



**Srihaswani: a Gender Case Study  
Shantiniketan, West Bengal, India**

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## **ABSTRACT:**

This 'gender case study' looks at the experience of a small but potentially significant experiment in rural self-reliance in a rain-fed district of the state of West Bengal in India. Although the programme of Creative Manual Skills for Self-Reliant Development (CMSSRD) was not designed specifically as a 'gender initiative', it demonstrates many features of interest to broad gender concerns. These were brought out in this study with the support of Boston and Brandeis Universities through Dr. Brenda Gael McSweeney. Of special interest are the ways in which a 'parallel economy' of subsistence livelihoods draws upon the skills and traditions of women's contributions to the household, to agriculture, health and nutrition, and allows rural communities to better face the uncertainties of engagement in the globalising economy. At the same time, CMSSRD encourages women to strengthen their roles in the culture and identity of the village community and beyond. ... *kd*

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## **Background:**

This paper is an empirical inquiry into a development initiative in the district of Birbhum in the state of West Bengal, India through a gender lens. This case study, drawn from a small piece of recent work involving field observations and discussions, is based on the experience of an innovative programme called "Srihaswani" – a Bengali composite word for Creative Manual Skills for Self-Reliant Development (CMSSRD). It allows us an insight into unique methods that can be used to understand the relationships between men and women, their access to resources, their activities, and the constraints they face relative to each other. Gender analysis yields information showing that gender, and its relationship to ethnicity, culture, class, and age, affect different patterns of involvement, behavior, and activities of women and men in economic, social, and legal structures.

*Why in a course on Gender and International Development would one choose a small programme like 'Srihaswani' as a case study? How do the conditions and experiences of low-income women in a little corner of India help our understanding of either 'development' or the situations of women, and men, in other parts of the world, whether industrialized or not? For that matter, what does "international development" itself have to offer of interest to the study of women? Or why does the perspective brought by a focus on women bring any special insights to initiatives for the progress of people everywhere?*

The question of what constitutes development is a source of endless debate. This paper follows Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum<sup>1</sup> and equates development with an increase in the creative capabilities of women, men, and children. Unfortunately, misleading simplifications are common, such as making 'development' synonymous with 'economic development,' where economic development itself is made synonymous with market-led economic growth. This case study attempts to show that people's, and especially women's, concepts of development do not match such simplifications. By giving much more room for local households and communities to voice their desires and concerns, the directions taken were often unexpected.

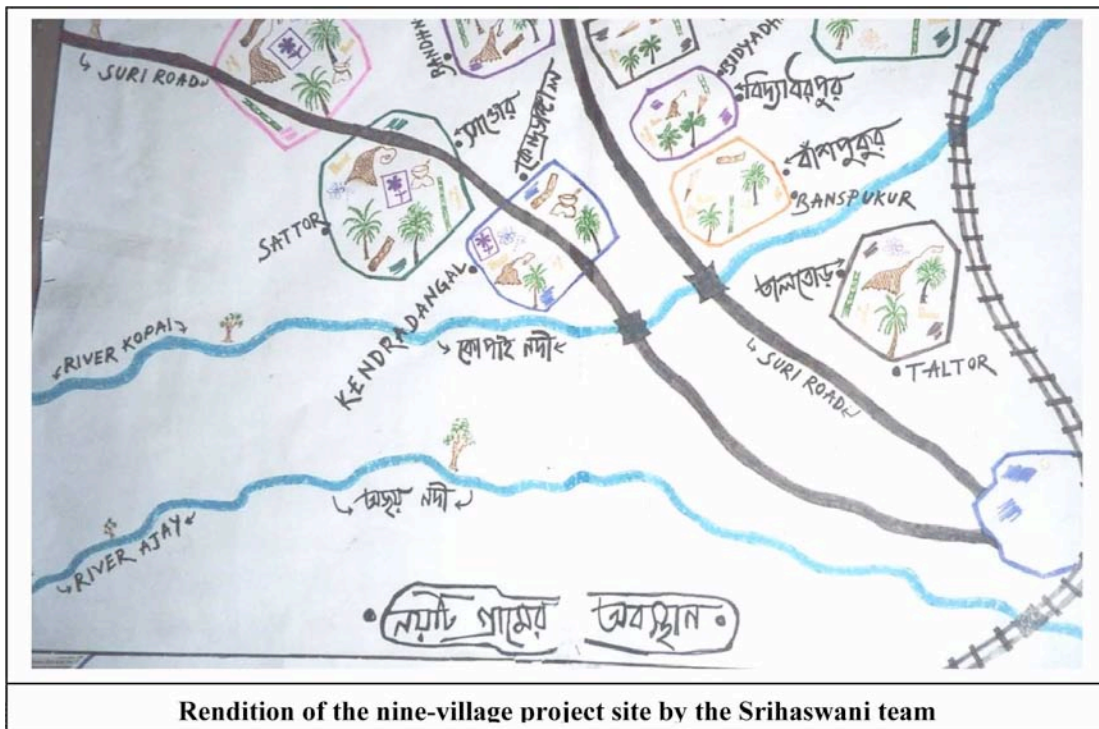
Public sector organisations dealing with international resource transfers under 'aid,' transfer of knowledge and know-how, trade, investment, and institutional capacity-building have been forced

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<sup>1</sup> Amartya Sen: *Development as Freedom*, Oxford, 1999, Ch 2; Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, Kali for Women, 2000, *Ch.1*.

to acknowledge that local complexity and the multi-faceted nature of people's concerns were inadequately taken into account in project design. This failure accounts for much of the disappointment felt when results fall short of expectations, or when efforts bring about unintended results.

