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CHALLENGING CULTURAL CONVENTIONS

Challenging Cultural Conventions: QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE FROM JEEViKA

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This note is based on the paper *Recasting Culture to Undo Gender: A Sociological Analysis of JEEViKA in Rural Bihar, India* authored by P. Sanyal, V. Rao and S. Majumdar.¹

CONTEXT

In 2006, when the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project was launched, the state's rural poverty ration was 44.6% - 36 million of the total 82 million people in Bihar were living in poverty. Bihar is India's third most populous state with 8% of the total population but ranks lowest on the human development index (HDI). Rural communities in the state are often beset by pervasive social inequalities and caste and gender hierarchies.

Simultaneously, Bihar has also had a long history of progressive movements that constantly challenged upper caste hegemony. However, these movements have had limited success in address gender inequality - Bihar ranked lowest on the Gender Equality Index with lower caste women facing double subordination. Overall, rural Bihar was characterized by weak service delivery, complex political and social dynamics, limited inclusion of the poor into institutions, few economic opportunities, and a frail development infrastructure. It was in the midst of this that JEEViKA was piloted and implemented.

HIGHLIGHTS

Do large-scale participatory development interventions induce cultural change and change conventional boundaries associated with gender?

- An ethnographic study of a participatory poverty alleviation and livelihoods program in rural Bihar targeted at women shows that giving economic and socially disadvantaged women access to a defined system of resources, knowledge and people, can change normative restrictions and boundaries of gender.
- Across treatment villages, the project provided women with the institutional scope to step out of their houses and empowered them to stake claim to public spaces as well as interact with the community at large.
- Women associated with the project experienced an improved status in society as well as within their households on account of their access to credit as well as group solidarity.
- The program also improved women's political participation, with more women participating in village assemblies and freely voicing their opinions.

1. The original paper is available at <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/346831467995637047/pdf/WPS7411.pdf>



out credit and livelihoods programs and linkages with government subsidy schemes.

In 2006, the project was first piloted in six high-poverty districts² based on the concentration of poverty, high Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe populations, adverse status of women (reflected by sex ratio and female literacy levels), and availability of basic infrastructure. The project is expected to reach all thirty-eight districts of Bihar by 2022, and cover 12.5 million households. By 2016, the project had mobilized 1.8 million rural households in 154,626 SHGs across 102 villages in 6 districts. Following the tiered structure, these SHGs had been federated upwards into nearly 10,445 VOs at the village level and 102 block level federations.

EVALUATION DESIGN

This note draws on analysis of ethnographic work over a twelve cycles of data collection over a three-year period (2011 to early 2015) from four villages (2 treatment and 2 control).³ The “treatment” villages were randomly selected from the set of treated villages in two different districts – Muzaffarpur and Madhubani. Each “treatment” village was then matched with a set of “control” villages using propensity score matching methods on the basis of village level data.⁴

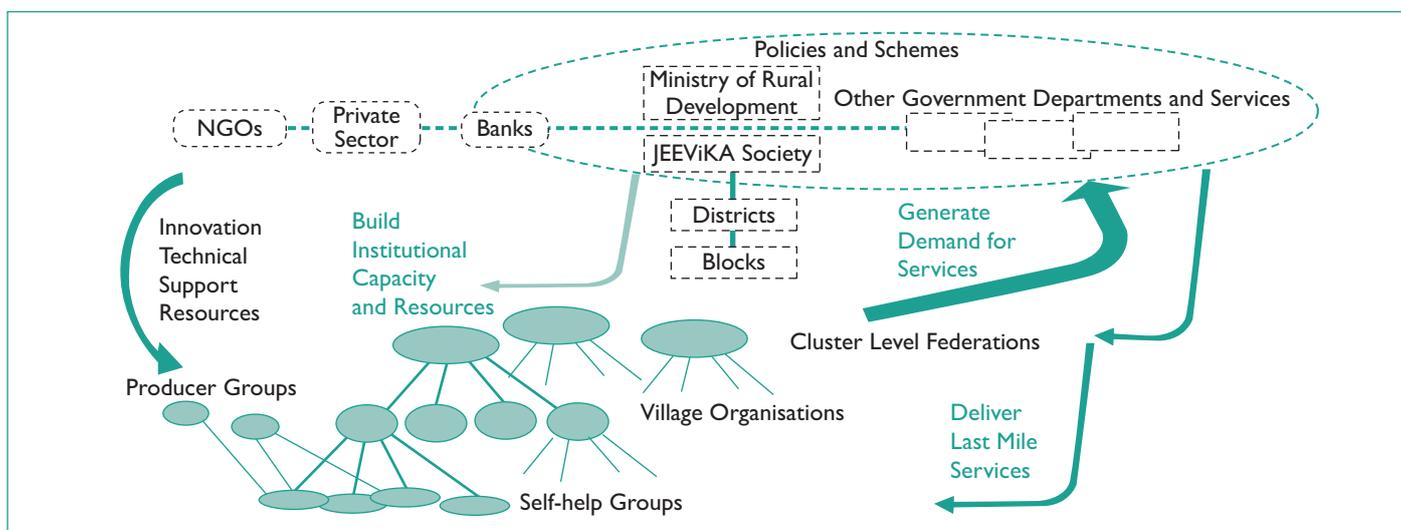
As a first step, preliminary studies were conducted in each of the villages using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods to gain an understanding of the village layout. Qualitative data was then collected at regular intervals through interviews, observations, and focus group discussions that were guided by set themes modified through the course of data collection. This process matched with the experimental design, allowed for a thorough understanding of cause-effect relations and mechanisms of change over time. The design gives insight

