

Srihaswani – Five Years On

A Gender Case Study Update



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Shantiniketan, West Bengal, India

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A brief field visit

We had an opportunity in November 2010 to visit one of the nine original ‘Srihaswani’ (Creative Manual Skills for Self-Reliant Development) villages to capture the impressions of many of those, both women and men, who had participated in the programme [\[1\]](#) for several years. Since 2008, eight of the villages had also participated in a specific ‘Gender Group’ in which there were 127 girls with their mothers. As with the Gender Group, pre-school groups in each village had also been formed (ages 2.5 – 5 years old) for a home-based educational and nutritional supplement programme (called “Home Schooling”), and the one located in the selected village was also visited. A separate discussion took place in Shantiniketan with the girl members of the Gender Group from two villages, along with their village animators.



The village chosen was Darpashila, situated a little more than 6 km from the Visva-Bharati University campus in Shantiniketan in the State of West Bengal, India. The village itself is divided into two ‘paras’ or neighbourhoods according to caste, the Programme involving the much poorer lower caste settlement of the ‘Das Para’. With some 90-odd households (approx. population of 500) the main occupation continues to be manual labour, mostly farming, on the lands of more prosperous farmers, although many of them also possess small parcels of their own for part-survival food needs.

Despite the fact that the whole region had suffered from a severe drought, leading to many of the paddy fields (the main source of income) not having been sown at all, there were signs of relative prosperity in the look of many houses and in the faces and bodies of the villagers and their livestock. Nevertheless, this was the first year that families had had to go to the neighbouring, richer district of Bardhaman in search of manual work. According to the villagers, major relief had been afforded by a nationwide employment-through public-works programme (popularly known as the “100 days” programme), despite its implementation shortcomings. The works themselves, such as the construction of new ponds and flood channels, had improved their food consumption. The last segment of donor funding for the successor to the Srihaswani Programme (through the Irish Government) had ended two months before, in September 2010. Yet the villagers (both women and men) attended the meetings with the visitors with evident enthusiasm and interest, keen to share their views.

Programme phases

The original Srihaswani programme of eight years' duration, started in 2000 with Australian Government funding and management through the AHIMSA Trust^[2] and UN Development Programme, had been ambitious in its scope. It had attempted to cover most aspects of village life, livelihood and welfare which depended on local and traditional skills that promised sustainability, and where the dominant economic system remained one of subsistence and local barter: a large part of food production and processing, kitchen gardens to supplement household nutrition, handicrafts for domestic use including weaving, tailoring and pottery, house construction and repair, use of medicinal herbs and *ayurvedic* health treatment, literacy and basic education. The focus had been on awareness-raising through villagers conducting their own surveys and mapping of resources and skills, and on improvements introduced through seed capital, local training (often with the help of local NGO partners) and visits to specialized centres in other parts of India. The primary methodology involved had been continuous dialogue with and between villagers, and the training of village-based local trainers and animators who were seen as core elements of the Srihaswani team and who could ultimately continue their promotion and dissemination work without external grants and training support. A second phase of this work supported the establishment of three Self-Reliance Centres that would serve all nine villages, and where groups of farmers and kitchen gardeners and artisans could continue with their own training and capacity-building. These Centres also carried out a Survey of the Local Economy (2006) with the data collected from the same villages.



Although there was no specific gender bias in either the content or the village participants, the basic non-market, self-reliance nature of the entire programme made it intrinsically more attractive to the women who were less involved in transactions involving cash or wage payments. They attended sessions in larger numbers, and also seized the opportunity to meet others outside their homes and villages. Majority-male-based farmers' groups took several years to form and gain support, gradually convinced of the need to experiment with organic forms of cultivation and pest-control. Farmers found that their production levels had either dipped or leveled and were willing thereafter to be re-trained in organic techniques aimed at improving soil fertility and break the cycle of mono-cultivation. The programme helped farmers' groups with inputs and training on seed banks. Gradually the nutrition awareness had spread to the farmers' programme as well - for example, unless farmers could be convinced of the need to cultivate pulses along with paddy, the nutritional status of families would not improve. It is worth noting that Farmers' Clubs (with help from a Government bank, and in conjunction with other NGOs) are being set up in all villages nationwide from 2010 onwards and these will also be a mechanism for adapting to and fighting the impact of climate change on sustainable livelihoods.

