly, it will collect moisture. The storage place should be *pucca* and the floor and roof cemented. The mahua should be packed in jute packets and an insecticide like kusum leaves and plaster of Paris spread over the floor and bags. However, having gained confidence, the women bought 2 quintals and experimented with the price: while they sold for Rs 10, they bought for Rs 11, and stored it in one quintal drums with wheat straw and sagun leaves, made airtight with mud. The two quintals went up by seven more kilos because mahua swells, and the women sold it at Rs 14!

While the women were prepared to do the same in 2005, mahua prices were at a low because of the glut in the market. Women who were involved in the business made a profit ranging from Rs 140 to Rs 1,018. It was the first time in their life when they sold their mahua for more than 10 rupees. What decided the margin of profit was quantity of stored mahua, mode of business, storage, and selling period. Udyogini's analysis showed that most profits earned had been invested in education, rations and house renovation. The experience was not without hitches. The local trader did not want to cooperate and the group had to go to sell to the mandi at Mandla.

Local traders have a storage network in the villages and are also trusted by the people. The traders have an emotional relationship with the people: they help them during a difficult time; in lieu, the villagers sell mahua to them.

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KANTI BAI says she convinced her husband about the objective and benefits of being part of an enterprise group. "I managed my household work with group activities and never missed a meeting or a training organised by 'Udyogini'," she recounts. Most of the time, she took financial help only for economic activities and she repaid each successfully.

“Our intervention directly impacts on the trader's interests. Aabhi jao; jab tumahara mahuwa pani banker sad kar bahney lagega, tab aana. Hum pura mahuwa 15 (Rs 15) mai kharid lenge”, say the traders. This is what a local trader, Hari Maharaj based at Bakori, said when group members went to him to sell him their mahuwa during the rainy season. Apart from these problems, the group's internal dynamics also plays a vital role. Our experiences indicate that groups who were storing mahuwa jointly had more conflict in management. Sometimes, it was noticed that there were few active members who took the initiative in proper storage & marketing. But they are not supported by other group members. This results in demotivating these active members, since the profits are shared equally.

On the other hand, individually stored mahuwa was cared for properly but the selling decision was individual-specific (especially male) who were also influenced by other considerations.

It was decided that local traders would be preferred for selling, since the objective was to build a relationship with them and not to threaten their business in any way.

Thirty-eight-year-old Kanti Bai Pendro president of Sari Mahila Udyog Samuha is a Gond, where women are not allowed to come out of their houses except to collect forest produce. Kanti Bai hails from a small village, Dungariya. Her husband, Premlal Pendro, owns five acres of land and she has two sons aged 12 and 15 years respectively. Kanti Bai, who is not even allowed to eat food made outside her home (as prescribed by the community), was dependent on forest produce collection and agricultural labour as

this was the only source of livelihood for her family. In July, 2003, she became a part of 'Women Enterprise Group' formed by Delhi-based CSO 'Udyogini', covering 30 villages under the Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) programme in Mandla. On the basis of her interest, abilities and fewer demand on her time for domestic chores, she became the president of the group.

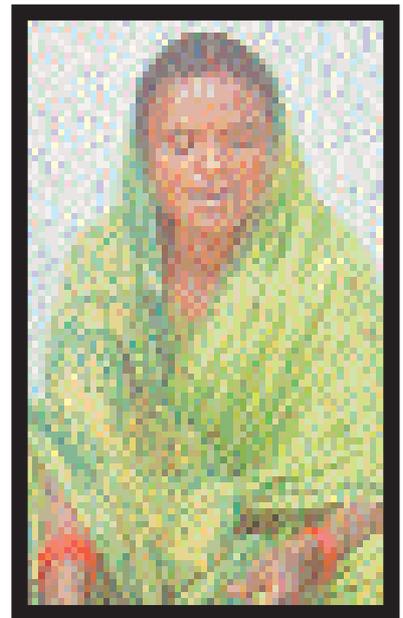
However, because of the caste system, the villagers opposed the group because it was against their principle to interact in a mixed group. Group members were also warned of dire religious conversions, a fear prevalent in the area because of the presence of missionaries. Despite these uncertainties, Kanti Bai says, "I made the group, even though many members did not have money. But we wanted to do some business and we hoped that the bank would help us." Secretary, Savitri Dhurve, and other members like Ram Kali Endre, Gulaboti Neti, Sita Devi and Kanti Bai also encountered opposition to attend group meetings, but decided to move ahead anyway.

Kanti Bai says she convinced her husband about the objective and benefits of being part of an enterprise group. "I managed my household work with group activities and never missed a meeting or a training organised by 'Udyogini'," she recounts. Balancing home and work, her first loan from the group was to fulfill her family's socio-economic needs, especially books for her children, buying seeds, and hiring a tractor. Most of the time, she took financial help only for economic activities and she repaid each successfully.

As a result of Udyogini's efforts and Kanti Bai's determination, dur-

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KANTI BAI has attended a five day 'bank training' and smiles when she remembers that earlier she could not speak in public. For her, training as a business motivator meant that she had to travel to Jabalpur, Raipur, Katni and Delhi. "When I first went to Jabalpur, I was scared when I had to speak about my work as a tendu-patta collector to forest officials."

ing the mahuwa season, she, along with group members, decided to trade in mahuwa. Earlier, she and her members used to sell mahuwa immediately after the annual collection in March at very low prices.

Now, armed with marketing knowledge through Grassroots Management Training (GMTs) given by Udyogini, Kanti Bai and others of her group added value to mahuwa by drying and storing the produce for sale during the peak season. With help from Udyogini, Kanti Bai took a loan of Rs 1,333 and purchased 100 kilos of mahuwa at a rate of Rs 7 per kg and stored it. In the peak season (in October), she sold it for Rs 14 per kg and made a net profit of Rs 700. With this profit, she bought furniture for her house and a silver nose ring for herself. The rest of the amount she saved for her children's education. Encouraged by the gains, Kanti Bai has now also started vegetable cultivation.

The business process and profits enhanced her knowledge and confidence and silenced her detractors. Now she is a good leader to her group, an inspiration to other women of the village, and is an important bread winner for her family. She is not a labourer but an entrepreneur able to sense new opportunities and take up newer activities. Kanti Bai's group now works independently without any assistance. She recently took a loan of Rs 10,000 from NABARD on behalf of her group for trading and completed all the formalities and paper work with the support of her group members.

