

# WOMEN'S GROUP FARMING ON LEASED LAND:

## THE EXPERIENCE OF PRADAN IN ODISHA



### Context

- Women's groups have emerged as an important platform for promoting the economic, political and social empowerment of poor women. In India, Self Help Groups (SHGs), are becoming substantially involved in agricultural development activities, largely through the National Rural Livelihoods Mission platforms (NRLM) and with the assistance of NGOs.
- In the tribal areas of Odisha, women farmers' access to land is low, even though they are closely involved in farming activities. In fact, most tribal women are legally landless, meaning, either they don't own land or own less than one standard acre (a minimum area required to ensure food production for an average family).
- Individual forest rights are now being recently formally recognized under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, which requires that both spouses' names are recorded. The Record of Rights (RoR) maintained by the Revenue Department lacks a column to record the landholder's gender and does not always record land jointly in the name of wife and husband. As most of the agricultural land titles are maintained in the RoR, women lack recognition as landowners and hence women farmers.

### Interventions

- PRADAN, an NGO with considerable experience of working with SHGs and agriculture, used collective farming as a strategy in Rayagada district to augment the livelihoods of tribal women SHG members and also to support their recognition, at least among local actors, as women farmers.
- Along with a strong institutional support system, PRADAN assisted the women's groups to lease in private land and also cultivate on government land, with the consent of the village community, supported by robust extension, communication, convergence and market linkages, to significantly increase their farm income.

### Lessons

- Group farming can be an alternative production model for women farmers to pool land, labour and capital to create larger farms, improve their agricultural income and also become recognised as women farmers at least by local actors.
- In the absence of legal sanction and enforceability of the leasing arrangements - which are informal, due to the prevailing legal framework banning agricultural land leasing in Odisha - these groups, however, face the risk of landlords either demanding higher rents after witnessing the increasing profitability of group-farming or preferring to withdraw their land from the lease arrangement due to their fear of losing the land to the SHG through long-term possession, as per existing laws.
- As most women farmers are landless, lack land records and operate through informal land leasing, they are also not eligible as individual farmers to access formal credit and government entitlements, which affect the profitability of group farming and individual returns, in addition to the pace and inclusivity of agricultural transformation in the state more broadly.

## Introduction

Globally, women's groups have emerged as an important platform for promoting the economic, political and social empowerment of poor women and in India, SHGs have become a central component of many rural development interventions. Under the guidance of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) and NGOs involved in the formation and strengthening of these groups, SHGs in India are implementing interventions in agriculture and livelihoods. Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN)<sup>2</sup>, one of India's largest NGOs, has worked with women farmers over the last thirty years both alongside and independent of the government's NRLM and has pioneered efforts in providing agriculture extension for and through women's SHGs in rural India<sup>3</sup>.

PRADAN's livelihood-centric interventions across India are primarily routed through women's SHGs, and collective farming is one of the emerging areas of their interventions over the past five years. Women farmers in the Rayagada district of Odisha face multiple barriers to maximizing the income they earn from farming on their own, including landlessness, small land holdings, insecure tenure and the high levels of drudgery for which women are responsible in the agriculture sector. It was also difficult for individual women farmers to achieve aggregation of both the input supply chain and the sale of produce due to the isolated location of their parcels and the sporadic nature of their farming practices. These barriers were major drivers of PRADAN's decision to promote collective farming by women in Odisha. Thus, the need for collective farming emerged from the principles of aggregation that SHGs as an institution already followed for thrift and credit (group savings).



Image Credit: Rohit Jain/ World Bank

The women SHG members are mostly landless and work as agriculture laborers or casual laborers under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which provides 100 days right to work for willing households in India. Farmers cultivating on government land<sup>4</sup> and tenant farmers are unable to access any government entitlements. Moreover they are also not interested to invest in land development due to lack of tenure security. The lack of land records, affects farmers' individual identities, especially for landless households, who cannot therefore access a caste certificate. These are usually issued by local land revenue officials, based on the land record, which documents caste. Caste certificates are particularly important for members of tribes and scheduled castes, as they enable subsidized access to education and healthcare.

As per the data collected by PRADAN, the average land holding of the women SHG members<sup>5</sup> in the intervention area, is less than one acre. Many women who had been informally farming forest lands, have now claimed their rights under The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA), on which they mostly grow rainfed paddy. Some of them also rear small livestock, like goats, sheep and poultry for income generation.