In 2008, when the principal Irish donor had to diminish its funding support, a decision had to be taken to limit the scope of the programme to one of vocational training and preparation for entry to the market as well as to the formal education system. Gender-specific elements of the Programme were strengthened. The reasons for this change or evolution were many: one of the findings of the evaluation undertaken in 2004, at the end of the original Srihaswani Programme, was that certain deprived and vulnerable groups were not participating adequately in the programme. One of these was "poor Muslim women"- who were not

permitted by their families to come out of their homes for group work. Thus, one of the additional objectives became one of involving the Muslim community, especially the women, through design and craft and mobile library schemes.

Another long-term objective was to work with adolescents, especially girls from impoverished backgrounds. Thus the “Lifeskills Development and Sustainable Vocational Training Programme” emerged out of the felt need of young people to be trained in something useful for future incomes, as well as to learn about vital aspects of daily living that were not contained in school curricula. Students discussed areas such as governance, the Constitution, and ways of benefiting from a range of government initiatives e.g. the Right to Information and the ‘100-Days’ Programme, the Integrated Child Development Scheme (known locally as the “*anganwadi*”, the name given to the village-based woman health assistant) the sanitation work of the *Panchayat* (Village Council), as well as how self-help groups are formed and what they aim to do. The Gender Group was trained in pre-school education and an understanding of child psychology; the members were also encouraged to read and discuss what was written in newspapers (a first time for most of the group) and relate broader concerns such as trafficking in women and female foeticide to what they saw around them. In addition, discussions have taken place on women’s rights, laws that have been designed especially to protect vulnerable women as well as other more general issues of women’s equality.



The current focus of the programme is to encourage the economic participation of women in their own route to freedom: here a pivotal role is played by a cooperative specifically set up for the purpose (Ajoli), composed largely of women thus far. Women kitchen-gardeners provide the vegetables; the Food Processing Unit turns these into pickles and chutneys, which are then sold in the local market. A group of terracotta artists makes decorative items and also “markets” the traditional art of decorating mud houses for people living in the greater Shantiniketan area. There are some men artisans (mainly house builders and thatchers) and farmers in the Ajoli Cooperative too. Current plans are to secure funding to enhance those skills of the cooperative that will help women to take a leading role in marketing and dissemination, as well as improve the use of their own assets and capital. The intention is to focus on niche markets that are emerging *because of* climate change - with many people in urban India wanting to draw on the art and artistry they see in the countryside. For instance, homemakers of Santiniketan may like to have a thatched sit-out in their garden, or wish to decorate their walls with “terracotta designs”. There are plans to set up a “one-stop destination organic store”.

Even if external funding to many segments of the Programme has ceased, the mere fact that many of the participants in the new activities had been long-term participants of the old activities (such as kitchen gardens and English language teaching) lent continuity and received continuing knowledge support from

the Srihaswani team. One aspect that this brief visit probed, therefore, was the extent to which the ending of external funding might mean a loss of participation in the activities themselves.

Findings through the visit dialogues and villagers' own statements

- The dominant impression, when comparing the 2005 past with the present, was one of a marked increase in the self-confidence, free expression of views, and self-assertiveness of the village participants, especially on the part of the girls and women, and in their fluid, close relationship with the mostly female animators.

- Three of the young women who had reached their late teens, and been associated with the Programme since the age of 10 or earlier, had become the first females in their villages ever to have graduated from school and were well on their way to a college education at the tertiary level. Not only were they highly articulate and free of shyness; they also were volunteers in their own villages to continue key activities without or with minimal animator support.

- Mothers showed us their healthy kitchen gardens and were confident about their herbal prescriptions and remedies.

- The pre-school children happily recited their understanding of common terms and objects, their prowess with drawing and Montessori-type manual skills. The mothers clearly appreciated the value of the extra nutrition provided during the pre-schooling sessions and willingly made the modest monetary monthly contributions that would ultimately help reach sustainable levels.



- The state of gender relations in their households and communities was openly discussed at their meetings and subsequently at home, and increased women's aspirations appeared to be supported by both husbands and fathers. Although sex-selection in favour of male babies was still practiced (though not at the levels prevalent in many North Indian states), the girls present at the Gender Group discussion attributed blame as much to mothers' attitudes as to fathers', and were convinced that changing women's and men's attitudes and community pressures was more important than multiplying government regulations and laws.

- For the decision-making power of women to increase, although greater political participation at the Panchayat might help to some degree, the most important single change towards gender equality would be for women to get paid jobs (the issue of equal wages for equal work seemed to have been resolved, at least at the wage-labour level), and to bring home cash income contributions that would immediately boost their status, independence and voice in the household. The program had provided many concrete evidences of this, particularly since the Ajoli Cooperative was set up. The men present concurred.



