

# **Women, Participation and Development: A Case Study from West Bengal**

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The importance of Women's Organisations for bringing women within reach of the development process is a recognised policy for women's development in India. However, nature and functional role of such organisations were not always clearly defined. In recent years, it was increasingly being felt that such grassroot organisations with certain definite objectives and roles can serve as key instruments for mobilising women to develop their economic activity in an organised manner - by ensuring access to needed development inputs and to strengthen women's voice in development decisions and in the political process. In other words, such grassroot organisations are expected to serve as participatory and mobilising mechanisms rather than mere delivery agencies in the planning and development process. Introduction of an economic component in grassroot women's organisations is gradually emerging as a critical need not only to alleviate poverty but also to reduce exploitation of the most vulnerable groups of women workers and to stabilise the participatory and mobilising mechanisms.

However, the need for such organisations of rural women was thought of in the fifties as a part of the community development programmes and various organisations did come into existence in India. But they ran into difficulties because no economic component was envisaged and as a result the organisations became the monopoly of affluent section of the rural women. Government was also not clear about the functions and roles of these organisations which depended largely on government support and assistance. As a results most of them collapsed when government assistance was withdrawn.

There were exceptions in a few states because of the presence of some women with clear vision in the state administration who did not see these organizations as mere delivery agencies.

When the Committee for the Status of Women in India in its report severely criticised the government's approach and pointed out the disturbing decline in the status of rural women and suggested economic activity as an important component for such organisations, the Committee's views were endorsed by the Committee on Panchayati Raj and Working Groups on Employment of Women, Adult Education for Women and Development of village Level Organisations of Rural Women.

The mid-seventies was also the period of increasing realisation of growing rural inequality which affected the implementation of progressive legislations for Abolition of

Bonded Labour, Land Reforms measures, Minimum Wages Act etc. The Committee appointed by the Ministry of Education for review of adult education programme for adult women, while trying to explain the failure of the programme to reach illiterate adult women who constitute three fourth of all adult illiterates in India recommended that such women could only be reached through forming organisations for both learning and earning activities.

These recommendations were however articulating the need for a new strategy and approach but did not spell out the possible obstacles adequately. It was not realised that in the context of existing politico-economic class relations and inequalities in the rural areas the female section of the rural poor could not be fully mobilised through usual forms of workers' organizations. In West Bengal for instance, the government was holding rural camps under 'Operation Barga' for successful implementation of land reforms by promoting Organisation of poor farmers and agricultural workers. It was found that participation of women or women's organisations was marginal in such camps and the Land Reforms Commissioner resorted to holding a special camp to look into specific problems of rural poor women at Jhilimil, Bankura in 1980. Studies on peasant movements and organisations reveal that while women are militantly involved in struggles of the poor peasantry they are seldom represented in the organisations or the leadership. It is only in this context that some voluntary organisations developed separate organizations of poor women workers.

Both Government and Voluntary Organisational, however had to face several issues. Of these two critical ones were the needed methodology for development of such organisation and required stabilising mechanisms for these organisations which are mainly formed by landless and asset less illiterate poor women depending mainly on wage labour. The solutions to these issues are likely to emerge through a learning process and from various instances of success and failure in the context of set goals and objectives. In the context of these two critical issues - the need for intermediaries between grassroot level organisations and developmental agencies has been identified as a temporary solution and preliminary methodology. But this solution or methodology has not yet passed the severe test of time, and competing involvements and pressures.

## **Lessons from Current Development Programmes**

The ongoing developmental efforts through IRDPP, ITDP, DWCRA, ANP, NREP etc. plan the creation of durable productive assets and income generating activities for the rural poor and mention women as the most vulnerable section of the target group. Most of these developmental thrusts aim at building on existing local skills and occupations and utilising local raw materials and marketing outlets. To fortify these approaches basic instruments designed so far are cheap credit, some amount of training in production skills and subsidised distribution of technological equipment/livestock/seeds etc. The objective of all these

programmes is to make these poor households economically viable through increased opportunities for 'self-employment'. Field evaluations have, however, increasingly revealed that (a) 'self-employment for individuals or households' at this level of poverty is an impossibility because of their own limitations and structure of the rural market economy, and (b) small assets without training in economic management of such assets only intensifies the vulnerability of those households.

