

**BRINGING LAND RIGHTS TO GRASSROOTS WOMEN:
CREATING AWARENESS ON SOCIO-LEGAL RIGHTS
IN WEST MIDNAPORE DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL, INDIA**

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Introduction

Swadhina was established in 1986, by a small group of social activist friends who wanted to do something concrete for women, especially underprivileged women. It was formally inaugurated by Justice Padma Khastagir and former Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University, Dr. Roma Chowdhury. Swadhina began her work with a sum of Rs. 300 collected through door-to-door sale of hand-made year planners. With limited funds from friends and well-wishers, activities were held initially in and around South 24 Parganas and Hooghly districts of West Bengal.

The primary objective of Swadhina is to bring about a holistic social change that has a direct effect on the lives of women. Swadhina works on an issue-based approach, depending on the need of the area.

Over these past 25 years Swadhina has been instrumental in improving the status of women in 12 areas of 6 states of India- mostly from the indigenous or economically impoverished sections and contributing to global development efforts.

Project background

West Midnapore is a small part of the state of West Bengal in India - dominated by poor, tribal communities. Traditionally an agro-based society, the main economic contribution comes from agricultural produce. It is much in the news these days due to regular violence and political disturbance.

Women have a very important involvement in agriculture and most of the hard work is done by them, involved as they are in heavy physical labour in the field as well as the totality of domestic chores. But notwithstanding this, most of the land is in the name of the male family members. Also, as is the custom, the Santhal tribe in the region transfers their property and land rights to their sons. Even a widow would have a right to her land only if she has a male child through her husband. A childless widow has no property rights. Added to this is the low level of literacy among women that has made them easy, vulnerable victims of deceit and forgery. Moreover, the local system of witch hunting has made it a traditional practice to ostracise helpless women in order to grab their land or house.

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Swadhina has been actively working in the region since 1996. The work has centred around socio-economic empowerment of tribal women and children in the region through Women's Groups, Savings and Income generation schemes for women, non-formal education centres for children, health camps for women and children, agricultural support to women, animal resource support to women and awareness generation programmes on gender justice.

Project coverage and challenges

The project covered 10 villages in West Midnapore District, West Bengal covering about 600 or more women belonging to the backward section of the tribal society. The West Midnapore area is a study in contrast - while the urban area is academically oriented with a good number of reputable schools, colleges, social institutions and quite modern facilities with a rich cultural heritage and a mixed population of different castes, the rural area is dominated by tribal peoples, dependant largely on agriculture for their livelihoods.

The rural tribal population is still guided by local tribal norms and diktats and seems to have a separate socio-cultural system. Though originally the tribal culture was much more gender-balanced, so-called 'external influence' has resulted in diminishing gender-sensitivity. Being agriculture-oriented, most of the agricultural work and domestic chores are done by the women (On being questioned, one woman rattled off 14 different type of works that she does in a day! And all of them involved physical labour!). But when it comes to providing equal rights, the practice takes a 'patriarchal color' - whether in terms of education, social security or property rights - women are always lacking in these sectors. To top it all there is the problem of alcoholism which plagues every family. The tribal society is rife with superstitions like "witch hunting" - a practice of ostracising widows and deserted women - a shrewd and smart way to take away the property in her name.

So while working in these areas Swadhina workers faced the daunting task of addressing these social challenges:

- Making the women come out of the traditional mould of being a homemaker to participate in meetings and programmes, and attend literacy classes.
- Breaking the social norm and organising women as self-reliant groups.
- Questioning the 'patriarchal system' of excluding women of their right to literacy, livelihood and land.

