State initiatives for the empowerment of women of rural communities: experiences from eastern India

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Abstract Women of rural communities in India are handicapped by entrenched caste, class and gender hierarchies, ethnic and religious discrimination as well as unequal distribution of resources. Poor women of rural communities adopt many creative strategies to cope with difficult and highly unequal situations. However, programmes taken up by the government for the empowerment of women of rural communities often fail to recognize these. This is mainly because while developing an analytical framework for examining empowerment, women’s own definitions and understandings are seldom heard. This paper analyzes government-initiated development experiences of rural women in India. It is based on extensive fieldwork by the authors during 1995–2000 in the Burdwan district of West Bengal in eastern India where another research project on rural–urban interactions was ongoing. The field interviews culminated in an intensive group discussion well-attended by women of rural communities. Several cases were thoroughly dissected in this six-hour long focussed group discussion. Our intention is to bring forward women’s own views and comments on government policies and development programmes for women of rural communities in a specific region. These views should be heard by decision-makers before policy formulation. We also highlight the successes and failures of such government programmes as seen by rural women in an exploration of possible alternatives emerging from these views.

Introduction

Despite efforts made by the government over the past few decades, rural poverty in India continues to be significant. It is true that the poverty alleviation/eradication programmes have been strengthened by the government in successive years and in percentage terms poverty levels have
reduced from around 56 percent of India’s population in 1973–1974 to around 34 percent in 1998–1999. The number of rural poor, however, has more or less remained static and is estimated to be about 244 million persons.

Problems of rural women are quite different and more intense than their urban counterparts – lack of access to better education, health and nutrition, water and sanitation, burdensome and time-consuming domestic chores such as fodder and fuel collection, and fewer opportunities of formal employment. The official data from the Census of India do not consider women’s informal work at home or in family plots of agriculture as ‘work’. Still, women in rural communities are found to be working everywhere throughout the day – such is the drudgery and burden of work upon them. As per the latest Census reports of India, there were 90 million women workers in India of which about 78 million (nearly 87 per cent) are employed in rural activities. Most of these jobs are low-paying, low-technology manual jobs with no certainty of long-term employment.

State initiatives to improve the condition of women of rural communities began during the British period; it was recognized that women’s position could be used as an indicator of society’s advancement. James Mill in his famous book *History of British India* (first published in 1826) outlined the official position that ‘the condition of the weaker sex is gradually improved, till they associate on equal terms with the men, and occupy the place of voluntary and useful coadjutors’ (quoted in Forbes, 1998).

Rural development programmes

Rural development (RD) programmes in post-colonial India initially began with a sectoral approach that made women invisible to the planners. As a community and then a spatial approach replaced the sectoral approach in RD programmes, women’s various roles in the economy and society began to be noticed. The ongoing debate on the question of ‘women in development’ (WID) and ‘women and development’ (WAD), however, was little reflected in Indian RD programmes (Mitra, 1997), neither was the intersection between gender, development and environment explored thoroughly to take stock of the changing roles of women in a transforming economy and changing natural resource base (Venkateswaran, 1995). However, long ago, Kandiyoti (1985) had noted that there was a ‘sense of both urgency and optimism concerning the need to assist rural women’. The evidence of increasing levels of female poverty and its implications for community welfare have promoted reassessments of rural women’s access to resources like land and water, to agricultural inputs, credit and services, to education, training and extension, and to institutions and organizations.
Consequently, the government of India has made strong statements favouring greater commitment of resources in critical areas of women’s empowerment. This stands out in contrast to countries like China which could not go further than saying that ‘resources would be gradually increased’ and the government of Bangladesh that stated its intention to ‘make resources available for women in all sectors’ (UNIFEM, 2000). The year 2001 was in fact observed in India as Women’s Empowerment Year indicating the government’s recognition of the need for improved access of women to national resources and for ensuring their rightful place in the mainstream of economic development.

RD planners of India, therefore, no longer assume that women’s ‘position’ would automatically improve, as did the economic prosperity of their husbands, and no longer channel all initiatives to male household heads (John, 1996). However, government-sponsored programmes designed to increase rural women’s economic production outside the home are generally designed by outsiders for rural women, without taking into account their views, attitudes and abilities, and the constraints upon them (Brydon and Chant, 1989; Carr et al., 1997). Such a focus on project implementation without beneficiary involvement in policy formulation is likely to make women’s basic needs peripheral to the main thrust of policies, plans, and programmes (Sen and Grown, 1987).