To strengthen enterprise groups and share NTFP information, Udyogini organised a workshop on July 16-17, 2004, where Kanti Bai shared her group formation experi-

ence. Facing nearly 100 participants for the first time, her nervousness did not deter her. The experience, in fact, made her bolder, more confident and determined. Kanti Bai says: "Earlier, we used to see advertisements on television and many people gave us books telling us to collect money and do some business, but we did not believe anybody." Today, although Kanti Bai is not educated, she is a strong votary of learning, believing in the motto that "women who understand move ahead."

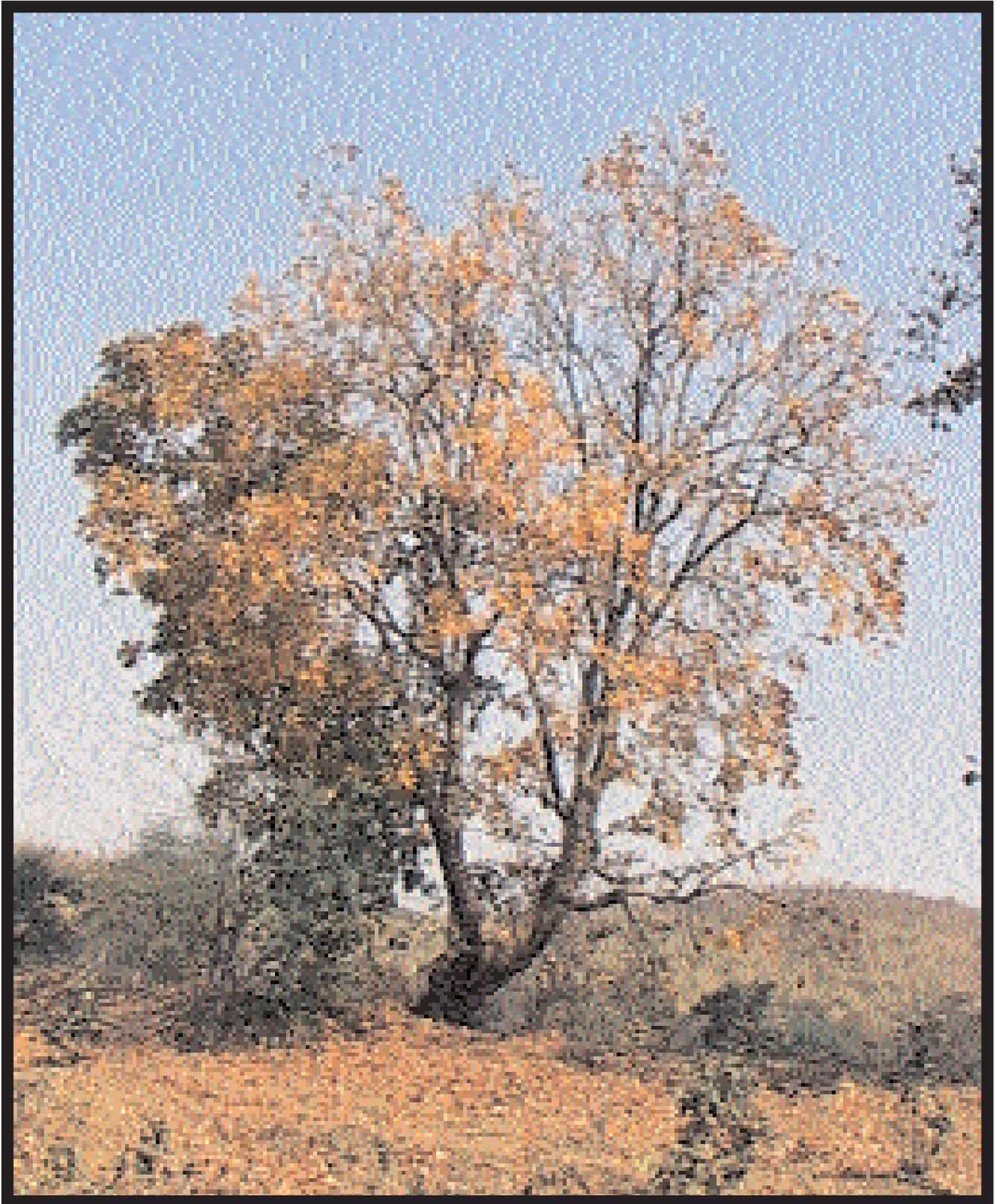
"I am *hoshiyar* (alert) wherever I go. Those who do not understand the importance of interacting and are not allowed to go anywhere by their husbands are unable to move ahead," she explains, throwing light on why other women (and groups) are not able to make the kind of progress that she has been able to make. "When their husbands tell them that there is no profit in this kind of work, many women just give up."

Recalling a personal incident, she says her sister-in-law wanted Rs 1,000. "While I have the key to the cash box, the box itself is kept with another member. That is the group's practice." Unable to give her money meant that the woman had to return home empty-handed and her husband immediately asked her to leave the group. Kanti Bai has attended a five day 'bank training' and smiles when she remembers that earlier she could not speak in public. For her, training as a business motivator meant that she had to travel to Jabalpur, Raipur, Katni and Delhi. "When I first went to Jabalpur, I was scared when I had to speak about my work as a tendu-patta collector to forest officials."

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Savitri recounts how she went to a Katni factory to see how 'Chawyanpraash' was made.



THE WOMEN also say that when they were collecting mahua, it was the men who were helping them locate good quality mahua "Many groups were collecting mahua, so many of our menfolk had to make several trips outside the village to get hold of the mahua."

Savitri recounts how she went to a Katni factory to see how 'Chawyanpraash' (an ayurvedic health tonic) was made, and finally learnt how natural resource were collected. The women today are the backbone of a forest conservation drive. Udyogini's Manavendra explains: "Earlier, when private collectors approached women, they were asked to collect in bulk and, in order to meet their targets and the competition, villagers would often cut down entire trees." Today, after sustained interaction and guidance, people have begun to realise that along with their livelihood, they would have to protect the forest also".

Earlier, the women were saving Rs 12; however, when the bank encouraged them, they began to save Rs 50. At an interest rate of 3%, they took a loan of Rs 2,500 loan also returned it to the Mandla-Balaghat Regional Rural Bank, Bakori branch, in five months!