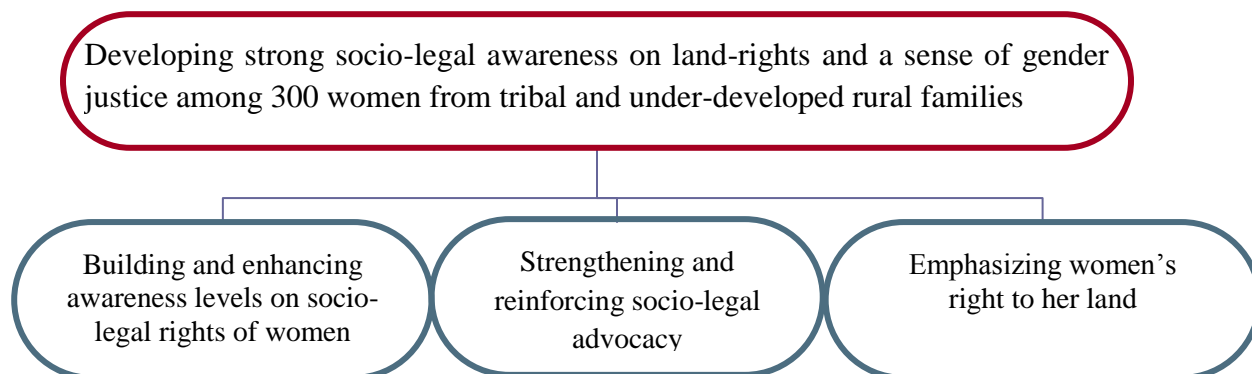
Initially there was a lot of uneasiness among the women to break the barrier; there was a certain amount of reluctance, too, but once the ice was broken many women came forward and joined the momentum. It was a collective effort. As to the men, initially there were questions and doubts in their mind but interestingly, at later stages many of them volunteered at the different programmes and became active participants, too.

Another big challenge is the current political scenario. West Midnapore, in recent years, has been a part of everyday news because of political violence - due to ongoing terrorist activities in the area which has made everyday life difficult for the local people, especially women. This has meant that several government policies and initiatives for the people could not be successfully implemented in many parts of the region. Though there was no direct interference in Swadhina's

work in the area, there was a certain amount of preparedness required on the part of local Swadhina workers, especially while arranging for video shows or the Earth Festival which required public gathering. But the courage and capacity that the women display everyday of their lives, battling these circumstances, is praiseworthy.

Accomplishments

The objectives were divided into three broad segments and the activities were grouped as per the objective they were required to fulfil.



1. Building/Enhancing Awareness: The primary step to fulfilling any objective is to generate enough awareness in the minds of the people. In this case, the challenge was tough because apart from social awareness, a certain amount of legal knowledge was also needed. This became one of the core success areas of the project. While interacting with the local women it was felt that the basic level of awareness on various issues has been generated. For example during conversation women could easily speak about legal aspects like "Succession Act" and could say that they had every right over their paternal property.

"Navodaya Centres", provide a lot of functional knowledge among women – even to fulfil certain basic necessities of their life like knowing to write the name of their village, knowing how to read time, understanding how to count money, etc. It also showed how wide the gap is between the urban areas and rural areas in terms of knowledge and awareness generation opportunities. The programmes under this objective covered a wide variety of people, including men. Thus the awareness could reach beyond its specific target.

Also the awareness-building processes, being interactive in nature, like the public meetings, left ample scope for participation in the process. For instance, during the public meetings posters were used for a contest among the participants – one had to explain the contents of the poster- and in many instances the men voluntarily took part and successfully explained the posters on the theme of women's rights!

This kind of proactive awareness building works very well in the rural setting and sends across messages to the population, something Swadhina was able to accomplish very well.

2. *Strengthening Socio-legal Advocacy*: The activities under this objective very cleverly built a two way process of approaching the problem. One, at the grass-root level and at the higher policy-influencing level. The District-level Socio-legal advisory committee comprised of highly accomplished members - ranging from academicians to lawyers to social workers to retired government officers. The advisory committee meets had rich discussions, layered with discussion about the condition of women of the district to existing legal insulations offered to women. Their contribution began with presence in the meetings but gradually stemmed over to connecting with the women through the various meets and being genuinely concerned about their welfare. At the State-level Seminar they placed many important suggestions and feedbacks, based on their experience as committee members.

The Grass-root women's advocacy group, on the other hand, provided support at the grass-root sphere, directly implementing the legal issues. They provided a strength to the local women to build a support for themselves. It was observed that the men too are wary of this kind of 'organised strength' of women. It is a hope that it will go a long way in curbing the oppression of women.

