



REPORT OF THE SOCIAL AUDIT OF THE WOMEN RESOURCE CENTRE PROJECT AND ITS FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Munsiyari (Dist. Pithoragarh, Uttaranchal)

5-6 July 2005

Acknowledgements

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External Social Auditor: Mr. Biju Negi (Dehra Dun)

BACKGROUND

In March 2001, ARPAN (Association for Rural Planning and Action, Pithoragarh, Uttaranchal) had applied to Sir Dorabji Tata Trust (Mumbai) with a proposal for setting up a “Women Resource Centre” (WRC) at Munsiyari (District Pithoragarh, Uttaranchal).

While the proposed Centre was broadly modelled to act as the hub for an income generation programme, it was really visualized as a galvanizing force toward the empowerment of the women of the area through collective action. Also, by seeking to focus on knitting and weaving as the major activity, the proposed project also sought to revive this vanishing traditional craft and restore it as a major cultural and economic practice.

Once a major occupation in this predominantly tribal region, knitting and weaving lost their eminence with the closure of trade with the neighbouring Tibet in the early sixties, migration of the men from the region for employment and the subsequent breakdown of support infrastructures and institutions. As a result, there were no changes or developments in the craft, no fresh technical infusion and, of course, there was market no more. All these the proposed project aimed to address. Equally importantly, the craft had provided the women of the region their distinct identity and so its loss affected their status as well. Ultimately, then, this was what the proposed project hoped to regain for the women of the area.

In April 2002, Sir Dorabji Tata Trust agreed to support the setting up of the “Women Resource Centre” with a focus on knitting and weaving. The Trust approved a grant of Rs 6.50 lakhs, specifically towards the training of master trainers, a revolving fund for purchase of raw material and for building market linkages for weavers. This fund support was spread over three years. Effectively, the project completed in April 2005.

According to Renu Thakur of ARPAN, the organization itself was clear from the very outset that, at the end of three years, it must move out and hand over the assets and everything to the women – women as a group. As such, from the beginning, the endeavour was that the WRC must not only get properly established, but grow beyond becoming a mere training unit and selling outlet. In the given three years, WRC must move further to truly become an empowering agent, and its women, from mere weavers, must learn to become managers and entrepreneurs. It was ARPAN’s vision that by the end of three years when it withdraws, the WRC should become strong enough to stand on its own feet, take the cudgels into its own hands and seek its future independent of ARPAN –

again, not simply as a trading unit but as a women-centered socially-conscious institution of the society.

Towards achievement of these and related objectives, ARPAN took the support of a few other organizations as well in the execution of the project. These were namely CBED and NABARD. In 2003, the Uttarakhand State Government passed a Self-Reliant Cooperative Act 2003. Under this, towards the middle of the third year, the collective of WRC members formally set up “Johar Mahila Bunkar Sangathan” (JMBS – Johar Women Weavers Association), a duly registered Cooperative. This was the first step in the women coming together to form an institution, which they would manage themselves. It was this cooperative which was seen as to be taking over from ARPAN when the time came for the project to wind up.

Soon enough, came 2005, and the time for handing over the assets of the WRC developed in the course of the project to the women and their cooperative. But the question was how to hand it over. There were several things at stake. To simply hand over the assets, without establishing a future ground for the Cooperative to build on, would mean nothing. It was also important to have some sort of an evaluation done. But any evaluation by an external agency or consultant would not be enough without the women members of the WRC (and now the JMBS) realizing its importance. Then, thirdly and in line with ARPAN’s *modus operandi*, everything had to, now more than ever, be transparent. Participation and Transparency, then, were the two essential criteria.

After considerable thought, it was decided to conduct a Social Audit of the project, wherein the process of handing over by ARPAN and taking over by JMBS could also be completed. Social Audit would lay bare the nuts and bolts of the three-year WRC project, openly displayed and up for scrutiny of the audience, comprising not just the WRC members but concerned officials of the block, district and state besides representatives of related or interested departments, agencies and organizations and other individuals. The Social Audit would also generate member participation in this open evaluation.

According to Renu Thakur (Secretary, ARPAN), “The funding agency had carried out mid-term monitoring and evaluation of the project, but there were contradictory responses from the women members. Also, in the course of the project, the group dynamics had thrown up a leadership struggle and other conflicts, and there were mixed questions being raised, particularly on the ownership of assets in the future. These were best understood by the women themselves. It was

important that the women confronted and sorted out these questions and conflicts, which only they themselves could best sort out." But it was important to do it in a proper, organized, definite manner.