PRADAN, having been involved in livelihoods improvement through women's SHGs, was inspired by this model to pilot collective farming in Rayagada. Engagements with collective farming later led PRADAN to realize that the land deprivation among tribal women was a barrier to their economic empowerment, both in terms of their limited ability to expand

<sup>2</sup>PRADAN has a strategic partnership with NRLM at both center and state level in providing technical support on range of livelihood-based interventions. PRADAN provided programmatic guidance to NRLM and SRLM on women's access to information on agricultural practices, women's role in agricultural decision-making, use of better agricultural practices, production diversification, and market orientation.

<sup>3</sup>IFPRI Discussion Paper 01735, June 2018

<sup>4</sup>Odisha has a high percentage of government land. In the revenue villages of Odisha, on an average approximately one-third of land is private and one third each under forest and government revenue land. Different categories of government lands are cultural waste (Abad jogya anabadi) and unculturable waste lands (Abad ajogya anabadi), reserve and community land. Most of these lands can be settled with private individuals, as per state laws. The availability of the government lands for potential settlement with landless households (i.e. legal recognition of their de facto possession) is relatively high in Odisha: in 2014 there was 0.28 ha on average per household in Odisha. This ratio is higher in tribal districts where land deprivation is also high (World Bank, 2014) However, these land cannot be formally leased for agriculture as per present laws.

<sup>5</sup>With reference to the data of 150 members of 10 SHGs from Boriguda and Bandhamunda village of Kolnara Block



cultivation and reach economies of scale and in terms of their inability to access land-based entitlements and services for farmers. This realization led to them exploring interventions to enhance women's land access through different interventions viz. facilitating informal leasing, recognition of individual forest rights under Forest Rights Act.

These sporadic experiments by PRADAN were scaled up during 2013 through the Mahila Kisan Sashatikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) under NRLM. Women SHG members were organized into farmer producer groups at village level, and these

producer groups were further federated into production clusters at a larger, economically viable scale. The key focus of MKSP is to promote sustainable agriculture practices through community institutions of farmers, and the approach adopted by PRADAN is in sync with the core objectives of MKSP. The design of MKSP, as well as PRADAN's earlier work and focus, did not consider land tenure as an issue or intervention. PRADAN soon realized the land-deprivation among tribal women and the imperative of working on it vis-à-vis collective farming. This case study analyses the inclusion and exclusion of women, landless and tenant farmers in the collective farming initiatives of PRADAN based on their land tenure rights and

explores how collective farming as an intervention can subsequently lead to their enhanced inclusion.

## Objective

The primary objective of this intervention was the income enhancement of SHG members through collective farming. Additionally, it was expanded to enhance land access for women farmers through informal leasing on private land along with

local arrangements to use government land to also expand the cultivable area and generate a marketable volume of produce and economies of scale.



Image Credit: Navin Amang

## Implementation

The NRLM supports women's SHGs to scale up and diversify their farming systems to increase incomes for their members under Mahila Kisan Shasaktikaran Pariyojna (MKSP), drawing from learning from Kerala's Kudumbashree program<sup>6</sup> (Kudumbashree, n.d). In Odisha, the MKSP under the Odisha Livelihood Mission (OLM) promotes collective farming as a model for including vulnerable families in agriculture through community institutions (SHGs). The OLM first helped women SHG members organize themselves to adopt collective (group) farming in a cluster approach. The cluster refers to a contiguous geographical area, preferably covering 8 to 10 villages and 200 women SHG members adopting collective farming.

Subsequently, PRADAN assisted the women's farmer groups it works with to negotiate informal lease arrangements to use agricultural lands belonging to large farmers or absentee landlords from their village or from neighboring villages, that largely remained fallow during the Kharif (monsoon) season. Although the leasing of land is informal (without any written lease agreement or other documentation) due to the Odisha Land Reforms Act 1960 and subsequent amendment in 1965, which ban tenancy, the women's groups paid up to Rs.1000/- per acre (0.4 ha) per season to use these lands, with uncertainty remaining on the continuation of the lease at the same rate. Generally, the SHG team negotiated the lease, while the PRADAN field team assisted occasionally. The Panchayat or other such institutions were not involved, as PRADAN's focus was largely on SHGs.

The establishment of four production clusters in Kolnara block of Rayagada district is a result of PRADAN's consistent facilitation and follow up with the women farmers. Women farmers were exposed to commercial production of vegetables in oth-

er districts, viz. Koraput, Bargarh in Odisha and Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh. This influenced them to focus on specific vegetable crops (commodity approach) intensively to achieve economies of scale and efficiently access bulk inputs, credit and markets.

