

Oxfam India is part of a global movement working to fight poverty, injustice and inequality. In India, it works in six states<sup>1</sup>. Oxfam India's programme on Gender Justice aims to address the deeply entrenched gender biased social norms that are responsible for the poor status of women and girls in the society. Oxfam India's effort to address violence against women and girls is well recognised in its current strategy period of 2016-2020. Now it has been aligned with Oxfam's international strategic plan 2013-19 for which advancing gender justice is a core 'Change Goal'. Promoting transformative leadership for women's rights (TLWR) is the central objective of this change goal. This is seen as a strategy to address the root causes of gender inequality. Oxfam India is focusing on TLWR as an approach to gender mainstreaming. Samudram<sup>2</sup>, a cooperative turned producer company, supported by Oxfam India and United Artists Association (UAA) can be seen through the TLWR lens for the changes that it has brought about in the lives of women both at home and in the community.

Oxfam has traditionally believed that increasing women's political partnership is akin to advancement of women's leadership. This is an important strategy as evidence suggests that increasing the participation of women in politics and public life makes a significant difference for women and the society. Transformative leadership for women's rights is about advancing leadership and how women exercise the same. TLWR seeks to transform power relations between men and women in households, village, market and other institutions, and at the level of the government; this catalyses social changes and eventually promotes gender justice.

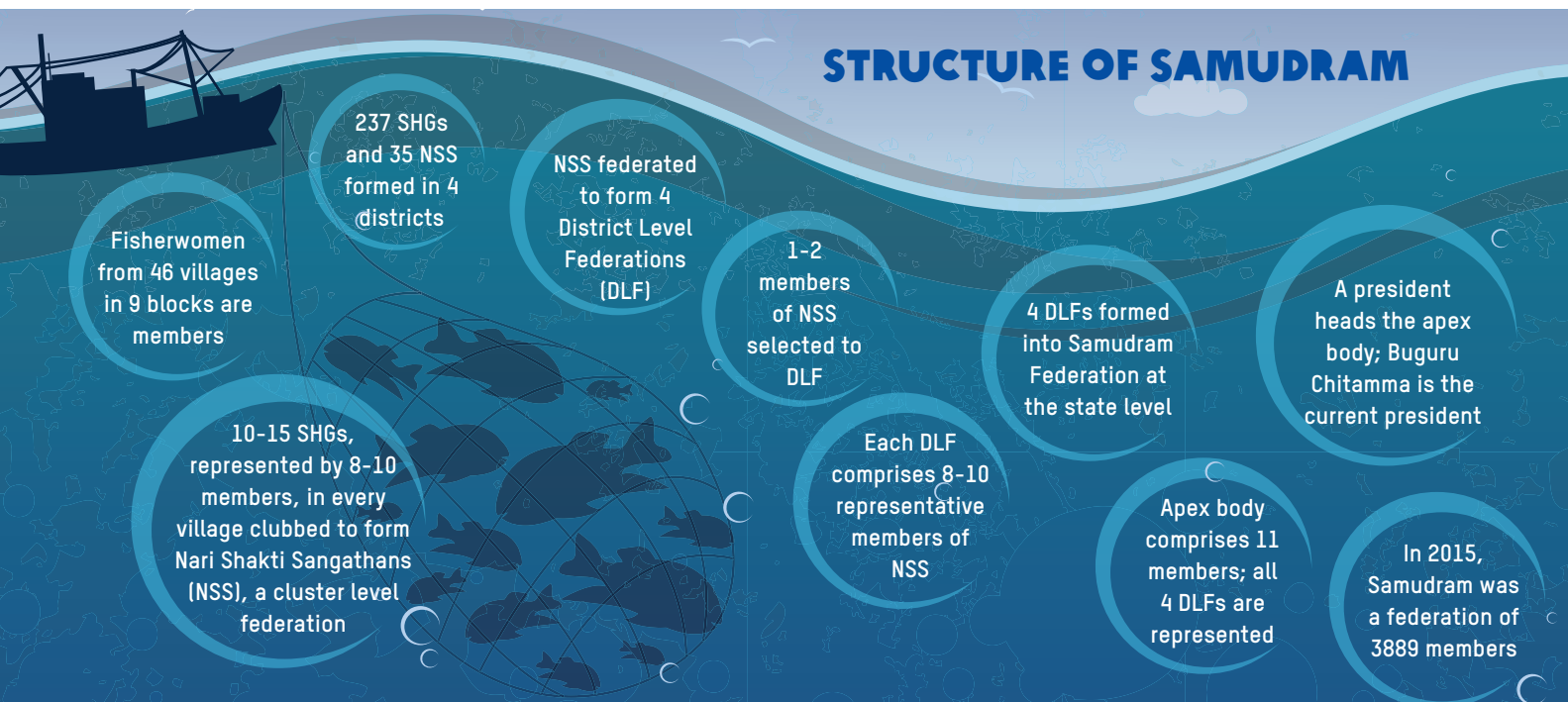
TLWR can be analysed through the individual and systemic changes brought about at both the formal and informal level. The

