

CHAPTER: 01

FOSTERING GRAM SWARAJ IN THE IMPOVERISHED AND DROUGHT-PRONE BUNDELKHAND

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ABSTRACT

Bundelkhand has become synonymous with droughts, distress, and poverty. The recurring droughts have seriously impacted the local economy leading to distress, forcing people towards borrowing from money lenders, mass migration, starvation deaths, farmers' suicides, and even the "mortgaging" of women. The region once famous for the historic Chandeli tanks – built by the Chandeli kings a thousand years ago is now known for droughts and poverty. The appalling condition of the region has remained the same over the years despite several efforts. People's Science Institute (PSI) took the initiative of addressing the regional problems by applying the concept of Gram Swaraj. Through community mobilization, participatory micro-planning, local institution building and convergence with different government and non-government programs, it has helped in promoting water, food, nutrition and livelihood security across 50 villages of Panna district. The model demonstrates the potential of Gram Swaraj in making a drought and poverty free Bundelkhand.

Keywords: Gram Swaraj, Participatory approach, Sustainable agriculture, Institution building, Bundelkhand

INTRODUCTION

Bundelkhand: A Region full of Challenges

The Bundelkhand region of India, having an area of 7.08 M Ha covers 13 districts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. According to the 2011 Census, the total population of the region is 18.32 M out of which over 79% is rural and SC and ST population accounted for 0 percent. The overall literacy in the region is little over 69 percent (57% in case of female).

The annual rainfall ranges from 768 to 1068 mm, 90% of which is received between July to September (Singh R., et al., 2022). There has been massive deforestation in Bundelkhand since the colonial rule (Perspectives, 2010). Presently, only 17 percent of the total area is under forests (Chavan et al., 2016).

Bundelkhand is a predominantly agrarian economy; with 80% of population dependent on agriculture, livestock, and usufructs from forests in addition to income from seasonal migration (Prasad, R., et al., 2014). Cultivated area is about 50% of the total area. Despite 45% of the net sown area (Gulati et al., 2021) being in irrigated command, agriculture is mostly rainfed, not able to fulfill even the subsistence requirements of most of the people.

Majority of farmers in Bundelkhand are small and marginal farmers (with average land holding of 3 to 4 acres). Local farmers either become dependent on taking loans from moneylenders or forced to migrate and work as laborers. The seasonal calendar of the region shows that agricultural activities begin from June with the onset of the monsoon and continue for the next two months. The region witnesses large scale migration by the landless and marginal farmers from November to June (Perspectives, 2010).

It is a region having inequitable distribution of resources (Singh and Joshi, 2020). The Zamindari system has always flourished here. The news of suicides of farmers from Bundelkhand have now become a common thing (Rastogi, 2017). This is because of uneven distribution of resources and faulty developmental activities and schemes of government departments.

The social structure of Bundelkhand makes it very difficult for the departmental schemes to reach the needy. Only resourceful people avail the benefits of the departmental schemes resulting in widening the valley between rich and poor. Distress borrowing, mass migration, starvation deaths, farmers' suicides and even the "mortgaging" of women have become an issue over the years.

There are several examples in the country- such as the Sukha Mukti Abhiyan in Palamau (*Sukha Mukti Abhiyan (1993-96)*, n.d.), Sukhomajri in Haryana (Khurana, 2005), and Ralegan Siddhi in Maharashtra (Mehta et al., 2008)- which show that whenever local communities are involved in the process of planning, implementation and management of development activities based on the concept of Gandhiji's Gram Swaraj (Sharma et al., 2008), they bring significant change in the living conditions of the people.

Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (GSA) - A Way Forward

People's Science Institute (PSI), is an NGO based in Dehraund, Uttarakhand. Between 2002-06, it undertook a successful large scale development program 'Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (GSA)' in the KBK region

of western Odisha in response to the starvation deaths of 2001. It was a program of self-reliant development based on plans prepared by local communities covering 31 villages.¹

Looking at the success of the program in Odisha, and based on the situation analysis of Bundelkhand, PSI decided to intervene in the distressed region keeping in mind the approach of GSA. The work of community driven protection of natural resources and livelihood promotion required social activism. There was a need to create a system facilitating inclusive and sustainable development for the deprived people. With this understanding, the GSA program was started in 5 districts of Bundelkhand (Chhatarpur, Damoh, Lalitpur, Mahoba, and Panna) in January 2012. An operation guideline for the GSA was prepared (Fig. 1.1).