Contiguous patches of land parcels (average of 20 decimals per farmer) totaling about 4 acres (1.6 ha) for about 20 farmers in each program village were identified for cultivation by the women's groups, which include land leased informally, government land and also subsequently land recognized as individual forest rights<sup>7</sup>. This collective farming model was implemented in four clusters covering 30 villages, which includes 535 household members of SHG. These clusters are geographically contiguous patches selected by these women farmers in the vicinity of their own land and/or habitations. These patches of land are either owned or leased in informally or are government land or are a combination of these. Subsequently, individual forest rights lands were also added to this pool. Pooling such land together allowed the women farmers to overcome the challenges posed by land fragmentation and enabled them to plan and implement more sustainable production practices on a larger contiguous patch of land, such as Integrated Pest Management, use of farm machinery, aggregate input procurement etc. (Agrawal, 2010; Personal Comm). In addition, it also supported the intensive management of the crop viz. irrigation, inter-cultural operations<sup>8</sup>, protecting crops from cattle, birds etc. Cultivating land in larger contiguous patches also helped achieve better quality control, standards and harvesting, which enhanced their farm income.

In most cases, these lands are leased in by the SHG members from large farmers or absentee landlords or are government

lands, cultivated informally with the villagers' consent. A few SHG members also practiced these improved farming methods on their own family land along with the lands that are taken on lease in contiguous patches wherever feasible. To achieve competitive advantage, vegetable production was scheduled to ensure early season arrival in the market. This provided better market prices and demand for the vegetables.

The program was later scaled up with support from the Odisha Livelihood Mission, Horticulture Mission, Agriculture Production Cluster Programme of the Agriculture Department and the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) to cover more than 300 acres of land involving more than 1,200 women farmers. About 70 percent of these lands are taken on lease by the SHG members, and the remaining lands are either government land (used informally through village consent) or own private land cultivated by the SHG members. The vegetables cultivated in these clusters include Brinjal, Chilly and Beans (Personal Comm)<sup>9</sup>.

One of the major challenges that PRADAN's field team encountered while supporting these tribal women was landlessness and prevalence of single women in the villages who lack land rights. In Bandhaguda village, which is home to 60 Tribal families, there are 40 single women out of which 24 are widows. These single women were socially not accepted in the community and were not given their due rights in terms of land and not even employed as wage labour in the locality, increasing their vulnerability to poverty. The dependency on the Public Distribution System for food supplies under the National Food Security Mission was their only means of survival, apart from foraging forest products from common forest lands. Recognizing that land rights are critical for their participation in collective farming, and

<sup>6</sup> Kudumbashree is a society designed and set up in 1997 by the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM) of the Government of Kerala (GoK) with a broad objective to eradicate poverty and empower women through community-based organizational convergence with local government organization. It promotes a three-tier federal structure of women's collectives raised independently below the umbrella of local self-government as community based organisations (CBO). These women collectives under Kudumbashree work towards sustainable agriculture-based livelihoods for rural women by enhancing their access to land through collective land leasing, complemented by agricultural services and entitlements. These models were later adopted in the national women farmers' empowerment programme or the Mahila Kisan Shasaktikaran Pariyojna (MKSP), a sub-component under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) (Abraham, 2019). NRLM was launched by Ministry of Rural Development, GoI in June 2011. In 2012 Kudumbashree was recognized by the Ministry of Rural Development, GoI as a National Resource Organization (NRO) under NRLM.

<sup>7</sup> This size is comparatively smaller than group farming which area in Andhra Pradesh (2.49 ha for 20 farmers) and in Kerala (0.96 ha for 6 farmers) under similar collectivized women farming approaches (Agrawal, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> agronomical practices viz. soil working, weeding, fertilizer/manure applications etc.

<sup>9</sup> Personal Communication and information shared by Amit Kumar Dash, Pradan, Kolnara, Odisha.



hence livelihood enhancement, PRADAN facilitated these communities in claiming the land they are cultivating under the Forest Rights Act 2006. Forty-four families out of 60 received title as Individual Forest Rights<sup>10</sup> (IFRs) to one acre each of the government forest lands they were cultivating out of which 12 were single women. These interventions boosted the confidence of women in the village to take up vegetable cultivation as a part of the production cluster.

Some women's groups also farmed government lands, used de facto as commons in the village, with the consent of the village, though it is not legally possible to lease this land. It is possible to regularize individual possession or encroachment over some types of Government lands<sup>11</sup> under acts like the Orissa Government Land Settlement (OGLS) Act, 1968 or the Orissa Prevention of Land Encroachment (OPLE) Rule, 1972. However, there is no provision for group rights under these acts. The Government of Odisha, under rural development projects like the Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP), Economic Rehabilitation of

Rural Poor (ERRP) etc. have also settled usufruct (user rights) rights on fruit trees planted on such government lands, mostly in tribal districts. Nonetheless, being part of a group improves land access for women who want to farm but own little or no land. It also increases their financial resources and negotiating power in the land lease markets.

