

Bundelkhand: Building on Partnership

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Working in one of the most backward regions of the country, guiding farmers to build resources and infrastructure, using the latest technological advances to help farmers, PRADAN, in partnership with local NGOs, is supporting the transformation of barren lands into fertile fields as well as infusing confidence in farmers about self sufficiency

THE DRY LANDS OF BUNDELKHAND—A BRIEF BACKGROUND

Geographically, the region of Bundelkhand is the centre of India and, therefore, has played an important part in the history of the country. It covers six districts in north Madhya Pradesh—MP—(Datia, Tikamgarh, Chhatarpur, Panna, Sagar and Damoh) and seven districts in south Uttar Pradesh—UP—(Jhansi, Lalitpur, Jalaun, Hamirpur, Mahoba, Banda and Chitrakoot). It is located in the central Hindi belt, south of the Yamuna, between the fertile Gangetic plains, stretching across northern Uttar Pradesh and the highlands of central Madhya Pradesh.

Once considered a prosperous region, this is now one of the most backward regions in the country. Prolonged drought, low industrial growth, rampant poverty and apathy of the administration have forced the people to migrate from this region. Since early 1960s, there has been discontent in the area; and there has been a call to establish a separate state of Bundelkhand.

The Bundelkhand region is drained by a number of rivers of the Yamuna river system. The main rivers are Yamuna in the north, Ken in east, and Betwa and Pahuj in the west. River Yamuna flows from west to east and its first order tributaries—Betwa, Ken, Pahuj, Baghain and Paisuni flow from south to north. Also flowing along the west are the Sindh and the Chambal rivers whereas Narmada flows in the south. Betwa, Ken and Pahuj are the main rivers; their seasonal fluctuations, however, are very great. For example, the average annual discharge of Ken is around 800 cusecs; in winter it falls to around 300 cusecs, and it dwindles to practically nothing in May. Such fluctuations undermine the security of irrigation.

Unfavourable rainfall patterns and geological and topographical conditions, coupled with the lack of a proper planning strategy for water harvesting, have made the Bundelkhand region prone to water shortages. The region receives an annual precipitation in the range of 200 to 1,000 mm with 20 to 50 days of rainfall every year. A popular saying in the region is: *Gagari na phoote, chahe balam mar jaye* (Let the water pot not break, even if the husband dies). The above statement sums up fairly accurately the value of water in the Bundelkhand region. The non-availability of water is a major concern in the region.

The J.S. Samra Committee report on the drought mitigation strategy for Bundelkhand states that, historically, in 18th and 19th centuries, the Bundelkhand region of UP and MP experienced a drought once in 16 years. The frequency of these droughts increased three-fold from 1968–92. The most recent and continued period of poor rainfall recorded in Bundelkhand was in 2004–07 and in 2009–10, when below average and erratic rain was reported in most parts of the region through all the years.

The long dry spells lead to people sinking bore-wells and overusing the ground water. Except in Jalaun district of UP, all other districts of Bundelkhand show a projected annual groundwater availability of less than half a billion cubic metres.

Mahoba and Chitrakoot are two districts where the annual groundwater balance is close to zero, indicating that the groundwater abstraction is far larger than the annual recharge. Jhansi in UP, and Damoh and Tikamgarh in MP are not too far behind.

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This has a negative impact on the local moisture regime. Many attempts by the government and the farmers at digging wells and bore-wells have failed due to improper selection of sites and also because there is no focus on improving the water-table through in-situ, rainwater harvesting. The water scarcity is alarming and

it adversely affects the people, the ecology and the socio-economic development of the region, particularly the life of the resource-poor, farming communities of small-holders. The Scheduled Tribes (ST) and the Scheduled Castes (SC) are the most deprived in terms of irrigation support because they have to mostly rely on purchasing water from a higher class person, who owns the bore-wells and wells.

CHALLENGES

Status of women in Bundelkhand

As in most other rural parts of the country, women in Bundelkhand's villages toil from dawn to dusk—cooking, working in the fields, grazing cattle, collecting dung, collecting water, collecting firewood, doing manual labour at construction sites—and their contribution is not realized. When they work for wages, women get lower daily wages. This is an unchallenged norm. In the entire Bundelkhand region, there are no strong and extensive women's rights movements although many small, localized efforts do exist. Domestic violence is common in Bundelkhand and largely remains uncontested. Among the forms of violence practised is the literal demonstration of the phrase *naak katwana*—the woman's nose is chopped off. Women from the SC groups are also vulnerable to sexual assault by upper caste men.

Social and political challenges

From the time of the Chandelas, Bundelkhand's ruling clans have claimed high Rajput status and behaved accordingly. A feudal culture emerged and remains quite strong, especially in some of the Bundelkhand districts of MP such as Tikamgarh.