Under GSA, micro level planning was done in 50 tribal dominated villages of the above districts. PSI's team and other local NGOs facilitated the communities to prepare their village development plans (VDPs), in which planning was done for every family of the village. In just one year, the VDPs were prepared and further approved in the *Gram Sabha*. Physical works were done through convergence with departmental schemes. People made collective efforts to solve the long-drawn problems related to different issues. *Mahila Mangal Dal* was formed at the village level to work on pressing social issues like education, health and purdah system.

Encouraged by the above success during past ten years, PSI further extended the GSA program in 50 additional villages of Panna and Chattarpur districts of Bundelkhand with the financial support of Sir Doravji Tata Education Trust, Mumbai and Azim Premji Foundation, Bengaluru (Fig.1.2).

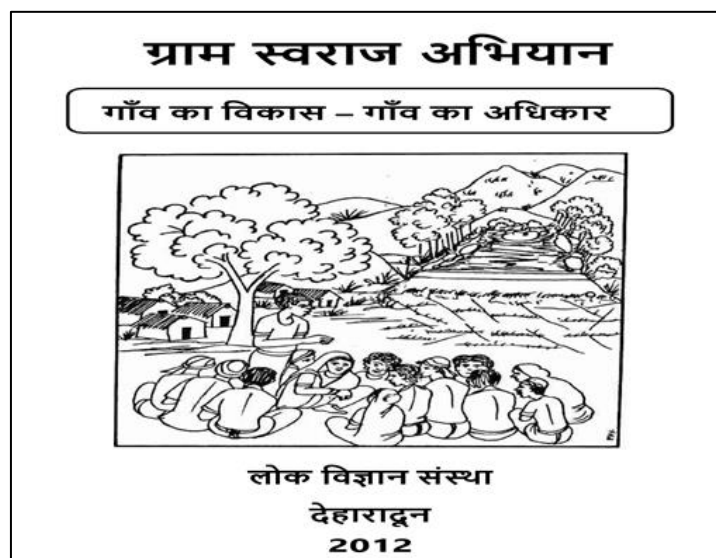


Figure 1.1: Operational guidelines of Gram Swaraj Abhiyan

¹ The central activity of this programme was to prepare village and panchayat level development plans. The process motivated local communities to identify development projects, establish village-level institutions, volunteer labour (*shramdan*) and access government funds to implement their projects.

