

SeSTA: The Genesis

PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action- www.pradan.net) a NGO of national repute, explored North-eastern ('NE') region of India for expansion, specifically Assam, in 2007-08 as a part of its Perspective Planning exercise following "Vision-2015" (a precursor exercise for organizational visioning). Interest and willingness of Pradanites hailing from NE states (in good numbers) were also factors to initiate the exploration. After detailed exploration and discussion in the management committee in 2008, PRADAN decided not to work directly in Assam. This meant that PRADAN would not start a team of professionals in Assam which is the normal PRADAN way of operating in an area. However, as there was expectation from one of the main donors of PRADAN to have PRADAN's contribution in NE region in whatever possible way and willingness from Pradanites (hailing from NE) to do something concrete in Assam and NE; PRADAN decided to support an independent initiative for two to three years in NE region with three basic premises: a) the initiative must be relevant to the context, b) the local community would be benefited from it and c) it is relevant and meaningful for the person/s who is initiating it. Additionally it would be wonderful if that initiative had a snowballing effect.

Accordingly, Aswini Bhattacharya, an experienced PRADAN professional from Jharkhand shifted to Assam in May 2008 and started a base in Bongaigaon. In absence of an entity / organization (as Aswini took some years to set up an entity), the initiative, for all practical purposes, was treated as a PRADAN project in the initial years. Logistics, team and programme cost were provided by PRADAN. Linkages, network, identity, community contact were also created with PRADAN's goodwill. PRADAN could negotiate a small grant project from Sir Dorabji Tata Trust ('SDTT'), Mumbai (now called Tata Trusts) as SDTT had launched a large scale project in Assam.

Aswini started with a field based project on promoting System of Rice Intensification ('SRI') among small and marginal farmers in Bodoland Territorial Council ('BTC') areas of Assam. Initial response was encouraging and community in the BTC area started accepting the initiative. Based on the experience of the pilot project on SRI, Aswini could mobilize another long term project to promote SRI with 8,000 farmers in Assam by partnering with local NGOs. At the same time, PRADAN also included a component for the Assam initiative in its long term project of "Strengthening rural livelihoods in endemically poor regions of India with support of SDTT". The project included social mobilization (formation of SHG and associated tiers), creation of irrigation infrastructure and establishing a vibrant organization in Assam and NE. After some initial troubles in early days due to ethnic riots and blasts at BTC as well as severe drought in 2009 the initiative got momentum from 2010. The initiative accelerated further after Parag Boruah, another ex-PRADAN professional joined in 2011. It helped to scale up SRI project and strengthen the Assam Initiative component of the PRADAN-SDTT project for creating social mobilization and organizational development. In 2011, the initiative got registered as a Society with the name "**Seven Sisters Development Assistance (SeSTA)**". SeSTA (pronounced ChesTA) in Assamese language means putting effort. The name was conceived to put systematic effort as catalyst for economic development of the NE India; by building capabilities of poor communities, promoting and strengthening their institutions so that they could come out of vicious cycle of contested identity war, poverty and are able to meaningfully participate in the global economy.

The mission of SeSTA is to catalyze sustainable and inclusive development in NE India by building capabilities of rural communities. SeSTA envisages a vibrant society where every citizen is empowered and lives a dignified life. The mission and vision of SeSTA got finalized in April 2012 after three-day deliberations in which all of SeSTA's staff participated. During the same year SeSTA was registered under section 12-A and 80-G of the Income Tax Act, 1961; necessary for receiving charitable grants from donors and individuals. On SeSTA obtaining section 12-A registration, PRADAN transferred all the funds of the two ongoing projects to SeSTA and SeSTA could become truly independent.



