

Oxfam India, through its programme on Small Holder Agriculture, focuses on socialising the identity of women as farmers, strengthening the economic leadership of women farmers, ensuring their land rights, and making public investments in agriculture accessible to small farmers, especially women farmers. Oxfam India, with its focus in six states¹, is part of a global movement working to fight poverty, injustice and inequality. In Bihar, Oxfam India has been supporting Pragati Gramin Vikas Samiti (PGVS) since 2003. PGVS started working specifically on collectivising women farmers and establishing linkages between village communities and government schemes for improved production and income generation in 2010. They work mostly among the *Dalit* and *Mahadalit* communities, especially the *Musahars*², in 10 districts of Bihar.

In Bihar, where 90 per cent of the population lives in the villages and 70 per cent of its workforce is employed in agriculture and related sectors, land reforms are central to any development programme³. The problem of landlessness among the poor is steadily increasing in the state aggravating poverty and retarding the development of agriculture⁴. Moreover, the concentration of marginal landholdings (up to 1 hectare) of *Dalits* and *Adivasis* in Bihar is very high as is the number of families facing complete landlessness⁵.

According to a preliminary survey conducted by the state Department of Revenue and Land Reforms, in 2012, as many as 2.10 lakh *Mahadalit*⁶ families were identified as families without homestead land. A 2014 study registered an increase; the number went up from 2.10 to 2.47 lakh families. These numbers point to high prevalence of landlessness among *Mahadalit* families in particular and the *Dalits* in general⁷.

The state government has taken a few steps to address this. In 2005, the state set up a Land Reforms Commission (LRC) under the chairmanship of D Bandyopadhyay to recommend land reforms in Bihar. The Commission recommended "assignment of at least 10 decimals of land to landless households of 5.84 lakh non-farm rural workers each who are in the state of semi-bondedness as they live on the land of other landowners"⁸.

The report wasn't made public until, in 2009, after a lot of pressure, mobilisation and advocacy from different sections of the society. However, the state government agreed to provide only 3 decimals of homestead land to each landless *Mahadalit* family⁹. As on March 2014, land has been distributed to 2.22 lakh families, as against a target of 2.47 lakh families, involving 6641 acres of land¹⁰. In 2014-15, the state government proposed to increase the limit to 5 decimals¹¹. The Land Reforms

Department also started 'Operation *Dakhal Dehani*' to ensure land possession on the distributed land pattas¹².

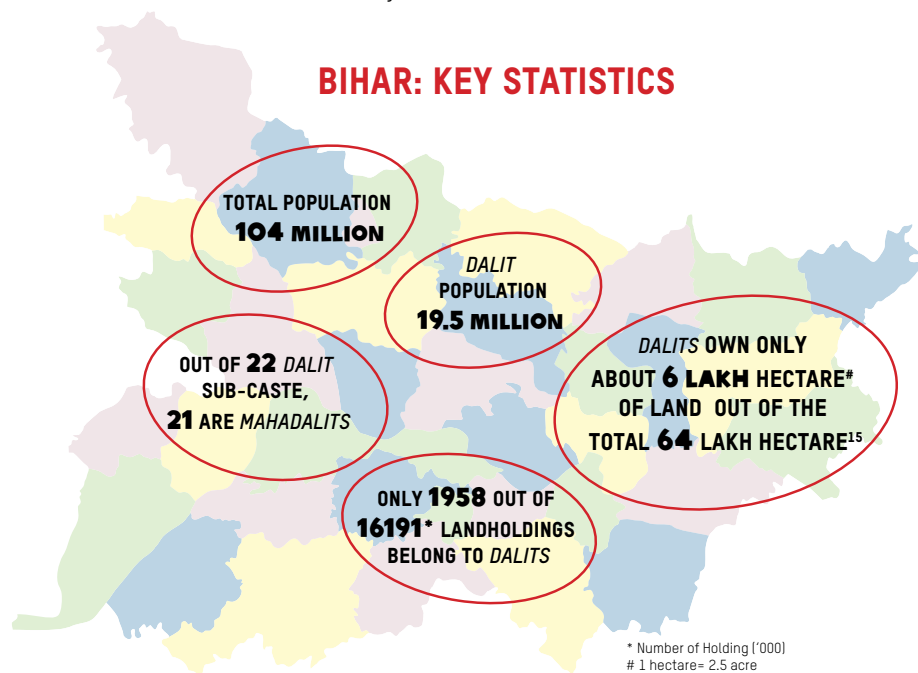
Even after getting homestead land, the *Mahadalits* have continued to work as farm labourers in upper caste-owned farmlands. In this regard, it is worthwhile to note that the land tenancy conditions have always been unfavourable to all tenants especially *Dalits*, *Mahadalits* and women farmers; if anything, they are exploitative. Given this backdrop, Oxfam India joined hands with PGVS¹³ in 2003 to empower the excluded communities, especially the *Musahars*, to fight for their rights to land and livelihood.