The structural constraints are provided by inequalities and limited purchasing power of the majority of the rural population, dominant influence of urban products which depress the demand for locally produced goods, difficulties in getting raw materials etc. The local power elites normally the employers (often the money-lenders) are reluctant to see them acquire economic viability - as that would prevent the farmers' ability to exploit their labour and need. All these problems affect women from such households even more adversely. In addition, they have to face some special constraints emanating from their familial responsibilities and their depressed status in the local community - which men do not share. All these problems are intensified when these households take to seasonal migrations for survival.

Strategies for improving poor rural women's access to development must, therefore, face several challenging obstacles: (i) identifying an economic activity which will be viable and within reach of the women's skills, understanding, resources and marketability; (ii) transforming the dependency of wage workers to the self-reliance of entrepreneurs and managers; (iii) finding a mechanism that can help to combat their special vulnerabilities/constraints, and to provide them basic services.

Grassroot level organisations of rural women had been introduced to meet the last challenge as early as the Second Plan (Mahila Mandal, Mahila Samitis, Mahila Samajams, Mader Sangams). At that time, however, employment generation had not been seen as a priority for women, and only training taken up through these bodies was in household activities (nutrition, childcare, sewing and embroidery etc.). As a result, the organisations could not draw the rural poor women and remained confined to women of the rural elite. These became inactive the moment government support was withdrawn.

The new perspective - of economic independence for women, coupled with the strategies for eradication of poverty gives a new dimension to the formation and development of these grassroot organisations. For the first time these are being viewed as possible instruments for employment generation and viable economic development as well as channels for socio-political development of the most oppressed and deprived section of the rural populations.

IRDP/ITDP assistance for acquiring livestock, for sericulture and household industry though given to male heads of households generally increase the work burden of women particularly with livestock and sericulture. But women have no control over the disposal of

assets, or the use of credit. These low capital, labour intensive activities, to achieve viability, need some scale of investment and production. A household dependent on daily earnings of its members cannot wait for future income - from multiplication/maturity/sale of its products. At the household level such scale can only be achieved by land-owning affluent farmers, not assetless households. Collective activity - through grassroot organisations offers the added advantage of channelising vital social services - which the poor rural women (and their children) cannot normally avail of.

Story of Gramin Mahila Sramik Unnayan Samitis (GMSUS) in Bankura District of West Bengal

## **The Area and the Women**

Bankura is one of the most economically and industrially backward districts of West Bengal and within Bankura, Ranibandh block occupies the south-western corner touching the borders of Purulia and Medinipur districts. The entire block is hilly and forested and forms a part of the drought-prone region. Agriculture is dependent on rain and a single crop of paddy is taken from the undulating land if there is timely rain. Backyard cultivation of maize is undertaken by almost all households who have some land. On the high lands babui grass is cultivated in some areas mainly for rope making. The forest - which was once a source of food, fuel, fodder and occasionally of livelihood - still provides for fuel and some income from minor forest products. However collection of Kandu and Sal leaves, Mahua flower, Neem, Mahua, Zamun, Amlaki, Haritaki, Kusum and Sal fruits, and various kinds of medicinal herbs and barks still constitute a supplementary source of livelihood for the women.

Ethnically the area is inhabited predominantly by tribal communities like Santal Bhumij, Kheria and Sabar. Other communities living in the area are Oriya Brahmins, a conglomerate of lower castes of Bengal who have embraced Baisnabism, other backward communities like Mahato, Deswali Majhi, Kora (Mudi), scheduled castes like Sunris, Kaira, Chamar, Dom etc. and a host of occupational and service castes like Kumbhakar, Karmakar, Teli, Napit, Dhobi etc. Of all the communities, the Oriya Brahmins, Sunris and some Baisnabs are prosperous (obviously at the cost of Bhumij and Santal), and others largely belong to the group falling below the poverty line.

After being dispossessed of their land and after forest resources depleted or went under the control of others, the tribal groups took to seasonal migration for agricultural work in the adjacent district of Burdwan and Hoogly for the sake of survival. In view of multiple cropping in these areas intensity of seasonal migration increased and in these treks women were in majority.

The social costs of such intermittent nomadism were - high infant mortality, physical decline of women resulting in low life expectancy, denial of all schooling training and

healthcare opportunity to the children who went with their mothers, increasing incidence of alcoholism and domestic violence, frequent destruction of family life and stability, sexual assault by employers/labour contractors, growing number of young unmarried women with little prospect of marriage, frequent collapse of homesteads from bad weather during families' absences, perpetual state of indebtedness etc. Various other evil effects are also visible at the community level and in the socio-economic milieu of the area.