Ask the women what has changed for them after they have come together as a group and they say, "Earlier, when any of us had a problem, we did not know how to look after our own. During deliveries, women were always in a spot about how to seek help in case of an emergency. Today we have each other." Another thing the women agree on is that their menfolk have begun to understand that the savings are making a difference in their lives. "So they have begun to chip-ping in with household chores and realise that we have to leave the house to work," says Kanti Bai.

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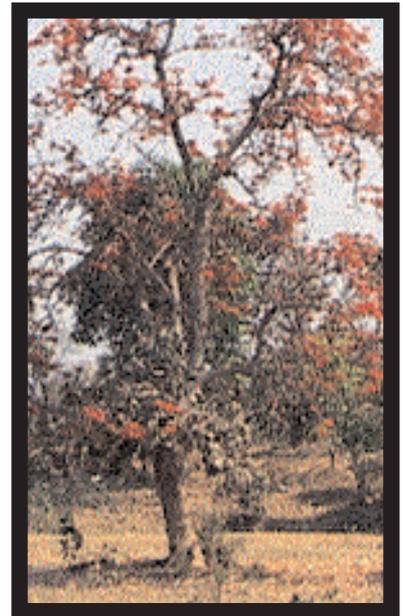
About the strength of their group, Gulaboti Neti says, "Kanti Bai has the spirit to take people along and 'she never abuses people." Kanti Bai admits that sometimes she does get depressed, "but I know my work will be good for the children, and my husband helps me." She also appreciates that while earlier she had a lot of problem with money, now she has been able to tide over that. "With the training, I have learnt to speak in front of so many people. And we never had access to banks. Now we even travel to Delhi and Raipur."

On January 16 and 17, 2005, the Mandla district administration organised an 'SHG Meet' where an officer requested all SHG members to come voluntarily to the stage and share their experience. Kanti Bai was the first to raise her hand. She shared her experiences with a gathering of 1,000 people. She was also interviewed by ETV!

During Udyogini's 'Network Building Workshop' in March, 2005, where newly-formed groups raised questions related to loans, savings, trading and markets, Kanti Bai responded with solutions and quoted relevant examples based on her experience. She also worked as a resource person in a Network Building Workshop in Babaliya cluster held in September, 2005, in which she shared her experience regarding group dynamics and enterprise. Now Kanti Bai not only provides guidance to her group but also conducts Grassroots Management Training in other groups. She is also working as a troubleshooter for other groups.

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"**WE HAD** called a special Gram Sabha and the villagers came. We wanted to know how much money had come to the panchayat and what it had been spent on," says Khan.

The villagers also demanded that the accounts be made public, but the sarpanch and secretary did not come.

Social Audit: The New Face of Change

The tall, well-built Rafiganj janpad member Atiullah Khan is a tired man, but he knows he cannot stop now. Over the last few months, he along with the Jagriti Yuwa Mandal youth group in his village, have been trying to get the panchayat to discuss finances. After a six-month long struggle & even with documents in his hands, there has not been much progress.

"We had called a special Gram Sabha and the villagers came. We wanted to know how much money had come to the panchayat and what it had been spent on," says Khan. The villagers also demanded that the accounts be made public, but the sarpanch and secretary did not come.

Three issues were to be discussed in the special Gram Sabha, viz. the panchayat's finances for the year 2004-05 (budget and expenditure), current panchayat work plan, and the functioning of the Panchayat. On September 10, 2004, a group of about 60 people decided that on September 20 they would hold a special gram sabha on the three issues.

The people in the village knew that the poor in the village got a raw deal because the panchayat secretary travelled from Bhopal, sometimes only once a week, and sometimes, even once a month. Explains Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) Samarthan co-ordinator Arun Mukati, "Under the Gram Swaraj 2005 provision, people are within their rights to seek panchayat accounts in a social audit."

Says cluster level volunteer Manoj Tiwari, "We collected the required number of signatures, and with Khan, gave the Panchayat secretary an application to call a special

gram sabha." However, the group was shocked with the response they got. "She threatened us that if we took things ahead, she would beat us with slippers. Since she was a woman, and an adivasi at that, she said she would file harassment cases against us under the Atrocities Against Harijans Act," Mukesh and others say.

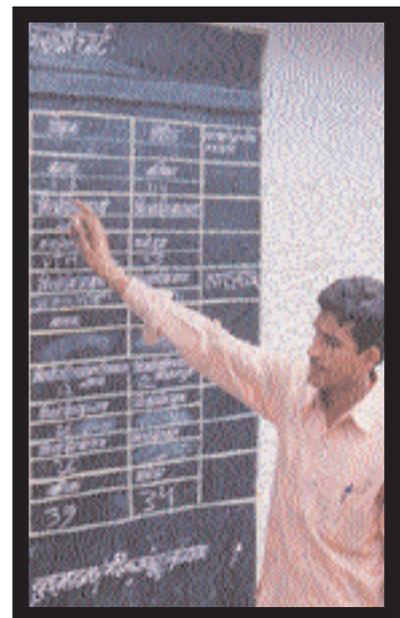
Not to be cowed down, on September 12, 2005, the youth group submitted an application to the Collector. Disappointment there, too. "Our application was marked and the Collector suggested that we deposit it at the Zila Panchayat. It is now March, 2006, and still the special Gram Sabha remains to be held," they say. On November 15, 2005, when people actually gathered, those who were necessary to validate the proceedings did not turn up. What they did get after a lot of hard work at the Janpad level was the old work plan with the old cash book !

As the tussle continued, Khan, unable to wait, sought the necessary information under the Right to Information Act. Khan was desperate for the information because, "Work is shown on paper but it is not done. For instance, the panchayat said red soil was put on the roads in Mageshwar ward at a cost of Rs 50,000 and 10 trolleys of boulders were used there. There is nothing there."

Citing another recent example, he says an expenditure of Rs 30,000 was shown for the village bridge, "when only two labourers were employed and hardly Rs 1,000 would have been spent for the entire job."

Apart from this, machines have been used in the neighbouring

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ACCORDING TO rules, if people want to call a special gram sabha they have to submit an application with the signature of 50 villagers. "Although 80 people had signed the application, the secretary cleverly removed the last three pages of the application. Since the first page had only 37 names, the Zila Panchayat did not allow the Gram Sabha to be held!" exclaims Govind Singh.

