

## TRANSFORMING THE LIVES OF TRIBALS

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When our group first came to the Kerandimal tribal area in Ganjam, Orissa, to work with the *Khond adivasis* (a tribal community), we were all struck by the poverty and backwardness in the area – poor health, dismal living conditions, no education or employment. That was in 1975, and most of us were student volunteers, a few from Madras University and the rest from the coastal districts of Orissa. To us, one of the obvious solutions to their problems was that people should start saving little by little, so that they could build up their own resources to improve their lives and living conditions.

We went around talking to the people about this – urging them to save anything - cash or grain. In one particular meeting, a wizened elder in the community Mr. Siro Mallik said, “ What is the use, even if we save anything, either the rats will eat it up or the *sahukar* (moneylender) will take it away. Is it not better that we eat whatever little we get? It will at least go to fill our stomachs.”

Gradually, we realized that the tribals were caught in a vicious trap, where they owned practically nothing. Their lands and cattles were mortgaged. Men, women and even children worked as bonded labour for a handful of *Shundis* (liquor merchants) and *sahukars* (moneylenders), who had a vice-like grip on the lives and souls of the tribal people. Rural indebtedness existed in its worst form.

Over the next four years, we worked closely with people. Tribals from over 60 villages came together to fight the common problem, armed with the new regulation on rural indebtedness promulgated by the government. The *shundis* and *sahukars* were ousted by collective effort (how it was done is another story...). This led to an abrupt change in the socio-economic structure, but to bring about a real change in people’s minds – a people who had for so long lived in subjugation, and existed on a subsistence level. Having control over their own resources had little meaning or significance. They did not know how to use their land, or market the produce from the land and forests. Though, they earned more, little was left with them at the end of the day, as it was spent as quickly as it came.

By this time, our organization grew out of being a student movement to a more rooted development intervention organization, and we were registered as *Gram Vikas*, which literally translates to “village development”. We worked closely with tribal communities initiating a whole new process of education, based on optimal use of local resources and skills. *Gram Vikas* is now working with *adivasis* (tribals), *dalits* and other poor and marginalized communities in 12 districts of Orissa. Its coverage extends primarily over South and South Western Orissa, with the exception of

Mayurbhanj in the North. Community grain banks are integral in one of our main programmes, the Integrated Tribal Development Programme, through which we work in 154 adivasi villages with over 5,000 families. The other main programme is the Rural Health and Environment Programme, which covers 5,000 families in 67 tribal and non-tribal villages.

### **Reviving traditions – Initiation of the grain bank concept**

The tribals had a traditional system of grain storage and exchange known as *kutha panthi* (community fund), to tide over the lean periods. They could raise only one rainfed crop in a year. In many instances the grain was also used at the time of feasts. The grain was usually stored in a large bin made of bamboo plastered with cowdung. Each village had its own norms for the operation of the common pool. We started working towards reviving this tradition. What began in a few villages, soon spread to others. Today, there are grain banks supported by *Gram Vikas* in over 200 villages.

The day-to-day management of the grain banks rests with the community, which decides where and what to store, how to collect deposits and other norms for lending and repayment.

The initial grain deposits are collected at the time of the harvest. In most of the tribal villages, being homogenous in nature, deposits are also of equal amount, with all families participating. In the lean months, the grain is distributed among the needy families, who make their case in the general meeting of village adults (men and women). There are strict norms on repayment, which is monitored by the village committee/women's committee. Repayments usually coincide with the harvesting cycle, but in a few cases cash repayments are also accepted. Records are kept with the committee secretary in the village, and are accessible to everyone in the village.

### **Roots of change**

The importance of grain banks is that it has played a catalytic role in elevating tribal communities from the subsistence level of existence and has given them the confidence to aspire for better things. No longer are they dependent on moneylenders to tide over difficult periods, or other periods of need.

### **Extrapolating the gain**

The operations of grain banks are flexible. For instance, if they borrow *dhaan* (rice) they can also repay in *mandia* (millet) after the equivalent value is ascertained. In a few areas, the grain banks also double as seed banks. When the stock of grain is beyond the available storage facilities, the surplus is sold at market price. The profit is shared as decided by the village bodies. There is periodic check of inventory to move old stocks first.

### **Women in command**

We also started small savings programmes, primarily with the women. This was largely successful and women started saving Rs. 5-10 per month. Though, a majority of them are illiterate, given their meticulousness, the operation and management of the grain bank soon passed to them. Village volunteers trained by *Gram Vikas* assist them in the maintenance of records.

### **Linking with the government**

When the programmes were running successfully, the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA), Bhawanipatna, came forward to tie up with *Gram Vikas* by offering to provide some grain as revolving fund to all sixty villages in Gopalpur *Panchayat* of Thuamul Rampur Block, Kalahandi. This additional grain also augmented the need for appropriate storage facilities and we are mobilizing funds to cater to this need.

### **Grain storage**

Interventions in enabling livelihoods, based on upgradation and better utilisation of land, water and human skills were initiated. Production rose, and while they marketed what they could produce, the need for storage also cropped up. The bamboo bins were rather inadequate, and often not rat-or moisture-proof, resulting in increased volumes of damaged grain. We, therefore, started building grain storerooms in each village, using brick and mortar. The storage space was 20 to 40 sq.m. – depending on the size of the village. In all the villages, people contributed the locally available raw materials, stone, sand, and aggregate. *Gram Vikas* provided technical assistance, cement and steel and the storage structures were constructed.

### **Better living conditions and aspirations**

It is over ten years since the grain bank programme was initiated by *Gram Vikas*. One of the important spin-offs of this programme has been an increased awareness and confidence in the people. The same people, who were once reluctant to save, are now prepared take loans to construct permanent disaster-proof houses and for livelihood purposes, and even repay in time.

By satisfying the basic need for food on an assured basis, the grain banks have provided the leverage to eject people out of the orbit of poverty to a more secure and dignified quality life.