### **Involvement of the Centre for Women's Development Studies at Bankura.**

Some of these facts surfaced during a 'Re-orientation Camp for Migrant Women Agricultural Labourers' organised by the Government of West Bengal at Jhilimili in May 1980 - in which representatives from Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), New Delhi participated. Apart from Government officials, the camp was also attended to by the Minister for Land Reforms. The Minister, after the camp, requested the CWDS representatives to assist the Government of West Bengal in amelioration of the conditions of these women.

By about this time the CWDS was also approached by the Women's Empowerment Policy branch of the International Labour Organisation to implement a project on "Employment Opportunities for Rural Women through Organisations" in a few States of India, and CWDS decided to plant itself in the Ranibandh Block of Bankura district. The Ministry of Labour, Government of India, also wanted CWDS to undertake a survey on vocational training needs of rural women in Bankura. The Minister's request paved the way for various needed supports, the ILO assistance provided the financial support needed for mobilisation and implementation and the Labour Ministry's work gave a chance to survey two clusters of villages in the Ranibandh Block for basic socioeconomic data. (The survey not only confirmed the various statements made by the women in the Rural Camp but also added new dimensions. Women everywhere identified seasonal migration as an evil necessity and stable employment in their own area as their most critical need. They felt that other needs - healthy education, social security etc will follow after stable employment locally has been ensured).

### **The Samitis**

The participants of the Re-orientation Camp were chosen by the local level government officials. They were about 30 in number - coming from several villages in and around Jhilimili. CWDS field workers contacted these women through the local Panchayat Sabhapati and the Pradhans. They moved from one village to another and held meetings and discussions. Some of the women who participated in the Re-orientation Camp often accompanied the CWDS field-team and narrated their experience of the Camp to other women. The discussions used to emphasize on their problems first and then used to move on to the possible solutions for the same. The

crucial point on which the women stressed repeatedly was generation of employment opportunity locally and they realised that in the context of existing politico-economic class relations and inequalities in the rural areas they cannot achieve anything without being united into an Organisation of their own (and the CWDS was constantly supporting this ideology). Thus the first Gramin Mahila Sramik Unnayan Samiti (GMSUS) was born at Jhilimili in the beginning of 1981. Although it started with less than 100 members originally by end of 1982 the membership crossed 200 who came from a cluster of eight settlements around Jhilimili. About 20 kilometers away from Jhilimili and near the Block headquarter the second GMSUS was formed at Bhurkura in the middle of 1981 - drawing its more than 100 members from four settlements.

By the end of 1981, the third GMSUS was formed at, Chhendapathar - 25 kms. away from Jhilimili and Bhurkura - drawing its more than 200 members from eight mauzas. The members everywhere belonged to the tribal communities of Santal and Bhumij but a few women from the Mahato, Teli, Kairal Koral, Deswali Majhi etc. also joined (It will take several pages to recount the experience of mobilisation, obstacles faced, assistance received and opposition encountered in the formation of the three GMSUS).

Each GMSUS (hereafter mentioned as 'Samiti') was registered as a Samiti and has a memorandum of association. Once a year, it elects an Executive Committee through democratic means. The Executive Committee elects a President, a Secretary and a Treasurer from among the executive committee members. In order to ensure a permanent relationship with the CWDS (and to provide a locus standi for CWDS field staff) each Samiti has nominated the Director, CWDS as its permanent Joint Secretary. Initially the Samiti members on account of being mostly illiterate were highly apprehensive of accountability conditions attached to any funds they might receive from Government. They, therefore thought that by keeping the Director CWDS as permanent Joint Secretary of the Samiti they would be able to tide over various difficulties. At the initial stage the Director, CWDS could play the role of spokesperson on behalf of the Samitis in dealing with Government and other agencies.

The three Samitis, locationally form the apexes of an imaginary isolateral triangle within the Ranibandh Block. Members consist of unmarried adult women, married women with or without children, widows, divorced/separated/deserted. All of them are agricultural workers and most of them had the bitter experience of seasonal migration. Most of them are also illiterate. The deserted/ divorced/ widows, the married women without children and the unmarried girls were found to be more active and enthusiastic. The traditional tribal ethos of Collective activity (for instance in fuel collection, minor forest produce collection, festivals etc.) helped in providing the base of collective approach.