In Boriguda village of Kolnara block, only 97.67 acres of land is under private ownership, and 417.20 acres of land are government owned. Out of the government land, 105.20 acres of land (about 25 percent) are under cultivation by the local tribal communities. These government lands are used for cotton and paddy cultivation by the farmers. After introduction of the collective farming by PRADAN, about 10 acres (10 percent) of these encroached lands have been brought under vegetable cultivation by women's SHGs. The families currently cultivating these government land deposit fines imposed by the local revenue authorities and received receipts as evidence of their encroachment, which can later be used for settlement of their land under the OPLE Act.

The line departments (viz. Agriculture, Horticulture, Panchayati Raj), supported eligible members of these production groups by supplying farm inputs, such as seeds, fertilizers, pesticides etc. (Agriculture and Horticulture Departments) and group credit (Panchayati Raj Department) under existing schemes implemented by these departments. However, many agriculture schemes require land records to validate farmers' eligibility as per scheme guidelines. As many women farmer members of the SHG groups are landless and lack land records, they are unable to directly access entitlements and benefits under agriculture schemes. In an attempt to address this restriction, the program assists land-owning SHG members, who constitute less than 10 percent of the total farmers involved in the collective farming program, to access government subsidized input supply and then distributes this supply to all of the farmers involved in the collective. Although the subsidized inputs delivered to each SHG member were grossly inadequate, this was seen as an improvement over the status quo, which typically excludes women



Image Credit: Rohit Jain/ World Bank

<sup>10</sup>IFR land can be used for agriculture, homesteads and agroforestry etc.

<sup>11</sup>In terms of eligibility for settlement for private purposes viz. for agriculture or homestead there are two types of Government land. Tenable lands which can be settled viz. culturable waste and some types of unculturable waste. Untenable lands are village pasture (gauchar), village forest and other reserved or community lands. Cultivation on untenable land may invite penalty and eviction, where on tenable lands can be settled if the individual is eligible as per OGLS and OPLE.





Image Credit: Rohit Jain/ World Bank

farmers from accessing any such benefits. Other landless SHG members were provided access to credit through OLM financial inclusion loans to help them buy additional inputs. There were also instances of creating irrigation facilities for these small patches of land as the government supported irrigation schemes viz. lift irrigation required 50 acres of land to be irrigated under each project. Undulating terrains in these villages do not allow such large patch of contiguous land to avail such a irrigation facilities from the government. PRADAN arranged alternative support by creating smaller irrigation structures covering 2 to 3 acres of land.

At the post-harvest stage, the collective at the cluster level played a pivotal role in organizing the marketing of the produce. Women leaders negotiated with the traders to earn a better price for their produce and organized logistics support for its transportation and storage. According to the negotiated terms with the traders, they scheduled the sale of produce in the villages. In addition, product standardization through cleaning, sorting and improved packaging were also promoted by the cluster federation in response to market demand and trends.



## Institutional Arrangement

Building on the production-centric collective agriculture model promoted by the OLM (Odisha Livelihoods Mission), PRADAN supported institution building, improved land availability through informal leasing and government land cultivation, as well as Individual Forest Rights recognition, and intensive extension services<sup>12</sup>. These have been major contributors to the success of this model in Odisha. (Figure 1). PRADAN worked closely with the local Gram Panchayat Representatives and opinion leaders in the village to get an informal

consent for using available government land for the purpose of collective farming by women. Similarly, PRADAN identified owners of the private fallow land and facilitated the SHG members to negotiate lease terms and price with the landowners. However, the leasing arrangements and government land cultivation remained largely informal, and no significant interventions have been made to formalize it in the absence of a supportive legal framework for leasing. The exception is PRADAN's support for formal individual

forest rights (IFR) recognition (under the Forest Rights Act, 2006) for eligible existing users of forest land through capacity building and documentation assistance to the legitimate Forest Rights Committee in the village to make appropriate claims. PRADAN also facilitated the IFR claim verification and recognition process with the relevant stakeholders, like the Gram Sabha and Sub-Division Level Committee.