analytical framework of TLWR can be divided into four parts — power; politics and purpose; principles and values; and practices. The TLWR cycle is complete when any project or programme is able to transform women's access to resources; transform informal norms and exclusionary practices; transform the consciousness of men and women; and transform formal institutions.

Samudram, a fisherwomen's cooperative supported by Oxfam India in Odisha, is a good example of TLWR in operation. In 2009, Oxfam India lent its support to UAA, a Ganjam based NGO, to promote its biggest fisherwomen cooperative. Though the Samudram Federation was already formed in 1993, Oxfam India supported the cooperative with a series of activities to provide market access and ensure livelihood security to Samudram. The support extended to the cooperative helped it evolve and eventually register it as a producer company in 2013 — called the 'Samudram Trading Fisherwomen Collective Producer Company Limited'. The members of Samudram belong to four coastal districts of Odisha — Ganjam, Balasore, Puri, and Jagatsinghpur.

Apart from establishing women as the key player in the fishing community and making them economically independent, Samudram propelled them to take up leadership roles in their communities and transform the equation between the fishing community and government institutions. On the home front, too, the women began taking decisions in matters of buying and selling property and planning for their children's health and education. Samudram helped break a few stereotypical roles, which was unthinkable in the past; women were holding key responsibilities like managing business volumes, identifying markets and managing finance and accounts.

### STRUCTURE OF SAMUDRAM



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF SAMUDRAM

Samudram was born of a long struggle of women of the fisherfolk community. Alcoholism and gambling was a big problem in these parts. The fishermen, who held the purse strings, often spent all the money on liquor leaving nothing for health and education expenses. This also led to incidences of domestic violence. To add to this the fishing villages lacked basic amenities due to the remoteness of these villages. Women of the fisherfolk community came together to fight against alcoholism.

The women, led by a firebrand Buguru Chitamma,<sup>3</sup> raided local liquor brewing units and ensured that they shut down. The women formed themselves into Self Help Groups (SHGs) to fight alcoholism and other social ills like child marriage.

In the 1990's, several SHGs were formed in these districts. UAA which was already working at the grassroots, helped to federate these SHGs at the village and district level in order to strengthen the alliance, and raise a collective and a stronger voice. The SHGs did well in

shutting down local liquor stores and ending child marriage. Till date they hold vigils to keep a tab on both drunkards and liquor brewing units. Samudram imposed a fine of Rs 500 on anyone caught drinking; the fine was divided between the informer (Rs 200) and the SHG (Rs 300). Gradually, over the years, the women have managed to get the police on their side.

The other big problem of the fisherfolk community was indebtedness. The fishermen purchased their nets and boats on a loan from moneylenders, who incidentally were also the traders. In order to pay back, the fisherfolk would sell their catch to the traders at throwaway prices. Lack of storage facilities, reduced catch due to global warming and an impending natural disaster further exacerbated the already weak bargaining power. The SHGs that were formed started with the usual savings-credit activity that helped ease some of these problems. All the groups deposited their savings (anything between Rs 25 and Rs 100 per month) once a month in the Revolving Fund of the respective

groups. The women, who did the back end job of sorting, grading, and trading, were now able to save a small amount every month for their household needs.