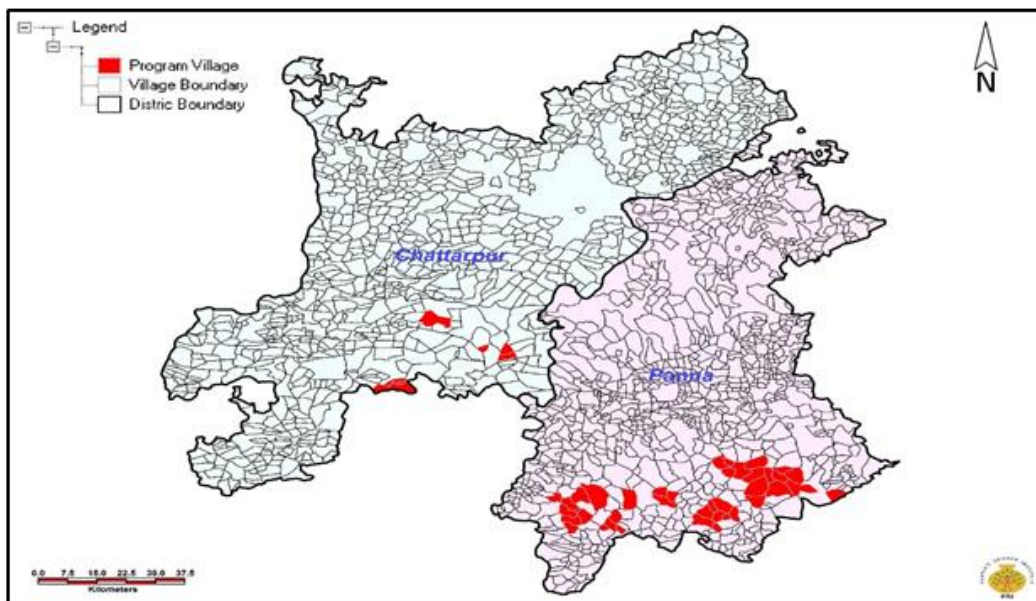


Figure 1.2: Villages covered under GSA in Bundelkhand

METHODOLOGY

a. Team formation

For efficient implementation of the GSA, it was necessary to have a competent team involving the local youth, that could understand the critical issues of the concerned villages, increase social activism and enhance the capacity of the villagers and support them for efficient management of natural resources to promote livelihood security in a sustainable manner. A female worker (*Lok Sevak*) was selected from every village to work on social issues and increase social activism. At the same time, a male worker as a community resource person (CRP) was selected from each village for natural resources management, sustainable agricultural practices, and livelihood promotion. A total of 20 *Lok Sevaks* and 40 CRPs were trained (Fig. 1.3).

In addition to the above, village engineers were designated at the Panchayat level to undertake soil and water conservation works at the village level. 14 Master Trainers were identified at the Panchayat level and trained to ensure an in-depth understanding of the technical subjects and program activities. The process of formation of the team was also based on the ideology of Gram Swaraj. Meetings were held at the village level to select the team members with the consent of the villagers. The selected members were given intensive training on various subjects forming a strong local team.



Figure 1.3: Role of local team members

b. Micro-level planning

For GSA, VDPs needed to be prepared in the selected villages ensuring the participation of every household in the village, hence micro-level planning process was adopted. Various PRA exercises such as transect walk, timeline, trend analysis, seasonal mapping, social mapping, resource mapping, Venn/Chapatti diagrams, and daily schedules were undertaken to identify the critical issues in a participatory manner. Both men and women participated in micro-level planning getting the opportunity to analyze the situation of their village, which paved the way for identifying, prioritizing, and working on the problem areas (Fig.1.4) .

The major environmental problems listed during the planning included droughts, excess rains, lack of irrigation, less fertile land, uneven agricultural land, deforestation, and wild animals. Among the socio-economic problems, scarcity of fodder, low crop productivity, food and livelihood insecurity, excessive workload on women, non-functioning of village level institutions, improper functioning of schools, lack of social security, purdah system, drug addiction, and debt problems were also highlighted.

After analysing each issue, possible solutions were discussed, appropriate solutions were selected, and VDPs (including social and technical interventions) were prepared and responsibilities of existing and/or potential institutions were decided.



Figure 1.4: Micro level planning

c. Institution building

It was necessary to ensure community mobilization for effective implementation of the VDPs. Hence, social organizations were formed and/or strengthened at different levels according to the nature of the tasks (Fig. 1.5).



Figure 1.5: Local institutions and their roles

- (i) **Aam sabha:** Communities were mobilized to strengthen the effectiveness of public meetings at the village level. Gram Sabha in the villages is generally held four times in a year. In these Gram Sabha meetings, attended by the Panchayat representatives, there is hardly any discussion on the issues of the deprived sections as there is lack of their active participation. For the active participation of the

vulnerable sections and women, it was necessary that their issues be discussed in advance and the concerning proposals be placed in the Gram Sabha.

For the above purpose, the meetings of the General Assembly (Aam Sabha) were regularized. In these Aam Sabha meetings, men and women of all the households of the village participated and. Also, social issues were put forward in these meetings and efforts were made to create a common consensus of men and women, which ensured subsequent effectiveness of the work.

- (ii) Gram Swaraj Committee (GSC):** To ensure the selection of deserving beneficiaries and quality of works implemented by the Panchayat or other departments, Gram Swaraj Committee (GSC) was formed at the village level. The GSC was made accountable for the decisions taken at Aam Sabha meetings and monitor the implementation of planned activities. They supervised the construction of all soil and water conservations works, decided by the Aam Sabha and approved through Gram Panchayats, government departments and other agencies.