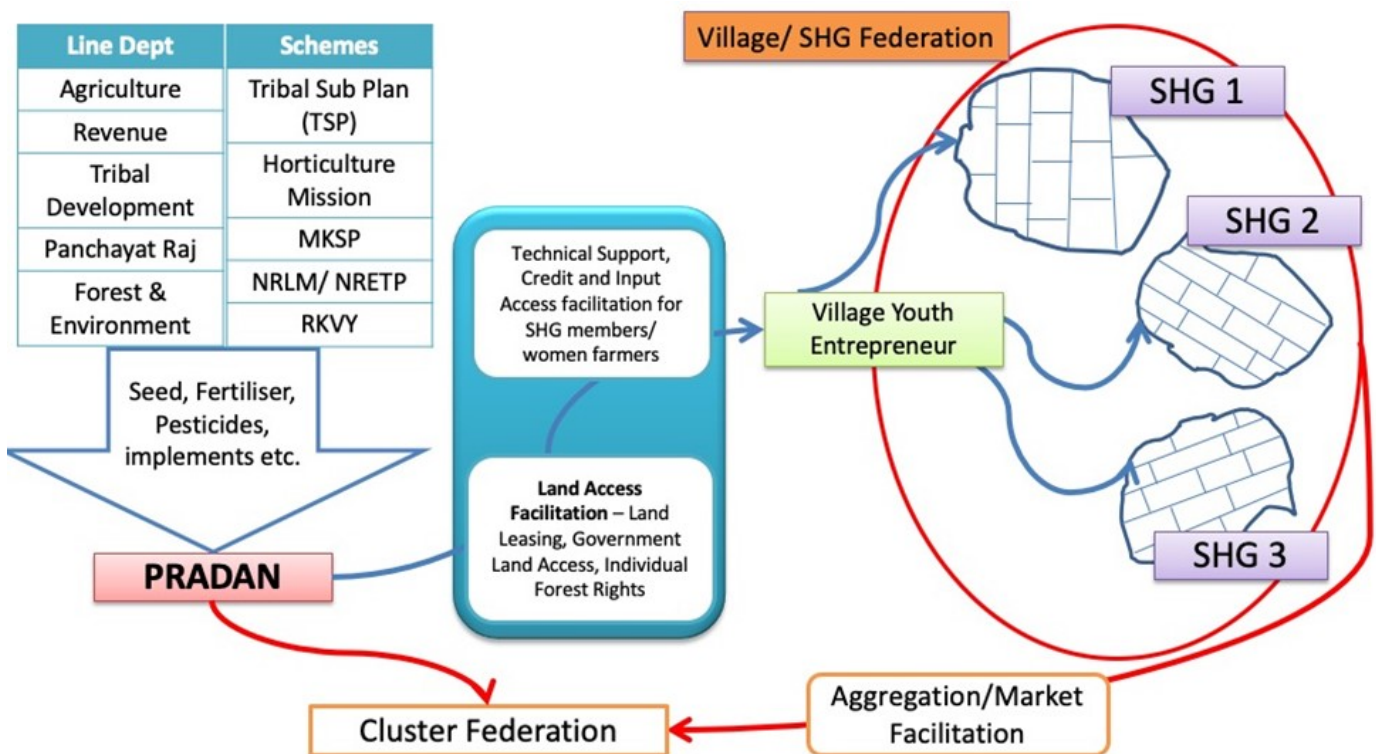


Figure 1: Institutional framework of PRADAN model to support women farmer collectives

<sup>12</sup>By supporting technology extension in form of IEC through village entrepreneurs, aggregated quality input supply and Integrated pest management etc.



## Initial Impacts

Collective farming by women SHG members emerged as a successful model for sustainable income generation among landless and smallholder women farmers, who constitute more than 95 percent of the participating women farmers. The creation of an ecosystem to help the poor and marginal women farmers organize land leasing, input supply, training and capacity building, credit, marketing and logistics support is a new experience for these women members in Odisha. In addition to enhancing household income and creating new social space for women in the society, the collective farming model changed the identities of these women from domestic laborers to farmers, which had a broader moral impact.

Evidence from the two cluster villages where collective farming was piloted shows that farmers earned a gross income of Rs. 4500 in one season per farmer (about 4 months' time) from collective farming<sup>13</sup>. The average gross income per acre of land was about Rs.22,000. Vegetable farming alone earned a monthly average of INR 1115 per household. Given that most of the participating women farmers would have previously been engaged in small-scale subsistence paddy/vegetable farming or

house work, this cash income represents an important new livelihood that can improve the economic status of poor families.