## **Search for Employment**

All the three Samities immediately after their formation were in desperate search for suitable activity which would generate local employment for their members. The CWDS is a research and professional institution specialising in women's developmental problem and it had no fund to contribute for actual development activities (Its project staff and other field expenses are supported by the ILO's Rural Employment Policies branch with the approval of government of India). Naturally, the samitis had to depend on State/Central Governments and/or other developmental agencies for funding such activities. At that moment, Government of West Bengal and the local Panchayat Sabhapati came to their help. The GMSUS (Jhilimili) undertook the agency of Kandu leaf and Sal seed collection from local LAMP (Large Size Multipurpose Cooperative Society) and provided employment to some of its members for about three months. The GMSUS (Bhurkura) managed to procure an absolutely rocky patch of wasteland by persuading its owners to donate the same to the Samiti and decided to develop the same for cultivation of Asan/ Arjun plants with the aim of rearing Tassar cocoons. (This was once a traditional occupation in the area - although not exactly with the women - but had been abandoned with the recession of forest and establishment of government control over all forest areas). The Government of West Bengal provided a grant of one lakh rupees to this samiti to undertake the activity. The other two samitis were not able to mobilise such local sources and were getting frustrated in their search for some income/ employment generating activities.

Towards the end of 1981, the CWDS project staff came across a simple machine with the help of which plates and cups could be manufactured out of sal leaves. After discussion with the GMSUS (Chhandapathar) and GMSUS (Jhilimili) steps were taken to procure a few machines (the financial assistance at that time came from Government of West Bengal and subsequently from the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India). These are simple foot operated machines with a pair of dies - which are heated by blow lamps. Stitched Sal leaves with a thin layer of Polythene in between are placed between the two heated dies and pressed by the pedal. The plates and cups of specific sizes are obtained. These plates and cups can be used in lieu of paper plates. Some of the Samiti members from the two Samitis were trained on these machines and limited employment could be generated through training and production of Sal plates on machines and collection of Sal leaves from forest as raw material.

Meanwhile, the district as a whole was passing through a period of severe drought which continued upto mid 1983. There was immediate need for some activities and actions to help out the poor women. The frantic efforts of the CWDS and the Samiti members to augment financial resources from government and other developmental agencies, and mobilise local resources, were getting frustrated at various levels and for various reasons. The GMSUS (Jhilimili) and GMSUS (Chhendapathar) took the step of getting themselves affiliated to the West Bengal Tribal Development Cooperative Corporation (WBTDCC) in the hope of augmenting cash credit to continue the activity of mechanised manufacture of Sal plates. One of the samitis even participated in a WBTDCC organised workshop at Calcutta to plead for their

right to carry on trade in minor forest produce independent of the LAMPS with which their relationship was somewhat strained by that time due to differential treatment meted out to them by the LAMPS in regard to Sal seed and Kandu leaf agency. Fortunately, it was possible to bring these women face to face with two Ministers and a few Government officials through a Rural Camp organised by CWDS in October 1982 at Jhilimili. A few of them had also met the Chief Minister of the State while inviting him to the Rural Camp. Everytime the women stressed on their rights and state of present condition. They expressed that they are basically workers and therefore their right to work should be ensured and employment opportunities should be created. These dialogues were helpful in many ways subsequently.

For the whole of 1982 and the first half of 1983, the GMSUS (Jhilimili) and GMSUS (Chhendapathar) were primarily experimenting with mechanised manufacture of Sal plates. The GMSUS (Bhurkura) was primarily pre-occupied with motherly care of Asan/Arjun plates. The CWDS project staff were trying to find out other sources of activities - such as - possibilities of rope making out of Babui grass, animal husbandry programmes, expansion of Tassar cultivation in Bhurkura and in the other areas, cultivation of cash crops which are less dependent on rain, trade in those minor forest produce in which the LAMPS is not involved, etc. The absence of appropriate technology, adverse climatic conditions, delay in mobilising local resource and above all, inadequate financial resources were posing as major obstacles to any such effort. The CWDS also by this time conducted a market survey on possibilities of sale of Sal plates in the industrial belt of West Bengal and in the city of Calcutta, and established contacts with the various marketing agencies like WBTDCC Ltd. Bengal Home Industries, BENFEB and a few private traders. All these efforts generated some hope both among the Samiti members and CWDS project staff.

