

Women's Empowerment and Increased Food Security through increased Access to Land and Water: An Experience from Jharkhand, India

- Saswati Roy Patnaik (Swadhina, India)
- Srichandra Venkataramanan (Swadhina, India)

1)Preface:

The paper highlights the issue of Land and Water Governance based on practical, field-based experience of Swadhina – a women's organisation working for the rights of grass-root women for nearly three decades. Here the field experience of Swadhina in rural areas of East Singbhum district of Jharkhand very effectively illustrates the need to have a people-based system in order to magnify the impact of land and water governance. The simple steps taken by Swadhina to empower women and ensure food security through increased access to land and water, actually helped the entire community experience positive development coupled with enhanced access to their rights. It is also a powerful example to demonstrate how women can actually be active decision-makers and take up meaningful role in land and water governance.

2)The State of Jharkhand : A Backdrop

Jharkhand was a new state of India, formed in the year 2000 to support the rights of the indigenous people to have a separate state for themselves. It is a State of immense contrasts. The state of Jharkhand is home to a large number of poorest population of the country even though the state is one of the richest areas in the country in terms of minerals and natural resources. Almost 39% of people in Jharkhand are registered under the poverty head-count according to 2009-10 data (<http://www.in.undp.org>) and according to a Planning Commission presentation of 2012-13, the *state 'falls short of the national average in almost all the development indicators'*. The report also indicates that out of total 6.9 million households, about 3.5 million families live Below the Poverty Line (<http://planningcommission.nic.in>).

On the other hand, Jharkhand is famous for its rich mineral resources ranging from Iron ore, Coal, Copper ore, Mica, Bauxite, Fire clay, Graphite, Kyanite, Sillimanite, Lime stone, to Uranium and is the leading producer of mineral wealth in the country (www.jharkhand.gov.in/minerals).

Vast areas of Jharkhand are actually forest land and the total recorded forest area of the state is 23,605 sq. km which is 29.61% of the geographical area of the state, which is amongst the highest in India (www.jharkhand.gov.in/about-forest-department).

Agriculture is the sole economic activity of rural population of the area. Compared to the rapid industrial growth, agriculture has remained neglected in the state. The villagers depend on rain-fed mono crop. Much of the land is rocky and uncultivable. The reddish soil cannot retain moisture and is very difficult to plough and sow. The area is also drought prone and marked by erratic rainfall. Hence the agricultural output is also very low and the stock of grains lasts only a few months. Rest of the year, the indigenous communities (tribal Adivasis) buy or borrow paddy at a high price. Most of them survive as migrant labours.

This newly born state was carved out of the state of Bihar in the year 2000 with the sole purpose of ensuring development of the indigenous people. But in reality that did not happen. The indigenous communities continue to live in abject poverty. They have been worst hit by

the massive exploitation of the natural resources rampant in the state. Loss of land to the mines and industries has gone hand in hand with impoverishment, loss of identity and erosion of self-esteem. The rapid industrial growth has benefitted solely a very small section of the urban based educated immigrant population. Illiteracy and ignorance are the lifelong companions of the indigenous people. Thus they are reduced to the status of easily replaceable unskilled labourers. Starvation and malnutrition are widespread.

Though the state was formed with great fan-fare the real challenges came in the forefront after the formation of the state. While the people of Jharkhand were primarily agriculturists, the support for agriculture was nil – water facilities were poor, access to upgraded and modern agriculture-based knowledge was limited and the overall produce from the rugged land was very low.

3) Swadhina's Intervention:

With request from the local communities, Swadhina began working in the areas since year 2000. The basic idea was to :

- 1) Uphold the importance of agro-based economy with specific focus on food security
- 2) Prevent the trend of migration of the local people as cheap labourers to the urban cities and neighbouring areas.
- 3) And to focus women as the core actors of the economic and social activities.

Thus our approach was to address the issue of food security with a strong emphasis on women's empowerment through increased access to land and water.