Oxfam India and PGVS work together in 15 Gram Panchayats in 10 blocks of 10 districts¹⁴. It has, through the years, facilitated 3610 families to get 3 decimals of homestead land with joint ownership. While initially Oxfam India and PGVS were working with both landless men and women, a narrowing of focus to promote women's collectives started in 2010. The project mobilised around 1500 women, including 592 *Musahar* women farmers to form a collective, lease land and farm. At present, 64 women farmers groups are doing collective farming on almost 60 acre (24 ha) of leased land.

Though the processes, whether it be applying for land ownership or forming collectives, have been led purely by the community, Oxfam India and PGVS have provided handholding support at every stage. Meetings, trainings and orientation of village level cadres (community mobilisers) were conducted regularly and livelihood support centres were promoted to bridge the gap between government departments and the community.

Oxfam India-PGVS's support to the landless women to access land has made them key contributors to food production and ensured their recognition and relevance both at the household and the community level.

BIHAR: KEY STATISTICS



FORMING WOMEN COLLECTIVES

"If you would have seen me a few years ago, you would have found me with unkempt hair and unclean clothes. There was no money for anything. We were just living our lives somehow," says Seema Devi. She ruffles her hair to show how she used to be – not so long ago. Seema belongs to the Musahar community at the Devnaryannagar village in Bhojpur's Sahar block.

Seema is the secretary of the *Saraswati Mahila Kisan Samooh*. The *Samooh* or the women's farmer collective is a 15-member collective that leases land and does collective farming. Seema and the others have been associated with PGVS since 2006 and are a part of the collective since 2010.

Musahars' backwardness and marginalisation is reinforced by Seema's recollection of the past. "There wasn't enough food. Our staple diet was *maarah-bhaat*¹⁶. Cleanliness wasn't our priority and that was because we did not have any money to spend on soap etc. We had to make do with one set of clothes," she says.

Traditionally, Musahars do not own land and work as farm labourers instead. Socially considered untouchables, the Musahars are given very low wages and meted out worse treatment as compared to farm labourers of other castes and communities. During the focussed group discussions (FGDs) in three villages, we learnt that farm labourers weren't paid in cash but were reimbursed in kind, which was usually grain.

It is much worse for women farm labourers. "We were given some food that was usually stale. Some others who were not Musahars got *roti* and pickles," explains Lalita Devi, president of the *Samooh*. The formation of collectives opened opportunities for them.

Now instead of working as farm labourers, the collective has helped establish them as women farmers and encouraged them to lease land and farm. Usually farm labourers work on a sharecropping basis where the landlord and the landless tenant share inputs and output equally. But under the lease, the collective would pay an annual amount as rent to the landlord, use their own inputs and share the outputs among themselves.

The *Saraswati Mahila Kisan Samooh* leased farms to grow paddy, wheat, and vegetables. Seema explains that a few women from the collective would go and negotiate the rent. Once they collected money and rented 0.30 acre of land for Rs 3000 for sharecropping.

Once the land has been rented, the cropping pattern is decided and work commences. Krishna Devi of *Kali Mahila Kisan Samooh*, in Bhojpur's Bishanpura village, recalls that their produce as sharecroppers was around 720 kg of paddy or wheat in 0.6 acre (0.2 ha). After leasing the land, the very first year the production increased to over 800 kg. This collective comprises of women from the Ravidas community; Ravidas is a notified *Dalit* community.

The women's collectives diversified as well. Seema adds that alongside growing paddy on the main land, they used another 0.45 acre of waste land to grow potato and pulses (*dal*). "The first year we produced 800 kg of potato, 80 kg of *masur dal* and 640 kg of paddy. Such high yields took care of our domestic dietary requirements especially during the non-agricultural seasons," recalls Seema.