The chief features of the feudal culture include:

Sense of honour: Even after losing all power and privileges, the Bundelas remain highly conscious of their claim to upper caste status. The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India report that any low-caste person, who passed by a Bundela house, had to salute them with the words, "*Diwan ji ko Ram Ram*". No lower caste person could go past the house of a Bundela, riding on a pony or holding up an umbrella. Women had to take off their footwear when they went past a Bundela house.

Rules of Dadus: Across Bundelkhand's villages and in its local newspapers, one routinely comes across people being harassed or terrorized by *dadus*—equivalent of *dabang*, a common North Indian word for one who exercises power through the use of force. In Bundelkhand, the *dadu* is usually a member of a family that has enjoyed feudal privileges in the past and has not accepted the realities of democratic politics and society. The *dadus* continue to lord over many villages, maintaining control over key resources of land and water bodies, *panchayat* affairs and expenditure of public money. There can be more than one *dadu* in a village and they usually work together, with areas of control implicitly demarcated.

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Although Wcaste-based discrimination has decreased in the last 10–15 years, it is still prevalent in some form in the Bundelkhand region. The communities are still structured along feudal lines and caste, with the lower-caste women at the bottom of the rung. The status of the SC and the ST is lower than that of the general population. There is an unequal distribution of assets, especially land, which makes these groups economically vulnerable.

Occupationally, a high proportion of the labour class belongs to the SC and the ST, which makes them vulnerable to discrimination and exploitation at the hands of their upper class employers.

Local and mainstream institutions

Local institutions such as *gram panchayats* are in an abysmal condition. If a *gram pradhan* comes from a particular community, her/his emphasis is to give maximum benefits to her/his vote bank, caste and clan, and s/he does not particularly care for the overall development of the *panchayat* or the village. Although many water bodies have been developed in the villages, the emphasis is more on utilizing funds and making money. There is no participatory planning, and structures that are constructed do not follow the top-to-bottom approach but focus more on the construction of big structures that attract greater funds. Large farm ponds are dug at the top of the fields where there is no scope of catching the running water except from direct rain. And when the scheme fails to conserve water, these institutions declare that this technology is not suitable for Bundelkhand.

Timely payment in schemes such as MGNREGA is a big issue and a hindrance to these schemes.

Civil society institutions

There are also many small civil society organizations at the grass roots, working in the Bundelkhand region. These organizations are mostly localized and are formed by the local people, who understand the local context. However, due to lack of experience, expertise and regular presence in a single domain for a long period, they are not able to demonstrate a good developmental model in this region. Because of the absence of a good development model, influencing the mainstream institution is also a challenge, especially in the UP part of Bundelkhand.

Some of the organizations have considerable experience of working with the community and have been working on various issues prominent in the area.

INITIATIVES

Sir Dorabji Tata Trust (SDTT) launched the Bundelkhand Initiative, to address poverty and inequities in the Bundelkhand region, through partnership with local NGOs. However, there were problems because there were no specific livelihood prototypes for the region, and also the potential partner NGOs lacked the experience and the technical capabilities for promoting livelihood interventions.

PRADAN, in its effort to reach out to the very poor population in weaker areas,

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identified Bundelkhand for developing partnerships with existing local NGOs. PRADAN and SDTT initiated a joint endeavour, wherein PRADAN would be the knowledge and resource partner of the NGOs whereas SDTT would provide the financial support to the partner organizations. PRADAN then initiated a pilot project in the region, with the focus on enriching and introducing Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM)-based livelihood planning processes, and enhancing the competencies of the NGO partners for implementation of livelihood enhancement activities.

This was a new approach for PRADAN, wherein instead of directly working with the community, it would support existing organizations to reach out to a larger section of the poor and, in turn, build the capacities of small NGOs, which would gain immense learning from the endeavour. PRADAN began work in the new region by setting up a small team of three people—one executive and two technical staff—to support the endeavour. PRADAN supported 18 NGOs in six districts of Bundelkhand. They were to gain from the expertise of PRADAN and initiate INRM-based livelihood programmes, and received the grant directly from the SDTT for one year.

Bundelkhand Development Consortium (BDC)

The first organization PRADAN supported was Akhil Bhartiya Samaj Sewa Sansthan (ABSSS) in Bundelkhand. Working with ABSSS gave PRADAN the confidence to build partnerships with other NGOs in the region.