The October 1982 Rural Camp where two Cabinet Ministers and a host of officials of the State Government, Panchayat office bearers, special invitees, ILO representatives and CWDS field team were present and listened to the Samiti representatives one by one for three days provided the occasion of a thorough reappraisal of the whole approach. The Ministers and Government officials - on return took steps to clear some of the pending proposals of the Samitis for employment generating activities in March-April 1983. It is then that the Samitis could diversify their activities - by way of setting up poultry and goateries, expanding Tassar plantation areas in Bhurkura, adding Sal plate machines in Jhilimili and Chhendapathar etc. The success of Tassar plantation in Bhurkura has been noticed by other two Samitis and they were in constant search of wasted land in their respective areas. Both the Samitis ultimately found some land and persuaded the owners to donate the same to the Samitis. The Jhilimili Samiti went ahead with plantation of Asan/Arjun on a two acre plot without waiting for government assistance. It also obtained a cash credit from the West Bengal Tribal Development Cooperative Corporation Ltd. (WBTDCC) for Sal plate manufacturing activity. Jhilimili Samiti also started a small piggery unit on experimental basis. All these activities



provided employment to some members but not to all. The Samitis, therefore, decided to share amongst all whatever employment opportunity could be created. They owned all the assets collectively and took all actions-also collectively.

Till March 1984 (i) the Bhurkura Samiti had added four acres of Tassar Plantation to its earlier seven acres, set up two goatery units of 22 animals each and a poultry unit of more than 100 birds, (ii) the Chhendapathar Samiti had procured six Sal plate machines, set up two goatery units of 33 animals each, a poultry unit of more than 150 birds and had obtained a seven acre plot for Tassar plantation, a two acre plot for fodder cultivation and two small plots for setting up two more goatery units under the Government of West Bengal nutrition programme for which this Samiti was chosen(iii) the Jhilimili Samiti had procured ten Sal plate machines, set up four goatery units, a poultry and a piggery unit, and had obtained two plots of wasteland - on one of which plantation of Asan/Arjun was completed.

Apart from emphasis on employment generation, the Samiti members realised that they needed some amount of education to discharge certain activities (e.g. transaction with banks, government functionaries etc.). Each Samiti, therefore, started adult education units in its area. On the request of CWDS, the West Bengal Illiteracy Eradication Association trained a few Samiti members as teachers. Several months' effort to this and prepared certain members to read and write elementary things and they were able to carry on transactions with banks, government functionaries without the help of CWDS field team.

Since all the basic activities were based on local resources and existing skill of Samiti members the only other inputs necessary were augmentation of financial resources and some training to upgrade the traditional skills of the women. To these ends - the Samitis (and the CWDS team) have been partially successful. It was possible to obtain grants from Government of West Bengal for Tassar plantation, animal husbandry, adult education, nutrition - improvement activities and for purchase of Sal plate manufacturing machines. Credit was procured by one Samiti from the WBTDC for Sal plate manufacture. But these were not enough - and the Samitis went on submitting one scheme after another (e.g. scheme for Babui rope making, construction for worksheds) to government of West Bengal and Government of India.

The training input came in regard to Tassar plantation, mechanized manufacture of Sal plates and adult-education. The district sericulture department was persuaded to provide one month's on-the-field training to Bhurkura women in Tassar cultures Training was also given to almost all women of the Jhilimili and Chhandapathar Samiti in the manufacture of Sal plates and in service and repair of Sal plate-machine. However, several vital trainings are immediately necessary for the survival and self-reliance of the Samitis and their activities. The trainings are required in the field of animal husbandry (poultry, goatery, piggery), accounts keepings and management of the Samiti. At the moment, suitable institution/individuals are being identified by the CWDS team for bringing these training facilities to the illiterate Samiti members who

have hardly ever managed any assets themselves and who have their whole life been dependent on others giving them work. The content materials of the training, therefore, need to break several barriers and take the women out from the psychology of dependence to psychology of self-reliance and independence.

## **Employment Generation**

The main objective of all three Samitis has been to generate employment locally for the members. Fulfillment of this objective would depend on Samitis' ability to augment financial resources, to mobilise local resources and to stabilise the assets owned and created. Synthesis of all these efforts can lead the Samitis towards achievement of the main objective. To this end the three Samitis have not been equally successful. A review in September 1982 and again in September 1983 showed that due to Tassar plantation oriented activity, supported all through by the Government of West Bengal, the Bhurkura Samiti generated 10,000 person-days of employment every year. The other two Samitis did not have any such sustained activity. The mechanised manufacture of Sal plate used to get stopped occasionally for such reasons as breakage of machines, scarcity of kerosene, lack of storage space for leaves, slackening of market demands and finally lack of experience in planning various activities. In spite of all these difficulties the annual rate of employment generation by the Jhilimili and Chhendepathat Samiti was 5000 and 3000 person-days respectively. The estimated person-days of employment generation during October 1983 to September 1984 by the three Samitis would be 15,000 (Jhilimili) 10,000 (Chhendapathar) and 20,000 (Bhurkura).