The formation of the collective has not just helped improve their nutrition but also increased their productivity and their bargaining powers. "It's like a team and it's much better going



in like this. We can do more work and we can get a better deal. Though, inequalities of wages continue - for instance, a man gets 3 kg of food grain for a day's work while a woman gets 1.5 kg - the quality has improved," smiles Seema. It has also bettered their social standing where they feel more socially accepted.

Over the years, Oxfam India and PGVS facilitated training through the state agriculture departments for the women collectives. "In fact, we didn't even know that we could get seeds and inputs from the department," says Seema. In 2012, Oxfam India held a training session on the *Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana* (RKVY)¹⁷, a central assistance scheme. The *Kisan Salahakar* (or farmer advisers) was called in to train the women on the use of fertilisers, seeds, and pesticides. The farmer advisers were initially reluctant to train but were convinced when they were taken to the fields and saw how women had diversified farming. The women were also trained to grow paddy through the System of Rice Intensification (SRI).

While they were trained in ways of using agricultural inputs, the hurdle of accessing the inputs remained (**see box: *Ajeevika Sahayata Kendra***). Well versed with the RKVY, women farmers approached the department at the block and district levels with their demands for agriculture inputs but got only hollow assurances. As a tangible outcome of the trainings and exposure, the women farmers' collective took their demands to the members' of Agriculture Technology Management Agency (ATMA), an all-male conclave that recognised their identity as farmers¹⁸. Further, a *Jan Sunwai* (public hearing) was organised by PGVS to facilitate interaction between the agriculture officers and women collectives.

"The interactions with ATMA members and the *Jan Sunwais* helped establish their identities as women farmers and bring them and their demands to the notice of the agriculture department," says Sanjay Prasad, programme manager, PGVS. These interactions were followed by visits to the farms by the officers of the

agriculture department. "The officers visited our fields to verify our claims that we are indeed farmers. They were more than satisfied. They asked the collectives to be registered so that we could avail the inputs from the department," says Lalita. Subsequently, the women were formed into 15-member collectives and registered. The registration process took some time.

In 2013-14, five groups from different villages were registered and another nine groups were registered the following year. In 2015-16, 44 such collectives have been registered with ATMA; there are 149 women collectives across the 10 districts. In December 2015, Bihar Agriculture Management & Extension Training Institute (BAMETI)¹⁹ instructed the ATMA project directors to recognise and register all women farmer groups in the 10 districts, where Oxfam India-PGVS work. The institute was asked to provide trainings, arrange exposure visits and provide options for self-employment.

As on March 2016, Oxfam India - PGVS had established 171 collectives across 10 districts of which 80 collectives were

registered by ATMA; 1018 women in the 10 districts have been registered as women farmers. "This is a huge boost to the women farmers. Now that they are registered as farmers they will have easy access to the agricultural inputs like fertiliser, seeds and implements," explains Sanjay.

The recognition by the state has instilled the women with confidence. "We hardly stepped out of the Baruhi Gram Panchayat, but after becoming a part of the women's collective, we have gone to Patna, Gwalior, Agra and Delhi for meetings and exposure visit. We can walk into a government office, talk to them, and demand our rights," says Seema. The women collectives are now following up on the claims filed for the distribution of homestead land²⁰.

Shy and usually relegated to homes, the women are now regulars at schools and health centres to monitor the functioning of the various schemes. Furthermore, education and health have become priorities for these families.

MOBILISING WOMEN FARMERS: FROM PERSONAL HYGIENE TO KITCHEN GARDEN

The change did not take place overnight. And neither was it very direct. In fact, PGVS which is working with the community since 2006, started working with women through *Kishori Kendras*²¹. "The girls never went to school. We called the mothers with their daughters for these meetings. We spoke to them about the importance of education, cleanliness, sanitation and hygiene. The most common question was 'what will they accomplish by studying?' It took several meetings to convince them," explains Sindhu Sinha, regional coordinator, PGVS.

A few girls were sent to Kasturba Gandhi *Balika Vidyalaya*²² in 2006. Of these, five cleared their matriculation examinations and went for higher studies to the neighbouring Patna district. These meetings with mothers continue till date and have evolved into School Management Committees (SMCs) that monitor the mid-day meals being served, the curriculum being taught, and the regularity of teachers.