Subsequently, the increased profitability made possible through the aggregation of farm inputs and outputs along with improved market linkages under the collective farming model further enhanced the groups' demand for leasing-in lands. Besides, it led to adoption of standardized cultivation practices and promoting vegetable cultivation in clusters to make this business model viable and sustainable in terms of attaining economies of scale.

Although there is no baseline data for the project villages available for comparison, the average agriculture household income in Odisha was Rs 8,931 per month in 2016-17 as per the NABARD All India Rural Financial Inclusion Survey (NAFIS, 2017), and the income from agriculture alone was INR 3140 per month according to NAFIS. With an average household holding size in the state of 1.08 ha (2.66 acres), this translates to INR 1180 per acre per month on an average of total household agriculture income (NABARD, 2018). As every woman in the PRADAN villages is earning INR 1115 from

0.20 acres, the monthly average income per acre comes to INR 4462, which is almost four times the state average income of an agricultural household per month.

A substantial part of this production and hence, income comes from informally leased land, highlighting the potential of land leasing to augment the income of women farmers, as well as that of poor farm households. In some cases, there are women SHG members who earned up to INR 50,000 per year by participating in collective farming for two agricultural seasons (Kharif and Rabi). However, it may be noted that these data are based on small samples, as provided by the field teams of PRADAN, and therefore must not be generalized or compared in absolute terms. Based on the available data, it appears there is scope to increase (even double) the income of tribal women farmers through collective farming and increased land access through informal land leasing, government land cultivation and formal individual forest rights recognition.

**Table 1: Women farmers' Income from Group Vegetable Cultivation**

Cluster	No. of Women	Area Cultivated in Cluster (In Ac)	Income from Crops for one season (4 months) In INR Lakh					
			Brinjal	Chilly	Beans	Total	Avg. Income Per Farmer	Avg. Income per farmer per Acre
Mukundpur	140	28	3.80	0.56	2.16	6.52	4657.14	23285.71
Dumuriguda	120	24	4.30	0.78	0	5.08	4233.33	21166.67

Source: Primary data shared by PRADAN during May 2020

<sup>13</sup>Personal Communication with PRADAN team



Over a period of 3 years (2017 to 2020), the area under collective farming of vegetables in Bandhaguda village has trebled from 4 acres to 14.34 acres. A similar impact was also observed in Boriguda village as part of the cluster, where over four years the area under collective farming increased from 7 acres to 17 acres. In both these villages, informally leased land, individual forest rights (IFR) land and government land cultivation together constitute now about 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the total land under collective farming. Informal lease land alone is about 1/5<sup>th</sup>, as gradually the focus is shifting to IFR land, with farmers' land rights being formally recognized through facilitation by PRADAN, which enables the new landowners to access agricultural entitlements<sup>14</sup> (GoO, 2016).

Women from these villages have taken leadership positions in higher order institutions, like the Gram Panchayat Level Federation (GPLF) and Block Level Federation (BLF) promoted under the Odisha Livelihood Mission (OLM). Better exposure to women and improved legal awareness among women SHG members, have resulted in securing joint titles over individual forest rights<sup>15</sup> land records. PRADAN has organized training programs for the women SHG members and oriented them to understand their legal rights and entitlements. In the absence of enabling

legal regimes for leasing and with higher forest land availability and tribal concentration<sup>16</sup>, PRADAN has shifted more towards facilitating forest rights as a low hanging fruit to enhance land access. It is also evident from the Bandhaguda village that single women who received individual rights over forest land under FRA 2006<sup>17</sup> were able to access government supported schemes, such as land development work under MGNREGA, construction of compost units etc. Twelve out of 44 households (28 percent) whose lands were recognized under FRA are single women, and all these households have accessed government benefits post recognition of their land. Similarly, women from Boriguda village through the Block Level Federation influenced the local authorities to start homesteadless enumeration in their village and identified 11 homesteadless families in their village. Out of these, the government has settled homestead land for 4 families, who are also linked with government run social safety net programmes like PDS, Widow Pension etc. due to their rights over land.

Settlement of land in favour of women under FRA has empowered them to now plan for the future development of their villages and families. For example, they used the Individual Forest Rights (IFR) land rights to apply for and got sanctioned a river-lift irrigation

facility under the Odisha Lift Irrigation Project, which will ensure irrigation to their IFR and other agriculture land during the non-monsoon cropping season to enable them to grow winter vegetables, which could fetch a good price in the local markets. They also have plans to create different natural management interventions viz. check dam, farm pond, land leveling etc. with the support of the Gram Panchayat under MGNREGA in these patches of IFR land. They have also planned to regulate sustainable harvesting of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) from the community forest resources rights (CFR) area they have settled under FRA and are planning to develop grazing land within the CFR area for their livestock.