Our academic disciplines and their theories in the social sciences tend to rest on models and assumptions of human behavior that bear little relationship to reality. Economics, as it is generally taught today, assumes that men (women are largely ignored) act out of pure self-interest in the market-place. Fundamental human emotions such as care, love, hatred, solidarity, sharing, the thirst for power and status, envy, patriotism, and religious beliefs are cast aside by 'economic man' as engines of human behaviour, while people's needs for identity, dignity, and for secure, stable, safe relationships and social respect are equally disregarded. Other social science disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history, literature, and comparative religion, which examine motivations beyond self-interest in the marketplace, and would have had much to contribute to the study of development, find little place in the thinking that goes into programme designs.



This case study took as its premise that it was necessary to approach the work through the eyes of the village community and village household, the only level which allows a full and detailed observation and understanding of intra- and inter-household behavior with as few pre-conceptions as possible. It assumed that there was a need to listen to people, and, in particular, to the women whose problems and aspirations are seldom heard. The processes of rapid change that are affecting them are not always positive. It is necessary to understand if it is the processes or the outcomes that are not positive. Women's integration into larger markets creates changes in social relationships, the time available to care for their children and others, and changes the daily balance of women's lives. It is critical to understand these factors so that development activities become tailored to maximize creative capacities and have a new positive impact on the involved communities.

## The philosophy:

The *Sribaswani* initiative is based on the particular premise that self-reliance – both individual and collective – is a key development objective that grows in importance with the macro- and micro-effects of globalisation. The engagement of women with that objective provides a rich set of insights into processes and assessments of wide relevance to international development policies.

CMSSRD or *Sribaswani* tries to revive parallel, ‘safety’ circuits of economic activity. It tries to nurture a modest level of local economic contributions and transactions in a manner that allows the people to provide for their survival needs with resources and processes they control. The attempt of *Sribaswani* has been to help build the consciousness and pride of the villagers in their own knowledge, skills, and way of life, and to explore avenues to build on their existing capacities. If community members maintain their practical daily living skills and can meet their basic survival needs for shelter, food, and health through self-reliance at the household or village level, they can be more consciously selective about the transactions they choose to engage in beyond the village, rather than simply being at the mercy of decisions taken by others on their behalf. If they understand what they have, what they can do for themselves, and what they truly need from others, they are in a stronger position to retain control and choice. Choices that protect their land and natural resources make better use of government services, allow them to assess the worth (social cost-benefit) of proposed development schemes, and to involve themselves in local and parliamentary democracy. As large corporations and multinationals aggressively enter the rural environment, poised as they are – with the help of the state – to take over an increasing share of the economic space, rural households and communities need to think in advance of what the long-term implications might be for their own control over employment, their way of life, and cultures.

Unlike most development programmes, *Sribaswani* has not spent time trying to meet pre-determined numerical targets. Instead, from the start, it has focused on capturing the qualitative changes taking place in both men’s and women’s lives, and has addressed the problems of entire village communities. Through repeated interviews, detailed data was collected from each household member according to gender and age. The inclusion of both men and women (sometimes separately at first) allowed for animated discussions of male-female interactions, and provided opportunities for debate about the different impact of proposed and then ongoing activities. An exclusively female-oriented programme may not have stimulated such dialogue.

“A bullock cart has two wheels,” said a woman member of the kitchen-garden group, who also felt that Srihaswani’s work with both men and women had positive results for the community as a whole. “There are many things men do not know and others where women are ignorant. Education must include both women and men,” said an energetic *panchayat* (elected unit of local government) leader who has emerged from a scheduled caste community, and is busy on most days overseeing development help at the local level.

Selective local discussions suggested a tactical reason for not having an exclusive focus of women, namely that an exclusive orientation on women might provoke indifference, or even active hostility from the men. This could lead to their unwillingness to permit the women to take time off from other tasks in order to attend discussions and training sessions outside the home. Nevertheless,

### *Why gender?*

“An analysis of gender relations can tell us who has access, who has control, who is likely to benefit from a new initiative, and who is likely to lose. Gender analysis asks questions that can lead us in a search for information to understand why a situation has developed the way it has. It can also lead us to explore assumptions about issues such as the distribution of resources and the impact of culture and traditions. It can provide information on the potential direct or indirect benefit of a development initiative on women and men, on some appropriate entry points for measures that promote equality within a particular context, and on how a particular development initiative may challenge or maintain the existing gender division of labor. With this information, measures of equity can be created to address the disparities and promote equality.”

Citation from a Canadian International Development Agency publication on gender  
<http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/CIDAWEB/acdicida.nsf/En/JUD-32071913-GG4>

the description and analysis in the following pages has a dominant gender focus, extracted from the programme's broader scope.

### **The project area: local context and rationale of the Srihaswani programme:**

The villages of Birbhum are being rapidly integrated into the larger market economy. The introduction of electricity, telephone lines, mobile phones, and television, also brings advertising and marketing pressures into the more affluent households. Farm families as a whole have benefited from the State of West Bengal's agrarian reform programmes of the 1970s, and many have had recourse to diesel-powered pumps to obtain a second rice crop through well-irrigation, using high-yielding varieties.