3. *Emphasizing women's right to her land*: The Earth Festivals were creative, unique and a powerful tool of getting across the message that the earth that we worship as "Mother" belongs to the mothers and sisters of our family as well. These festivals served to spread awareness on many different aspects related to nature through information kiosks with pictures and live demonstrations – about birds, fruits, crops. There were kiosks explaining the role of women in agriculture etc which was a highlight activity.

There was scope for local participation through cultural activities and different games for women and above all there was worship of mother nature, which delivered a firm message that 'our lands ultimately belongs to the women. What was interesting, which many local women also noted, was the fact that the men, too, participated enthusiastically and endorsed the fact that without women agriculture would not be possible. This reaching-out of the message was a vital point of the project.

Touching lives

The qualitative success of a project depends on how well it has been able to touch lives and transform them - even if it is one or two persons, the change is important not the number. Here are a few real-life stories which can show how positively influencing this project has been.

- The "Basundhara Parab" or Earth Festival has been successful in emphasising the fact that women are the 'owners as well as protectors' of this earth. This fact has become so rooted in the minds of the local women that a group of 12 women from Taldanga village got together and decided to do something. Incidentally it was "Forestation Week" of the Government of West Bengal, so the women decided that they would approach the local Forest Officer themselves and ask if they could be given some saplings under the "Sapling Distribution Scheme" - normally a norm during the "Forestation Week". They thought that this way they could contribute to the reforestation process of protecting nature and add these trees to their asset as well. The Forest Officer was surprised to see so many women coming all the way to

the Forest Office. He happily gave them saplings of Guava, Papaya, Gamar, etc. free of cost. The women are now proud owners of the trees.

- The Local Women's Committees have given the women the required courage to fight for their rights – be it their land or be it for their rightful wages. One group of about 14 women normally work as labourers in the forest areas - putting fertiliser to the saplings at the forest. Some of them are members of the local Swadhina women's committees as well. They had not received their wages for a long time, although they were long overdue. The women, with the suggestion from other committee members, decided that they would approach the local forest office as a group. As planned, they approached the forest office together and placed their grievance. Within no time their problem was solved and they were given their due wages.
- The presence of Local Women's Committees and the socio-legal contents of the "Navodaya Classes" had been successful in providing basic courage and knowledge on legal issues. This became quite evident in the case of Sadhumoni Tudu of Sarabot village. Sadhumoni's husband Mongol is an alcoholic and they used to have frequent fights. While Sadhumoni slogged in the fields, Mongol used to ask for money for his drinking. And every time they quarrelled Mongol used to threaten that he would throw Sadhumoni out of the house if she did not give him her money. Sadhumoni started attending the different programmes and meetings by the local women's committee and began to attend the Navodaya classes. There she learnt about a woman's right over her husband's property. Then one fine day Mongol began his usual abuse and threats. But this time Sadhumoni decided to fight back. She retorted saying that she is a co-owner of the house and he can never throw her out at his wish. Moreover, she said, if he continues his behaviour she would get the help of the local women's committee and report the matter to the police. This gave a big jolt to Mongol and he realised that she was no longer alone in her fight but had the support of a large number of women. Things changed from that day on. Mongol is much cautious these days and does not dare to threaten Sadhumoni or abuse her as he used to.
- The fact that the grass-root level public meetings involved men had a far-reaching effect, because in most cases the men are equally as ignorant as the women. Take the case of Babita. She is a young girl who was married to Baidyanath of Pudurbankathi village. Within 9 months of her marriage, unfortunately for Babita, her husband died. As soon as she became a widow her in-laws sent her back to her father's house in Pardoh village. Her life would have remained the same had her father not chanced to be in one of the public meetings organised by Swadhina. There he learned that a widow has the primary right over her husband's property. He went back home and consulted with Babita and other family members. They then took Babita to her in-laws' village. There, they called some local village elders and explained what they had come to know. It was then decided that Babita's in-laws would give Babita her due rights over the portion of the house and agricultural land of her husband. Babita is content now; she is using her bit of the land for agriculture and staying happily with her in-laws.
- Signature is a strong tool of empowerment for women and Swadhina emphasises this issue through the "Navodaya Classes" and the "Signature Camps" that were organised. Dipali

