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The Kandhkelgaon Story

A bold bid by women in Kandhkelgaon Village, Saintala Block, Bolangir District, to break out of their *poverty trap*

Written by Graham Haylor, S D Tripathi, B K Satpathy and Dipti Behera

One third of the people on earth who are described as living in absolute poverty are found today in India. Of all the states and districts of this huge nation, the districts of Kalahandi, Bolangir and Nuapara in western Orissa State are among the poorest. If you travel south from Bolangir town on route 201 the tarmac stretches just the width of one vehicle so that each encounter with an on-coming truck or car involves one or both pulling off the road. After 30 km a small track turns off to the left – a few kilometers down that track lies a village with over 600 households. The mud brick houses belong to people of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and also those classified as “Other Backward Classes”. In houses and bamboo shacks throughout the village are wooden looms where men and women sit for many hours weaving *sarees*. Cloth and large spidery bobbins of threads clutter passage ways and walls along many of the narrow streets.

Poverty trap

“These people,” says Mr B K Satpathy, “are caught in *a poverty trap*’.” Mr Satpathy works with the NGO Sahabhagi Vikash Abhiyan (SVA), which means *mission to share development*. For almost a year he has been helping to instigate a development project based around a watershed. SVA is one of the agencies implementing the Western Orissa Rural Livelihoods Project (WORLP) of the state government, which is supported by the UK Government’s Department for International Development. Water is a scarce commodity in western Orissa and a watershed represents a useful geographic unit which shares rain that falls in a locality. India bases a lot of development effort around watersheds, supporting soil and water conservation measures – so-called water harvesting – in tanks and ponds, and other measures to support the livelihoods of local people.

“*Poverty trap?*” we ask. “These are creative weavers; their cloth has a distinctive style, but those who supply their thread also take away and sell the cloth, paying just a small labor cost for each



Weaving in Kandhkelgaon

saree. If they are skilled and work hard this amounts to only 25-30 rupees (60-70 US cents) per day.” Under this arrangement, weaving does not provide enough to live on, and people are seeking ways to escape their entrapment in poverty.

Light of life

A few years back, women weavers from neighboring houses in one part of the village began meeting together to discuss their plight and came to form a Self-Help Group (SHG), which they call *Jeeban Jyoti* (The Light of Life).

For more than 100 years, Kandhkelgaon, like most villages locally, has harvested rain water in a tank. At least a 1,000 people bathe each day in the 9-ha *Surjali Kattah*. Cattle, goats and sheep graze around its edges and buffalo wallow year round in its stored waters, which villagers use to irrigate rice paddies below its dyke. The women of *Jeeban Jyoti* knew that the tank could be leased out for fish culture but they also were aware that the annual



Surjali Kattah, *Kandhkelgaon*

lease basis was too short to guarantee that enough of the fish fingerlings stocked could be grown and captured to make such a venture worthwhile.

A new lease of life

Then in 2003, acting on a directive from policy-makers in Delhi – one that had been guided by recommendations from farmers and fishers across eastern India – the Orissa government, in a circular to the District Collector, increased the lease period from one to five years. The fifteen members of *Jeeban Jyoti* came to know of the change from Mr Mukund Nayak, the local Fisheries Supervisor. They also understood its significance and the new options it could open up for their livelihoods. Ms Subhasini Meher (*Jeeban Jyoti* President), Ms Saudamini Meher (Secretary) and the other group members agreed unanimously that they would do everything they could to seize this chance; a new lease period provided a new lease of life. The group contacted the President of the Watershed Committee, Mr Premanand Bhoi, and requested to take up the lease on *Surjali Kattah*. After discussions, the District Collector agreed to settle the lease in favor of the women’s Self-Help Group.

The struggle for entitlements

This was not a small undertaking for the weavers: the five-year lease would amount to Rs 176,922 (US\$ 4,212) and the first installment to secure the lease was 50% of the total. Because *Jeeban Jyoti* comprised women from a Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Classes, they were entitled to both a grant and a loan at a preferential rate to support their venture. However, as people who are poor know well, an entitlement is one thing; securing it is another.



Ms Saudamini Mehr (center), Ms Subhasini Mehr (left) and members of Jeeban Jyoti



Success for Jeeban Jyoti

Although the lease had been settled for five years there was a problem about the classification of *Surjali Kattah*. The tank was recorded as a Medium Irrigation Project (MIP) which, as per prevailing rules, could not be leased for five years. While the grant and loan could not be sanctioned until the classification was agreed, without the payment of the first installment the women could lose the lease to another party. They went to the Bolangir Anchalik Gramin Bank (BAGB) to ask for a loan. The bank could provide the group with a loan of Rs 25,000 at an interest rate of 10.50% per annum. Their only option now was to borrow the shortfall of Rs 65,000 from a local moneylender at an interest rate of 5% per month. The group discussed the matter. Mr Nayak assured them of the technical feasibility of aquaculture in the tank. Faced with the unsure classification of the tank and the hefty interest charges, five of the women felt unable to take the risk and left the SHG. The remaining members of *Jeeban Jyoti* pursued their claim for a

further year and after three visits to the District Collector it was clarified that it was not an MIP but a Panchayat tank. The lease orders were issued by the Collector's Office. Fortune (this time) had favored the brave; the women had their tank.