## **Future Plan**

The future plan of activity of the Samitis depends on several issues. On the one hand, each Samiti has a series of objectives to achieve for its members and on the other hand it needs various support - financial moral, political and material - to fulfil those objectives. Both the CWDS team and the Samiti members realised from the beginning that secondary and tertiary sector activities would be unsuitable from the marketing point of view. A distant and/or an urban market would be difficult to control or capture by goods produced by women whose production skill to produce goods for competitive market would take longer time to grow. Fortunately, the Samiti members also never demanded initiation of any such activity in which they have no preliminary skill. Half of the operation i.e. collection, selection, grading, stitching etc. of Sal leaves, in mechanised manufacture of Sal plates was already known to the women and therefore they readily accepted the activity. Both Tassar culture and animal husbandry programmes are close to the women's heart and with that in view both CWDS team and the Samitis would like to diversify in such activities for which raw materials, skills and market

could be easy to obtain. The primary emphasis therefore will remain an wasteland development oriented activities e.g. Tassar cultures fodder and fuel cultivation, introduction of suitable cash crops (papaya, sun flower, pulses, medicinal herbs etc.), animal husbandry (poultry, goatory, piggery and sheep rearing and cattle and rabbit rearing on experimental basic) and babui rope making and rope products. The Samitis desire for forestry based activities may come into conflict with both political and other vested interests in the region. The uncertain climatic condition and chronic problem of drought come in the way of primary sector activities and activities relating to wasteland development. The locational disadvantages increase investment costs as almost everything is required to be brought from a minimum distances of 50 kms.

Apart from economic activities the Samitis desire to undertake certain support service and social security activities. Education, health care, child and mother care, nutrition etc. will form the core of support services. Group insurance, maternity benefits, old-age care and Dharmagolas (for paddy, Mahua etc.) will be the components of social security measures. The Samitis also need to develop its own support services for successful implementation and management of various economic activities. The normal dependence on available facilities (e.g. veterinary, sericulture etc.) has caused a great deal of damage to the Samitis and therefore acquiring some basic knowledge and internalisation of the same in the Samitis' regular function have become imperative. Another important area on which the Samitis' survival depends to some extent is the local power structure. The Samitis are currently taking several steps to establish closer relationship as well as to demonstrate their rights and a share in the development process.

## **Lessons and Experience**

The success of the current experiment to generate employment for women from landless agricultural labour households in the Ranibandh Block through their own organisation has provided substantial lessons both for Programmes for women's development as well as for expanding the participatory base in rural development activities. The objective of the project was to identify and develop in close consultation with governments and women's organisations of all kinds, schemes to generate employment and income for women in the poorest groups, in particular female agricultural labourers. The project aimed to provide a basis for continued action by women's village level organisations ,and governments through their own resources. Participation of women in visualising an economic activity, assistance, management and marketing constitute the primary strategy for them to achieve ultimate self-reliance. The CWDS team in this case, have tried to depend mainly on local specialists and existing government programmes and their support services to promote economic activities for the women.

The lessons and experiences of the CWDS team during last three years have been so enormous that it is very difficult to relate here everything. It will be sufficient to narrate the major and significant lessons only.

(i) Both for mobilising poor rural women and for stabilizing poor women's grassroots Organisation a rural camp is an essential aid and tool. It provides opportunity for motivating women for collective action, assessment of rural women's problems and burdens, dialogue with government officials/local leadership who can help the poor women, identification of leadership quality, mobilisation of various resources from the community, educating rural women in legislation, programmes, technical details of various schemes and for organisational development.

(ii) The form of women's grassroots Organisation for collective work activities is an important issue to decide in the beginning. According to CWDS experience co-operative structure seems to be unsuitable in situations like Bankura where women were largely illiterate, poor and assetless. It is desirable to have a flexible form of organisation so that ownership or control over assets of organisation can be easy to establish. It is for this reason that a 'society' type of organisation was created.

(iii) Admittedly no serious thought was given initially about the optimum size of the organisations as a viable unit for fulfilment of various objectives. This issue is now surfacing in sharp way. However it was noticed that both large and small groups have advantages and disadvantages. Sometimes, choice of activity forced the hands of a organisation to become larger.