Rafiganj hills for digging and transporting boulders and red soil but there is no record of the royalty that is to be paid to the panchayat. So where is all this money going? "There is no receipt for the nearly 15-20 trolleys costing at least Rs 60 to Rs 70 each, which are taken out of the village everyday."

The group adds that last year, the panchayat began collecting a tax of Rs 150 from tea stalls, Rs 200 from dhabas, Rs 25,000 from the ITC e-chaupal, and Rs 500 from brick kilns. "What is being done with this money?" they ask.

In village Jahangirpura (in Sehore district), for long people have suspected irregularities in the mid-day meal. At a Gram Sabha, nearly 80 people signed an application demanding a special Gram Sabha. The sarpanch, Ram Naryana, admitted there were irregularities and it was decided that a special Gram Sabha would be called. People decided they wanted to see the accounts pertaining to not only the mid-day meal scheme, but for all the work that the panchayat had taken up. An angry Panch, Govind Singh, says, "When we asked for an account from the sarpanch and the secretary, they said they had misplaced the papers." Fed up with being taken for a ride, they gave an application to the Collector and Zila Panchayat.

According to the rules, if people want to call a special gram sabha they have to submit an application with the signature of 50 villagers. "Although 80 people had signed the application, the secretary cleverly removed the last three pages of the application. Since the first page had only 37 names, the Zila Panchayat did not allow the Gram Sabha to be held!" exclaims Govind Singh.

Shyamlal says they are far from having given up. "We had the support of 18 people and they will bring another 50 to the Gram Sabha. But here, too, the sarpanch and the secretary offered seven people some incentive (liquour) and we lost strength," he says. "Nobody can raise issues here," he says, alleging that four people were arrested on false charges for raising a protest in the village. "The atmosphere in the Panchayat is now very sour and often they offer liquor to people and get them to abuse us," he says.

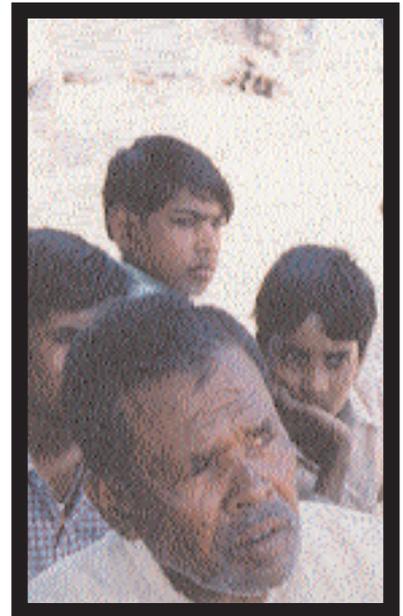
With basic civic amenities out of reach, the people's frustration is growing. Villager Shyam Lal says, "The road inside the village, which is used by people of 10 villages, is still kuccha. We have had seven sarpanchs, but this road has not been made." Several pleas to the village secretary and sarpanch have gone in vain.

For the women, the problems are ten-fold: an anganwadi in rented premises, no toilets in the village, filth in the village during the monsoons, leading to women and children falling ill frequently. There is no doctor or nurse, the ANM comes but once a month, and the nearest hospital is seven kms away. Deliveries are done at home and, very often, the dai who lives far away, reaches two or three hours after the infant is born! Panch Mannulal Lodhi says, "They have been working at their own whim—there is no accountability to the village."

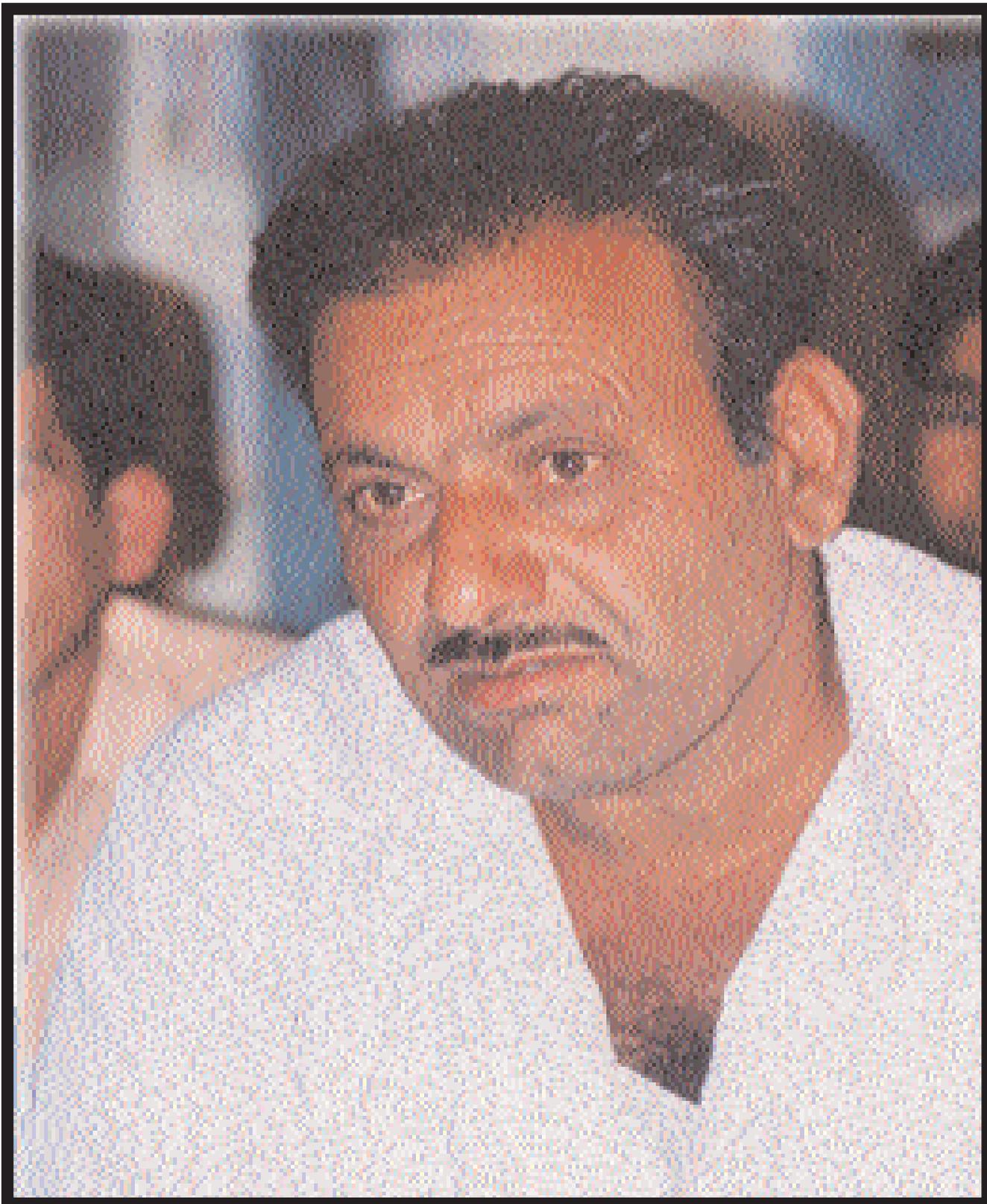
Samarthan's Youth coordinator Dinesh Singh says, "The sarpanch is a Harijan and he listens only to the secretary, who is a Government official. Apart from this, a group of people keep guiding the sarpanch."