To repay their debts as quickly as possible and to minimize interest charges, the group harvested and sold fish from the *kattah* which had a ready market in rural western Orissa.

The women sold their crop on the pond side as they harvested, to people in Kandhkelgaon and to fish traders who came on cycles from elsewhere. The women repaid their loan to the moneylender and to the bank after three months. Now they could think of stocking their tank for the following year.

Finding fingerlings



Aluminum hundies for transporting fingerlings

Fish seed is not so readily available in western Orissa. Finding out where fish hatcheries are, what and how to buy, was again a challenge for the weaver women of Kandhkelgaon. The WORLP Capacity Building Team tried to help, together with the Fisheries Department. The group brought 200,000 carp fry from the remote Binika hatchery in August 2004. Fry are too small to stock in such a tank, where predators would rapidly reduce their number. So on the advice of Mr Nayak, *Jeeban Jyoti* leased two smaller Panchayat ponds near to Kandhkelgaon which would serve as more secure nurseries for the fish fry. In October 2004, having reared the fry to fingerling size (70-100 mm), they stocked about 50,000 fingerlings in *Surjali Kattah*, transporting them in aluminum hundies carted by a cycle rickshaw from the nursery.

on average 300 g, to land owners whose private fields become flooded as the tank expands with the rains (the fish move into the fields with the water). Stocking, they learned, had to be done only after the monsoon floods had receded. In spite of the loss, they also harvested 3,181 kg of quality fish between February and May 2005, worth Rs 127, 241 (US\$ 3,030). All the fish were sold at the makeshift landing center where traders and villagers come to buy fish at Rs 40-45/kg.

In the first year of culturing fish in the tank the group lost about 500 kg, weighing



Makeshift landing center at Surjali Kattah

Ideas and change

The group now has the confidence of those who have struggled yet ultimately won through. They already have many ideas for improving the way they operate. They would like to install fences across the *nalas* which feed the tank to constrain the fish from migrating into farm lands upstream. They are also considering nursing fry in pens in the tank, so they will not have to transport them by rickshaw as fingerlings. The group will build a shed to keep nets and other equipment and also for sheltering those doing the watch and ward duty.



Jeeban Jyoti weighing and selling their catch to traders

During the May morning we spent with Subhasini Meher and her group, the women sold over 50 kg of carp to traders, while a constant stream of villagers came to purchase one or two fish each.

Jeeban Jyoti currently use small weighing pans, which can hold only 2 kg at a time. As they always let the scales come down on the side of the fish rather than the 2-kg weight in the other pan, with each pan they provide a good deal extra for buyers. Investing in a larger scale for their transactions with traders will enable them to still be generous but without giving away such a large proportion of their catch in the process.

In the short space of two years – through a bold bid to break out of their *poverty trap* and the opportunity which aquaculture provides – the livelihoods of

Jeeban Jyoti members have improved. Not only do they now have funds, they also have options. The Bolangir Anchalik Gramin Bank (BAGB) has now sanctioned the loan of Rs 150,000 (US\$ 3,571) and the grant of Rs 100,000 (US\$ 2,381) to which *Jeeban Jyoti* are entitled. The groups' bank balance and their cash flow are healthy, providing a firm foundation for operating a small to medium-sized enterprise. It is expensive to be poor, when funds, even for emergencies like medical treatment, come at an interest rate of 5% per month. Yet, being a large village, Kadhkelgaon has its own branch of BAGB and a range of useful financial products, and these too are now available to Subhasini Meher,

Saudamini Meher and the other group members. They now have individual savings of Rs 5,000 in a scheme called *Sambleswari Yojana* which provides an interest of 7% per annum, besides providing life insurance cover of Rs 50,000 (US\$ 2,762).



Jeeban Jyoti – their sarees and their fish

As we chat in the shade, between fish sales, these women describe fish culture as the best business venture currently open to them. The eldest of the group, her gray hair glistening in the sun, suddenly stands up; the temperature is now well over 40 °C. “Take one more photo,” she says, and in the *saree* she has woven, she wades into the tank, takes a carp from the sales *hapa*, turns to the camera and smiles mischievously. The others do the same.

With 18 other local Self-Help Groups, all keen to emulate the fine example of *Jeeban Jyoti*, and many large and small tanks within a 5-km radius, Mr Satpathy suggested that Saintala Block was an ideal place for establishing a *One-stop Aqua Shop* to provide services to Self-Help Groups starting aquaculture. On our way back through the village the women take us to the proposed building. We all agree there is no better place.



*A One-stop Aqua Shop for
Kandhkelgaon*

For more information about the Western Orissa Rural Livelihoods Project, please contact www.worlp.com. For more information on participatory aquaculture research and development in eastern India, contact DFID Natural Resources Systems Program or the NACA-STREAM Initiative. This story can be downloaded from www.streaminitiative.org.