Three key areas identified were –

- 1) Provision of Water for irrigation through micro-watershed creation
- 2) Increased Access to land and land based activities
- 3) Formation of village based women's groups for strong local level institution building for planning, implementation, sustenance of the above two areas.

4)The Process:

Swadhina began with the **formation of village based Women's Committees**. They met once in a month or whenever required. They were developed as decision making bodies on local issues. Supervision of all activities was also done by them.

This was followed by **Identification of Issues**: With the support of local women's group and local communities the core areas were identified which required a joint intervention of the people, the local government and facilitators like Swadhina. Three core challenge areas were identified in the process for intervention:

- Water
- Land
- Position of Women

Based on the identification of Issues and related challenges, several **Follow-up Actions** were undertaken.

5) Water: Dependence and lack of it

The basic characteristic of Jharkhand has always been antagonistic situations. On one hand Jharkhand is almost entirely dependent on rainfall for its irrigation facilities but the fact is that the pattern of rainfall is extremely erratic. Total irrigated area of Jharkhand is only 12.7% of the net sown area (<http://planningcommission.nic.in>). The state has seen several periods of droughts in recent years. And the harsh reality is that there hasn't been much initiatives on the part of the government to provide for supportive irrigational facilities, especially to the remote rural regions.

So the basic idea was to:

- * Establish feasible small irrigation option which will also compliment micro-watershed ion.
- * Improve water-retention capacities of the soil and improve arable quality.
- * Make the existent water-bodies re-usable
- * Highlight water as an important natural resource – to be in control of the local communities.

The action to ensure water included not just constructing or reorganising existent water bodies but also improve the overall water-holding capacity of the area. Keeping this in mind, the following activities were undertaken:

- * Construction of nearly 400 Irrigation Boxes to store the rain water, as well arrest run-off.
- * De-siltation of about 200 existing old water-tanks to increase their water retention capacity.
- * Increase green cover by encouraging plantation of various trees to arrest the rain-water run-off, thereby preventing soil erosion.
- * Encourage water-sharing and promote community-based irrigation facilities through water-pump facilities operated and maintained by the local Women's Group.

Every activity that was undertaken had dual benefits. For instance, what was interesting about the entire process of Irrigation Box construction or Tank Desiltation was that the processes were not implemented through external sources but with the active support and participation of the people themselves. The construction of the Irrigation Box, the desiltation of the tanks were done through labour support of the people themselves. This actually helped build a sense of responsibility and ownership over the water resources.

The women's committee members encouraged the families to plant forest trees surrounding the water bodies and in the nearby areas. So trees providing woods as well as fruit trees were planted extensively. This provided additional nutritional benefit. Many families which planted fruit trees could have access to nutritious fruits in their vicinity.

Similarly the water pumps that were provided to the women's committees not just helped immensely in water-sharing among all the villagers but also provided token support for the women's committees for the sustainability. The women's committees provided the water-pumps to the users for a token sum of money which was saved in the account of the women's committees. In a similar manner the women committees were also helped to

procure manually operated paddy-winning machine so that they could act on comprehensive manner, beyond working as water-committees.

6) Land: Rugged Challenges

Even though an agro-based economy, the land of the region is extremely rugged and dry. Total sown area is only 28% of the entire geographical area of the state due to uneven terrain (<http://planningcommission.nic.in>). There are large tracts of unusable, unarable fallow land.

Moreover the lack of upgraded knowledge about soil-management is also a serious handicap. Though the people of the rural regions do have profound knowledge about agriculture, they hardly have any idea about the way the fallow land can be made usable, less knowledge on agriculture also meant usage of limited type of seeds and limited use of land. But with increased influence of external sources result in a negative trend of an increased tendency of the people to resort to chemical fertilizers and pesticides for short-term gain.

Thus the primary task was to bring unused land under use and for that it was necessary to recondition the land and make them usable. Also it was important to ensure that the land usage is maximum and for that it was important to try out different varieties of vegetables or crops that are suitable for the region – breaking the trend of a mono-crop system and growing of only a handful variety of vegetables.