As a result, cases of acute hunger and starvation are rare today. Railroad and bus connections are good, the road network and wells for potable water show recent improvement, and school and

#### **A word about Birbhum district- project area**

The District of Birbhum, in which nine selected project villages are located, is one of 29 in the eastern Indian State of West Bengal (second most populous in India, with over 85 million people in 2001). It is a relatively poor district of the Indo-Gangetic plain, rain-fed on eroded soils for the most part, with rice as the principal crop. The project area is in a 15-km. radius of the small town of Bolpur (> 100,000 population) and the adjacent university campus of Visva Bharati, Shantiniketan, some 160 km. North-West of the metropolis of Kolkata (previously Calcutta, 14 million in the urban agglomeration). Such University proximity means a proliferation of student research surveys – to such a point that one village woman responded concerning her daily routine, “I get up very early, brush my teeth, then rush out to brush the teeth of my cow!” Shantiniketan owes its renown to its founder, the pre-eminent cultural figure of modern Bengal, Nobel laureate and poet-writer-composer Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), whose ideals of humanism, harmonious living and rural uplift through education have also inspired the *Srihaswani* programme. While Hindus are the dominant population, there are significant numbers of Muslims (close to 30%), as well as tribal people (less than 10% – mainly Santhals).

health services are becoming more accessible. Problems, however, remain with the quality and affordability of many public services, as most people have low incomes (less than rupees 3,000 – or \$60 per month per average household of 6 people), and schools with huge classes are poorly equipped and staffed. Their education is of little direct relevance for either their graduates or their villages, and adds to the pressure for limited government jobs and city employment. Health conditions need urgent improvement, especially freedom from water-and insect-borne diseases. High population growth keeps increasing the density of cultivable land, leading eventually to the sale of unviable plots and the abrupt transformation of farming specialists to landless wage-labourers. Despite the low employment potential of Kolkata and other urban centers, the young have an almost universal dream of leaving the village, thereby seeking to overcome isolation and monotony, the stifling weight of custom – especially for women – and the daily struggle for survival, given the chronic uncertainty of harvests and prices.

The *Srihaswani* programme seeks to address two notable features of the local society and economy: the precariousness of village life, which is increasingly dependent on external policies and fluctuations over which villagers have little or no influence and control, and the loss of the subsistence economy. Using modern cultivation practices implied a transformation from cultivating mixed crops (using retained seeds and techniques based on local knowledge developed over the centuries) to mono-cropping of high-yielding rice varieties dependent on purchased seeds, chemical inputs, regular water supplies mined from underground aquifers, and increased mechanization. The

original inducement was through a high and unsustainable system of State subsidies, but as India integrates its economy more closely with the global economy and follows World Trade Organisation (WTO) dictates, these subsidies are being withdrawn and agricultural income taxation looms as an imminent reality. Also, over time, the soils have begun to require ever-larger doses of chemical fertilizer, their salinity has risen, and arsenic poisoning is spreading throughout the region's watersheds as a result of depleting aquifers. This transformation in agriculture has also reduced women's contribution to agriculture and food production, especially as more mechanization and cash transactions take place.

In the area of crafts and services, similar factors of monetisation and industrialisation have displaced significant areas of subsistence village production, often by women, in favor of goods supplied through urban organized manufacturing or even imports. Rapidly rising consumerism and dowry demands for unmarried daughters are adding to the household debt burden, fueling the calls for aborting female fetuses through the use of illegal pre-natal sex-determination. Seasonal or permanent migration to the towns or to more affluent states in search of work are a regular feature of village life, made more bitter by those who return frustrated by their failures.

*Points to ponder...*

- \* Erosion of local knowledge, creativity and skills (and therefore self-pride and identity), especially those dependent on manual work
- \* Impact of rising consumerism and debt on the hunger for cash incomes and wage-labour
- \* As a result, many of women's contributions to the economy become even more invisible, since they are perceived as marginal to household needs. As elsewhere, women do a majority of the work within the informal sector and the home and as a result, much of their work is not counted or is underrepresented in official statistics.



The rapid disappearance of the subsistence economy, especially of collecting natural foods and herbal supplements and artisan work – in which women played a large role – is the second feature addressed by the programme.

“I get up at 5 am and read the *namaz*” (Muslim prayer). Then I open the chicken coop, wash the previous night's dishes, and make the beds. I sweep the courtyard, especially the kitchen. I make tea and serve it to everyone in my house. Then I have my own tea, sometimes with puffed rice. I then clean the cowshed. Then I cook food for my children before they leave for school. During the peak-farming season, I also cook for my husband who has to go off to the fields early. Then I make lunch for the rest of the household. I have my bath and I pray again. During the day, I pray five times. After lunch, I grab a quick rest. If there is any handcraft-work like weaving *talais* (straw mats) or embroidery for *kanthas* (quilts), I do this in the afternoon rest time. I make the evening tea. My children come home – they eat – I wash these dishes. I then start cooking the evening meal; we eat by 8 pm and we go to bed by 9.”

*Account of an average 15-hour day in the life of a housewife in Khiruli village. Collected from a Women and Children Survey conducted by women in their own villages at the start of the Srihaswani Project (in the year 2000).*

The Srihaswani team members in 2004 drew up a list of tasks which were essentially gender-based. It is important to note here that men have specific skilled or unskilled tasks at specific hours of the day outside the perimeters of their homes. Women, on the other hand, are fulfilling their multiple roles as care-givers and income-earners. The onus of running a household and earning for their families falls on women.