<sup>14</sup>Agriculture and horticulture entitlements including land development under MGNREGS is allowed under IFR land [https://www.fra.org.in/ASP\\_OrderCirculars\\_UploadFile/%7B7a7110ef-7d0d-459c-bb30-5d9b3c587d06%7D\\_Letter%20to%20All%20ITDA%20%20for%20implementation%20of%20convergence%20under%20FRA%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.fra.org.in/ASP_OrderCirculars_UploadFile/%7B7a7110ef-7d0d-459c-bb30-5d9b3c587d06%7D_Letter%20to%20All%20ITDA%20%20for%20implementation%20of%20convergence%20under%20FRA%20(1).pdf)

<sup>15</sup>As mentioned earlier, forty-four families out of 60 got recognition title of one acre of forest land as Individual Forest Rights (IFR) they were cultivating out of which 12 were single women

<sup>16</sup>Rayagada is district with tribal dominance. This is part of Schedule V areas in Odisha, which are declared by the Indian Constitution as areas with higher tribal population. Scheduled areas of the state contain almost 70 percent of the forest areas of Odisha, even though they form only 44 percent of the State geography. In such tribal districts, about three-fourths of the village lands is owned by the land revenue department of the state which includes forest and government revenue land.

<sup>17</sup>Due to persistent follow up with the local authorities, women members from the Bandhaguda village have claimed and settled 408.07 acre of forest land under community forest rights and community forest resources rights under FRA 2006.

## Box 1: Enhancing Women Land Rights through Land Literacy

Odisha Livelihood Mission (OLM) collaborated with Landesa, an international NGO active in the land rights domain in the state in 2018 to pilot a Legal Land Literacy training programme for women SHG members in Kalahandi and Koraput districts. The pilot aimed to enhance the knowledge of women SHG members on secured land rights and its benefits. The pilot also focused on the delivery of structured training to the women SHG members to help them understand tenure typologies, land related laws and entitlements, process knowhow related to mutation, conversion, land record correction and other relevant land related issues.

Landesa designed and developed training modules and tools for both Master Trainers and SHG members and prepared Master Trainers who subsequently trained the SHG members. It also coordinated the pilot to ensure the quality of the training. The pilot was initiated with an Information Need Assessment (INA) of the women SHG members around land rights followed by designing and developing training modules, rolling out the Master Trainer's training at block level and organising training for the SHG members. The INA found that about 80 percent of the women never met local revenue officials, 62 percent of women do not have their names in their land title documents and 83 percent of women were unaware of their rights over their ancestral/ in-law's property. Keeping these as an entry point, the training courses were designed in a manner to help women members understand their rights and procedures to access/ claim their rights.

38 Master Bookkeepers (of SHG) and 225 Community Resource Persons were trained and promoted as Master Trainers who subsequently trained 8582 women SHG members in three pilot blocks in two districts by July 2018. The initial outcomes as observed by Landesa included women members being empowered to know about their rights and entitlements, exposure to local revenue offices viz. Revenue Inspector, Tehsildar etc., understanding procedures to apply for title correction, mutation etc. While the target was to train 25,567 women SHG members, the pilot could attain only 33% of the target mostly due to operational challenges. Low priority of OLM on conducting legal land literacy program, low level of participation at BMMU/ DMMU level, lack of monitoring by OLM, Master Trainers (Master Book Keepers and CFPs) being occupied with other priority works, non-inclusion of progress reporting in the existing MIS, delayed supply of training modules etc. are some of the challenges that resulted in premature closure of the pilot.

However, there is a need to promote legal land literacy for 2 million women SHG members in Odisha organised under OLM, as majority of the livelihood interventions promoted under NRLM/ National Rural Economic Transformation Project (NRETP) are based on land.



Image Credit: Navin Amang



## Lessons Learnt

### 1. Group farming can be a viable alternative for women farmers and bring women farmers recognition.

Group farming can be a viable alternative for women farmers to pool land, labour and capital to create larger farms, improve agriculture income and also be recognized as farmers, at least by local actors.

However, the women's groups need to strengthen their linkages and networks with market institutions and agricultural service providers to enable this ecosystem to sustain itself and become self-reliant without PRADAN.