Over the years, the GSCs have gained confidence in conducting Aam Sabhas, preparing proposals and following it up with concerned agencies and ensuring quality works. They conduct quarterly meetings of the Aam Sabha where proposals are reviewed, physical progress and quality of works are discussed, and financial transparency is ensured. They actively participate in the Gram Panchayat meetings.

- (iii) Mahila Mangal Dal (MMD):** Various issues related to women came to the fore during the micro-level planning exercises. Men also accepted with equal seriousness that there was a need to work on these issues. Since, women hardly participated in the Aam Sabha or Gram Sabha meetings at the village and/or Panchayat levels, there was a felt need of having a separate platform, Mahila Mangal Dal (MMD), to raise their concerns.

Women members from each household were mobilized with the help of Lok Sevaks to form MMDs in the villages to work on issues related to women like purdah system, drinking water, excessive workload on women, women's health, effect of men's drug addiction on women and other social issues at the village level. After the establishment of MMDs, discussion on these issues started and proposals were submitted to the concerned government departments for resolving the problems, as required.

- (iv) Farmers Interest Group (FIG):** In the Aam Sabha meetings, it was decided to encourage the small and marginal farmers to form small Farmers Interest Groups (FIGs) to discuss their agriculture related problems, share resources (labour and equipment) and skills for promoting sustainable agricultural practices like System of Crop Intensification and Natural Farming. A total of 96 FIGs were formed whose meetings were held on fortnightly basis. Participation of women was ensured in these groups. FIGs were provided training related to seed selection and treatment, sowing methods, pest control, crop protection etc. These groups also helped in solving the problem of stray animals. Farmers of the same FIGs adopted collective farming establishing group nurseries, and helping each other in

transplanting, weeding and other farming activities. FIGs helped not only in reducing the cost of cultivation but also saving time and created an environment of mutual cooperation in the villages.

d. Livelihood Interventions

(i) **Farm ponds:** Farmers' problems in the villages used to get exacerbated due to uncertain and untimely rains. Water retention capacity of the soil, especially in the uplands is very poor, hence rain water harvesting was suggested as possible solution. The villagers along with PSI's team came up with the idea of constructing farm ponds with the help of village labour. Potential farmers and lands were selected especially from the vulnerable households for the construction of farm ponds. The site for construction of the pond was selected based on the catchment area. The soil taken out from the excavation of farm pond was used to build a ridge in the field (Fig. 1.6). This work was done without the use of any machine generating local employment. The farmers contributed 20 percent of the labour cost in building the farm ponds. A total of 250 farm ponds were dug, which not only provided life-saving irrigation to the crops but also helped in recharging wells downstream.



Figure 1.6: Farm pond



Figure 1.7: Earthen check dam repair

(ii) **Earthen dams:** Due to lack of financial resources for digging individual wells and to avoid over exploitation of groundwater, it was decided to build small earthen dams on suitable drainage lines. Sites were identified considering catchment areas having good inflows and unirrigated lands as command areas. During discussions in the Aam Sabha meetings, it was highlighted that such works done in the past lacked proper planning and quality work, rendering most of the earthen dams built by the departments in dilapidated condition. Proposals were prepared for repair of old dams and construction of new earthen dams. 36 earthen dams and repair of six earthen dams were carried out in 23 villages, irrigating 1380 acres benefitting 1000 households (Fig. 1.7). The villagers contributed 20 per cent of the costs in the form of labour while close supervision of GSCs ensured quality work.