Increasing appreciation

In India, we have seen an increasing appreciation that in dealing with rural women’s issues, the basic needs approach does not really take into consideration the institutional, legal and political aspects of inequality (Karl, year not mentioned). Menon-Sen and Seeta Prabhu (2001) have studied the budgetary allocations to different schemes earmarked for women, and found that it is impossible to track details of subheads of expenditure or to quantify them. Still, they found as many as 35 schemes that can be classified as women-specific. Of these, as many as 23 are located in the department of women and child development, and critical sectors like agriculture, rural development, urban development, science and technology, and industry – to name only those mentioned in the Beijing +5 document – do not have any explicitly women-specific schemes. Menon-Sen and Seeta Prabhu (2001) identified three types of women-related programmes leading to empowerment:

1. those through financial and technical support, including the Indira Mahila Yojana (IMY), Mahila Samridhhi Yojana (MSY), Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) and Swashakti;
2 socio-economic programmes for special categories of women; and
3 schemes for children’s welfare.

Through these schemes, it is evident that women continue to be identified primarily as mothers, and consequently investing in building their individual capacities as workers, as farmers, as professionals – comes low on the list of priorities. Again, there is an overt insensitivity towards women’s education or their roles in spreading education. Many of the programmes reflect a basic insensitivity to women’s priorities and problems as seen through their own experience in ‘doing’ government schemes. In dealing with women of a rural community, the household or family cannot be taken as the basic unit of analysis (DasGupta, Chen and Krishnan, 1998). Evaluation of government programmes is usually undertaken on the basis of monetary investment-return, and not improvements in the social position of women in the rural society (Rodda, 1991). Above all, many of the programmes still adopt an approach that puts all localities into the same category. Women tend to shy away from the programmes designed for their economic betterment which can result, for example, in government schemes providing assistance for goat-rearing in a low-lying wetland region with little grassland for the goat to feed upon.

Workshop issues
An informal, interactive workshop, held in Burdwan in August, 1999, undertaken on behalf of Sachetana, a non-governmental organization working for women’s empowerment in the metropolitan city of Calcutta with financial support provided partially by UNIFEM (indirectly through Sachetana) discussed these issues. Topmost on our agenda was the evaluation by rural women of successes and failures of the various government schemes designed to empower them. We also analyzed the success of the group approach in woman and development programmes adopted recently by the Indian government. The workshop was attended by 49 women from different villages of Burdwan district of the state of West Bengal (in eastern India), some officials of the District Rural Development Authority (DRDA), local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), members of women’s organizations (mahila samitis), activists, village-based workers of the literacy programme of the District Resource Unit (DRU), and university teachers and research scholars.

During the six-hour long discussion, focus often hovered on three major issues concerning women in rural communities in eastern India: extension of health, literacy, and above all self-employment/economic opportunities. Other problem areas like social opportunities and status, domestic violence and political participation also figured in the discussions. In this paper, we
have not attempted to evaluate the ‘implementation’ aspect of government programmes; the focus is on conceptualization of the schemes and women’s perceptions about them.

**Paper overview**

This paper intends to provide a brief overview of the main outlines of discussions that emerged from the workshop keeping in mind our previous research on the area. We have also used information collected from government reports and interviews made during field surveys in the region. We expect to examine women’s own understanding and evaluation of rural women’s development (WD) programmes taken up by the various government agencies through this report. The methodology of focussed group discussion adopted by us enabled rural women to respond and interact freely with each other and among various sections of participants, voicing their opinions and sharing experience in a less inhibitory environment. The participants were chosen to reflect a wide variety of women’s situations – women who have received DRDA assistant, women *preraks* (agent) and *mukhya-preraks* (chief agent) of DRU as they act as key sources of information in villages, Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) staff, voluntary workers and NGO beneficiaries, those who received DRDA assistant but faced problems in other spheres and could not sustain their projects, women from extremely poor families who have not even heard about government programmes at all, women who tried to obtain government assistance but failed due to one reason or the other, women *panchayat*¹ (local village council) members and so on.