However, to escape the local moneylender-trader-debt cycle, the women would need institutional credit. Federating the SHGs into a cooperative structure facilitated the availability of credit; the cooperative, Samudram Federation of Fisherwomen was formed in 1995<sup>3</sup>. Though a force to reckon with on the social aspects, the federation was slipping on the trade front. Rising production cost, lack of proper market linkages and storage space, and a fall in catch — all led them to distress sales and subsequent decline in household income and poverty.

In 2009, Oxfam India supported Samudram to initiate cooperative trading to ensure fair price through market intervention. Further, in 2012, the cooperative was turned into a producer company—Samudram Trading Fisherwomen Collective Producer Company Limited—to make trading more viable and share the benefits among all the members.

## SAMUDRAM: FROM A COOPERATIVE TO A PRODUCER COMPANY

**W**hen Oxfam India first supported Samudram, the aim was to build market linkages to make the fish trade profitable. Six procurement centres were established across the four districts<sup>4</sup>. Lack of infrastructure for cold storage was one of the key reasons for distress sales by the fisherfolk. So the procurement centres had deep freezers, icebox, and ice-grinding machine apart from weighing scale and bamboo mats for drying fish. These centres are equipped with computers and office furniture. For the fisherwomen, these centres serve as the point of information for current fish price, procurement centre of fish from the landing centre and storage facilities. The procured fish is cleaned, graded packed, and ready to be transported.

Procurement agents are appointed at the centres; they procure fish from producers, participate in the auction, and bid competitive prices based on the daily price data (both regional and national prices) provided by the centres. This ensures that

the other traders either quote at par or a greater price for the fish. This has ensured a fair and just price for the fisherfolk community. With proper system of storage, fisherwomen have the option of holding back till they get a high price; they expanded beyond the local market and started sending consignments to Kolkata and Vishakhapatnam. The payments, made to Samudram, are almost always received immediately. This is then paid to the producer and the surplus shared among the members.

The collective gave a huge boost to the women to stand up against local traders. The fisherwomen recollect the initial reaction of the local traders and the middlemen when they bargained and refused to sell them the catch because they were quoting a price unacceptable to the women. "They said 'we will see how women manage it'. Once, all the traders boycotted the fishermen and told them to go to Samudram. The fishermen were demanding a higher price for the catch. So they came to us, we packed it and stored it. Some we sold when we got a good price and the rest we converted into dry fish," says Kuntala Behera, member of the Rasikulia Parvati SHG, Puri.

The decision to diversify into dry fish trade and value added products like pickles and papad (made out of fish and prawns) was made to compensate for the dip in the fresh fish catch<sup>5</sup>. This dip, as the fisherfolk and experts observe, is triggered due to changes in climatic conditions, rise in sea temperature, sea water pollution from an ever increasing number of industries/ports and beach hotels and resorts, increased bottom trawling by big trawlers and fast vanishing mangroves from the coast.

Though the fisherfolks were preparing dry fish in the past, they admit that it was of low value. "We learnt to make hygienic dry fish



prepare dry fish hygienically. Earlier we barely got, say, Rs 40-Rs 60 per kg of dry fish of a particular variety after the training we started getting upto Rs 130,” says Premila Behera, DLF President, Puri. The fisherfolk were trained on cleaning, drying, grading, and packing.

Technical knowhow for drying fish and preparing value added products is also provided in these centres. Oxfam India trained fisherwomen on technologies of value addition. This was done with the support from Central Institute of Fisheries Education in Mumbai and the College of Fisheries at the Orissa University of Agriculture and Technology (OUAT). At present, 10 members are engaged in the preparation of value added products at the Ganjam processing centre. Samudram’s products such as prawn/ fish pickles, prawn papad, fish *jhuri bhaja* and dry fish have been certified under ISO 22000<sup>6</sup> and Food Safety and Standard Act (FSSAI), 2006<sup>7</sup>. These products are well received as far as Pune and Kolkata.