On cleanliness, PGVS had to start from the basics. From teaching students the importance of cleaning their homes and streets to personal hygiene, it was a step by step process. "They never cleaned their clothes, hair was unkempt, nails were dirty and they hardly took a bath. They were trained to clean themselves; plays and skits were used to explain the importance of cleanliness. It worked. You can see them and their homes now. Also, the fact that they were getting economically empowered played a big role," says Devanti Devi, a community mobiliser with PGVS.

According to Devanti and Sindhu, these communities hardly saved and depended on loans. While the men migrated for work, mostly as labourers to Kerala, Gujarat and Delhi, women stayed back in the village to work as agricultural labourers. To promote savings, women were formed into self-help groups and were encouraged to deposit Rs 10 every month. This was the money they earned from selling firewood and wood charcoal. "Apart from what the men earned as income that they brought back when they would return after six months, this was the only source of income. The rice which we got from the landlords was used to barter for oil and salt," says Seema.

Oxfam India's involvement with PGVS steered the latter's orientation

towards agriculture and women farmers. So in 2010, when the women were already saving money, they were encouraged to begin farming. Kitchen gardens were promoted both for improving nutrition and enhancing their income. Even after the collectives were formed and women farmers went on to lease large plots of land, the kitchen garden remained as a priority.

Chandravati Devi, of Bishanpura village, grows seasonal vegetables on a small plot close to her house. "I grow vegetables for my household. Our diet has improved remarkably. I take the surplus to the Narayanpur market. Sometimes I go twice a week. I manage to earn around Rs 500 to Rs 600 a visit. If there is a function in the village, the vegetables are supplied from these kitchen gardens," says Chandravati, a member of the *Kali Mahila Kisan Samooh*.



AJEEVIKA SAHAYATA KENDRA (LIVELIHOOD SUPPORT CENTRES)

THE AJEEVIKA SAHAYATA KENDRAS WERE SET UP BY OXFAM INDIA AND PGVS IN EACH PANCHAYAT TO HELP THE WOMEN COLLECTIVES GET EASY ACCESS TO INPUTS. THESE CENTRES HOLD INFORMATION ABOUT THE DIFFERENT GOVERNMENT AGRICULTURE SCHEMES AND THE AVAILABILITY OF SEEDS AND FERTILISERS. THEY ALSO FACILITATE LOANS FROM THE BANKS FOR THE FARMERS. DURING 2014-15, 790 WOMEN FARMERS RECEIVED AGRICULTURE INPUTS AND CREDIT AND 384 FAMILIES RECEIVED CROP COMPENSATION AMOUNTING TO RS 25.37 LAKHS WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE KENDRA.

THE KENDRA ALSO SERVES AS A GRAIN BANK; IT HAS ENSURED FOOD SECURITY TO THE COMMUNITY. "THE MEMBERS OF THE COLLECTIVE DEPOSIT THEIR SHARE OF THE GRAINS SOON AFTER THE HARVEST

AND WITHDRAW FROM THE BANK DURING THE LEAN PERIOD. THEY HAVE TO RETURN THE GRAIN TO THE BANK THE FOLLOWING SEASON OR WHENEVER THEY CAN WITH SOME INTEREST I.E. ADDING A FEW 100 GRAMS TO EVERY KILOGRAM OF GRAIN WITHDRAWN," SAYS DULARCHAND RAM. DULARCHAND IS IN-CHARGE OF THE KENDRA AT DEVNARYANNAGAR VILLAGE.

THE WOMEN COLLECTIVES MEET TWICE EVERY MONTH AT THE KENDRA TO TAKE STOCK OF THE INPUTS AVAILABLE AND TAKE A DECISION ON THE DISTRIBUTION OF THESE INPUTS. THESE CENTRES ARE PLATFORMS FOR LANDLESS WOMEN FARMERS TO NOT JUST DISCUSS ISSUES RELATED TO FARMING BUT ALSO HEALTH AND EDUCATION.