**Burdwan: specificities of rural localities**

Burdwan district, located in the middle of a vast agricultural region, has always received special priority in government-initiated RD schemes in post-colonial India. This is partly due to its rich agricultural heritage (Guha and Mitra, 1956), partly due to its fascinating diversity of cultural and geographical conditions (see Risley, 1891; Paterson, 1910 for colonial

¹ The *panchayats* provide a three-tier system – at village, block and district levels – of democratic institutions of local governance for rural areas of India (Alagh, 1994). West Bengal was a comparatively late-starter in adopting village *panchayats*. The West Bengal *Panchayat* Act was passed in 1956 but its serious implementation did not begin until 1977 when a coalition of leftist political parties dominated by the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPIM), came to power in the state. It has been noted (Mukherjee, 1994) that the 1978 *panchayat* elections brought into power representatives from small and marginal farmers (by definition those owning less than five acres of land) and has carved out a pattern of political organization in West Bengal rare in India. It has been observed (Lieten, 1996) that poor peasants and agricultural labourers have increasingly occupied the public space in West Bengal through their effective political participation.
accounts of the peoples and land of Burdwan), immense variety of natural resources (Chaudhuri, 1994), and the locational advantages relative to metropolitan Calcutta. Above all, it has always had a thriving peasantry very much involved in local and regional issues; consequently left parties in the district initiated several krishak (peasant) movements as early as the 1950s. Finally, the various land reforms including the Operation barga\(^2\) were rather more successful in the district than anywhere else in the state of West Bengal (see Sanyal, Biswas and Bardhan, 1998 for a detailed analysis of the impacts of such reforms). Burdwan has been a recipient of almost all major modernization programmes of post-colonial India; it featured prominently as one of the sixteen Intensive Agricultural District Programme (IADP) districts in India in 1962, as well as received a steel plant under the Second Five Year plan (1956–1960).

East–West dichotomy
As a result, the district has undergone tremendous changes in its socio-economic and environmental aspects since then. Two major Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) reservoirs lie at the two western ends of this ‘hammer-shaped’ district; in addition, there is a barrage on the Damodar, and the Left Bank Main Canal of the DVC flowing through the southern half of the eastern part of the district has had a major impact on its rural economy. Besides, it is the district where tubewell irrigation was adopted earlier and more intensively than in other districts of this part of India (Lahiri, 1985).

There is a notable east–west dichotomy; the western end is an extension of the Chotanagpur plateau fringe with some of the oldest and deepest collieries of India, and their associated environmental problems (Lahiri-Dutt, 1999). There are still a few patches of sal forest left as relics of the former jungle mahal in between the coal-mining-industrial-urban belt in the west and the agricultural tract of the east. There are variations within this tract too; whereas the central parts have benefited from the canal-tubewell-HYV seeds-chemical fertilizers technology package, the far eastern and south-eastern ends form waterlogged, low-lying areas with low accessibility.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the DRDA official (Assistant Project Officer, WD) described Burdwan at the beginning of our discussions as ‘an easier district to work in as compared to other districts of West Bengal’. Possibly
the statement can be translated as implying that women are comparatively better off in rural Burdwan than elsewhere in the state. It is also possible that she meant to say that a lower level government initiative is required in Burdwan as compared to other places in rural India for WAD schemes. In any case, it is good to begin with the statement and examine this official perception in the light of women’s own experiences.

Participation in local movements
The statement may also have some political overtones: the Panchayati Raj (PR) system is well-entrenched in the district which is well-known as a left-bastion. The third generation of panchayats introduced through the seventy-third constitutional amendment provides for reservation of seats for women and ‘other weaker sections’ such as scheduled (lower, as identified by the Indian Constitution) castes and scheduled tribes for election to local bodies. At present West Bengal has 24,799 women elected to the different tiers of the panchayat system. Of them, eight are office bearers of the Zilla Parishads (District Councils), eighty-two of the panchayat samitis, and 196 of the gram panchayats (village level bodies). In terms of percentage, women constitute more than 36 per cent of all the elected representatives (GOWB, year not mentioned). There is no detailed study on their social background, but one micro-study conducted by the State Institute of Panchayats in Burdwan shows that a good number of women have either the experience of participating in local movements or in the literacy campaigns. If the term ‘empowerment’ is used in a rather restricted way, then the PR has somewhat succeeded in empowering rural women by ensuring their participation in the local institutions. Such ‘protected representation’ in local bodies, it is hoped (Jha, 1999), will correct the distortions in the democratic processes that are affected by the logic of a structured society. Burdwan being a spearhead of panchayat movement, we also hope that the elected rural women will act as key figures in operationalizing government development programmes for women. How far this hope has materialized now remains to be tested.