(iv) In Bankurat all the Samitis grew to large organisations in terms of membership strength. Surprisingly each one has shown remarkable evidence of solidarity and cohesiveness even in the face of frustration and inactivity. There had been delay in initiating economic activity and there was no provision for employment of all members. Instances of exogenous forces trying to destabilise the Samiti were many. In the face of all theses the Samitis held on and the most remarkable outcome was emergence of leadership qualities and confidence of some members.

(v) These women had never earlier been exposed to new technology and scientific methods. The CWDS team, as a result, was somewhat apprehensive in taking up activities like modern method of Tassar culture, Sal plate manufacture on machines, poultry farming etc. However, the women not only adapted themselves to these activities with ease and eagerness but also demonstrated interest in simple technology based other activities (e.g. Twister for rope making, mushroom cultivation etc.). They also showed remarkable ability to blend their traditional skill

with up-graded skill. In case of Tassar culture and Sal-plate manufacture, the women seemed to be visibly happy to see that their traditional knowledge and skill had so much utility in modern technology.

(vi) Destabilising efforts of certain elements and groups of the local community ushered in the realisation among the Samiti members that unless they become cohesive and are represented in the local bodies for power, they are going to be forgotten and neglected. Two of the Samitis sought and obtained affiliation of the WBTDC Ltd. and started demanding equal status with LAMPS. Individually, the Samiti members are desirous of becoming shares holders of the local LAMPS in order to send their own representatives in the LAMPS' body for influencing its policy decision in favour of women - whose contribution to the LAMPS' activity is much greater than men. The CWDS field team avoided interfering with a member's political liberty and views and advised that the organization should not try to impose any political affiliation on any of its member. Surprisingly while members of the Samitis were found to subscribe to at least three different political views, as a group they preferred to remain non-political. One of the Samitis has been able to send two of its members in the local body of panchayat, and was seriously considering to contest election in the LAMPS' executive body.

(vii) CWDS discovered that although increase in political participation by women through voting has taken place till recently women were unaware of their right to be represented in the panchayat or LAMPS. This awareness on the one hand has unleashed political aspiration and on the other has provided courage and confidence to face political obstacles and rath. These experiences go totally against the views of most development planners and administrators that women lack motivation for collective or developmental action to change their conditions. It had never been necessary to motivate these women - what was needed was to find out feasible methods and suitable resources to meet their basic objectives which were often very clearly articulated by them. It is the hope that the objectives are realisable that has provided them with determination and a sense of solidarity.

(viii) Even with so much growth at the moral level, it may be admitted that the Samitis, after three years' of existence are yet to reach the stage of self-sustainability of the organisations and ongoing activities. The withdrawal of CWDS at this moment may risk the Samitis' access to financial support, needs of training and human resource development, market, and protection against hostile and vested interests.

(ix) The utility of Mahila Samitis as an organ for channelling development projects and resources on a collective basis in waste land use, small animal husbandry and poultry, Applied Nutrition Programme etc. is being gradually realised by the State administration currently. The

affiliation of the Samitis to the WBTDCC Ltd., induction of Samiti members in the Panchayat and LAMPS bodies, genuine support by Ministers, high level administrators and other elected representatives, acceptance of wasteland development for sericulture, fuel and fodder as a priority area in the plan documents are some of the definite indicators.

(x) The West Bengal Tribal Development Co-operative Corporations Ltd. is one of the organisations with which the Samitis established early linkage. The representatives of the samitis attended annual meetings of the WBTDCC affiliated organisations and placed their demands of equal status with government sponsored co-operatives like LAMPS. The WBTDCC is now facing a problem in defining its relationship procedures with the Samitis. This may ultimately force the TDCC to simplify its procedures thus bringing itself within more accessible reach of educationally deprived and economically and socially backward groups. Such a development would certainly help to realise the initial objectives with which the TDCC was formed.

(xi) Those who have observed the Samiti members closely during the last two years will now admit that there is substantial decline in their low self image. They now undertake various operational part of the activities with greater ease and confidence. This decline in low self image has resulted in gradual increase in their bargaining power. While it is a necessary tool for survival of the organisations, it may be remembered that Mahila Samitis as a model is a new concept in the area and too much show of bargaining power may be self-defeated for the Organisation in its nascent stage. In view of this, the CWDS at times had to advice restraint to avoid definite hostility from local power groups.