To make trading more viable and benefit sharing among the members, the cooperative was turned into a producer company in 2012. Each member would hold shares of Rs 500 to develop the running capital base and the benefits of the sale would be shared between them. The company was set up to procure and market fish to centres like Kolkata, Vishakhapatnam, and Chennai. Owing



to the high risk involved in the fresh fish business, they shifted focus to dry fish trade. Puri and Jagatsinghpur procurement centres handle 90 per cent of the volume and 93 per cent of the value of the dry fish traded<sup>8</sup>.

The role of the members of the different layers of the cooperative is well defined. The NSS procures fresh fish and dry fish from the SHG members and sell at the appropriate price. The DLF is involved in the procurement, processing, value addition and sale of marine fish and fish products. The apex body is responsible for the overall management of Revolving Fund and the entire fish trade.

## TRANSFORMING FISHERWOMEN INTO LOCAL AND GLOBAL LEADERS

Samudram ensured that fisherwomen were economically independent, were able to tackle domestic violence, and take decisions regarding health and education in the family. The awareness created by Samudram and the exposure received through field trips was an eye opener for the women. Stress was laid on the importance of maintaining health and hygiene of the entire family. There was an increase in the demand to access services at public health centres and *Anganwadis*. This translated to a marked improvement in health parameters like institutional deliveries, maternal and infant mortality.

“Once we started saving we ensured that we spent on our children’s education. We started monitoring the functioning of the schools and helping out as much as possible. Many of us are now members of school management committees ensuring that the teachers and students attend schools and that the mid day meals are served,” says Basanti Behera of Tambeshwara SHG in Ganjam. As on 2014, 402 members participated in the School Management and Development Committee meetings and 35 members were selected as members in 19 schools. 262 members participated in *Anganwadi* management committee meeting and 46 selected as member of Food Monitoring Committees<sup>9</sup>.

Girl child education was stressed upon during Samudram meetings; the savings through the SHG significantly help put many girls through schools and college. “When my daughter got a first class in her matriculation exam her father tore off the mark-sheet. He said there was no need for further studies. There wasn’t enough money,” recalls Jyoti Malick of Oshonga village in Balasore district. “I would have agreed with him if it wasn’t for Samudram. It helped me enhance my income from fishing. Not only did I get her admitted to class XI, I also got her a bicycle. And I didn’t take a single penny from my husband”.

Though Samudram was an all-women’s organisation, it wasn’t about working against men. They were called for meetings so they could see from close quarters how the federation worked. Though men were used to women doing the back end job, they were not

used to women controlling the money or making inroads into the fish trade. “Women hardly went out so this was a first. But the SHG and the cooperative helped boost the income of the household. We didn’t have to go to the moneylenders. They are also doing good work with the schools and colleges as well. They travel to places, meet different people and learn new things, this has in fact improved our outlook as well,” says Pitobash, husband of DLF member Rita Behera.

Samudram brought the women on an equal footing with their male counterparts. Women, earlier, confined to their homes had now become decision makers at home and in the fish business,

### TRANSFORMING WOMEN

#### TRANSFORMING WOMEN’S ACCESS TO RESOURCES

- Negotiated with fisheries department to receive trainings
- Received 230 solar driers from ICZMP
- Received bank and government scheme linkages to the tune of Rs. 40 lakhs

#### TRANSFORMING WOMEN’S & MEN’S CONSCIOUSNESS

- Men understand the importance of economically independent women
- Women have freed them from debt
- Traders pay women well and expedite payments

#### TRANSFORMING INFORMAL NORMS & EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICES

- Girls sent for higher education
- Brewing liquor and its sale stopped in the villages
- Voices raised against domestic violence and child marriage
- Rallied against communal violence<sup>11</sup>
- Managing books of accounts

#### TRANSFORMING AND CHALLENGING INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS

- Challenged local money lenders
- Managed procurement centres and business
- Enhanced bargaining power in the local markets
- Participation increased in Gram Sabha meetings



were dealing with traders, and managing finances and accounts. Though most fisherwomen are illiterate, a few were identified and trained to maintain accounts and records of trade volume, income and expenditures. "Sometimes our daughters chip in when we need some help with the accounts," says Eramma, a federation member from Ganjam. They maintain these books now with the minimum support of UAA. This was a huge paradigm shift for the fisherwomen.