Figure 1.8: Sustainable crop intensification in Mustard



Figure 1.9: Tools in resource centre

- (iii) Sustainable agricultural practices:** In the discussions held during micro level planning, low-cost sustainable agricultural practices including crop diversification, intercropping, organic and non-pesticide management were suggested. The principles of System of Rice Intensification (SRI) and natural farming were tried and adapted according to the local conditions in different crops including wheat, maize, pigeon pea, and mustard (Fig. 1.8). Regular training was held at the FIG level by the master trainers. Initially, a smaller number of farmers started adopting these methods, however, gradually their numbers increased. About 3556 farmers have been able to adopt sustainable agricultural practices in 907 ha, increasing crop production by 30 to 60 percent. It helped farmers to reduce input costs, reduce agriculture risk, and increase crop yields.
- (iv) Technology resource centers:** The availability of small farming tools was highlighted as a constraint in the village-level meetings. Farming tools were thereby designed as per the local soil conditions, fabricated and made available at the village level. Similarly, bio-inputs (like Agniyastra, Mathastra, Kanda Pani, Jeevamrit, Matka Khad etc.) were required for promoting sustainable agricultural practices as many farmers were unable to make these themselves. During the MMD meetings, the issue of unavailability of quality local seeds was also raised. 34 Technology Resource Centers (TRCs) were therefore established across the villages to ensure availability of bio-inputs, seed and farm equipment at the same place (Fig. 1.9). 24 varieties of local seeds are available as seed banks at these TRCs. Farmers take equipment from the TRCs on rent. Farmers who require local seeds and ready bio inputs purchase them from these centers. Some TRCs have also started establishing community nurseries in polytunnels for providing vegetable seedlings.
- (v) Nutrition gardens:** According to the villagers, due to deforestation, the availability of fruits and vegetables had reduced, depriving the natives of required nutrition. They grew only 3-4 fruits and vegetables near their house mainly during monsoon. Other times, they mostly consumed dry *chapatis* with salt or *chutney* resulting in nutrition deficiency. Discussions led to the decision of establishing nutrition gardens near the house (Fig.1.10). Initially, a small model of nutrition garden of 10 x 20 feet was adopted, which was gradually increased as per availability of land and water. With the help of training from PSI's team, MMD's support and seeds from TRCs, 4350 nutrition gardens have been established, in which 16 types of nutritious vegetables are available throughout the year. 13 solar pump sets have further been installed for supplying water to the nutrition gardens of 156 households. Various types of nutritious vegetables like green vegetables, carrot, radish, beetroot, green gram etc. have now been included in the food plate.



Figure 1.10: Nutrition garden



Figure 1.11: Bamboo goat shed

(vi) Goat rearing: A total of 540 families were identified who practiced goat rearing in an unorganized manner. There was lack of vaccination facilities, feed management, and provisions for goat sheds. During the village-level discussions, many of the above families shared the challenges faced by them. Exposure visit was arranged for the goat rearing families to expose them to successful practices. Subsequently, a goat rearing program was developed including components of vaccination, feed management, and shelter management. 12 *Pashu Sakhis* were trained to extend support to the goat rearing families in the form of vaccination and better feed management. Goat sheds have been prepared using local bamboo, providing hygienic conditions (Fig. 1.11). The mortality rate of goats has reduced. Farmers who used to keep only 2 to 3 goats, are now keeping 10 to 15 goats. Today goat rearing is known as farmer's ATM.

(vii) Other activities: The GSCs have been able to access Rs. 5.1 crore worth of convergence in government programs. Convergence and community contributions have led to the construction of bandstands, roads, community and farm ponds, earthen check dams and different soil and water conservation works. Plantation drives have been organized through community participation.

Drinking water shortage has been resolved in many villages where villagers agreed to share their water sources and/or contribute free labor, in addition to support from government schemes and MLA Nidhi Fund. One such example is that of Shri Milan Singh, a farmer of Makkepala village who agreed to donate water from his private well for the benefit of other villagers. Drinking water was made available in two villages by installing solar panels and irrigation water was made available in 25 villages by installing solar panels (Fig. 1.12).

The MMDs have been very effective in regularizing the operation of inactive schools, timely vaccination, and distribution of nutritious food in the Anganwadi. 1260 households were covered under various social security schemes by convergence.



Figure 1.12: Solar panel for drinking water supply



Figure 1.13: Haat in Bilpura village after land acquisition

RESULTS

The wide range of community driven livelihood interventions based on micro planning and institution building have led to transformation of the concerned villages moving them back on the track of self-reliance. The impacts of various activities are summarised in Table 1.1. The villagers who during the micro planning exercises, had earlier felt that it would be impossible to meet their household needs of

grains and vegetables due to lack of water, low fertile lands, and absence of suitable farm machinery, are now confident and are even selling surplus in the markets.