For that the following activities were undertaken:

- * About 410 Acres of non-arable land was made arable through digging, levelling, regular ploughing, soil treatment by application of green manure.
- * The green manure was procured through 210 compost pits prepared by the families.
- * Wide variety of fodder, grasses, multiple use grasses, rough-soil friendly vegetables were grown on the reclaimed land.
- * Crop-rotation, multiple cropping were encouraged.
- * About 8 new varieties of non-hybrid (but high-yielding) vegetables, conducive to the soil condition, were given on an experimental basis to about 296 families with a very successful outcome. Similarly, in the reclaimed land, indigenous seeds of high quality were used instead of hybrid seeds. Moreover seed preservation, seed sharing were encouraged.

One basic fact that needs to be mentioned in this context is that – though the overall thrust was on making land reusable, there was also a parallel focus on making agriculture environment-friendly. This was also to curb the growing tendency of the local people to move towards chemical-based agriculture.

In order to illustrate the immense power of organic manure, families were encouraged to make organic Compost Pits. This organic manure was used in the fields to fertilize and improve land quality to a marvellous effect.

7) Women: Profound Contribution, Minimum Rights

The status of women in Jharkhand almost reflects the pathetic situation of women in the country. The skewed gender status, especially in the rural regions, can be understood from the basic fact that the literacy rate of rural men is 72%, compared to a rate of 46% in women (www.census2011.co.in).

Women contribute to the major work-force for agriculture in Jharkhand. According to Labour Bureau report of Government of India according to the 2011 census, women account for 32.6% of cultivation in the state as compared to 27.2% men and 44.8% women are agricultural labourers as compared to 27.8% men (http://labourbureau.nic.in/Statistical_Profile_2012_13). And inspite of such a major contribution to agriculture, recognition of women as farmers is never a recognised reality. Inspite of their immense contribution to agriculture, women have always been the under players – their contribution seldom recognized, their rights never accepted.

Be it land, water or society – they neither had decision-making power nor ownership. This not only had a negative social impact but also had a negative impact on health, nutrition status of the families as well because agriculture, being controlled by men, the focus of it was gradually shifting from food security to commercial purposes – affecting the food and nutrition needs of the family in the process.

8) Women: Action Taken:

The primary focus thus was to effectively utilize the power of women as the decision-makers and involve them in governing the decisions with regard to land and water. This would not only help in uplifting the social status of women but also emphasize family farming initiatives. Thus certain concrete steps were taken to establish and enhance the role of women as farmers, owners and decision-makers.

- * To emphasize the role of women in water and land governance, strong Women's Groups were formed; which were later transformed into Women Farmer's Groups.
- * Not only were women asked to contribute to the work force towards their land or water resource but at the end of the process they were also given 'Possession Certificates' in their name.
- * Women received extensive training on agriculture, animal care and seed preservation. Near about 16 residential trainings were imparted to young women farmers.
- * The significance of women in food security was highlighted through the supply of Community Granaries, as well Family Grain Store Bins which stored grains for the lean cropping period. 100 Grain Bins and 25 Community Granaries (each of 50 Quintal capacity) were used by the local women.
- * To facilitate participation of women in marketing of agro-products and to cut out the tendency of middle-men, establishment of localised Rural Markets (popularly called *Haats*) was also encouraged.

The best part about the entire process was that it helped develop a strong self-reliant economic system in the area. On one hand, the land and water bodies were effectively controlled as well as shared by the women; there was adequate scope of knowledge sharing;

governed and controlled by local community thus reducing the chances of exploitation by external sources.

9) Water, Land & Women: From Development to Empowerment:

One important aspect of the project was that the issues of land, water and women were inter-linked in such a way that the positive action in one aspect would be reflected on the other. This was done because co-ordinated efforts on each of the issues was crucial to usher in a process of development.

A good irrigation system helped improve land and agriculture conditions and overall productivity. The overall improvement in land and related productivity enhanced the economic condition of women, also assuring food security for their families.