(xii) Conflict is not wholly dependent on the size of the organisation, and conflict is bound to arise where there is collective action. It is however in the resolution of the conflict that the strength of the Samiti can be measured. Although it is true that the Samitis have generally availed of the counseling of the CWDS in conflict resolution they have settle the issues in their own peculiar ways. In the same way, while the Samitis express in no uncertain terms their bid for an equal status with the local LAMPS for resource exploitation and desire for share in trading in minor forest produce they preferred to avoid confrontationalist approach to allow the conflicts to subside.

(xiii) The areas where such organisations need recognition most are at the community and family level. This is an aspect which cannot be generalised or quantified with certainty but visible behaviours, obvious incidents and tiny gestures prove the point that the Samitis have come to be accepted at the community and family level. This can be exemplified by a number of instances e.g. allowing the women to undertake voluntary work for the Samitis, making

definite enquiries through community level organisations about the current activities and future plans, men coming forward with the suggestion to set up such organisations in other villages with definite offer of large chunks of wasteland etc.

(xiv) Human resource development initiatives by the Samitis could not be vigorously followed and undertaken. They have not been able to do much in the field of nutrition and only a start has been made in this direction through the state sponsored nutrition programmes. In the field of health and family planning practically nothing has been attempted but concern for the health of mother and children exists. This has been voiced by general members during occasional meetings. However, the desire for basic education has been the most pressing demand by the Samitis and in this area all the Samitis have been able to make a start. Besides this, a large number of members have acquired new skills through training and shown evidence of growth of confidence and in articulation power. Apart from the State sponsored ICDS, Adult Education, Nutrition and Social Forestry Programmes which are open to the Samiti members in somewhat limited way and which are conducive of human resources development, the programme which can help the Samitis in a definite way is the new programme known as Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA). This programme can take advantage of the existing three grassroot organisations in Ranibandh Block and should be able to set an example in fulfilling the various objectives. In several Samiti meetings the women are emphatic about two specific problems viz. security of aged women and support to women who remain spinsters, who are deserted/divorced or separated.

(xv) Although the Sixth Plan document with a Chapter on Women's Development proves the concern for women at the highest level in the country, at the operational level a lot more need to be done. The approaches to women's development are not always based on objective recognition of women's critical needs and most of the schemes formulated and illustrated as model schemes need a critical review. This problem is being continuously faced both by the CWDS and the Samitis and this should be the experience of other intermediaries also. There are not only structural barriers but also barriers arising out of lack of insight and lack of knowledge of the field situation. There is another kind of mental blockade imbibed through administrative processes and accountability procedures which have all been designed for far more educated and sophisticated people and which take no note of the social handicaps the women suffer from.

The future plan of action in the ILO sponsored project at Bankura concerns both the grassroot organisations and the project staff. While emphasis on intensifying and diversifying the employment generating activities remains the primary aim, it is necessary to strengthen those aspects which will be supportive and sustaining to these activities. The project staff engaged in action projects need to be trained on methodological issues, organisation building and formal management methods. This training should encompass both operational as well as

ideological issues. The Samitis on the other hand have to be self-reliant and self-sustaining ultimately. This can be achieved through preparing a cadre from among the members of the organisations for various kinds of organisational functions and management methods on the one hand and gradual withdrawal of the intervening agency on the other to start a process where these women can more effectively perform decision making and entrepreneurial roles.

For last two years, the attempts of the CWDS were focussed mainly on employment generation activities which itself served as a mobilisation device. It is now time to start intensive discussion on broader objectives of the organisations with emphasis on local issues and problems. The October 1982 Rural camp has demonstrated that interaction between groups is a convincing device to promote leadership, dissemination of knowledge and broader perspectives.

In the areas of employment generation activities, it is being increasingly realised that secondary sector activities offer a number of risks and pitfalls. This is why the designing of handicrafts as activities for rural women should be examined with great caution. Primary sector activities and activities with simple technology and market near at hand built on traditional skills and knowledge appear to be more appropriate. It is thus proposed to search for such activities and technologies to widen the range of alternate activities.

Employment generation for themselves through Organisation is only one of the objectives of the Samitis. This was a critical need of the women and therefore received the priority. But the Samitis have other committed objectives and other broader objectives. To fulfill these objectives, the CWDS feels that frequent education through group discussion, rural camps, inter-group visits are necessary. This process is also expected to strengthen their perception about their economic independence, values of collective strength and to weaken the sources of intra-familial and intra-community oppression.