Disadvantage and discrimination
Rural women in Burdwan are characterized by lower levels of literacy, lower purchasing power, poorer health status, and lower participation in the formal employment-generation sector. However, this is a rather broad characterization as there is a notable heterogeneity among the women living in rural areas of Burdwan, and that is not only attributable to the diversity of ethnic groupings of Radh Bengal (Peterson, 1910) of which the region is a part. Gender disparity and discrimination are pervasive in rural areas of India. In villages of Burdwan too, women are disadvantaged both at home
and in society. The large majority of women in rural Burdwan work long hours, contributing substantially to the viability of the household economy and the welfare of the family. Women have little or no control over household assets or means of production even when these are owned by them in a formal sense. Their control over incomes they may earn and moneys they may borrow is also often tenuous. Dowry continues to remain a compulsory affair in all castes and income classes of the society. Crimes against women such as dowry-related tortures and killing, as well as rapes of women, are widespread. Legal redress against the perpetrators of these crimes is not usually available to the affected women or their parents/families because of their severe economic and social disadvantages, protection of the criminals by social and political godfathers, and corruption in the administrative and legal systems. Illiteracy is much more pronounced among women than men. Women are also disadvantaged or discriminated against in the labour market, the extent of which varies from occupation to occupation. In general, poorer women in rural Burdwan have lesser access to social services, and lower security to life and property. Yet, there are some women who have been able to overcome these immense obstacles and emerged as key agents in various government programmes such as literacy and health extension. In the panchayats too, women members have often been notably successful in performing their duties. Unequal power relations between women of different castes, races, classes and political alliances produce myriad categories of rural women, and force us to turn following Gibson-Graham (1995) eventually to women’s subjective experiences of ‘development programmes’ initiated by the government.

**DRDA and DRU activities in Burdwan**

The absence of a gender perspective in the rural development process in India began to be noted by feminist scholars in the 1970s (Desai, 1986; Desai and Krishnaraj, 1987). Especially the economic dimensions of women’s deteriorating circumstances, ‘the marginalization and impoverishment of the majority of women within the transforming economy’ (Agnihotri and Mazumdar, 1995) brought the focus back on to the exclusion of the majority of rural women from the promises to progress (John, 1996), modernization and development.

*Community development programmes*

Rural community development programmes adopted by the Government of India had ascribed a supplementary place to women till the 1970s. A gender approach was first adopted when Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) was introduced by the year of
1982–1983 as a pilot project in 50 districts of India. This programme was
designed towards economic self-sufficiency by inculcating the idea of
symbiotic professionalism and accountability among the deserving
women. Economic empowerment of poor women was the main objective
of this programme. The basic objective of DWCRA was the socioeconomic
upliftment of backward women based on the philosophy of collective
operation.

In West Bengal the scheme was first introduced by the year 1983–1984 in
the backward, adivasi (tribal)-dominated marginal and dry district of
Purulia. However, the more prosperous Burdwan received its first DWCRA
scheme as late as 1991–1992. In the initial stage only 10 rural blocks of
the district were arbitrarily selected to extend this scheme. Since the DWCRA
programme aims at improving the quality of life of women of families below
the poverty line, it involved not only economic activities, but also social
activities like literacy, childcare, immunization. During 1997–1998, twenty-
four blocks of the district were covered under the programme. In the last
count, Burdwan had about 317 groups in the district out of which ninety-
nine have become already defunct (DRD Cell, 2000).

Activities of the functioning DWCRA groups range from paddy husking,
cattle rearing to tailoring, embroidery, pottery, bag making, etc. According
to the nature of activities the groups can be divided in the following
categories – agro-based, trading and provision of services of various sorts,
production-oriented, crafts, and mixed groups which have taken up more
than one activity. The groups in general comprise ten to fifteen women
members coming mostly from poor agricultural communities. Some of the
blocks, such as Ausgram II and Jamalpur, have a sizeable involvement of
women of Muslim families. In almost all the cases, the group leader is the
only executive and decision-maker. In some cases she is assisted by the
assistant leader.