Added Ramesh Bhatt of ARPAN, the organization wanted to leave with a clean slate, "clarifying every single point, clearing any doubts and answering every single question that could be raised. This would stand the JMBS in good stead for the future as well."

So, it was decided to conduct a Social Audit in July 2005. It was conceived as a one and half day programme – one day for the Social Audit proper and the next half day for handing over – taking over and outlining the future directions of the JMBS cooperative.

SOCIAL AUDIT PREPARATION AND ORGANIZATION

Since the Social Audit of the WRC project was not part of the original project plan or proposal and was as such not budgeted for, and since Social Audit itself is still relatively a new concept with no provisions under suitable heads in funding agencies, it was organized with voluntary contributions and support from different organizations and individuals – Sri Bhubaneshwari Mahila Ashram (Tehri Garhwal), PEACE and the Institute for Social Democracy (both Delhi), among others.

The resource constraint did not allow invitation for desirable widespread participation. Still, the list of invitees to the Social Audit included the Secretary (Cooperatives, Uttaranchal), District Magistrate (Pithoragarh), SDM (Munsiyari), Manager (Industries, Pithoragarh), Manager (Khadi Gramodyog, Pithoragarh). Also invited was the Manager (NABARD), SEVA (Lucknow) besides representatives from many government departments, marketing organizations and other non-government organizations in the region.

However, primarily due to the weather constraints, none of the above could attend the Social Audit programme. Unfortunately, even the representative/s from the funding agency, Sir Dorabji Tata Trust could not attend. The incessant and unusually heavy rains this year had resulted in widespread landslides, floods and other damages in the state in general and Pithoragarh district in particular. In fact, during the period, Munsiyari was virtually cut-off from the rest of the district. And even the Consultant for conducting the Social Audit, could barely make it in time, that too by travelling non-stop late into the night and then having to cross over and change vehicles because of massive road blockade.

But the women were in full attendance. Over a hundred women – WRC (and JMBS) members and others who had benefited economically and socially or who found emotional support from associating with WRC. This not merely reflected the keen participatory approach of the project and to the Social Audit, but also the women's enthusiasm (and concern) for its stable future.

Sh Kundan Singh Tolia, Block Pramukh (Munsiyari) was the Chief Guest at the programme. On the dais was also Sh Nirmal Chaudhary, an Advocate from Pithoragarh. Among other prominent attendants was Ms Bhavna from the Mati organization. The audience also included women from two other weaver groups in the region as well.

The Social Audit was organized at the spacious Block Auditorium. On the walls were displayed charts and posters, outlining the major objectives, processes, achievements and other relevant points of the entire project, including financial statements and income and expenditure accounts *vis-à-vis* the funds received from Sir Dorabji Tata Trust. Many participants had already gone through these posters before the Social Audit process started, while others looked at them during the lunch break.

SOCIAL AUDIT EXECUTION

The Social Audit was conducted in two broad sessions. The pre-lunch session invited questions, doubts, discussions and reciprocal answers and clarifications on the beginnings of the project, the **setting up** of the Women Resource Centre, and its **functioning** – the processes, administration and accounts. The second session concentrated on the **achievements** and **social dimensions** of the project. Sh Tolia presided over the first session, while Sh Nirmal Chaudhary presided over the second session.

The proceedings began with Renu Thakur detailing the two-day programme and introducing the concept of Social Audit, what it means, what it entails and why it was being conducted in the context of the WRC project. Biju Negi added to the concept of Social Audit by underlining its necessity, importance and relevance – that it is an exercise in empowerment which has emerged as a response to the felt need to raise questions and demand accountability in developmental works and programmes. He also explained the process of this enquiry into the WRC project, of the structure of the sessions, and then opened the floor for questions on the origins of the project and its functioning.

Broadly, much of the discussion in the first session revolved around questions and objections by Hira Devi Dharamsaktu and their counter-explanations from ARPAN. Hira Devi was the Coordinator of the project in Munsiyari until July 2004, when she was replaced. Until then too, the WRC operated from a rented accommodation in her house, and thereafter it was shifted to another location. Hira Devi's contention was that it was because of her in the first place that the project had come to Munsiyari and but for her, the project couldn't have got properly established. She also stated that it was she who also introduced Renu Thakur and ARPAN to Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and to this region, and suggested that the latter had hijacked the project and evicted her out of it. To support her argument, she presented a letter she had received from a representative from Sir Dorabji Tata Trust in 1998, evincing an interest in supporting a woman-centered income generation programme in Munsiyari. And demanded that Renu Thakur reveal how she got in touch with Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and how did this project come here.