	
Planting, Plowing, Irrigation, Fertilization, and Weeding	Sewing, Harvesting paddy
Seasonal Paddy collection and cutting	Par-boiling rice, daily frying of puffed rice
House construction	Daily cooking and fuel preparation (cow-dung cakes)
Occasional home/garden fencing	Daily home and courtyard cleaning, frequent plastering with cow-dung
Occasional house/furniture repair	Washing and mending of clothes
Occasional hut thatching, sharing in building/maintaining village infrastructure	Milking and feeding livestock and poultry, cleaning the shelters
Fishing and making fish nets	Fetching water for all household needs, collecting leaves and brushwood as fuel
Tree planting and care	Responsible for kitchen gardens and herb-patches for medicinal purposes
External marketing of produce (in the towns)	Bartering, exchanging/transacting, within the village
Borrowing and lending money, cash purchases and sales, savings and accounts	Collection of "free" foods (vegetables, roots, snails), spinach, mushrooms
Van/Rickshaw driving, bullock cart construction	Care of children, elders, sick, and handicapped
Paid employment outside (labour wages, teaching and clerical positions, informal)	Looking after animals, livestock
Pottery/Blacksmith/Carpentry/Cobbling/Bamboo crafts	Crafts for home and sales, such as making mats, quilts, brooms, embroidery, sewing
Political discussions and group-based activities	Worship and rituals, home decoration

Group interview response to B. McSweeney and C. Dey, Nov. 2004.

Other than agriculture itself, the *common-property resources*, namely: forests, ponds and embankments, the common lands and properties for animal husbandry, and the monsoon-flooded fields, provided rich sources of additional food and nutrition, fuel and raw material for each household, which were rarely monetized or traded. Much of the artisan and craft work consisted in making herbal medicines, utensils, furniture, shelter materials, clothing, and simple creature-comforts from cultivated, collected, surplus and waste products. The education and training of children passed from grandparent or parent to child, or from master-craftsman to apprentice, were immediately put to use, unlike the classroom rote-memorization of much irrelevant information that is often undigested and wasted. The work of artisans is used for ceremonial and traditional ritual and festivity, for religious devotion, for home decoration, and for art, music, and dance entertainment. All these were rich not only in customary tradition but in accumulated and well-tested treasures of knowledge and skills. It should be noted that 'artisan' is rarely a distinct category of people in these villages, but a part-time occupation of many farmers and housewives.

### **The Srihaswani method and approach:**

As noted above, the prime thrust of the *Srihaswani* programme is to explore ways of increasing the individual and collective self-reliance of rural communities, while dealing with the challenges and uncertainties provoked by the rapid market integration of rural societies. The

assumption, at the time of conception, was that since market forces were in any case likely to play a dominant role in shaping ordinary people's lives, they needed to be better equipped to deal with them.

### **Introduction to the community:**

A three-year process of dialogue and mutual learning between interested villagers and a few Shantiniketan-based researchers, started in 1996, was the basis and prelude to outlining the Srihaswani framework on an experimental project scale. Once it was possible to draw on modest external resources,<sup>2</sup> nine villages – within an accessible (to bicycles and buses) radius of Shantiniketan – were selected for the initial phase of work on the basis of village discussions, on grounds of being fairly representative of the wider rural society. It was clear at the outset that this project would need to be the first stage of a much longer, sustained effort, if local women and men were to be able to accept and work out their own interpretations of the basic Srihaswani philosophy.

Drawing on earlier experience with the UN Volunteers (UNV) Programme, a structure of interaction and support was organized for the project to maximize the volunteer effort of all participants. Village groups, some of them exclusively composed of women or children, others mixed, and a few (mostly male) groups of farmers, were the mainstay of the project. For reasons of sustainability, the first line of women and men *animators*<sup>3</sup> and trainers were selected from the villages themselves, through acquaintance (earlier dialogue process) and interview, and participated on a part-time paid basis, in addition to volunteering time when required. The major constraint was the time available to village women and men to participate in a programme that would not provide them with immediate additional cash benefits. Yet, it sought to reduce their little leisure from their survival-based routine. Consequently, a high degree of flexibility was demanded from all project staff, to fit in with the limited free time of the participating villagers. Most of the project field team were selected from those based in Shantiniketan-Bolpur as field agents, each responsible for a cluster of villages and activities, and functioning on a near full-time basis. The field coordinator has been a woman, as has been the overall project coordinator (Chandana Dey) selected by the Ahimsa Trust.

The first year was spent entirely on household and cluster discussions around the Srihaswani framework and its relevance to the concerns and priorities of villagers. Much importance was ascribed to getting to know each other and building up a platform of trust and understanding. Repeated visits to the same households, with separate or joint discussions with the women, children, parents, and grandparents, proved necessary to obtain a full gender- and age-differentiated picture, as well as to dispel the original suspicions of village inhabitants. It was during these intense and focused discussions that it became apparent to the field team just how tired the community members had become of responding to survey questionnaires and participating in short-term service-delivery projects administered by numerous Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). A number of such NGOs had promised much but delivered little, and then suddenly left.<sup>4</sup> In the Srihaswani case, what was most puzzling for the villagers at first was that there were no concrete activities that were being proposed, and nothing being constructed or distributed. Moreover, the concepts seemed alien and contrary to the normal flow of things. What did the Srihaswani team really want, who was behind them, what might the underlying motives of the entire exercise be? It

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<sup>2</sup> About \$15,000 per year for four years from the year 2000, provided through the United Nations (UN Development Programme) and the overseeing Ahimsa Trust (Non-Governmental Organisation) by AUSAID (the international cooperation arm of the Australian Government).

<sup>3</sup> Catalysts, responsible largely for social mobilisation.