Table 1.1: Major activities and impacts of Gram Swaraj Abhiyan in Bundelkhand

S. No.	Major Activities	Impacts
1	4350 nutrition gardens	Fresh vegetables for 8-12 months in a year
2	250 farm ponds	Protective irrigation; Increase in Kharif Crop productivity: 39%; Increase in Rabi Crop productivity: 87%
3	36 earthen dams and repair of 6 earthen dams	Increase in irrigated area by 552 ha benefitting 1000 households
4	13 solar pumps	156 households benefitted
5	Goat rearing	540 households benefitted
6	34 Technology Resource Centres	Access to tools, bio-inputs, 24 varieties of local seeds and vegetable seedlings
7	Low-cost sustainable agricultural practices	3566 farmers benefitted (907 ha) 30% to 60% increase in crop productivity
8	Convergence with government departments/schemes	Rs. 5.1 crore worth of convergence led to water conservation and plantation; 1260 households covered under social security schemes

More than 1000 households have been ensured of fresh vegetables for 8-12 months in a year from the nutrition gardens. Commercial vegetable cultivation has been taken up by 455 families, reporting an average 115% increase in their annual income. Off-farm activities, including goat rearing have been adopted by 1000 households. In all, annual income of 2500 families have increased by Rs. 15,000 on an average. The FIGs are now looking forward to come together and form a Farmer Produce Organization.

Following are some case studies highlighting how households in different villages have come together for inclusive community development.

Case Study 1: Fencing of School through Shramdaan

In Saraikheda village, Bilpura Panchayat, villagers used to gather in the courtyard of the school to hold meetings. Earlier fencing (made of wire mesh and iron angles) installed in the school boundary had been uprooted by some families for their personal use at homes. Since the school had no boundary, animals littered the area. Whenever meetings were held, the area had to be first cleaned with water. During the discussions at the micro-level planning in 2014, people accepted that it was their own fault, and accepted the responsibility to solve this problem. Since the installation costs of wire fencing would be high, they decided to go for bio-fencing. As per the fixed schedule, all the villagers gathered and completed the work in two days. Few families who were unable to give labor contribution, provided monetary support. The fact that the same villagers who had earlier destroyed the fencing for personal benefit, had developed a sense of responsibility and collectively contributed towards the construction of the new school fencing, is highly commendable.

Case Study 2: Removing Encroachment for the Weekly Market

In 2015, MMD of Bilpura village started a weekly (Tuesday) haat (market) in Siharan, where 12 ST families started selling vegetables, grains etc. Over the years, the market expanded. Since the market was set up on both sides of the main road, the MMD realized that there was a risk for the buyers and children being hurt due to passing by vehicles. In 2020, the MMD started demanding for allocation of separate land for the market for which they identified 2.5 acres' government land adjacent to the existing roadside market, but it was found to be encroached by a person from General Caste of the same village. He was not ready to part up with the land. In September 2021, MMD of Bilpura collectively approached the Tehsildar of Raipura Tehsil and Patwari for getting the land freed and re-establish the market there. The land was finally freed from encroachment and handed over to the Haat Bazaar Committee, following which the MMD set up shops at the new place, bringing the dispute to end (Fig. 1.13).

Case Study 3: Women's Bathroom through Labour Contribution

Saraikheda village of Bilpura Panchayat, has only one well as a source of potable water. The residents not only take drinking water from this well but also go there to take bath. During the micro level planning exercise, women shared that despite of the prevailing purdah system, they were forced to take bath in the open near the well as it was not possible to bring water from the well located far away from their home for bathing. Many women reported of having skin diseases as they were not able to take bath properly in the open. During further discussions, the villagers suggested building a bathroom near the well, to resolve the above problem. Next, the villagers came together and contributed labour for construction of the proposed bathroom. It took the villagers two days to complete the bathroom. Now women do not have to bathe in the open, retaining their dignity.