INTERVENTION

JEEViKA or the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project is a community-based anti-poverty intervention of the Bihar government that was initiated in 2006 by a low-interest loan and technical assistance from the World Bank to the Government of Bihar. The core objective of the intervention was the socio-economic empowerment of the poorest of poor families by establishing self-managed institutions for a majority of the population – Self-Help Groups (SHGs).

The project mobilized women from the target population - one per household - into bankable SHGs with 10-15 members. A group of 10-15 SHGs was federated upwards into representative Village Organisations (VOs). These VOs were finally federated into Cluster-Level Federations (CLFs) that spanned 35-45 VOs. This tiered structure was instituted to support the implementation of the project and the CLF was envisaged as the foundational organisation for rolling

Figure 1: Community Platform under JEEViKA



Source: Enhancing agricultural livelihoods through community institutions in Bihar, India - JEEViKA Learning Note Series, No. 5.

2. Gaya, Khagaria, Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Nalanda, and Purnia.

3. In treatment villages, JEEViKA had been operating since 2006, no project intervention in control villages.

4. Based on the 2001 government census on literacy, caste composition, landlessness, levels of out-migration, and the availability of infrastructure.

into social processes as they unfold and the provision of a control allows for a comparison of the variation in processes in similar rural landscapes.

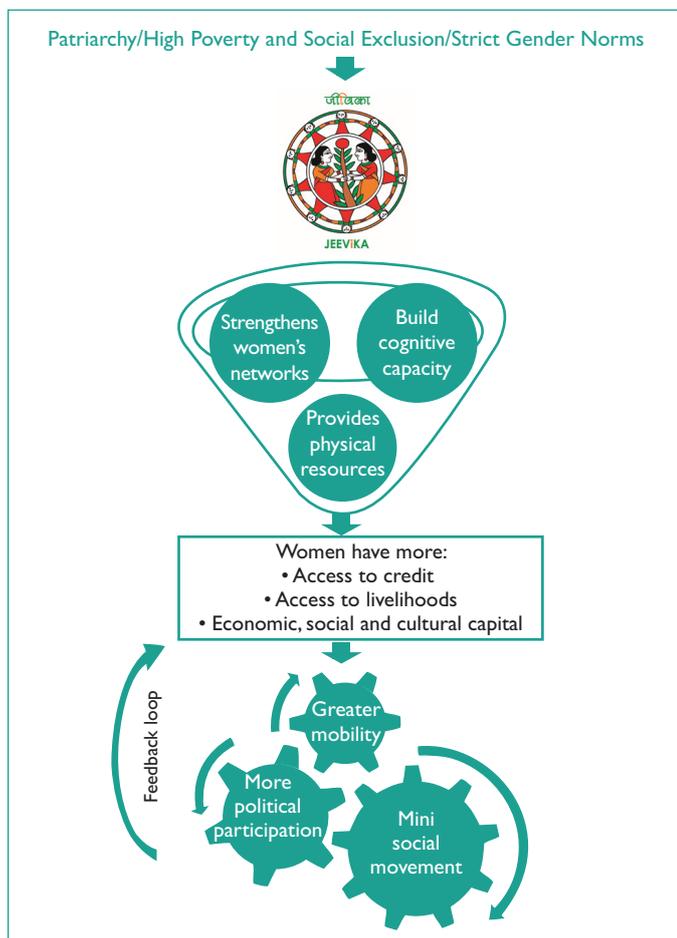
Four dimensions of change emerge in the analysis of the qualitative data - increased physical and spatial mobility, group solidarity, access to money, and finally access to public spaces of deliberation and action. This impact note mirrors the paper and will focus on mobility and access to the public sphere.

KEY FINDINGS

The intervention gave women privileged access to resources, a new identity anchored in their SHGs and away from caste and kinship (symbolic resources), access to low cost credit and an avenue for savings (physical resources). In addition, it provided them an institutional environment through the tiered structure of SHGs, VOs and CLFs, which was instrumental in developing new cultural competencies, and discourses that defied the traditional conventions of gender.