<sup>4</sup> It should be made clear that this is not a remark about all the NGOs active in the area, some of which have been making much-appreciated contributions over many years.



was well into 2002 when the first groups were formed. Initially the groups were composed of women and children, and drawn usually from among the lower income strata and castes where the women proved more accessible, more interested in the new ideas and proposals, and more anxious to find opportunities for discussion outside the home. Children and schools constituted fertile ground for cultural and educational activities, which included setting up drama groups, producing newsletters and exhibits, and learning new songs and dances. It took time to find appropriate village animators, especially from among the Santhal (tribal) hamlets where little Bengali was used. Detailed time-studies at the household level and mapping of the villages themselves were undertaken, with as much participation as possible by the adults. Workloads of women and men were discussed and presented through diagrams.

The project focused on establishing three “resource centers” at the outset, located at central points within the village clusters where the locally-manufactured products of Creative Manual Skills for Self-Reliant Development (CMSSRD)<sup>5</sup> could be displayed as contributed by, or acquired from, the villagers. This was done in order for them to become more aware of how broad the range of items and skills really were, and encouraging them to question the causes and impact of their disappearance over time.

In carrying out the ‘sectoral’ activities of health, literacy, nutrition, tailoring, bamboo and other craft training, recourse was made to the volunteer services of doctors, academics, and social workers located in Shantiniketan. Gradually, the project reached out to other NGOs for specialized knowledge and experience, in areas such as medicinal plants, mushroom cultivation, and organic farming, which meant sending village teams to them for training and exchange. These were often in different, far-off corners of India, and the visits proved to be radical departures for people who had rarely, if ever, left their own neighborhoods. The third and fourth years have seen more of these network arrangements being established and more attention given to producing reports, evaluations and consultations, photographs, web-material, and film recordings.



**Three women leaders conversing with Case Study Interviewers  
Brenda Gael McSweeney and Chandana and Krishno Dey in West Bengal**

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<sup>5</sup> Srihaswani, or CMSSRD, tries to understand and improve the totality of daily life at the local level through the creative (i.e. not just mindless, repetitive, routine tasks) use of manual skills. Why manual? There is a use of manual skills so that there is direct, personal involvement and satisfaction through contributions that require a conscious joining together of mind and body capacities.

### **Activity areas and their components:**

The first year's discussions led to an identification of the many areas of daily village activity, which best lent themselves to CMS strengthening and development in an inter-related manner. In turn, this suggested groups of project initiatives, which could be undertaken in several villages simultaneously, and managed in accordance with criteria covering geographic proximity and ethnic affinity. While not comprehensive for a *Sribaswani* strategy, these would be sufficient to start off the process.

Project activities came to be broadly grouped into awareness-raising; health, medicinal plants, nutrition and kitchen-gardening; culture, education and communication; manual skills for craft, village infrastructure and barter in essential goods; and natural and organic farming, water conservation and environmental protection.

### **Awareness-raising activities:**

Villagers and project team-members together assessed the current state and inventory of creative manual skills and their products in the nine villages. Instead of quantitative survey methods, a combination of exhibitions, posters, maps, and newsletters was used to create awareness of what there was, as well as of what there was not (or had been lost over time), matched against needs as well as local resources and raw materials. (For instance, ploughs were still being made locally by one or two families, but there were no longer skills for making good thatching, pottery, or bamboo articles, despite the evident demand for the latter and the continued availability of the necessary raw materials. Most households had to hire expensive masons from outside to re-thatch their roofs, or wait for annual markets to purchase their bamboo baskets.) The findings, in terms of the range of skills, were surprising for many villagers. At the same time, sample observations noted the rapid shrinking of the subsistence economy and the need for cash expenditures to replace what they had earlier collected, grown or made for themselves (such as medicinal plants for healthcare). The role of grandparents and older relatives in keeping alive folk wisdom, their role as carriers of local history, of traditional medicine, and other elements of indigenous knowledge, hardly remained. It was found that women were more readily conscious of both the changes that had taken place and the potential for reviving the lost manual skills.

*"Their daughters have begun to dream. Dreams that are clearer and shimmer with a reality that might be grasped, unlike the unformed dreams of their mothers ... These new dreams are bringing with them new struggle ... those that come with the freedom to choose. Education, alternatives, ambitions, choices which hold a promise that might somehow fail."*

- Anees Jung, *Beyond the Courtyard*

Those attending schools as well as other children participated in awareness-raising activities. *Potnas* (singing, painting-based story-tellers) were engaged to inform people, as were short plays and street-theatre. Video-filming and compilations of case study material were among the techniques used to train and record.

This is indeed 'work in progress.' Future attempts are needed to establish "dependency and self-reliance indices" with their attendant risks and advantages. The level of ignorance about the most basic differences between political parties and their policies, or on the functions and responsibilities of the State and the bureaucracy, make it problematic for real democracy to flourish. Much work is needed on simplifying and making relevant subjects taught as abstractions in school books, in the context of a global system of power and wealth. People should have the tools to make

informed electoral choices, which one hopes can protect them from policies that work against their self-interests.

### **Healthcare, medicinal plants, nutrition and kitchen-gardening activities:**

A committee of volunteer doctors and paramedics from Shantiniketan-Bolpur assisted this cluster. They helped to conduct the first assessment of the health conditions of the villagers and gather data on the frequency and severity of communicable and water-borne diseases, and the particular health problems faced by women, especially during pregnancy and birth, along with the types of treatment women sought. Free patient consultations were also arranged in order to build up a sense of solidarity, while lessons were given in first aid to youth groups. The cost of medicines emerged as the major factor inhibiting the regular and timely treatment of families, as also a sense of mistrust concerning local hospitals. As a result, the poor rarely consulted qualified practitioners, running instead to the “quack” doctors (so termed locally to refer to fake practitioners who are little more than peddlers of patented medicines) regularly visiting the villages. Otherwise, they visited the resident *ojhas* (traditional medicine-men) using occult methods to deal with life-threatening crises, such as snake-bites.