- An interesting observation from the late-teen girls' remarks was that there was little enthusiasm for marriage (and clarity that it should not take place before the legal age of eighteen), signifying a loss of personal freedom and the inevitability of having to give in to the strongly held and usually conservative views of their prospective in-laws and/or husbands. Divorce, although rare in non-tribal villages, was more in evidence, and the Panchayats were increasingly involved in settling marital disputes and maintenance issues. Women (mothers) are getting further involved in the choice of grooms for their daughters – since they want to be sure their daughters will be able to adjust to their new homes.

- The men from farmers' groups expressed their appreciation for the way in which their confidence in organic cultivation had been built up through better information, on-site demonstrations and the free supply of inputs on pilot plots. Moreover, the expansion of their own kitchen gardens through the Programme was showing its importance in these times of climate stress.

"I feel proud. I see that people have taken these initiatives on as their own, not as something from the outside. I would like to develop further on my own as well!"

Santosh Das, Member of the Cultivators' Group, Shantiniketan, West Bengal

- The Vocational Training programme, started two years ago, was already showing some remarkable results in obtaining remunerative employment. One of the meeting participants, a young man of 20, recounted how he had become apprenticed as an electrician after the training received. He had since set up his own business in the adjoining town of Bolpur, sometimes making as much as Rs 2,000 per month, and was in turn training others. It was a pity that Darpashila village, although it had electric poles, still did not have electricity connections. Otherwise, his knowledge could have been of more direct benefit to his local neighbourhood.



- With greater awareness of Government schemes to which all families had a right, such as the '100-days' guaranteed work scheme, women were now active participants, often exceeding the numbers of men involved (but average 40:60 woman-man ratio). Since one family member had to be nominated, it was often the woman who was nominated, leaving the male member to continue cultivation work and thereby doubling the cash return to the family. Women received the same Rs 100 per day worked; the pity was that nowhere was the target of 100 days' work to be provided reached – the most days worked in a year by a family from Darpashila had reached only 45 days.

“Gender equality will come earlier than 2060. Change is happening fast, things are different from our mothers' and grandmothers' experiences.”

Student Members of the Gender Group, Shantiniketan, West Bengal

- In general, women were receiving the same daily “minimum wage” as the men for work performed on land or construction sites. Women's rights and women's equality issues were forefront issues for them now. When questioned on their suggestions and aspirations for their view on women achieving full equality by 2060, many believed that equality would have been achieved well before that date. The pace of change, Sagari Das – one of the school graduates said, had been very rapid in the last decade, education was the key along with paid employment. They agreed that education needed to be more analytical and practical, less rote-learning for exams. Girls were still finding it difficult to continue schooling beyond Class 8 (age 14), without adequate support from their parents who did not 'see the need'.

- Again, they blamed their mothers' acquiescence in, or implicit support for, such negative attitudes, which needed to change. A key problem was the lack of sufficient outside exposure for girls and women. None had traveled to any town other than the adjoining one of Bolpur. The girls loved music and dance. Yet there were no opportunities for learning to sing in the village and therefore such expression. It was poignant that the visit session with the Gender Group ended with dance and song performances orchestrated by the Programme and seeing the rapt expressions on their faces.



In conclusion, the greatest aspiration for women in the Programme was freedom. Freedom from joint family pressures, freedom to travel, freedom to meet the partner of choice, freedom to control their family size, freedom to pursue their own ambitions.



Photo by Krishno Dey

Reflections based on village interactions organized by Chandana Dey, Ahimsa Project Coordinator, on the occasion of a visit 11-12 November 2010 to Shantiniketan of Dr. Brenda Gael McSweeney, accompanied by Krishno Dey, Nandalal Jha and Pritha Maity, all also key actors in Srihaswani. Photos by Brenda Gael McSweeney, unless otherwise indicated. *Krishno Dey/Chandana Dey/Brenda Gael McSweeney, 21.XI.10*

[1] See original Gender Case Study of the Srihaswani Programme, published in 2008 as Chapter 4 of *Another Side of India: Gender, Culture, Development* (Brenda Gael McSweeney, Editor: UNESCO, Paris).

[2] The AHIMSA Trust, a Delhi-based Non-Profit, which has been associated throughout the original Srihaswani Programme, its successor scheme, and now the post-donor phase after Irish funding ended, has not only provided management and monitoring support, it has also been the driving force behind fund-seeking, arranging for NGO partnerships, helped with marketing, and continues to search for innovative ways of supporting the underlying purpose of social transformation and strengthened village livelihoods and skills.