As part of the PRADAN team, we had many challenges, including building a relationship of trust and support with the NGOs in the implementation of the projects within the short time-frame of one year. We made it very clear

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to the partners that we would were a resource organization and would not be taking on the monitoring role. The staff in the organizations was unaware of the new technology available for soil and water conservation, agriculture and so on. Moreover, the organizations had not had a chance to work on a larger canvas earlier because so far most of their projects were donor driven. The flow of funds and the availability of human resources was also a big challenge for the NGOs although they were keen to work in the field even with very limited resources. A continuous flow of funds to sustain themselves was the biggest challenge for them. So, in order to sustain themselves, they took up projects that did not follow a larger vision for the community or the region. In the absence of a flow of funds, the staff sometimes worked without remuneration.

Being in close interaction with the local NGOs, PRADAN had the opportunity to witness the struggles faced by smaller organizations. Despite initial differences with them, our team members began building a relationship with the staff in the organization. The relationship that developed was more collegial in nature, in which the organizations felt free to seek each others' support and also share their experiences of success and failures. Through regular engagement, several NGO partners began to share information with each other as well. Meetings involved planning, reviewing and giving feedback to each other.

We extended our support to all the organizations in the field, according to their needs and priority. As a group, we also

promoted a culture wherein the partners come together, share a platform and support each other's growth. For us, at PRADAN, it meant learning and improving our skills of functioning in peer groups.

After technical discussions, we also spent time trying to understand each partner's strengths and weakness and how we could learn from each other.

Practising this regularly helped the partners and us to develop a healthy relationship with each other. And together, we took the responsibility for any failure and celebrated our successes. "We have been working for many years but the recognition we have received and the good work we have done in the last three years, with the support of PRADAN and other partners, are very impressive," said Abhishek from the Arunoday Sansthan, Mohoba, in one meeting.

Because the partners were funded for only a year, our thrust remained on promoting sustainable livelihoods for the community. For that, two necessary elements had to be ensured: one, to create and strengthen the assets base of families so that they could generate food or income, and two, to enhance the capability of farmers so that they could engage themselves with the assets created.

We planned to build the capacity of the staff of the partner agencies systematically, and conducted a series of trainings to transfer the required knowledge and skills to them so that they could engage with the community. We modified the training modules according to the capability and the language constraints of the staff, and prepared the reading material accordingly. PRADAN also provided hand-holding support at the field level, helped in community mobilization and provided

technical support for planning and implementing projects.

Proud of his team's work, Dhruvji (the Chief functionary of the Margshree Charitable Trust) said, "We never thought of doing this kind of work (work related to INRM) and also didn't have the confidence that we could do any such work, especially in these barren lands. But with support from the network, we have done some very good work and the community has started appreciating us. Our staff is, now, much more confident."

Equipped, thus, both technically and as a collective, the coalition of NGOs set upon the larger task of transforming Bundelkhand. Together, we hoped to usher in development and well-being of the poor and disadvantaged communities in the area.

IMPACT OF PARTNERSHIP

Within a short period of three years, the agencies reached 4,000 families in 45 villages. Of these, 2,300 families benefitted directly through soil and water conservation work, by which infrastructure was created on 1,300 ha. As many as 261 farm ponds were dug on the farmers' land. This was a huge task; the farmers were very sceptical about developing farm ponds on their own land because they assumed that the land would then be unavailable to them for cultivation. The farmers demanded only conventional field bunding on the downstream border of each individual plot, without considering the limitations of bunding, including no uniform moisture regime across the plot or depletion of shallow groundwater resources.

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In some cases, people wanted to sink bore-wells. Through persistent effort, however, it was possible to establish that dividing bigger plots into smaller ones and adopting small, on-farm, water harvesting structures (ponds) would be a better option. We had to convince the farmers that the smaller structures would create better opportunities for crop diversification and reduce the inherent vulnerabilities of

the existing cropping system. In some cases (by the Vidyadham Samity Naina Sansthan, Banda, Abhiyan and Grameen Parampara in Chitrakoot and in others by the MCT, Lalitpur), demonstration of the working of a small, community-managed, lift irrigation system helped farmers understand how they would get assured irrigation. Besides this, a gravity-flow irrigation system (using underground PVC pipes) was implemented by the ABSSS at Tikamgarh.

In brief, the on-field impact of this project is reflected in the longer residence period of surface and shallow surface water beyond the rainy season, an increased moisture regime in the top soil, a recharge of shallow ground water and an overall better crop yield. All the partner-NGOs now are more confident about implementing INRM-based livelihood enhancement programmes.

In the past, the local administration had stopped promoting farm ponds under MGNREGS; in September 2012, it had even published an order in the local newspaper giving instructions not to include farm ponds under MGNREGS. However, upon seeing the results in the field of the Gramonnati Sansthan (in Mahoba) this year, the District Magistrate,

Mohoba, instructed the relevant department and PRIs to take up farm ponds in every farmer's field, while inaugurating one himself.