**Case
Study**



Figure 1.14: Construction of bandstand by shramdan in Bilha tola of Makkepala village



Figure 1.15: Men and women of Jamunpura and Pandapura tolas coming together to organize meetings in Aloni village

4:

Constructing Bandstand with Labor Contribution

In Bilha Tola of village Makkepala, when all the villagers gathered for micro-level planning, there was no place available for them to sit together. There is a banyan tree in the village, under which there was a small platform in a very dilapidated condition. The villagers decided to construct a low-cost platform in the form of bandstand through labour contribution (Fig. 1.14). Since stones were available in the village

itself, it was not required to be purchased. Initially some young men and women came forward and initiated the work, and soon all the men and women of the village joined them. Members of almost every family participated in the construction of the platform. The villagers worked four to five hours a day for three consecutive days and built a beautiful platform. Now more than 100 men and women can sit together and hold gatherings on this platform. It has become an accessible, pleasant, and inspiring place for the villagers.

Case Study 5: MMD brings Communal Harmony

Aloni is a small village in Shahnagar block having 65 ST families. In 2013, due to a mutual dispute between Jamunpura and Pandapura Tolas, the entire village got divided into two groups. Due to the above reason, the development work of the village started getting hampered, disagreements would arise on small matters and no decisions could be taken. In 2014, when PSI initiated the GSA program in this village, due to the existing conflicts, separate meetings were held in the two localities, involving women and explaining them it was necessary for all the villagers to join together, discuss and participate in the planning and implementation of development works. The women of both the localities got together and established MMD at the village level. A consensus was soon reached among men that even if they do not participate in each other's functions, they should participate in the village development works. When water conservation works were started, gradually support from the entire village started coming in. Thereafter, GSC was formed at the village level having representatives from both the localities. The entire village put together a VDP through micro level planning exercises. At present, men and women from both the localities participate in village-level meetings and development activities (Fig. 1.15).

DISCUSSIONS

The GSA (GSA) was an attempt to analyse and solve the regional problems of Bundelkhand from the lens of the local communities. Set in the participatory framework, the program aimed to take the people of Bundelkhand out of the vicious circle of poverty, and to build community resilience. It is a demonstration of an appropriate approach to drought-proofing. The climate-resilient GSA model based on the principles of productivity, sustainability, equity, diversity, inclusivity and self-reliance; emphasizes on water conservation and sustainable agriculture for water, food, nutritional and livelihood security. In several villages of Bundelkhand, people have begun demanding more development programs along the lines of the GSA.

GSA has become a model program for participatory resource management. It emphasized the representation of women and weaker sections. Most importantly, the process of micro-planning helped establish a sense of ownership of the developmental activities performed among the villagers. One of the most enabling factors was the formation and strengthening of the local level community-based institutions. Transparency was ensured in all the transactions through display boards at all the sites showcasing the information related to the program. It aided in the creation of a local talent pool of dozens of barefoot engineers and project managers now existing in many of the villages.

The biggest gain made by the GSA was that the people's trust was won and their confidence built up. The beneficiaries viewed the Abhiyan as their own program rather than a government one. The three-way partnership (involving local communities, PSI as a facilitating agency and government functionaries/department) of GSA is a very effective model for resolving regional level challenges. It is also clear that village-level institutions can take responsibility for resolving challenges on their own with the help of technical and managerial support. Like any evolving program, the GSA had its share of troubles. Externalities like that of the COVID-19 pandemic slowed the process of village development for some time. Other social challenges such as that of Purdah system hindered the village-level meetings, as women were tight-lipped in front of the male members of the community. This problem was however resolved by forming separate women's groups. Other than this, seasonal migration was a problem that affected adoption of sustainable agricultural practices. Environmental challenges such as erratic rainfall and frost affected the crop production. However, farmlands which adopted sustainable agricultural practices did much better.

The decade long experience of GSA has demonstrated an appropriate approach for bringing in development of the Bundelkhand region. There is still a long way to go – strengthening the three-way partnership process through multi-stakeholders' consultations, building on traditional wisdom, institutional strengthening, applying innovative technologies, effective convergence and appropriate policy interventions. The key to success is that the community needs to be seen not only as the receivers of benefits, but as the agents of change.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare and there are no conflicts of interest.