Responding to the assertions and accusations of Hira Devi, Renu Thakur stated that the project was given to ARPAN by name. It was the organization, which had sent the proposal, and it was with the organization that Sir Dorabji Tata Trust had signed a bond while agreeing to fund the project for execution. Referring to the letter presented by Hira Devi, she said that the letter was received from a representative of Sir Dorabji Tata Trust three years before the proposal was sent by ARPAN, and four years prior to the project actually starting. Explaining the background to the initiation of the project, she further stated that the Trust did not and does not provide funds to any individual but to a duly registered organization. It was true that Hira Devi had approached Renu in 2000 with the letter received in 1998, but this was after the former had failed to interest any other organization to take up the project. Renu expressed her inability to take this up because ARPAN's region of work was Askote, and Munsiyari would be totally new for it. She also suggested that Hira Devi form an organization herself for this, which the latter was not interested to do. On Hira Devi's insistence and on her behalf, Renu wrote to the Trust, which responded by stating that yes, it was still interested to fund a project but there had to be a proposal and there had to be an organization to do it.

It was after considerable thought that ARPAN then wrote to the Trust expressing its willingness to propose a project but also clarified that while ARPAN was a registered organization, Hira Devi was not its member. And so when the project was initiated, Hira Devi was inducted as the Coordinator of the project on a salary of Rs 3000/- per month.

Hira Devi denied all that Renu had said, and heated verbal altercations took place, which even forced the Chief Guest to enter the fray, and Hirma Devi too provided some inputs from her side. The issue was then placed before the participants to decide, and they resolved it by agreeing to go with Renu's version and, in fact, later expressed surprise at Hira Devi saying that they were not aware that Hira Devi was a salaried employee of the project and that she had provided her house for office at a monthly rent of Rs 1000/-.

The points then taken up were the formation of groups and the activities of WRC including the trainings to its members, exposure visits and marketing. Not much argument on that front. Finally, came the accounts part – the detailing of the funds received from the Trust and their expenditure accounts and statements. Ramesh Bhatt who was the overall in-charge for maintaining the accounts (and who said that being a member of ARPAN, he was not paid a single paisa for this work from this specific project), elucidated on the incomes and expenditures in the project.

While detailing the expenditures in the project, Ramesh underlined that funds from the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust were spent strictly on the line items specified by the latter at the time of approving the grant – namely, towards training of master trainers, revolving fund for purchase of raw material and building market linkages for the weavers. For all other works that formed the social dimensions of the project, like meetings on gender and other socio-economic issues and the legal camps, all expenses (including on resource persons, etc.) were met by ARPAN's own other funds. He informed that the Trust had withheld the last installment of the fund for the project on the basis of complaints by Hira Devi, and this was released after detailed correspondence and visit by a representative of the Trust. Renu revealed that it was this representative's suggestion to shift the office to a neutral location. Ramesh also informed that although Hira Devi was no longer the Coordinator and the WRC was no more located at her house, over Rs 24,000/- worth of ready products, besides some fixtures and assets of the projects costing about Rs 8,000/- (which were all listed on a chart) still remained in her possession and which she was not handing over.

This again brought vociferous protestations from Hira Devi. Renu also informed that WRC office was located at Hira Devi's residence against a rent of Rs 1000 per month, for which her signed vouchers/receipts were in place for scrutiny. According to Renu, much of the present conflict had its genesis in the majority decision to shift the office from Hira Devi's house. Once this was done, Hira

Devi's visit to WRC to attend to her duties became less and less. Subsequently, WRC was forced to replace Hira Devi as the Coordinator of the project.

Hira Devi; hotly denied all these, and when shown her signed receipts, accused the organization with misusing or even forging her signatures. Upon this, Sh Tolia and Sh Nirmal Chaudhary advised Hira Devi that if this was the case then she should file a case against ARPAN in the civil court.

The participants, rather taken aback at the noisy arguments and counter arguments, complained that they did not much appreciate women quarreling among themselves. But then, this was Social Audit, and the commotion was only to be expected where issues and problems needed to be confronted head-on to be able to resolve them finally.