Under existing legal provisions that allow

### 2. Lack of legal sanction and enforceability puts women's SHGs that cultivate land under informal land leasing arrangement at risk.

tenants with long-term possession to acquire ownership rights, the probability of the landowner not renewing the lease is high. This is also due to absence of reforms to the Odisha Land Reforms Act 1960, which bans tenancy and does not provide for lease documentation or enforceability. There are already cases, in some villages, where the landowners withdrew the lease after a single agricultural season. Noting the profits that the women farmers gain from vegetable cultivation on their land, the landlords apparently decided to cultivate the land themselves instead of leasing it out to women's SHGs. Landowners also fear their land being taken away by the collective

pressure or bargaining of SHGs through continuous possession<sup>18</sup> or through purchase. The scaling up of the cluster production model appears to have also increased the land rents demanded by landowners (Personal Comm)<sup>19</sup>. This trend of landlords withdrawing their land or increasing rents due to the improved profitability of collective farming can decrease land availability in the future<sup>20</sup> in the absence of legal reforms to legally recognize agricultural land leasing and provide for registration of lease documents to support their enforceability, as provided for by the NITI Aayog's Model Agricultural Land Leasing Act.

Similarly, the informal cultivation of

### 3. Systematic institutionalization with strategic partnership and Convergence is critical to address complex issues around pro-poor land access.

government land lying fallow is also a risk, particularly for long-term cultivation, as it could be construed as an encroachment, leading to eviction under the Orissa Prevention of Land Encroachment Rule, 1972. The said government land may also be allotted for other uses or settled with others as per provisions under the Orissa Government Land Settlement Act, 1968, both of which add to tenure insecurity. As a result, PRADAN and the SHGs are now shifting their strategy towards facilitating recognition and collective farming of Individual Forest Rights (IFR) land as a low hanging fruit, given the higher availability of such land in the targeted villages and the eligibility of tribal households including women for these rights and associated land-based agricultural entitlements.

The formal registration of these women tenant farmers would allow them to access

### 4. Legalization of land leasing for landless farmers and updating of land records in the name of women landholders can enhance access to institutional input supply and credit

government direct benefit transfers, credit and insurance programs for farmers, such as PM-KISAN, KALIA, the Kisan Credit Card and Agriculture Fasal Bima Yojana, to augment their financial resources and resilience. However, as another reformist initiative, the Government of Odisha has decided to recognize tenant farmers / sharecroppers through a Certificate of Cultivation (COC) under the new crop credit scheme Bhoomihina Agriculturist Loan and Resource Augmentation Model (BALRAM). In the absence of land/ lease document of the tenant farmers/ sharecroppers, this is a step forward in institutionalizing a decentralised mechanism for identifying tenant farmers and syndicating seasonal crop loan/ KCC to them. The BALRAM scheme aims to offer a crop loan or Kisan Credit Card to half a million tenant farmers/ sharecroppers over a period of 2 years through formal credit institutions. The Krushak Sathi (Agriculture Extension person located at Gram Panchayat level) will identify sharecroppers/ oral (informal) leases their allocated villages, organise them into Joint Liability Groups (JLG), assist them to prepare individual or group loans based on their crop choice and area cultivated and submit the loan application to a local bank. These sharecroppers/ tenant farmers will be issued a Certificate of Cultivation (COC) after due validation by the local agriculture department officials, which will be used as a base document for the crop loan. However, the scheme excludes the farmers who are defaulters in any of their previous/ existing loans. This can be an important pathway for these women farmer groups to access enhanced crop-credit, pending enactment of a revised land leasing act and addition of women's name in the land record.

<sup>18</sup>Article 23 B of Odisha Land Reform Act read with Article 65 of Limitation Act, 1963

<sup>19</sup>As communicated by Amit Kumar Dash, Executive, PRADAN, Kolnara, Rayagada, Odisha, during May 2020

<sup>20</sup>This has already started with SHG preferring to replacing IFR land with leased land

**5. Draft ordinance for farmland by Govt of Odisha for leasing along the lines of the Model Agricultural Land Leasing Act, which, if implemented can improve women farmers' access to land.**

The Government of Odisha has now drafted an ordinance for farmland leasing along the lines of the Model Agricultural Land Leasing Act, which, if implemented can improve women farmers' access to land. Similarly, the GoO had decided to include a gender column in the land records and there was a small pilot initiative by Landesa to train SHG leaders on how to add their names in the family land records. The scaling up of this activity can help many women farmers who currently cultivate land in their family's/

husband's name to add their names to the land records under existing legal frameworks, thereby enhancing their access to credit and entitlements and facilitating their recognition as farmers.

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**Authors:** Pranab Ranjan Choudhury & Pravanjan Mohapatra

**Series editor:** Mercedes Stickler

**Publication Design & Illustrations:** Navin Kumar Amang

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