The biggest challenge was to encourage investment in preventive healthcare, especially in promoting better hygiene and nutrition, keeping the village ponds clean, and improving sanitation and waste treatment. All these areas required much development and use of Creative Manual Skills (CMS), and the improvements suggested were readily appreciated. For medicinal plants in the service of indigenous systems of healthcare (Ayurveda), observation visits were encouraged through a Bangalore-based network. This was also supported by UNDP India, and the Foundation for the Revival of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT). The visit was also to one of the latter’s active groups in the vicinity of Madurai in South India. This activity was considered a great success in showing villagers and team members how much could be achieved through dedication and very limited resources by households and in locations even poorer than their own. They could also appreciate the potential that medicinal plants represented as a new source of income. Women and village youth were the enthusiastic standard-bearers of this area of activity.

#### ***“How can we work if we are not healthy?”***

The Health group members started kitchen-herbal gardens in their own patches of land adjoining their huts, and learned how to make a number of herbal medicines themselves for their own families’ consumption. A health survey done by the youth of this village in the first year of the project showed that most people suffered from acidity and heartburn and had to keep antacids with them at all times. Today, they say their health is much better, and they have learnt how to make a natural remedy for their stomach problems that is far more cost-effective than medicines from the village shops.

A related set of issues covered the problems of malnutrition, bad diets, and poor cooking practices. Villages had ignored many of the traditional plants and spinach varieties that were earlier collected freely from pond and canal embankments, and were thereby constrained to buying less nutritious but higher-status vegetables and cereals purchased from the market. The potential for growing nutritious vegetables, mushrooms, and medicinal plants in tiny plots maintained by housewives has been explored successfully by women’s groups from all the villages over eighteen months, with the support of an NGO ‘Resource Centre’ headquartered in Kolkata. The initial seeds, saplings and organic manure were supplied by the project.

It was felt by the project team that their efforts at propagating kitchen-gardens and basic nutrition information have been appreciated. Mothers in Muslim villages are happy that their

“Such groups working and meeting regularly feel they have benefited from the knowledge gained. The men seem happy with women learning to express themselves and encourage them to attend meetings,” says the kitchen-garden consultant

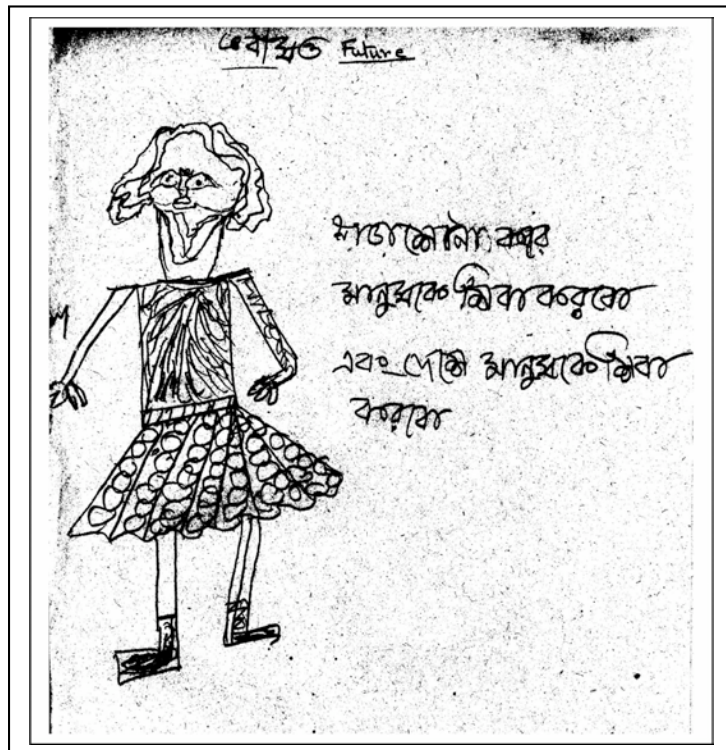
daughters have the chance to venture outside the confines of the home and learn useful things – something they would have liked to do, but find themselves unable to do at their age because of social barriers and an overwhelming burden of work.

The village ponds, some owned by the community, offer considerable opportunities for fish cultivation, duck-raising, and the planting of fruit-trees on their embankments. If the first priority of subsistence improvements in diet and health treatment is maintained, the scope for major savings in health treatment costs makes this area a prime candidate for sustainability. Women have been the only participants in this field, both because of custom and public perception, as well as for socio-organisational reasons on a single-gender basis. Cooking classes proved to be an excellent device for nutrition training and family budgeting. Perhaps more important, they encouraged women to meet outside their homes and discuss common concerns. In the future, there may be more scope for opening village ‘restaurants’ and running ‘communal kitchens,’ especially for the families most in need. If sufficient scale could be achieved, the potential for goods and services to be exchanged (bartered) and for parallel marketing would be greatly enhanced.

#### **Culture, education and communication:**

Closely related to the awareness-raising activities, and involving the local primary schools as much as possible, cultural awareness activities began with theatre workshops involving schoolchildren, featuring CMSSRD’s importance for daily life. Even when the parents were skeptical, the children joined in with enthusiasm and, in many cases, eventually influenced their parents. There were instances however, where girls’ participation in the activities were discouraged by the men in the community, based on the religious objections of elders.