"The road inside the village, which is used by people of 10 villages, is still kuccha. We have had seven sarpanchs, but this road has not been made."

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“WE GOT TO know from the PDS that 37 quintals of wheat had gone missing. When we confronted the sarpanch, he said he had given it to teachers of four schools for the mid-day meal,” she says.

When the teachers were called at the meeting, they denied this.

"The sarpanch is a simple and weak man and the secretary is the link to all that is happening in the village. Most work is carried out from his house and the way he wants it," the villagers concur.

There are logistical issues behind this also. Despite this being the panchayat headquarters, the village does not have a panchayat building or a panchayat office. There are no registers, no cupboards and all village certificates are made at the secretary's house, who lives in Sehore. "For the smallest job, villagers have to go to the secretary's house," Mannulal Lodhi says.

If men in the village are not able to get their voices heard, what about the women? Jahangirpura panch Sangeeta Bai says, "We never know about meetings and the sarpanch does not invite us to meetings. I am a panch and I do not have an account of the panchayat's expenditure."

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Apart from this, Saludra Bai, Sharda, Myra, Kiran and other women allege that proper arrangements are not made for women to attend gram sabhas. "We are made to sit very far from the main proceedings and are unable to follow what people are discussing. Sometimes, people come to the gram sabha drunk and they become abusive," they add. They are, of course, referring to the November 21, 2005, gram sabha, which instead of sorting out issues, turned into a free-for-

all mudslinging match. Another issue that the women vocally raise is the decrease in their PDS rations.

"We are not given rations. But if someone has access to the sarpanch or other influential people, or has the money, they are given our rations," Sharda says. Ask Atiullah Khan of Rafiganj - what now? He says, "I will now study the document and take this forward." Panch Govind Singh of Jahangirpura says, we are ready to engage in this process again, and we want to get all the information regarding the proceeding in the village and why these irregularities are happening.

For the PACS CSO, Samarthan, which has been supporting the process of social audit, these have been learning experiences. Samarthan's Harshul Brijesh says, "Thirteen villages around Sehore experimented with social audit and while there were six or seven successful instances, others like in Jahangirpura and Rafiganj have not been so easy." The reason, he adds, is that it is a long process of constant guidance and handholding, from introducing the concept to getting CBOs like youth, women, and water and sanitation committees engaged.

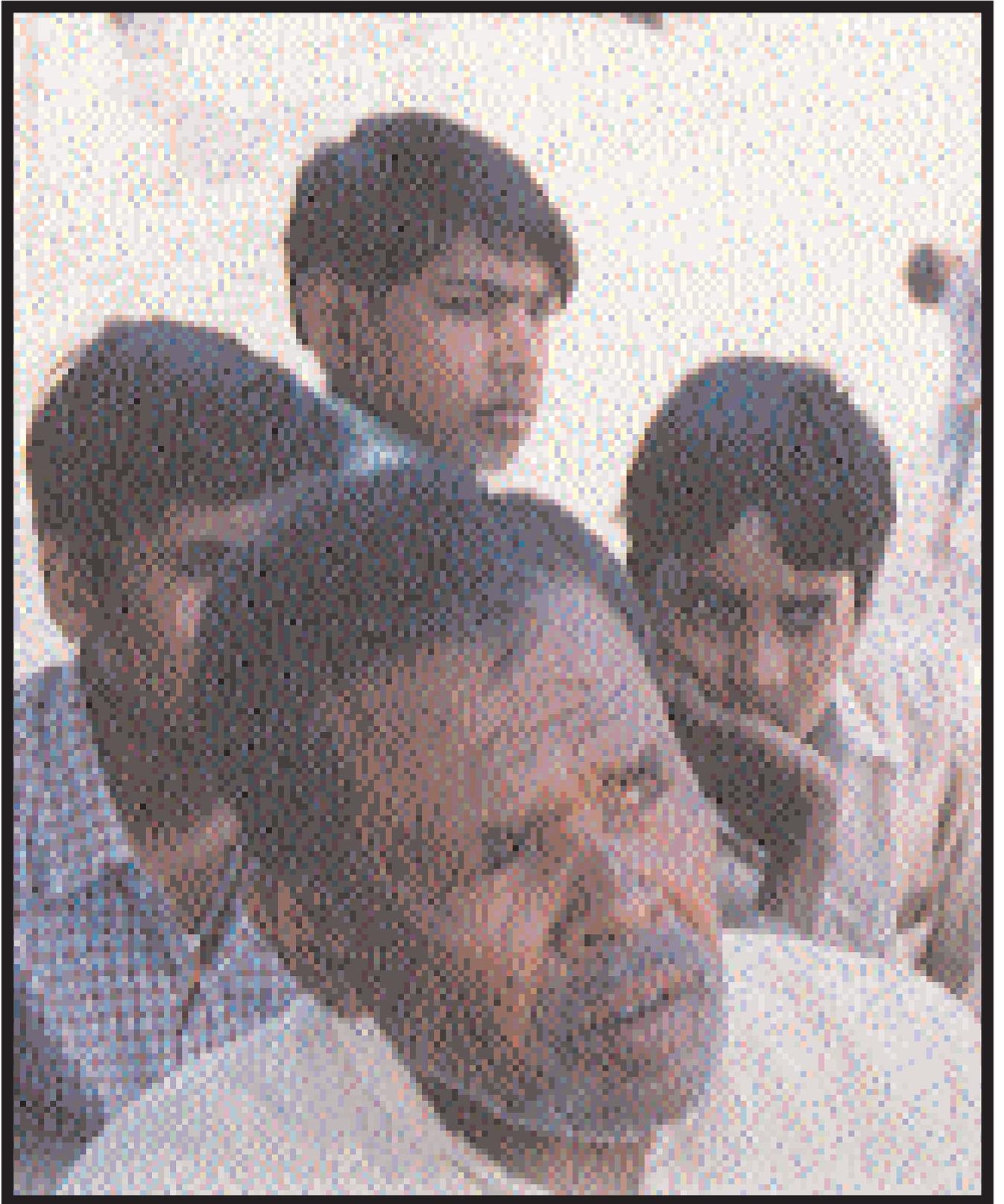
"The basic difference between a Government audit and social audit is that while the former is verification of bills and vouchers, the latter is the community physically verifying the work that has been carried out by the panchayat. Important things like what work was taken up, who was given the work and how much were they paid are involved."