The interactions with women and the community revealed four dimensions of empowerment and change: (1) increased physical and spatial mobility; (2) group solidarity; (3) access to money; and (4) finally access to public spaces of deliberation and action.

Figure 2: How JEEViKA Induces Cultural Change



BOX 1

“Earlier I never used to go anywhere. But ever since my association with JEEViKA, I've started managing a lot of work outside home. Typically, I would go out to conduct meetings and to do SHG related work. I even had to go live in the block office once until our bank linkages were done. But then I realized that if I keep going out for JEEViKA work and not for work that my family needs done then it will look bad. So now I go to the market when my children need things. I even go to their school when needed. One thing is for sure, that when a woman starts going out of the house, then the in-laws and everyone assumes that she can manage everything, both inside and outside the house...”

- Sita Devi from a treatment village in Muzaffarpur district, Cycle 4

GREATER PHYSICAL & SPATIAL MOBILITY

Across the sample an easing of traditional restrictions placed on women due to political empowerment of lower castes as well as a dramatic rise in male-out migration was noted. This contributed to subaltern discourses and opened up space for women to fill gaps in the local labor market (as agricultural labor) as well as compelled them to step into the public sphere to address their family's care giving needs.

In treatment villages, women from both upper and lower castes that were drawn into the project fold were forced to be mobile, thereby accelerating this social change. Some of the symbolic spatial boundaries that formed the basis of gender identities in these geographies began to get dismantled with pressure from the interventions' institutional requirement of mobility. As a result, for the first time, women laid claim to spaces that had traditionally been male-dominated and out of bounds for them.

JEEViKA women started taking pride in conceptions of 'gareeb-didi', poor woman/sister, and 'saksham-didi', capable woman/sister, propagated by the intervention as symbolic resources that would bolster solidarity and a strong collective identity tied firmly to group affiliation. These discourses had been successful in dis-embedding identity from conventional categories of caste and religion.

JEEViKA provided women with the institutional scope to step out and interact with the community at large, which began the process of undoing the everyday practice of gender. This was particularly significant for lower caste women, who were among the first to join the program. These women quickly took on leadership roles and experienced a change in social status as the program gained recognition.

The new ideas and discourses encouraging women's mobility that were promoted by the intervention were met with a lot of initial resistance including violence and ridicule. Over time as the program gained recognition and community acceptance, women's improved mobility was legitimized.

BOX 2

“JEEViKA does help build leadership skills and instills confidence in us to handle a community. No school, no formal education can teach you that.”

-Veena Paswan (CLF Treasurer) from a treatment village in Madhubani district, Cycle

PUBLIC DEBATE AND ACTIONS

Under the *panchayati raj*, *gram sabhas* (village assemblies) were envisaged as spaces for public debate and deliberation at the local level in rural India. However, an established system of holding these constitutionally mandated assemblies was lacking at the time in rural Bihar and they were not perceived as legitimate problem-solving arenas.

In control villages, women rarely attended these village assemblies, which were largely male-dominated. Women were seldom recognized as capable of active participation and were denied information and access. In stark contrast, JEEViKA women (especially position holders) actively participated in these village assemblies. These women freely voiced their opinions, became conduits/brokers of public services for the community and even arbitrated with PRIs and other institutions when needed.

While JEEViKA was never intended to interact with the established political governance system, JEEViKA women's entry into the sphere of the panchayat can be seen as an unintended consequence of women's empowerment.

POLICY LESSONS

JEEViKA was setup in the context of a weak local government system and frail development infrastructure, and succeeded

in creating the required infrastructure to address social inclusion and women's empowerment. It is possible that some of the changes associated with the program are more fluid and long term in nature. Therefore, in order to sustain socio-cultural changes brought about by participatory programs, deeper community engagement is required.

Further, while political participation and changes to local governance were not an intended consequence of the project, the (tiered) institutional structure was successful in improving accountability in public service delivery. Policy-makers need to ensure that a constant feedback loop is developed to encourage and sustain these institutional changes.

Very often the effectiveness of livelihood programs and interventions are determined on the basis of results from quantitative, number-driven impact evaluations that can only capture impact on tangible outcomes. These evaluations fail to capture more intangible, nuanced changes that are critical to understanding the processes associated with the unfolding of the program and how change happens at the grassroots, which is critical to scaling up or replicating interventions.

CONCLUSION

JEEViKA was successful in bringing about a mini-social revolution that provided women with both physical and symbolic resources as well as institutional support to defy traditional roles associated with the domesticated space of the home and adopt new identities associated with being a “JEEViKA-didi”. The project was successful in bringing about changes in self-esteem and wider social capacity of women as well as on social norms such as mobility, decision-making within the households and collective action at the community level.

ABOUT THE IMPACT NOTE SERIES

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