Similarly, the water and land management being in the hands of women, brought in a vast difference – improving sharing and resulting in replicating success stories.

Moreover with women being in control of the land and water resources, the prime focus of agriculture became food security. There were efforts to store grains, undertake seed preservation and focus on cultivation of food-crops. The additional crops that were not consumed, now had a scope of being marketed through local markets, cutting off the intervention of middle-men. This self-controlled system gave a scope of self-empowering the communities.

Likewise, organising women as groups gave a social recognition – as women farmers – which is a crucial step towards ensuring women's land rights . Over the time these women's groups were transformed as Women Farmers' Groups, where the women could exert their rights as farmers. And this organised effort of women could actually ensure access to various land-based schemes of the government.

So, what began as a development process could be successfully transited to a sustainable process of empowerment .

10) Objectives Fulfilled:

The activities helped in fulfilling the following objectives:

- Arranged sustained irrigation through storage of rain water.
- Brought additional land under cultivation with stored water.
- Enabled villagers continue farming beyond monsoon.
- Increased agricultural yield with more vegetables and new types of vegetables.
- Stored rain water for emergency use to save crops in drought conditions.
- Motivated families to get additional income through pisciculture and animal rearing due to availability of adequate water resources as well as fodder for animals.
- Facilitated capacity building of women through repeated trainings.

- Enhanced confidence level of women through increased income, participation in decision making processes.
- Established women as owner of resources created by distributing Possession Certificates in their name only.
- Improvement of soil quality through the watershed in and around the water-bodies created or desilted.

11) Impact:

The programmes had a visible impact in the lives of the local people, especially women. What was interesting is that the impact was not just limited to economic enhancement but resulted in an overall change in the situation of the people, as well as the area. It was interesting to see how the people themselves were instrumental in changing their own situations.

The overall impact can be summarised as:

- Qualitative and quantitative changes in people's lives, especially the women.
- Living standards improved; more families living in concrete houses.
- Consumption of milk and vegetables increased as a result of animal and seed support programme.
- Women empowered and became aware of their rights, spoke confidently in public, worked collectively to improve their own lives.
- Economic upsurge as a result of increased access to land and water minimized migration levels.
- Reduction in migration reduced burden on women.
- Women's improved leadership qualities facilitated their political participation in local government system (Panchayat)

12) Challenges Faced:

Though most of the activities were carried out by the local people themselves, there were enormous socio-economic challenges that had to be faced.

- Changing people's mindset was a very difficult task. Traditionally men are believed to be 'farmers'. Hence increasing access to land and water with women's involvement was a real challenge.
- Political unrest of the area was a cause of constant concern.
- Pursuing people's development agenda with/without support of apathetic administrative officials was indeed another challenging issue.

-Successful use of water storage in Irrigation Box and De-silted tanks depended on rainwater. The years with less rainfall had less water stored, however, unlike other years there still was enough water for irrigation.

13) Stories of Success:

The efforts undertaken could support more than 600 indigenous families, especially the women, to build a sustainable socio-economic life and livelihood system for themselves, especially supporting their nutrition and food requirements .

On one hand there were individual success stories, on the other hand there was success as groups.

Sukurmoni Tudu of Mudidih village was supported with Irrigation Box. The water from the Irrigation Box was used to grow potato, mustard, tomato, bitter-gourd. The water was also used for fish-rearing and providing drinking water for the animals. Around the water body, they had planted several Shegun trees (teak) – which are expensive wood trees. The trees would sell at very high cost after years. She had also been able to reclaim 2 Acres of land which had been used to grow a variety of pulses. They had also planted 70 forest-tree variety of saplings.

She had been able to provide nutritious food to her family including rice, pulses and vegetables – far different from her normal staple fare of only rice and salt.

Selling the surplus had also given her immense profit with which the children of the family had been able to purchase books and ensured admission for them in good schools. She had also been able to save enough money to open a savings account in the local post office.