The decision to expand their business and convert a cooperative into a producer company was taken by the women at Samudram. "It was important to make the cooperative and the business sustainable and independent of external funding. Oxfam India and UAA have put the basic structure in place and developed our business strategy. We needed to maintain this model and keep it running. Converting it to a shareholding company was the first step towards making the model sustainable," says Chitamma.

Samudram changed the dynamics between traders and middlemen, and the fishing community. The procurement centres ensured that there were no more distress sales, erratic payments or exploitation. The initial hostile response of the traders changed after they realised that they were losing out because of the competitive prices the federation offered. Now traders too have become prompt with their payments and generous with the price they offer for the fish. Moreover, since the women have been able to bring families out of the debt trap of traders-middlemen, it has improved their bargaining power and status in the trade.

Samudram has ensured that the local governance and officials — police, district administration, fisheries department, and banks — take these women seriously. "We are invited to Gram Sabha meetings now and heard. Few members have been elected to local bodies and the collective, overall, has been vocal on issues like school management, public distribution system, illegal land

grabbing and corruption in mid day meals. We have taken up these issues directly with block officials," adds Jharna. Around 1178 members actively participated in the *Palli Sabha* and Gram Sabha. They continue to mobilise against alcohol, gambling, child marriage, illiteracy, low wages, and malfunctioning of the Public Distribution System. They also passed resolutions regarding construction of latrines, dry fish yard, and kitchen garden<sup>10</sup>.

The members of Samudram negotiated with the fisheries department to receive trainings on the various schemes; they received solar driers from the Integrated Coastal Zonal Management Project (ICZMP), Odisha and till December 2013 they managed to get bank and government linkages to the volume of Rs 40 lakhs. In a way Samudram gave the women of the fisherfolk community the economic independence and stability to fight for their rights transforming them into local and global leaders.

The benefits of regular trainings on disaster management to the members was evident during cyclone Phailin in October 2013. The members tided over the crisis without relying too much on the government; they even played a critical role in the rescue operations. Though the federation lost one procurement centre to Phailin, they have managed to get the structure up and running.

The model has shown all round development and the capacity to replicate itself. With the support of Oxfam India and UAA, Samudram has managed to become sustainable — enhanced income at the household level, increased producers' share in the final market value, vast market outreach, diversification into value added products, alternative credit source for women for other sources of income generation, improved status of women both at the household and community level, and strong institutional linkages for a wide scope of work. The model, since it initiated cooperative trade, has shown tremendous impact on incomes and livelihoods.

## NOTES

1 Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Assam

2 This project is run under the Economic Justice theme

3 Apart from propagating social development, Chitamma worked tirelessly over the years for the conservation of the marine ecosystems, especially the Olive Ridley Turtles, which face extinction. In 2010, she was awarded the Equator Award for 'Poverty Reduction by Conservation and Sustainable Use of Bio-Diversity' and in 2011 the Godfrey Philips

Amodini Award for 'Women Empowerment'.

4 Samudram was registered in 1995 under the Societies Registration Act of 1860 with its headquarters at Kothuru village in Chatrapur block of Ganjam district

5 Two each in Ganjam and Puri and one each in Balasore and Jagatsinghpur

6 Data available from the Directorate of Fisheries Government of Odisha shows a drastic fall (14.4 %) in marine fishing during 2011-12 with mild recovery in the following years. [http://www.orissafisheries.com/File/2014/fisheries\\_statistice\\_2014.pdf](http://www.orissafisheries.com/File/2014/fisheries_statistice_2014.pdf)

7 The ISO 22000 family of International Standards

addresses food safety management. <http://www.iso.org/iso/home/standards/management-standards/iso22000.htm> (as viewed on April 15, 2016)

8 Our Sea Our Living: A Process Documentation of Samudram Women Fish Workers Federation; Research and Writing: Shalini Shashi, nologo

9 ibid

10 ibid

11 ibid

12 This was against communal violence at Aryapalli village in Ganjam district

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**Photo Credit:** nologo

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