Samarthan's capacity building facilitator, Santoshi Tiwari, was part of an exhaustive social audit. Women in village Bijora in Sehore were faced with a severe water cri-

"The basic difference between a Government audit and social audit is that while the former is verification of bills and vouchers, the latter is the community physically verifying the work that has been carried out by the panchayat", says Harshul.



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ON AUGUST 12, 2005, the women presented the gram sabha their accounts, after which all the people were satisfied. The women took the sarpanch, Manju Pathak, to task. They, along with the villagers, complained that it was well past midday and the school had not yet opened for the day!

sis. Gusty self-help group, Nai Roshni, consisting of 12 women, took it upon themselves to find a way out of this situation. As a first step, they initiated discussions with the PHE.

People in the village made a lot of fun of them, but they persisted. When the handpump was sanctioned, people in the village began pressurising them install it in various places. One night the president, Balia Bai, and secretary, Rambo Bai, called the drillers and got the tube well installed in their locality. There was enough water and the women were happy with the outcome.

However, soon people in the village began questioning the women: like, 'drilling does not cost Rs 54,000; you must have siphoned off the money', and so on. The illiterate women were very disheartened when they heard these allegations. When they mentioned it to Santoshi, she told them that they should present the accounts at a gram sabha.

On August 12, 2005, these women presented the gram sabha their accounts, after which all the people were satisfied. The women took the sarpanch, Manju Pathak, to task. They, along with the villagers, complained that it was well past midday and the school had not yet opened for the day!

Samarthan, which had been working on making people aware and orienting them on such issues, was happy to see that people themselves took the sarpanch to the school, which was still locked and was without a teacher, with only the school helper herding the children under a tree.

The sarpanch, who is from a well-to-do family, picked up her

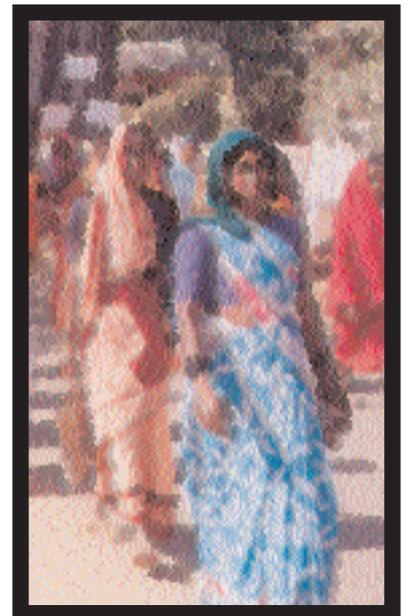
jeep and was at the Collectorate within hours. She brought the situation to the notice of the Collector and the DEO, and action against the teacher was swift.

However, the incident raised more issues. The school was literally a dumping ground for the village. The villagers decided to press their luck and asked that this also be cleaned up. For the last few months, the school has been opening on time and the quality of education has also improved. So have the environs!

While there are numerous villages where the process of social audit was thwarted and could not be carried out as effectively because of illiteracy, social divide and people unwilling to share a common platform with each other on common concerns, this motley group has instead gained immense strength from the women's battle in Bijora.

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ACCORDING TO rules, if people want to call a special gram sabha, they have to submit an application with the signature of 50 villagers. The secretary cleverly removed the last three pages of the application. Since the first page had only 37 names, the Zila Panchayat did not allow the Gram Sabha to be held.

Not Lame Ducks Anymore!

For 45-year-old Shyamlal of village Jangirpur in Sehore district, it has been a tough few weeks. For him, being a landless labourer and supporting a family of 10 is as tough as it gets, without the complications that issues like BPL listing bring with them. Shyamlal says that more than seventy-five percent of people in the village have been left out of the BPL listing. "At present, there are lot of people in the village who have land whose names are on the BPL list," he says wistfully.

"Samarthan give me information that the BPL list was being updated in February, 2006, and that March 4, 2006, was the last day. It took me 10 days to find out what was really happening. Then I took the form from Samarthan and went to the block to get the BPL list. There I found that not only was my name was not on the list, but many people from the village who are very poor, also did not have their names on the list. And each one of us had to forego upto 2-3 days work to fill in our applications".

Despite all the preparations, Shayam Lal was able to submit his form only on the last day - March 4. Nearly 10 people have filed their names afresh from the village.

Panch Govind Singh says that the Sarpanch and others continue to mislead people. 'I have misplaced it', 'they did not give the paper', 'they are saying it is with the Zila panchayat', are some of the well-trodden excuses. Fed up with the the lack of response, they decided to give an application to the Collector and Zila Panchayat. According to rules, if people want to call a special gram sabha, they have to submit an application with the signature of 50 villagers. The secretary cleverly removed the last three

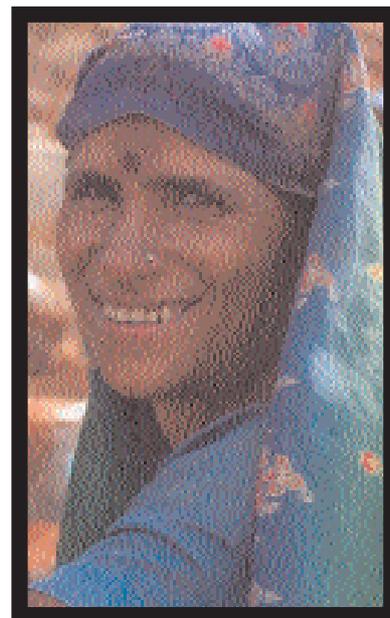
pages of the application. Since the first page had only 37 names, the Zila Panchayat did not allow the Gram Sabha to be held.