Drama performances and teaching materials addressed issues such as traditional customs and ceremonies, hygiene and environment, health treatment and first aid, and water conservation. Poster and wall ‘newsletters’ have brought a sense of village identity, resulting from surveys undertaken which include village histories gleaned from interviews with the elders. Literacy classes were also



Hupni Hembram, age 14, of Kayetpukur, a Santhal village in Birbhum district, draws and writes of her dreams for the future: “I want to study. I want to teach, and I want to serve the people of my country.”

started as needs were expressed for both reading and writing skills.

The project contributed to websites maintained by UNDP Delhi for the UN Volunteers, held exhibitions in Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore, as well as participated in the Annual “Poush Mela” or Winter Fair at Shantiniketan, and produced video footage for sharing the experiences of the project and for use in training villagers. Materials for use in the primary schools were also produced. Yet the project has had little opportunity or time to make proper use of the media, or to create alliances with potential supporters in the towns, especially Bolpur. There is considerable scope in interesting both domestic and foreign tourists in CMS activities and lifestyles, given the proximity of Shantiniketan. These and other networking activities are quite crucial for the sustainability of the venture.

### **Manual skills for craft, village infrastructure and services, and barter/parallel trade in essential goods & services:**

Although this ‘production and trade’ cluster is at the heart of CMSSRD economic activities, it proved the hardest to solicit participation and get off the ground for a number of reasons. For instance, the justification for not relying totally on the market appears difficult to grasp and contrary to ‘mainstream’ trends; some investment in re-gaining lost skills and simple tools is required: several occupations are associated with low castes and therefore seem undesirable. An early bamboo-training workshop demonstrated the scope and potential interest of the community members. This paved the way for determining the need for reviving skills such as blacksmiths, pottery, bamboo-work, and straw-thatching (traditionally male preserves). Many new areas are being added on an experimental basis, which would both strengthen collective self-reliance and encourage extra-market exchange. They include educational and healthcare skills, mechanical repairs, simple transport and construction of equipment, food processing and storage, organic and natural farming; skills in building and maintaining roads, sewage systems, culverts and small bridges, as well as better houses, smokeless *chulas* (stoves), and biogas pits, which were of enormous benefit to women’s health. Some of these newer areas offer greater scope for enlarging women’s recognized contributions.

As skills improve and their products begin to gain respect and enter into daily consciousness, there is an opportunity for exchanges to take place through *parallel markets*, which are formed and operated by clusters of participating villages in the first instance, their neighbours and nearby small towns. Detailed written accounts of transactions and negotiated, but notional, money values (lower than the regular market, and with in-kind equivalences) would allow for increasingly complicated and extended-duration transactions of both goods and services to take place; even special currencies could be used on the lines of the Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS) schemes operating in Western Europe today in a need-based manner. The key element of this work is that it should be based on readily available raw materials and skills of a ‘quasi-free’ nature, in the sense that they can be obtained through manual collection, and rely on unused (surplus) labour capacity in slack periods of the day and year. Again, there is little reason why these parallel markets should not be managed predominantly by women, providing them with more justification and scope for being active outside the domestic courtyard.

### **Natural and organic farming, water conservation and environmental protection:**

This is another field where most of the past and current effort has been going into awareness raising, and where persuasion and mobilisation efforts have dominated over concrete implementation on any scale. There is potential, however, to improve conditions in a generally barren, rain fed area with poor soil, once the farmers and villagers squarely face the longer-term negative implications of high-yielding monocultures and their environmental impact. Similarly, efforts have to focus simultaneously on the urban consumers to appreciate chemical-free cereals,

vegetables and fruit. There have been no resources so far to tackle the latter, while work on the former has been slow and beset by skepticism.

The CMSSRD input is to bring back “intelligent farming” – careful, mixed cropping, labour-intensive practices, drawing for inspiration on Masanobu Fukuoka’s natural farming as much as on the more widespread organic farming contributions. The project has thus far identified promising starts with reviving traditional paddy varieties, re-introducing species diversity, and producing organic fertilizers and vermi-compost. The related efforts on kitchen gardening and medicinal plants have already been mentioned under the health activity cluster. Tree planting on communally-owned lands and canal-pond embankments have been tried with some positive impact, and a start made on establishing tree-sapling nurseries. Women have a key role to play in all these practices, given their historical sensitivity to environmental issues (as witnessed, for example, in the renowned Chipko movement), and their more limited involvement thus far in immediate cash-generation and market trade.

Soil erosion is severe, and the planting of windbreaks and soil holding grasses needs to be strengthened. Water harvesting will have major benefits, but the project has not been able to benefit, so far, from the exciting experiences tried successfully in other states such as Rajasthan, Gujarat and Orissa. One of the areas where considerable group discussion has taken place, involving both women and men, has been to clean up the village ponds and use them for both fish farming and providing drinking water to livestock.

#### **Some hurdles:**

- For many months, villagers were skeptical and suspicious about the objectives and possible motivations of the project sponsors. Villagers felt that in the past they had been cheated or, in some way, “used” to obtain data for research or studies without any feedback to themselves, or, at best, ‘given’ something concrete like a well or pond. In contrast, this new initiative seemed excessively abstract, expressed messages that were difficult to understand, and demanded both time and sustained effort from them, especially from already overburdened women.
- As in most agrarian communities, the time for interaction with outsiders was always limited during the day. This project required many visits to the same households and many evenings spent getting to know one another and establishing a basis of trust. During the monsoon months, the villages were virtually cut off by local flooding and impassable lanes, while planting and harvesting peak periods demanded the full attention of villagers, thereby cutting almost three months each year from project field activities.
- Differences in gender behavior proved to be crucial. Most of the women venture outside the domestic walls little, if at all, particularly from those Muslim households and higher-caste Hindu households. *Santhal* women tend to look for work outside, and participate in cultivation activities much more easily, but the ability to converse in Bengali is more limited. Again, women were often not allowed to go out of the home or village for training purposes.
- The scheduling and phasing of project activities required much experimentation and improvisation. There were challenges posed by social fragmentation, especially between castes in the dominantly Hindu villages, and between Hindu and Muslim neighborhoods in the same village.