The basic objectives of this programme can be outlined as follows:

• To help organize poor rural women below the poverty line to solve
the problems faced by women and children in respect to the societal
norms, economic handicaps, low level of basic health and nutrition,
and lack of education.
• To help make rural women aware of the society they live in with the
hope that this awareness will lead to a desire to change their con-
dition and hence agency (forming the bases for action).
• To improve the economic condition of women of rural communities
by enhancing their various work skills and by extending economic
help for self employment;
• To make them aware of all the existing development schemes, to
take advantage of those schemes, and to enable them to participate actively at every level of DWCRA implementation.

The DWCRA groups are in a quasi-united state where fund allotment and responsibility of repayment is group specific while the utilization of fund is most often individual-specific and independent, operating through intra-group loan repayment norms. In most cases group members adhere to the practice of saving Rs 10–20/person/month under the small savings scheme. The formulation of this initial capital is critical for the group as it determines the availability and level of government funding assistance. Capital formation and creation of a revolving fund by a self-help group, therefore, is the first pre-requisite for the formalization of a DWCRA team.

In April, 1999, the Government of India put all RD schemes under an umbrella programme called the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana (called SGSY henceforth). SGSY was introduced to lay more emphasis on Self-Help Groups (SHG) identified as ‘a collection of rural poor who have volunteered to organize themselves into a group for improving the standard of living of the members’ (GOI, 1999). Though it puts more emphasis on the development of infrastructure and marketing support to swarojgaris (self-employed), it eliminates the special attention that DWCRA gave to rural women.

Other relevant programmes related to the development of rural women living below the poverty line are health related such as the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) have also progressed significantly in different parts of the district.

Dru and women literacy workers

The District Resource Unit (DRU) of Burdwan began to function in 1992 after the first phase of the literacy campaign. Burdwan’s case was considered to be ‘successful’ with 82.2 per cent of illiterates achieving National Literacy Mission (NLM) standards of literacy (which involves learning the basics of the three ‘R’s). In the post-literacy phases I and II were more or less effectively carried on in the district – does not make sense. Thereafter, the concept of having permanent literacy centres at villages in the form of Jana Siksha Nilayam (JSN) later renamed as Continuing Education Centre (CEC) was introduced. The CECs were set up with sports facilities, libraries and cultural/recreational arrangements. At present there are some 1700 general CECs and 250 nodal CECs in the district run respectively by preraks and mukhya preraks against a monthly allowance of Rs 300 and 700 per month. The district administration expects the CECs to play a vital role in organizing self-help groups in villages.
Women literacy workers of DRU can act as key resource persons in creating greater awareness of government programmes for rural women. Her aspirations change as the outside world opens up in front of a woman and she begins to get a sense of what is going on around the world beyond the domain of the family where they have a fixed gender role.

Take Aloka’s story for example. Aloka, a resident of Natu village, had passed class VIII when her father passed away. That was the end of her formal education and she was confined to the mud walls of her home for a few years, assisting her mother in daily chores. However, through a family relative she heard of the literacy programme and became a prerak for her own village area. She has been at this work for a couple of years when she came to know of DRDA funding schemes. As she had become quite well known in her community, she wanted to take up some more work; her argument was simple enough: ‘Now I know more people than I did when I used to stay at home. Now I want to be involved with DWCRA and ICDS schemes as well because I have built up my own contacts. I have access to families and have the trust of women of these families, but the government rules are such that one person can have only one role.’ Naturally she feels frustrated about the small payment she gets from DRU as a prerak.

Literacy workers have the potential to ensure that development can be made to work for whom it is intended. Also, they have the ability to act as intermediaries between the State and rural women by communicating to the State the real needs of these women. The human agency of women like Aloka can be put to fullest use with a little bit of innovative thinking instead of adhering strictly to rules that bypass the social reality of difficulty of building agency among women in rural India. Unfortunately, as a result, the government initiated programmes fail to utilize the potential of women workers like those of the DRU because they do not recognize the multiple roles a more aware woman can play in rural community life.

Main issues concerning women

The significant issues regarding state-initiated programmes and their effectiveness that came up during the course of our field visits and discussions were as follows:

1. Availability of Information
Do women have easy access to information on the various projects of the government with respect to their health, education, economic improvement and social benefits? If not, why not? Who has the information and who has not?
Arati Hembram of Jamalpur village panchayat said that this was the first time she heard of these government schemes for women’s development. Jamalpur itself is a comparatively inaccessible area, a swampy land enclosed by rivers and their embankments, and submerged in flood water for months at a stretch during the monsoon rains. Arati noted that the panchayat or block office staff neither volunteer information nor offer the schemes to women of very poor, often scheduled caste or adivasi women.