The villagers still did not give up. "We had the support of 18 people and they had signed on the document. But the sarpanch and the secretary offered seven people liquor, and thus we unfortunately lost strength. Even in the case of a Rs 15 ration card, they have been misleading people; they do not want to give an account of the concrete road also" says Singh.

People have begun to protest about the problem of basic civic amenities not being addressed. Says Shyam Lal: "See the road inside the village- it is used by people of 10 villages and is still kuccha. This needed to be made. Instead, the road outside the village has been concretised. We have had seven sarpanchs, but this road has not been made. See how filthy it is. I have called the secretary and sarpanch to have a look at the road several times".

Says Samarthan's Harshul Brijesh on the BPL issue " The situation today is such that people living below the poverty have begun demanding auditing of accounts from the panchayat. This has created a flutter in the administration. Because providing information under Right To Information is very different from verbal assurances to people. When you have to provide written information, you cannot be careful enough. Poor people want to access information, but they have the dual disadvantage of both being poor and illiterate. With the system being what it is, they get caught in it. We were come face to face with such situations, where we know the administration is making the situa-

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THERE WERE other questions which people in the village did not understand. For instance, many were asked how much oil do you consume in a month. The general perception was that the Government would provide them the oil, so even people who consumed only one litre of oil in a month said they consumed 12 to 13 litres of oil!

tion difficult for people. We then try and work to a different strategy”.

In Sehore district itself, it has emerged that nearly 25 to 27 per cent people are yet to find their names on the BPL list. However, the problem is Government categorisation. The basis of the BPL list is such that it does not match rural realities. For example, take the question ‘Do you have two pairs of clothes to wear?’. Obviously, today how ever poor a person may be, he or she will not be living naked and is bound to have a set of clothes! These questions have alienated a large number of genuine BPL families.

There were other questions which people in the village did not understand. For instance, many were asked how much oil do you consume in a month. The general perception was that the Government would provide them the oil, so even people who consumed only one litre of oil in a month said they consumed 12 to 13 litres of oil!

Similarly, in the village if somebody owned even an old television, it was assumed that the television was worth Rs 5000 and not Rs 500.

Samarthan capacity building facilitator Santoshi Tiwari says “When people go to give their applications, they are forced to do the panchayat-janpad rounds several times over, are asked to bring their house number, get the Sarpanch’s seal on their application, and so on. The biggest problem is the short span of time that we have been given (from Jan 26, 2006, to March 4, 2006). It took till the middle of February, 2006, to inform people that this notification had been issued and they could file their objections or have their names added to the list. Then it took people a day or two understand where

to file their application. Then they went to the tehsil. When they reached the tehsil, they were told to go back to village and get the sarpanch's signature. Then they returned to the village and got the application validated by the sarpanch. Another two days are wasted doing the rounds between the panchayat and the tehsil. In some cases, the people are sent back and asked to bring the BPL number and house number. Most of it is only to confuse them. Even if people use the RTI, that too takes 30 days and by that time, the deadline will have expired”.

Says Arun Mukate of Samarthan “At the village level, people have tried to get a receipt. But actually, in the entire process, people are just being confused deliberately. They are given assurances that their objections would be registered and their names added. But they are not given any receipt”.

“We had raised this issue at the Zila level through our sarpanch federation, demanding that receipts be given by the officials concerned. At the Zila-level, people are told to submit applications to their secretary. When the person goes to the tehsil he or she is sent back to the village. When he comes back here, the secretary is not ready to listen. In this way, the people are merrily being made to run around for almost five to six days at great personal and financial cost to them. If and when the people are finally able to fill their forms, they are then told they will not be issued a receipt for the same. When they ask why, they are told that there is no provision for a receipt!”.

Janpad Member Atiullah Khan says that 10 people wanted to add their names in the BPL list, and the

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“THIRTY FIVE people have given applications for adding their name to the list. After filing their application, they were never issued a receipt. Now if anybody questions them on documentary evidence that they had filed their application for inclusion in the BPL list, they have nothing to show. There is no receipt..!

information was received by him from the panchayat. 13 names have been added to the list so far. "The list was read out a few days ago, around January 31st, 2006. About 10 - 15 people were present. Three women in the village wanted maternity benefits. The secretary did not give information in the village so I got it from the Janpad office; others got the information from the youth group's information centre.

Another three or four names need to be added to the BPL list. However, it is very interesting that in our village, there has been no case of deleting anybody's name, because officials here are so scared to get into trouble. If they say that somebody's name should be cancelled, won't people beat them up?. If anybody's names goes off the list, they will fight. So applications here are being filed to add names. At least 25 more names should be added to the list from the panchayat".

"Thirty-five people have given applications for adding their name to the list. After filing their application, they were never issued a receipt. Now if anybody questions them on documentary evidence that they had filed their application for inclusion in the BPL list, they have nothing to show. There is no receipt. Despite the fact that we have taken photocopies and asked for receipts for them. The official concerned continues to refuse".

Similarly, Raisen-based Krishak Sahyog Sansthan's (KSS) Lalit Sinha, says "People who really live below the poverty line are still not on the list.

The concept of people discussing issues in the village and coming up with unanimous decisions does not happen. This is mainly because the

sarpanch and the panchayat secretary do not want people to have knowledge about Government schemes".

Sinha points out that in 2003, when training for OBC panchs and women was being organised, the effort was scuttled at the block level. "The forward families in villages made it an issue, saying if people began to talk about their rights, they would stop working in their (forward families') homes. What will we do then, they questioned.