In the initial days, SeSTA's work was confined to promoting SRI, formation of women Self Help Groups ('SHGs') and their institutions as well as promoting agriculture based livelihoods in Chirang district of Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD), Assam. Gradually the organization expanded its operational area to Bongaigaon and Kamrup districts and expanded its focus area to livelihood development through improved pig farming, youth development and intensive agriculture. In year 2011, the organization started working in partnership with other NGOs to promote SRI methods of crop cultivation with nearly 8,500 farmers. Gradually SeSTA started exploring possibilities to work with government programmes. SeSTA is presently promoting **25 FPOs** (Farmer Producer Organization) (around 15,000 farmers) in four districts of Assam in collaboration with Deloitte under the Assam Agriculture Competitiveness Project ('AACP') programme. SeSTA is also implementing **MKSP** (Mahila Kisan Swashaktikaran Pariyojana) project in Chirang and Bongaigaon districts with support from Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission ('SRLM'). Professionals of SeSTA have also supported SRLMs of Tripura, Mizoram and Meghalaya for recruitment and training of their professional staff.

Shift in Approach

In the initial period, SeSTA was primarily engaged in sectoral activities - mainly interventions in productivity enhancement of Paddy through adoption of SRI technique. The approach was to mobilize male members of the villages and creating awareness towards SRI. Some farmers' clubs were also formed. Sporadic interventions in productivity enhancement of maize, some efforts towards creating irrigation infrastructures like *dongs* (canals), shallow tube wells were also initiated. Certain efforts were also made towards understanding youth aspirations and subsequently designing some activities like sewing and cutting and computer education. However, these were not met with expected successes.

SHGs were formed from 2012 with support from KABIL which helped in capacity building of SeSTA staff. By 2013, around 200 SHGs were formed in Sidli and Borobazar blocks of Chirang district. But these were spread over almost 60 villages; saturation was not an approach.

In January 2014, an organizational consultation took place and it was decided that "agency enhancement" of women would be the approach to achieve holistic community development and promote peace and harmony in the highly fractured society. The goal for next 10 years was set as-

'Agency enhancement of women through women led processes to increase capabilities, livelihood, well being of vulnerable rural communities and increase harmony, peace and synergy in the society'

It was also agreed upon that the approach would be family and resource based and livelihoods would flow from need arousal of families. It was also decided that well qualified (having minimum 16 years of education) and well exposed personnel would be recruited in SeSTA as its professional staff. Staff on short term contract would no longer be there in SeSTA. Roles of professionals would be clearly delineated.

From April 2014, the Executive Traineeship Programme was launched by SeSTA to systematically recruit and groom young professionals through a structured year-long programme.

Change Pathway

SeSTA establishes initial contact with communities to understand their socio-economic situation and identify the sections of people it would collectivize. These people (women from the communities) are brought together to form self-help groups (SHGs) centered around savings and credit activities. SHGs are systematically equipped with a set of skills requisite for their optimal performance as a savings and credits group, and their evolution to a multidimensional space. The members of the group are engaged around discussions pertaining to livelihoods and natural resources, and detailed credit and livelihood planning exercises are initiated with them. SeSTA works with both, individual households as well as local communities to build a secure livelihoods portfolio, and necessary linkages (Inputs supply, Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) Markets to support the same.

SeSTA supports further collectivizing of the SHGs into village-level organizations called VOs, which have broader agendas of governance and well-being. Typically, all the VOs in an administrative block would be encouraged/supported to group together to form a women's federation, which engages with different stakeholders to further the agenda of well-being. Block level federations act as a larger platform for financial intermediation and community solidarity. SeSTA helps link different tiers of collectives to the key stakeholders in the local area for strengthening the local governance and service delivery systems.

As SHGs begin consolidating, the individual members are provided various training inputs centered on rights and entitlements, local governance, gender, women and child health so as to enhance their self-belief and capacities both.

SeSTA works with the federations / VOs / women collectives to understand the nature of unrest and disharmony amongst the communities, and works towards supporting community-led solutions towards mitigating the sense of mistrust amongst different ethnic and religious communities in the area. SeSTA works with identified youth in the operational area and engages with them on skill-building and creates linkages with different stakeholders, so as to ensure supply of quality employment avenues for the youth which are in line with their aspirations.

Presently SeSTA is directly working in 11 districts of Assam. The current staff strength (Feb'19) of SeSTA is 35 in the professional cadre and 10 support staff.

SeSTA has won two awards,

- 1) India Development Marketplace Award by the World Bank.
- 2) Chief Minister's Best Action Award for Community Development in for Bongaigaon district.