Her complaints were echoed in the words of the mukhya prerak of Adivasipara in the Dangapara village of Burdwan-I block. She has been running the literacy centre in the village since 1989, and has formed a group of about 40 women. However, she does not know in which bank to put in the money saved by the women and how, and feels that lack of advice and help in this regard is preventing her from improving her economic situation. Clearly even the women working in one government programme do not have information on other programmes.

A panchayat representative from Dainhat area noted that it is difficult to involve Muslim women in any activity outside the home. Even the children help parents in work throughout the day and hence cannot attend school for children. Therefore, she has opened a night school for children. However, the government response was not enthusiastic about understanding the specific problems of the community and she was discouraged to keep the school open at night. Since their families prevent Muslim women from attending school, she took up the initiative to visit their homes and teach them how to read and write. She delivers the books at home to the Muslim women. Government officials, however, do not acknowledge such innovative initiatives and dissuade her from adopting flexible programmes to suit her specific target group.

Lack of access to information is also due to non-allegiance to political parties in power at the village panchayat level. This happens to those women who have no political status as well as to those who have a political designation but belong to another party. An elected panchayat member of Siali village complained that her attempts to introduce WD schemes of DRDA in her village were thwarted by influential male members of the dominant party.

Health care was another important area on which readily available information was inadequate, and several participants raised this issue. Gender inequalities within the family, differences in economic roles and power, son preference, and cultural traditions – all restrict women’s autonomy and physical mobility. Kanchan is a scheduled caste woman with three married daughters, two unmarried sons and three grandchildren. Aged about 46 years, Kanchan has never heard of the government schemes providing care for pregnant mothers or of the Rs 500 grant for the birth of a
girl child. Her village does not have a metalled access road or any primary health centre.

The villages in the trans-Damodar area of Burdwan – in blocks such as khandaghosh, Raina-I, Raina-II, Jamalpur are especially handicapped by comparatively poor accessibility in the physical sense (Samanta and Lahiri-Dutt, 1996). Women from the villages in this southern part of the Damodar repeatedly complained that they have lesser access to government’s various schemes for WD. This area has traditionally been the nikashi (drainage) area for the Damodar’s monsoon overspill, and the embankment is lower and weaker along the southern bank of Damodar. The villages have a higher concentration of scheduled castes compared to other villages of the eastern agricultural tract, they are flood-prone and low-lying/waterlogged. An NGO – Dipan Yuba Gosthi – has set up a few crèches for women agricultural labourers as well as initiated a literacy programme. It used to run entirely on local financial resources till a couple of years ago they began to receive occasional grants from the UNICEF and a German philanthropic organization. As a result, they now have somewhat stronger presence in the region now. Yet, their location is close to Burdwan town, indicating that the urban bias still dominates.

2. Suitability of the Programmes to Women’s Need
Do the various programmes of the government appreciate the diversity of women’s needs and differentiate the requirements as per the specific, local, geographical, or social conditions? Do the mandatory approaches such as the inclusion of one’s name in the Below Poverty Level listing or the group approach for women really stand the test of experience?

Let us consider what the members of Tilakdanga Adivasi Mahila Samity had to say of their experience. The DRDA considers this initiative as one of their ‘success stories’. A DRDA employee living in the region – the ‘madam’ in this case – was responsible for bringing this group of women together. Tilakdanga is deep inside jungle mahal – 5 kilometres from the nearest motorable road and surrounded by sal forests. Since 1996, a group of fifteen women began to save small amounts of cash. When the amount reached Rs 3000, ‘madam’ organized to open a bank account for them, and DRDA consolidated it in a revolving fund. Only two women in this adivasi group are literate, and the main occupation of this group was daily wage worker in agricultural fields some distance away. Some of them also sewed sal leaves to make plates and bowls. Now this group has fifteen goats under joint supervision.

We explored further into the case history of the group. Who selected the type of activity? Since adivasi women traditionally rear pigs and poultry, they wanted to stick to their time-tested and proven skills. However, the DRDA officials felt that the village is relatively inaccessible and the
reproduction rate of pigs is so high that the women should preferably rear go... from Burdwan went to select the breed. Such inter... of government officials takes much of the decision-making power away from the group members. Though the group has survived for three years, they are yet to begin making a profit – a fact that can be taken as an indicator of the relative lack of ‘success’ of DWCRA groups.