NOTES

- 1 Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Assam
- 2 The Musahars fall in the *Mahadalit* category and is one of the most backward and marginalised community. The name Musahar literally means 'rat eaters'
- 3 Bihar Economic Survey 2014-2015; page no. 249 | <http://finance.bih.nic.in/Documents/Reports/Economic-Survey-2015-EN.pdf> [as viewed on 16 March 2016]
- 4 Bihar Economic Survey 2014-2015; page no. 249 | <http://finance.bih.nic.in/Documents/Reports/Economic-Survey-2015-EN.pdf> [as viewed on 16 March 2016]
- 5 Bihar Economic Survey 2014-2015; page no. 250 | <http://finance.bih.nic.in/Documents/Reports/Economic-Survey-2015-EN.pdf> [as viewed on 16 March 2016]
- 6 The state government observed that, out of the 22 scheduled castes in Bihar, 20 are acutely deprived in terms of economic, social, cultural and political status.
- 7 <http://scstwelfare.bih.nic.in/docs/scst%20report%20of%2016th%20August%20Copy.pdf> [as viewed on 15 December 2015]
- 8 <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article1547.html>
- 9 The Department sought to provide land to the target group by the following four land streams – (a) *Gair Mazarua malik/khas* land, (b) *Gair Mazarua aam* land, (c) land under Bihar Privileged Persons Homestead Tenancy Act, 1947, and (d) in the absence of the above lands, Raiyati land purchased under the Bihar Raiyati Land Purchase Policy, 2010
- 10 Bihar Economic Survey 2014-2015; page no. 250 [http://finance.bih.nic.in/Documents/Reports/Economic-Survey-2015-EN.pdf] [as viewed on 16 March 2016]
- 11 Though the government has announced it a, government notification is still awaited
- 12 Bihar Economic Survey 2014-2015; page no. 250 [http://finance.bih.nic.in/Documents/Reports/Economic-Survey-2015-EN.pdf] [as viewed on 16 March 2016]
- 13 Established in 1985 by a group of young social activists emerging from the *Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Wahini*, a youth cadre facilitated by Loknayak Jai Prakash Narayan, the group started working for the rights of most poor amongst the Scheduled Caste (SC) or *Dalit* community in four blocks of Patna District. In 1988 they registered PGVS. From then on as its focus spread gradually to include all SC and excluded communities, so did its field area. With a mission to work for the most marginalized and vulnerable sections of society to ensure their dignity, equality, rights and justice, PGVS has started intervening in Bihar to empower the weakest section of society

- 14 Patna, Arwal, East Champaran, West Champaran, Madhepura, Bhojpur, Muzzafarpur, Buxar, Jamui and Saharsa
- 15 *Dalits* own 5.94 lakh hectare out of a total of 63.8 lakh hectare
- 16 A gruel of rice and starch
- 17 RKVY is an Additional Central Assistance scheme, mooted by the National Development Council in 2007, to incentivise States to draw up plans for their agriculture sector more comprehensively, taking agro-climatic conditions, natural resource issues and technology into account, and integrating livestock, poultry and fisheries more fully. This will involve a new scheme for Additional Central Assistance to State Plans, administered by the Union Ministry of Agriculture over and above its existing Centrally Sponsored schemes, to supplement the State-specific strategies including special schemes for beneficiaries of land reforms. [source: <http://rkvy.nic.in/#>; as viewed on 28 March, 2016]
- 18 ATMA is a registered society responsible for technology dissemination at district level. It is a focal point for integrating research extension and marketing. It has decentralized day to day management of the Agricultural Technology System (ATS). It allows receiving and expanding project funds, entering into contracts and agreements and maintaining revolving accounts. It also has linkages with all the line departments, research organizations, non-government organisations and organisations associated with agricultural development in the districts. Each ATMA has a governing board. The district collector is the chairman of the board of the ATMA while other district level officials from the agricultural, veterinary, fishery etc department and farmers as members. Woman representative are also included. The board members take all discussion concerning programme planning resource allocation. (<http://agropedia.iitk.ac.in/content/agriculture-technology-management-agency-atma>; as viewed on 2 Nov 2015)
- 19 BAMETI is a state level institution which is autonomous with greater flexibility in structure and functioning and are responsible for organizing need based training programmes for the project implementation functionaries of different line departments as well as the farming community. BAMETI issued a letter on 9.12.2015 to Project Director, ATMA of all 10 districts of Bihar (where OxfamIndia - PGVS work) with reference of request letter submitted by PGVS on 8.12.2015
- 20 In 2015-16, 626 applications were filed; no one has received the title yet. In 2014-15 however, 2680 families had applied and seven families successfully got the land
- 21 *Kishori Kendras* are centres for adolescent girls
- 22 Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) is another scheme for setting up residential schools at upper primary level for girls belonging to the SC/ST, OBC and minority community. The scheme was merged with SSA with effect from April 1, 2007

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