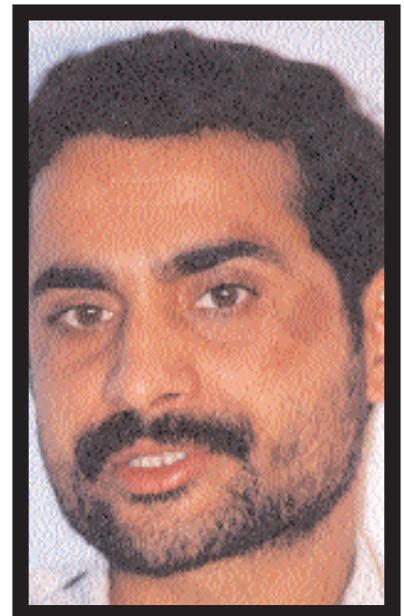
The process for objections and appeals for the BPL survey list of 2002 began earlier this year. According to the government initiative, the list was to be read out in the the mandatory gram sabha of January 26, 2006, and the last date for filing objections and appeals was March 4, 2006.

The Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh State Core Group (SCG) on February 1, 2006, took up the issue of the State Government issuing the order on verifications in the Below Poverty Line (BPL) list and not ensuring sufficient publicity of the process. The issue was raised by SCG members, especially Charles Ameen of CDC, Balaghat, who pointed out that while the Government had issued the order, the lack of proper publicity and a close deadline - March 15 - would, in fact, ensure the death of the entire exercise.

While the aim of the Government order was to publicise and create awareness about the process of finalization and filing of appeals in case of grievances, two important issues raised were:

1. People whose names were

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POOR & ILLITERATE people were taken for a ride of their lives. Many people first approach the panchayat, and getting no response from their panchayat, they approach the tehsildar. The tehsildar would send them back to the panchayat, asking them to get their sarpanch to endorse their application, where they would be asked to furnish the ration card number and other papers.

not on the list were not aware that the Government exercise was on.

2. Since this was the main migration season it was very likely that migrating families would not get a chance to file their objections during the entire exercise.

The SCG decided that a series of activities would be undertaken to address this issue by:

- rewriting Government instructions in an easy and understandable language
- distribution of pamphlets to CSOs
- publications of posters and their distribution
- sponsored radio programmes

All these activities focused on generating information on the verification process at the grassroots level, so as to make it a part of Gram Sabha agenda, empower people to contest the list, deal with the issue of migration, focus on a campaign by voluntary organizations, engage the media - radio, television and the print media - to inform people.

However, the process was easier said than done for those BPL families living in our villages.

Poor and illiterate people were taken for the ride of their lives. Since there is no information available easily in the villages, people have to really hunt for the right information to begin with. Many people first approach the panchayat, and getting no response from their panchayat, they approach the tehsildar. "That is where the to-fro actually begins. The tehsildar, for his part, would

promptly send people back to the panchayat, asking them to get their sarpanch to endorse their application, where they would be asked to furnish the ration card number and other papers, which they may not even possess.

Sinha explains that there was just no time for the running around, because it was the peak agricultural season, and people migrated in search of work. Half the villages were empty. Also, people did not get the necessary information from the panchayat, as it was not read out (to them).

Balaghat-based Community Development Centre's Ameen Charles points out that the Government order of January 26, 2006, had created a difficult situation at the ground level. "People who should have been on the list do not even know that the list is out for verification. If a person wants to contest the list, he has to go to the tehsildar. This means that the person would normally have to give up work for one day to take the matter up with the tehsildar, and many poor people simply do not have the wherewithal to do so". He points out that in one particular Panchayat, the sarpanch has been forwarding all queries on BPL to the tehsildar.

The Gram Sabha which has the power to ratify the list, was unlikely to meet before the scheduled Government deadline of March 14.

Betul-based Pradeepan's Rekha Gujre, while questioning the very premise of the BPL list, says that the timing of the verification, too, was inappropriate. "The period February to April sees the highest migration in our area. Is this the right time to do these verifications? This is the time when people are

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ANWAR JAFRI of Samavesh puts things in perspective. "It is a fact that the process of how this is to be conducted is questionable," he says. He adds that the Government order does not say that people have to go to the tehsildar. "In villages, people are not aware of their rights, and vital information remains with the village secretary. Voluntary organizations will have to step in to make people aware. "

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Samarathan's Yogesh Kumar, while agreeing that the issue was important, said, "The process of verification should not be done in a hurry."

On the format of the BPL list, Yogesh Kumar points out that currently, there is little scope of making any change, but added, "In the next round, when the BPL survey begins, there will have to be a relook into the inadequate parameters that have caused problems during this round." He has also suggested that the verification be done in two rounds.

For an organization that has been actively taking the issue of Right to Information forward, Kumar cautions that trying to use the act in this context to get correct information may not prove to be very useful, because of the 60-day window that any agency/functionary has in the Act to answer queries. "By that time, the process will be over." Keeping in view the imminent deadline, he suggests arrangements for mobilising people to get them to the tehsildar.

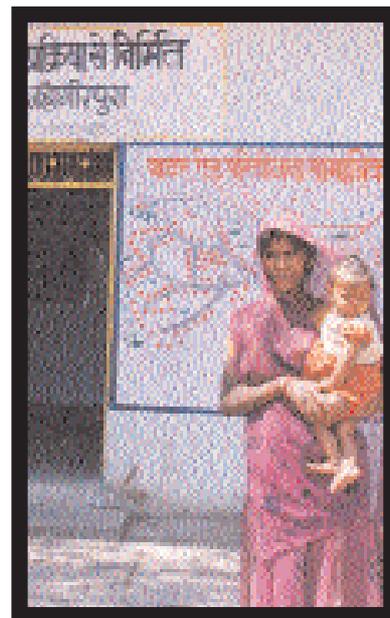
Most affected people do not know who to approach. While District Collectors are responsible for making the agenda on this issue,

when people want to contest the same, they do not know where to go. Pradan's Madhu Khaitan says out that in the prevailing confusion, people were being made to run from the the tehsildar to the zila Panchayat and back for no reason.

What is the connection with NREGA? The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) will be open to all rural households in areas notified by the Central Government. The Objective of the Act is to enhance the livelihood security of the people in rural areas by generating wage employment through works that develop the infrastructure base of that area. The choice of works suggested addresses causes of chronic poverty like drought, deforestation, soil erosion. Effectively implemented, the employment generated under the Act has the potential to transform the geography of poverty.

The entitlement of 100 days of guaranteed employment in a financial year is in terms of a household. And because the BPL card will be significant in deciding individuals or families as beneficiaries, apart from a host of other linkages, the BPL listing issue assumes greater urgency.

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