The Social Dimensions

The post-lunch session was devoted to enquiring into and listening to the women participants talking about themselves and their association with the WRC. The proceedings underlined the social dimensions of the project. While the project was primarily focused on the income generation by women weavers, WRC could neither overlook the deprivations and the difficult social conditions of the women – individually or collectively nor ignore the larger issues that affected the women in their daily or overall lives. The session provided brief glimpses into lives of women; individual cases of women in extreme deprivation, of widows and other single women heads of households, of women abandoned by their husbands, and of their finding economic, social and emotional refuge, a sense of belonging and purpose, and skills development in the Women Resource Centre – cases that reflected their joys and aspirations but more often the pains, pathos and struggles of their lives. These were the dimensions that lent relevance to the economic focus of the WRC project.

The Future Directions

With the insinuations and conflicts afflicting the project laid bare before everyone and now clarified and resolved, the second day of the workshop concentrated on the task of handing over the assets and other resources of the completed project to the Johar Mahila Bunkar Sangathan, the visible institution to replace WRC at the end of the project, and discussing its future directions. Sh Kalu Ram, a leading weaver-trader from Munsiyari was a special invitee to this session, chaired by Nirmal Chaudhary.

At the outset, Renu Thakur and Ramesh Bhatt explained the project and its various milestones including a statement on its financial accounts. Kalu Ram outlined a few suggestions for future works and promised his continued support and guidance. And then the women responded with their observation and questions.

With this, amidst enthusiastic audience approval, the books and records of "WRC project", duly completed, were handed over to Hirma Devi, the President of JMBS. The baton changed hands and the ARPAN team which was hitherto sitting on the dais, now moved to take seat among the audience, while the Board of the Cooperative rose to take its place at the head of the table – Hirma Devi, Gangotri Devi (Secretary), Sundari Devi (Treasurer), Gangotri Devi, Chandra Devi, Bhagirathi Devi and Pushpa Martoliya – representing the five groups of the original WRC. The last session was, then, chaired by this Board.

The women were now in-charge.

The JMBS Board, seeking future directions, then fielded questions and invited ideas and opinions from the audience to broadly discuss the following topics -

- (a) Sangathan
- (b) Funds
- (c) Production
- (d) Market
- (e) Training Needs
- (f) Support, involvement and commitment

The cooperative was nearing a year in completion, and its General Body meeting was due not too long away. As such, any discussion on its management and related issues, was left for then. Broadly, two-three major suggestions or felt needs came from the women. One, the need to constantly adopt new designs and patterns, with requisite quality control; two, the need for training in skills development (knitting, weaving, designing, colouring, marketing, accounts maintenance, office management, etc) and exposure visits; and three, that ARPAN not detach itself completely but continue to remain a kind of father-figure, providing guidance, particularly in the area of designing and marketing.

Understandably, in view of the budgetary restrictions, only a very few women could travel outside the region on exposure visits and just a 5-day training could be conducted in Munsiyari for the other women. This, the women felt, was highly inadequate. The training, they felt, should have been for at least 15 days. The women clearly displayed a keen desire to learn new designs and techniques and keep in step with weavers countrywide. The women were confident that they could handle the Cooperative and run it successfully, but voiced their concern on the marketing front. They said that since marketing was a new area for them, they needed to be provided more exposure and sought ARPAN's guidance in this. Renu reiterated that the Cooperative belonged to the women and only they could remain in any decisive roles, but assured that ARPAN would be available in any supporting role, particularly in the development of designs and patterns and in marketing.

With this assurance, the curtains came down on the one-and-a-half day programme – “Social Audit of the Women Resource Centre Project and its Future Directions”. The faces of the women glowed with a sense of achievement.

Ramesh Bhatt was confident that the women would successfully carry the Cooperative forward. “The main aim of the Cooperative is to do trade, and for these women trade has been part of their tradition. More importantly, they are keen to take on the responsibility,” he said. Renu added, “Obviously, the project is over, but not the work. However, with the Cooperative in place, the women now have even better opportunities. And the specific needs (of training and marketing), which were identified by the women in the last session, can be addressed by ARPAN best from the outside.” Indeed, what is important that the women were able to organize and ARPAN was able to move out. Renu says, “We believe that what society needs is people’s institutions. It is important that the community has its own institutions, its own systems which it manages by itself, without depending on anyone outside.”

Toward this, Social Audit proved to be a valuable experience and more than a worthwhile exercise. As Renu said, “For the last one year, we had been intensively trying that the women take on the responsibility of the project, that they become accountable, but were not able to. Now, this Social Audit seems to have done exactly that.”

Indeed, it is an achievement of the Social Audit that the women have now realized and accepted that it is they hereafter who are the main actors, and that ARPAN is now only in a supporting role.

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