The literacy workers voiced similar opinions too. In Burdwan, they complained, a significant reason for increasing school dropouts is the irregularity of teachers. However, since there is a significant difference between the pay scales of the teachers in formal schools and those teaching in literacy centres/CECs, the women literacy workers emphasized their role as opinion leaders in villages. A mukhya prerak of Susunia village panchayat of Monteswar block stressed that she feels she has a ‘social duty’ and hence has taken several personal initiatives such as visiting the homes of dropout children to talk to them, and re-enrolling them in formal schools.

A fact noted by the literacy workers of adivasi areas was the tremendous enthusiasm among women to take advantage of literacy centres. Many of these centres have introduced the culture of adopting adivasi traditions of song and dance. Several such teams have been formed and they have even received prizes at the competitions held at the district levels.

Rekha, a prerak noted that it is not true that the NLM has been a total failure, as it is commonly perceived to be. She emphasized that instead of making sweeping statements, the critics must try to understand that the general awareness level about the need for education has gone up significantly as an indirect consequence of NLM. The groundwork has been done as a result. Even if the mothers themselves cannot attend the literacy centres, they have realized the importance of sending small children to school. Mothers who were previously unenthusiastic about sending their children to school now take the initiative on children’s education. Overall health awareness has improved too, as evident from the mothers taking initiatives to reach children to primary health centres for vaccination. She mentioned the case of a bagdi family where the husband is mostly confined to the home because of excessive alcoholism. The wife, mother of three with one handicapped among them, has sent the eldest daughter out to a free residential school for education. Nasreen noted that even Muslim mothers following the purdah are now eager to get some education for their children. For girls a little bit of education improves the chances of getting a better groom, Nasreen felt. However, whether investments in women’s education and health have expanded their choices in labour markets and other income generating activities remains to be tested.

Many of the problems noted by women as obstacles are huge and sometimes seem insurmountable. Some of these are inherent in the nature of the
place – such as accessibility. Tilakdanga adivasi mahila group for example has a problem of marketing their product because of its remoteness. In fact there are quite large rural patches, besides the jungle mahal, that are poorly served by roads of any kind. Then there are roads that become inaccessible during the rainy season. When the DRDA official selects a village for initiation of groups, it is usually located on a motorable road accessible by government jeeps. In this way, villages located in remotest parts stay outside of the purview of WD programmes. Besides such logistical problems, women face usual gender-specific difficulties at different levels such as political intervention or lack of gender sensitivity among panchayat members at the community level, and active discouragement from male members at the family level. For example, local panchayats often discourage or snuff out the efforts of women’s groups belonging to other parties. The resistance often assumes the most serious proportion at the family level: husbands prevent women from going out of the home, use domestic quarrels, violence and other forms of intimidating behaviour, and try to use up the savings of women.

3. Perception of women’s Problems

Why, in spite of the government programmes, has the status of women remained low in rural Burdwan? The journey towards equality for women is imagined to be consecutive to rural development, but why is it so that the creativity and potential of women have remained relatively untapped at a formal level in rural India? The government’s investments in RD, literacy and health over several decades should have increased the social and economic opportunities of poorer women living in rural areas. Of the 99 defunct DWCRA groups cited in the report by DRDA, no specific reason was given for the closure of as many as thirty-five, whereas marketing or technological problems were given as causes. Upon enquiry, we found that in most of these cases local specificities – either of geography, community, or individual personalities were ignored while choosing the activity of the group. As it happened, the team leader comes from a background of a little better literacy than the other members of the group. This adds two negative dimensions to such teams – first is the obvious problem of the burden of keeping accounts falling on her, a task she may be ill-equipped to perform. The second is the more subtle problem of her being a leader among equals, that goes entirely against the very concept of ‘the group’ as the recipient of official support. The leader may develop further her own contacts with local political leaders and explore avenues to improve extra income sources for herself and family members. Sometimes, as it was reported in a few cases, even the husband of the team leader may become the virtual leader. Clearly, the problems on ground are different from those as perceived by government officials. In Burdwan, if we recollect here the DRDA (WD) officer’s
comment, the rural situation is quite different than the rest of the state (leading probably to intense academic scrutiny of the area’s economy by a significant number of scholars; for example see Harriss, 1993; Banerjee and Ghatak, 1995; Sanyal, Biswas and Bardhan, 1998; Gazdar and Sengupta, 1999; Sen and Sengupta, 1999; for a better understanding of the issues involved).

