

■ By Chitra Subramanyam

A group of children in Maharashtra's Lohra village turns to slogan-shouting (*bomb pheri* in the local language) outside the homes of school dropouts. It's their way of embarrassing parents into sending their children back to school. Hundreds of miles away in Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh, a husband abandons his 40-year-old wife

and four daughters. She forms a self-help group and opens a shop selling bangles and ornaments. In a little Musahir village in Bihar that has for long been forgotten with its populace on the brink of starvation, a 104-year-old man comments, "I feel something changing for the first time in 104 years."

It is a change, albeit a quiet one, sweeping across 108 districts in six states and has taken seven years in coming. It has reached out to 40.4 million people, marginalised and forgotten in the poorest areas of the country, where even a pucca road seems a luxury. This is a change that has given voice to these people, who have been reminded and educated of their rights, and have finally learned to demand what is rightfully theirs.

The birth of this movement, known as the Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) Programme goes back to 2001. With a budget of £27 million (Rs 227 crore) from UK's Department for International Development, Development Alternatives and PricewaterhouseCoopers aimed at working with civil society organisations to assist people living in the most backward districts of the country to realise their entitlements more effectively. It was a tough call, recalls Kiran Sharma, Development Alternatives' vice-president and programme director, PACS.

The PACS concept was unique. NGOs have usually been invested in taking concrete steps, something like building a school, says Sharma. "And here we were suddenly talking about rights and entitlements, of

enabling the people and increasing their awareness. We were giving these people money to talk about things that had no tangible results but would bring about a long-term change in their action and behaviour." On the one hand, she says, it was about empowering the poor and working with the government. But on the other hand, it was also confrontational and agitational.

Now, 655 civil society organisations work with communities in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. "There was so much government money provided for these people, but it all lay unutilised because of a total lack of awareness," says Sharma. There were problems. Like the time, Sharma says, Naxalites abducted a colleague at gunpoint. "More than 50 per cent of the villages under the PACS programme are under the Naxal shadow. Our colleague was abducted in Jharkhand but allowed to leave when the Naxals came to know of the work they were doing there," she says.

The result didn't take too long in coming. Members of the Kolam tribe, a marginalised community in Vidarbha, Maharashtra, have become active members of joint forest management committees. Elsewhere in the state, around 500 NGOs joined hands to become drought warriors as they travelled to villages raising awareness on drought-related issues and collecting data for advocacy and planning. In Madhya Pradesh's Betul district, local civil society organisations and NGOs helped set up grain banks in 30 villages reaching over 700

different STROKES

* Poorest Areas Civil Society

Project **Educating the poor about their civil rights**

Ah-ha Moment When a 104-year-old man said, "I feel something changing for the first time in 104 years"

604

districts are covered by the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme





RAVI S. SAHANI

“

Our greatest success was when 42,000 women across five states became literate in just nine months.

KIRAN SHARMA,
Programme director, PACS

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homes, most of which belonged to the poorest section of the villages. In Ramgarh, a village in the Chhattarpur district in Madhya Pradesh, women learned about the Right to Information Act (RTI) with the help of a PACS programme civil society organisation. It was the RTI that helped them find a solution to the severe water problem they were facing. Then there was the Musahir community that for the first time hoisted the national flag and invited the district collector for the salute.

Sharma remembers a particular meeting in Patna in April 2007. “That day, I saw 1,200 women who were elected as

TALKING HEADS: PACS at work in a Bihar panchayat

panchayat members from 22 of the poorest districts in Bihar gather in Gandhi Hall. The place was practically spilling out. One woman was carrying a child, another a sack, but they were all there,” she says. It was a goose-bump moment, Sharma says. But illiteracy, even there, seemed the biggest problem, she says. That’s when the Tara Akshar programme was put in place. Armed with laptops, NGOs went into villages. Their aim was to educate women who had never even held a pen. “The greatest success was when 42,000 women across five states became literate in just nine months,” says Sharma.

The PACS programme finally came to an end this year. During the interim period, before the next phase starts, Sharma says, a campaign to increase the reach and effectiveness of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme has been launched that will focus on around 480 villages. But, she says, the stories are many, each as inspirational as the other. “Listening to them, we feel we are finally making a difference.” ■