Young **Jaba Mandi's** family lives in the village of Hutupathar. With support for the Irrigation Box they had been able to improve the agriculture multi-fold. The water-body was being used for regular fish rearing. The Papaya trees planted around the water facility gave them regular supply of nutritious food – in the form of fruits and vegetables. Selling the surplus, their family earned more than double of what they used to earn earlier. Having been trained in agriculture from Swadhina, she was frequently consulted for any agriculture related problem. With improved income they had been able to add rooms to their house. Jaba, herself is a young leader of her women's group, showing way to others. In her own words: *"I have become a transformed person now. I could never imagine speaking in front of so many people as I am doing now. But now, I have ensured health for my family, earned money as well as lots of respect"*.

The impact as groups was also tremendous. The collective effort of 22 women of Sardardih village, belonging to women farmer's group, ensured that not only their own families but near about 300 families obtain the Agro Credit Card scheme from the government. This helped them enhance the agricultural productivity and improve their life as a whole. For example, group member **Phulmoni Mahato** took a loan of USD 219 through the Agro Credit Card and purchased seeds of potato and tomato. She planted the seeds in 1 Acre of land. The initiative fetched a profit of about USD 375. She repaid her loan amount and with the rest of the profit money she purchased two bullocks that she could use for her ploughing need. And from a part of the profit money, for the first time, she had been bold enough to invest for a Life Insurance Policy in her own name.

A group of 12 women belonging to Chirudih village had successfully used their Community Granary for sale of grains, resulting in a collective savings of USD 1200 with which they opened a group bank account.

14) Lessons Learnt:

The lessons learnt can be summarised as three basic focal points: AWARENESS, ACTION, ADVOCACY

Awareness:

1. There is a need for a basic awareness generation. Most often the resources are available, the laws are in place but if the people are not aware of their level and limit of access to the resources and laws then the real benefit would never reach the people. Moreover, without awareness there is always a scope of exploitation.
2. It is awareness that can lead the communities towards empowerment – unless they are aware of their rights, they will not be able to demand their rights. So awareness is a crucial factor in building a rights-based action.
3. But awareness will not reach the people just like that, the CSOs/NGOs or other such bodies can play a crucial role as facilitators in ensuring awareness related activities.

Action:

1. No development is possible without active participation and involvement of women. For that it is important to change the mindset of people towards position of women in the society.
2. Women's governance of land and water is truly effective when they have legal ownership of land. Customary law which debar tribal women from owning the land is the detriment to this.
3. To establish women's ownership of land and to ensure women's control over husband's property, marriages need to be registered otherwise women are easily evicted from their in-laws' house.

Advocacy:

1. There are several schemes of the government aimed towards land and water rights of the communities but those are seldom implemented because either the government representatives are apathetic or the people do not come forward to ask their rights. Advocacy plays a crucial role in building the bridge of access.
2. There is also a huge necessity to build a public opinion about the loopholes in laws and policies governing land and water through advocacy at different levels.

15) Conclusion:

The sleepy villages that once were socio-economically backward have seen immense changes over the years. They now have a good bus-road running through the villages; two English medium schools have come up in the region; young girls are now going to

colleges...And all these changes were possible because there is an overall socio-economic improvement in the situation of the people.

And these socio-economic improvements were not brought in artificially or through massive industrialization but by bringing in basic improvements in the traditional livelihood system.

They did not require cutting down of forests to bring in development, they rather tended to their land and water resources with great care. Swadhina was only a facilitator, but the real actors were the people themselves, especially the women – they were the true Magic Makers!

Swadhina : 34/C Bondel Road, Kolkata-700019, India/www.swadhina.org.in

** Saswati Roy Patnaik is a Post-Graduate in Education and is involved with Swadhina since 1987. Currently, she is the Secretary and Chief Functionary of Swadhina.*

** Srichandra Venkataramanan is a Post-Graduate in Energy-Environment Management and is involved with Swadhina since 1997. She looks after the Documentation and Reporting section of the organisation.*