Murmu is one such example. Dipali was a very active member of the SHG group of her village. However, when she was chosen as the Secretary of her group she became nervous because she did not know how to sign her name and that gave her a fear of going to the bank to open an account for her group. However once she attended the “Signature Camps”, she learnt to sign her name. At the “Navodaya Classes” too, she practiced her signature. She then became confident enough to sign the bank documents. Today she is the joint signatory for her Women’s Group bank account at Allahabad Bank and regularly goes to the bank for transactions.

These stories are a proof to the fact that small changes, however small they may be, are happening as a result of the activities undertaken in this project. They are also clues as to how the results and learnings of this project may be utilised for practising similar models in other similar circumstances.

Key learnings

Based on the field experience of the project the following key lessons can be suggested:

- One impact of this project is that it is having a positive influence both among women as well as men. While the women are more courageous and aware of the issues about their welfare, the men are more accepting about women being their equal partners. It has thus emerged that ‘gender-based issues’ cannot be exclusively involving women. The key lesson is to involve the men alongside the women. It is of no use if the women become aware of issues related to their welfare but face stiff resistance from the majority of the men because they have not been equally motivated to accept the change.
- An interesting learning from the project is that it is not enough to make legal changes alone; it is necessary to see how well such changes percolate down to the masses. For instance, in this context of legal ownership of land of women – there are laws in favour of women but there is so little awareness of them that the traditional system continues to prevail. In these circumstances it is very important that there is widespread grass-roots awareness on this issue. Swadhina, for example, developed a cartoon booklet on the laws favouring women, in the form of small stories. These proved to be effective tools of awareness-generation. It is thus necessary that when new legal provisions are made or amendments are done there should be mass awareness on the part of the government, through NGOs/ CBOs or local government legal cells. The booklets, reports and videos can be passed on to different organisations working in similar line: this would help publicize the issue and build motivation.
- A two-way process of advocacy has been quite fruitful. On one hand there have been the Advisory Committees comprising lawyers, teachers, policy makers who have played an advisory role. Due to their presence in several meetings and programmes legal issues were made more accessible and the grass-roots women could reach out to the people to whom they otherwise would not. On the other hand there have been the local grass-roots based Women’s Advocacy Committees that have made a good impact among the local women. These committees have strengthened women as a group and have given them courage. In

future there will be more scope of interaction between the members of the Advocacy Committees and the members of the Advisory Committees to build further synergy in the process.

- The “Navodaya Classes” gave women a fair scope to build their knowledge base and gave a purpose to them. This could be a good model of “Adult Literacy Classes” because unlike literacy classes, it did not just have education as a component. The women were taught to count money, read the time, provided nutritional advice apart from discussions on socio-legal matters. This ‘holistic approach’ helped women in different ways – each according to their need. However it would be good to arrange for trainings for these women in future so that they, too, develop the capacity to help develop the others –similar to the line of ‘each one, teach one’ method.
- The biggest plus point of the project has been the creative inputs such as “Vasundhara Parab” (Earth Festival) or “Video-films”. These added a different dimension to the project and made the components more acceptable and the issues clearer to the people. It is hoped that future endeavours would incorporate interesting and innovative ideas like these.
- The “Earth Festivals” in particular have been path-breaking events because they have been able to generate mass-awareness and support through a locally-accepted system of festivals and fairs. It has taught us that it is wiser to incorporate local components and build a process around it, rather than imposing anything that is alien to the culture. For instance if there had been just talks on women being the legal land-owners, the local people would have felt we are trying to change their system overnight. But when the same issue of a ‘woman’s contribution to her land’ was exhibited through the Earth Festival it was well accepted.
- The project has also shown us that key learnings from projects like this need to be shared among different state and national levels. This help in developing grass-roots level policies and help in building up project processes in similar lines, under similar socio-economic structures. Only then would there be change in the total system favouring women’s rights.