We found several key issues identified by women that are commonly neglected by the government agency in formulating policy. These gap areas became evident during our group meetings – both in the field and at the final meeting – compelling us to sit down and write about them. The following section attempts to provide an overview.

**Summary of observations**

Clearly, one primary reason for the lack-lustre performance of government schemes is that women are ‘targets’ of action in the various schemes devised at the top by some urban-based experts. Women’s own voices are rarely heard; instead quantitative data are interrogated by government officials whose thought processes give priority to factors different than empowerment. The problem with ‘self-help’ schemes for women is the way they problematize the ‘self’, mostly in the mould of the bureaucrat’s own image rather than the real woman for whom they are made. Such officials think in terms of feasibility of a particular activity and the organization of the activity is taught to the participants of a group. Women are thus not decision-makers and are not able to play a significant role in devising projects suitable to their needs as they should ideally do (Pryke, 1991). Similar opinions were voiced by women throughout our investigations. The very fact of ‘determining’ by government officials for women what kind of activities to indulge in, leads invariably to a situation in which the existing power structures of the society are replicated.

Consequently, programmes designed for women of rural communities do not take into account the small amount of time they have at home at their disposal. Seeing all rural women as a homogeneous mass in terms of economic levels, access to services, political empowerment, literacy, and initiative, the government programmes assume that women of rural communities are underemployed and, therefore, they had adequate time to take part in formal networking for enterprise-building. The essence of self-help groups is networking; but in trying to emphasize the positive role such groups can play in women’s empowerment, the policies ignore individual entrepreneurship. The example of one case will be pertinent here. Bela had worked in the fields for a few years to save some money. She wanted a matching loan from the DRDA official who had to refuse her because the DWCRA
recognized only groups and not individuals. The same was true of DRU workers who expected their leadership to be fruitful and flourish in other income-generating activities, but are thwarted by the government officials. This defeated the very purpose of such government schemes; when a woman creates a new identity for herself she might want to develop it further beyond the narrow confines set a priori by official norms. Over-emphasis on group formation and networking, emulating the example of poorer communities elsewhere in Bangladesh or in Africa, fails to recognize the various constraints rural poor women in India may operate within. As a result, the programmes reach only a limited audience – mainly those better-off farming households where the male members sometimes persuade their women to take advantage of government schemes to add to the family income.

Above all, the state assumes that women panchayat members are to act as leaders in propagating government schemes for women, but in reality they often are less than willing to carry out the task of information-provider or support-giver, let alone mobilizer of facilitator of others’ employment and organization. Many factors play roles in information dissemination to rural women about a helpful scheme; caste and political allegiance as well as subtle class differences keep inhibiting the free flow of government information from women panchayat members towards the women of families below the poverty line.

Finally, government programmes seem to be influenced by the success of one model of RD programmes. For example, the latest SGSY, described as ‘a holistic programme covering all aspects of self-employment’ maintains that women (and men) must form groups to be entitled for government loans. However, the success of groups in micro-enterprise projects elsewhere (Beaumont, Singh and Ramachandran, 1992; Creevey, 1996) cannot ensure their success in the context of India or Burdwan for that matter. Such universalizing principles deny localities and communities of their specific characteristics and needs. The woman as an individual in rural society must be viewed as a free actor making her own decisions. The implied collectivity envisioned by SGSY does not leave space for individual human’s agency as a significant factor in determining women’s efforts. The interconnectedness of women’s multiple occupations and multiple life roles in their livelihood strategies are clearly ignored in this approach.

As some of the projects begin to impact on the role of some of the women by giving them new responsibilities and authority, a sense of getting satisfaction of ‘completing a job’ successfully builds up. This is especially true of the grassroots level extension workers such as those working for ICDS or DRU. Quite naturally, they expect to be given more of such jobs, which they feel they can now perform better through their developed extra-household
forms of networks. Government policies must recognize and respect the new identities women build up and new spaces they create for themselves in the community through their work efforts and help to enhance them.

References

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