Similarly, seeing the impact of the work of the other partner organizations (Gramonnati and Arunoday Sansthan), the villagers demanded that their local *gram panchayat* also take up similar land development activities. However, the complexities and the weaknesses in the system of MGNREGS in UP, hindered the mobilization of MGNREGS for convergence with SDTT-supported projects.

Due to the inconsistency of rain in the Bundelkhand region, only 25–30 per cent of the land is sown in the *kharif* season and the farmers rely on the *rabi* season cultivation for their sustenance. *Rabi* crops need to be irrigated. With enhanced stability in the moisture regime, the farmers whose land had been treated in a contiguous patch, now have round-the-year food sufficiency and are getting an incremental income in the range of Rs 20,000–50,000. Farmers have been introduced to new cropping practices for traditional crops such as sesame and black gram. The farmers have cultivated paddy through SRI and DSR methods and much

effort has gone into promoting vegetables to increase income.

Jaykaran, from Chilheta village, Banda district, in the UP region of Bundelkhand, narrated his experience. "I was not convinced about what the people from the NGO (Gram Unmesh) were telling me to do. They were asking me to divide my land into five small patches and do levelling and field bunding in the small patches of land. I talked with the other farmers but no one was convinced and everyone thought that this would drastically reduce the land available for cultivation. Later, I thought that in any case the land lies barren; so there was no harm in trying out what they were suggesting. I did as the NGO staff told me to. And while I was only half-way through the work, the rain came and my small patches of land were filled with water. I had never seen so much water in my land before. I was very happy and with the technical support of the organization, I grew paddy through the SRI method. All villagers thought I had become mad but when the fields became green, everyone stopped by my field to admire my crop. We now have enough rice to sustain us through the year. I am now growing vegetables."



Uncultivated barren land being converted into fertile land in Lalitpur Bar block. Farmer Khilu Sahariya cultivated wheat for the first time on this land.



Ramkripal of Salarpur village, Mahoba, earned Rs 45,000 by adopting the Machan technique for creepers.

Other scope with partner organizations

As PRADAN's relationship with partner organizations developed, the latter sought support from PRADAN on SHG-based community institution building. We arranged for exposure visits of the partner organizations to PRADAN teams in Kesla in MP and Dholpur in Rajasthan for understanding women's collectives better. Community Resource Persons (CRPs) from Dholpur provided training to SHG members. Six partners have visited Dholpur and the entire collective (BDC) has seen the Kesla team's work. One partner (Society for Pragati Bharat, Lalitpur) also hired CRPs of Saheli Federation from Dholpur, to train their SHG members. They are very excited about adopting the processes and approaches in which PRADAN believes.

The organizations also showed a keen interest in understanding PRADAN's systems and approaches and sought its support in

improving financial and HR systems. PRADAN scheduled a training for them on finance and organization development. Experts from within PRADAN were invited. This training had not been conceptualized in the design by SDTT but emerged through the close partnership. There was transparency, accountability and mutual learning in the partnership.

BUILDING A COLLECTIVE VISION FOR BUNDELKHAND

After three years, there has been a visible change in the approach of the organizations. They are now more pro-active and seek support from each other, come together, think together, understand mutual strengths and limitations, work together without compromising on individual spaces and create more spaces for collective action to better the living conditions of the people who have been 'left out' for generations.

Isolated efforts by individual agencies will not be able to create such a large impact. If the picture of Bundelkhand is to be changed, organizations must share a collective vision and all steps must lead to achieving that collective vision. With this idea in mind, the Bundelkhand Development Consortium (BDC) was formed. In November 2013, a workshop was organized for all the partner agencies in Kesla, Madhya Pradesh, facilitated by experts. They helped the organizations concretize the picture and collectively create a vision statement.

"Bundelkhand ke vikas ke liye samaan vichar dhara ke logon dwara samanta, pardarshita, sahbhagita, parasparikata, , lok kendrit vikas ke sidhant se karya karega." (People of similar ideology will work together for the development of Bundelkhand upholding

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the principles of equality, transparency, collaboration, mutuality and people centeredness).

WAY AHEAD

In Bundelkhand, over the past one year, BDC is being nurtured. PRADAN believes that such a partnership, built on mutual respect and confidence, will be effective in spreading successful experiences. Considering all these positive initiatives by the partners and the investment made to build this base in Bundelkhand, it makes sense to take it to a logical end. The PRADAN team believes this has created the environment of working as a collective to realize the vision of a better society. The task of transforming Bundelkhand will certainly require long-term and patient engagement of BDC, along with all the other stakeholders.

The references for this article are available on request from newsreach@pradan.net