- Land and accommodation scarcity made it difficult to obtain space or rooms for the resource centre activities, or to hold discussions on a regular basis. Youth clubs were the most cooperative in lending space to the project when they appreciated the perceived benefits to the village. Similarly, for other activities like organic farming, the lack of availability of suitable land and assured irrigation water often proved to be a delaying factor. Ensuring local self governments or *Panchayat* as well as State government support came to be seen to be of critical importance for the longer-term viability of this venture.

#### **Key notes and observations from the field:**

- The bulk of Srihaswani work has been on bolstering the viable remnants of the self-reliant local economy. There has been an attempt to show how this can be feasible, albeit limited, through alternatives to current market-driven forces of globalisation encouraging the formation of a small, survival-oriented parallel economy. Conversations with several groups of men and women on whether this work on an "alternative economy" had any future, revealed surprisingly positive assessments. In a discussion with men and women in the village of Darpashila, where most people work as daily labourers, the majority view was that an injection of "cash" would finish in a short time and would leave no lasting results. In contrast, help in terms of spreading knowledge and literacy would have permanent results and be readily sustainable.
- Farmers have been helped by being given access to organic agriculture, traditional paddy seeds, and training. Some work has been done on building up the knowledge, especially of the women, concerning herbal remedies, helping them to plant and recognize locally grown medicinal plants. Initial efforts to teach villagers the logistics of the barter system have at least started discussions on the continuing relevance of non-market forms of exchange that might reinforce social ties and solidarity.
- Self-knowledge and thereby self-worth would probably be counted amongst the biggest gains: through the project life, women have traveled to other villages, talked to many different women and exchanged experiences. Today, women from all castes, religions, and economic strata sit and eat together. Early in the project, doubts were raised about the efficacy of a Muslim woman heading the nutrition team where her work involved cooking classes. The nutrition team overrode even the doubts expressed by the Project Coordinator. "If we are to do things differently," said a woman team member who was part of the nutrition team, "then we must be consistent. Our team head will do the cooking since she is the person best qualified for this job. Whoever wants to eat will eat." This strong assertion of commitment is surely enough reason to continue the work started and hope for even more positive statements from women as well as men in the future.
- It is being felt that Srihaswani's work with both men and women has had positive results for the community as a whole. More and more women are coming to the forefront and taking on important economic roles. In a Muslim village, we spoke to three such "change agents." Political support has been one reason for this change. Many *panchayats* (locally elected governance organisations) seats are now reserved for disadvantaged women. In the nine villages, there are two such reserved panchayats. Women are heading the *Anganwadis* (groups formed for women and child welfare under the central government/UNICEF-WHO-WFP-supported Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS)) in the villages. They are spreading ideas of health education, besides conducting their nutritional supplement programme.

- There are several SHGs (Self-Help Groups), also set up by the *panchayats*. This means that women have to leave the home, and go to the city to deposit money. More and more women are taking on important economic roles. As a result, some even have an impression that men's roles might have started to become marginalized, especially in the local economy.
- Some of the women have expressed the view that Srihaswani's work with both men and women had positive results for the community as a whole.

### **Issues for Discussion:**

- What are the ways of accurately **assessing the situation of rural women** under the kinds of conditions described, given the limited access to entering the household for strangers, and given the skepticism with regard to the utility for themselves of surveys and aided programmes?
- What **alternative strategies can there be for involving poor women** in their livelihood improvement, in the best possible way, in a society beset by all kinds of hierarchies, cultures, and barriers to access?
- **Should programmes deal exclusively with women**, and poor low-caste minority women at that, and spell out specific gender objectives, or should there be more comprehensive approaches with a more subtle (*i.e.* through interventions targeted in terms of natural interest) clustering of participants?
- How **from a gender perspective**, does one combine the possible benefits from global market integration with protecting local identity, culture, environment, and cooperative or mutually supportive social arrangements?
- In very resource-poor societies with skewed asset distributions, does the **Srihaswani/CMSSRD** approach, or others that follow an '**alternative economy or feminist economy model**', have the potential for application on a much larger scale and across different cultures? If so, what is the potential and possible strategy for a cross-country campaign and movement to take root?
- What is the significance of **community contribution in a development initiative** such as Srihaswani/CMSSRD? What do individual volunteers expect from the initiative in exchange for their time, labor, and effort? Is there a sense of ownership?
- What are the **roles and importance of development change agents** in an effort to improve women's empowerment and gender equality?
- How can **significant international support** be generated to sustain a similar effort over an adequate time period (say ten years), given that Governments (South or North) rarely show interest in this type of approach with few immediate market or trade gains? What role is there for civil society networking, and what options exist for its organisation?

*"... debates have recently arisen on the feminist development policy scene in India, which are typical of debates in international development more generally ... For one group...the essence of feminism is a critique of sexual domination, and the essence of change is changing socially constructed gender roles. For the other group... the essence of feminism is a critique of women's economic dependency, and the most desirable change is to give women more economic options." -Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: the capabilities approach**

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