

# PRADAN — The Organisation That Taught India How to Organise Rural Women

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In 1987, before Self-Help Groups were a government programme, before NRLM existed, before anyone used the phrase "community-based livelihoods" in a policy document, PRADAN put twelve rural women in a room in a village in eastern India and asked them to save money together. The experiment — eventually called a Self-Help Group — is now the foundational architecture of India's largest anti-poverty programme.

That is the measure of PRADAN's influence: they pioneered a model that a government then adopted, scaled to 10 million groups, and named the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission. The original experiment is now national policy. The organisation that ran the experiment is still in the field, still refining the approach, still doing the work.

## Who They Are

Professional Assistance for Development Action — PRADAN — was founded in 1983 by Deep Joshi and a group of young professionals from elite Indian institutions who chose rural India over corporate careers. Their founding insight was specific: that poor communities don't lack intelligence or initiative, they lack the technical and institutional support that would allow their existing capabilities to produce better outcomes. PRADAN's model was to place highly skilled professionals directly into

villages, not as managers of development programmes but as companions and catalysts.

They currently work directly with around 1 million families across seven of India's poorest states — Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Rajasthan — and support 116 NGOs. The states they work in are not coincidental: they are the states where poverty is most concentrated and where mainstream development institutions are least present.

## **The SHG Pioneer**

PRADAN's contribution to the SHG model is foundational and documented. Their 1987 pilots in SHGs, alongside similar experiences in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu, evolved into the DAY-NRLM — the government programme that now reaches tens of millions of rural households. By 31st March 2024, PRADAN had engaged with more than 1 million women organised into 86,711 SHGs. These SHGs have cumulatively disbursed credit of nearly Rs 7,209 crore (approximately USD 88 million).

The credit figure is important. What it represents is rural women lending to each other — without collateral, without formal credit history, without a bank branch in the village — at interest rates that do not extract wealth from communities but circulate it within them. The SHG is not just a financial mechanism. It is a governance structure, a conflict resolution forum, a peer learning environment, and in many cases the first institution in a rural woman's life in which her voice carries formal weight.

PRADAN supports 351 women's Block Level and Cluster Level Federations — the tier above the SHG that gives women's collectives the institutional strength to raise their voices against exploitation and violence, negotiate with government, and engage markets at scale.

## **The Livelihoods Evidence**

PRADAN's FY 2024-25 impact data: their livelihood initiatives reached 2.5 million households. Of these, 1.96 million households — 61 percent of participating households — made measurable progress. Notably, 332,000 households earned Rs 2.5 lakh annually through high-return livelihood models, and 491,000 crossed Rs 2 lakh.

These are not aspirational targets. They are verified outcomes from PRADAN's own monitoring systems, cross-referenced with the Co-Impact evaluation of the AWARE programme, which documented income increases of 30 to 50 percent for 54,000 women, and 76,322 women becoming shareholders in Farmer Producer Companies.

The AWARE (Augmenting Women's Agency for Resilient Economies) initiative focuses specifically on women's leadership in smallholder farming — the Central India Tribal Region, where 70 million tribals live and where 83 percent of farmers are smallholders dependent on rain-fed agriculture. PRADAN's specific focus here: water access and governance, where women's control over irrigation decisions is both a livelihood and a rights issue simultaneously.

## **PRADAN in Odisha: The Rayagada Collective Farming Model**

PRADAN's Odisha work is documented in a World Bank case study on women's group farming on leased land in Rayagada district. The model: PRADAN assisted women's SHG members to form collective farming clusters covering 30 villages, with 535 households adopting collective farming on over 300 acres. Women who previously said "one who ploughs and owns the land" is a farmer — meaning they excluded themselves — became recognised as farmers by local actors and eventually by government schemes.

The specificity of the Rayagada model matters: the hilly terrain of the Dongria and Kondh areas doesn't allow large patches of contiguous land, so PRADAN created smaller irrigation structures covering 2 to 3 acres. The adaptation to specific

geography is exactly the kind of field intelligence that is visible only to organisations embedded in specific communities over time.

## The 42 Districts of Accountability

PRADAN's work goes beyond household income. In 42 of India's poorest districts, communities supported by PRADAN have started holding local village councils accountable and claiming rights under government schemes. This is not a programme outcome — it is a civic outcome. Women who learned to manage an SHG account learned to speak at a gram sabha. Women who negotiated with a moneylender learned to negotiate with a Block Development Officer.

The SHG as citizenship infrastructure is PRADAN's least quantifiable and most important contribution.

## Contact and Further Reading

**Website:** [pradan.net](http://pradan.net) | **For Odisha partnerships:** contact via Ranchi headquarters or Odisha state office

### Key evidence:

- PRADAN Impact Page: [pradan.net/our-impact](http://pradan.net/our-impact) — FY 2024-25 data, including 2.5 million households and 332,000 crossing Rs 2.5 lakh
- Co-Impact AWARE evaluation: [co-impact.org](http://co-impact.org) — documented 54,000 women income increases of 30-50%
- World Bank case study: Women's Group Farming on Leased Land — The Experience of PRADAN in Odisha (2021)

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