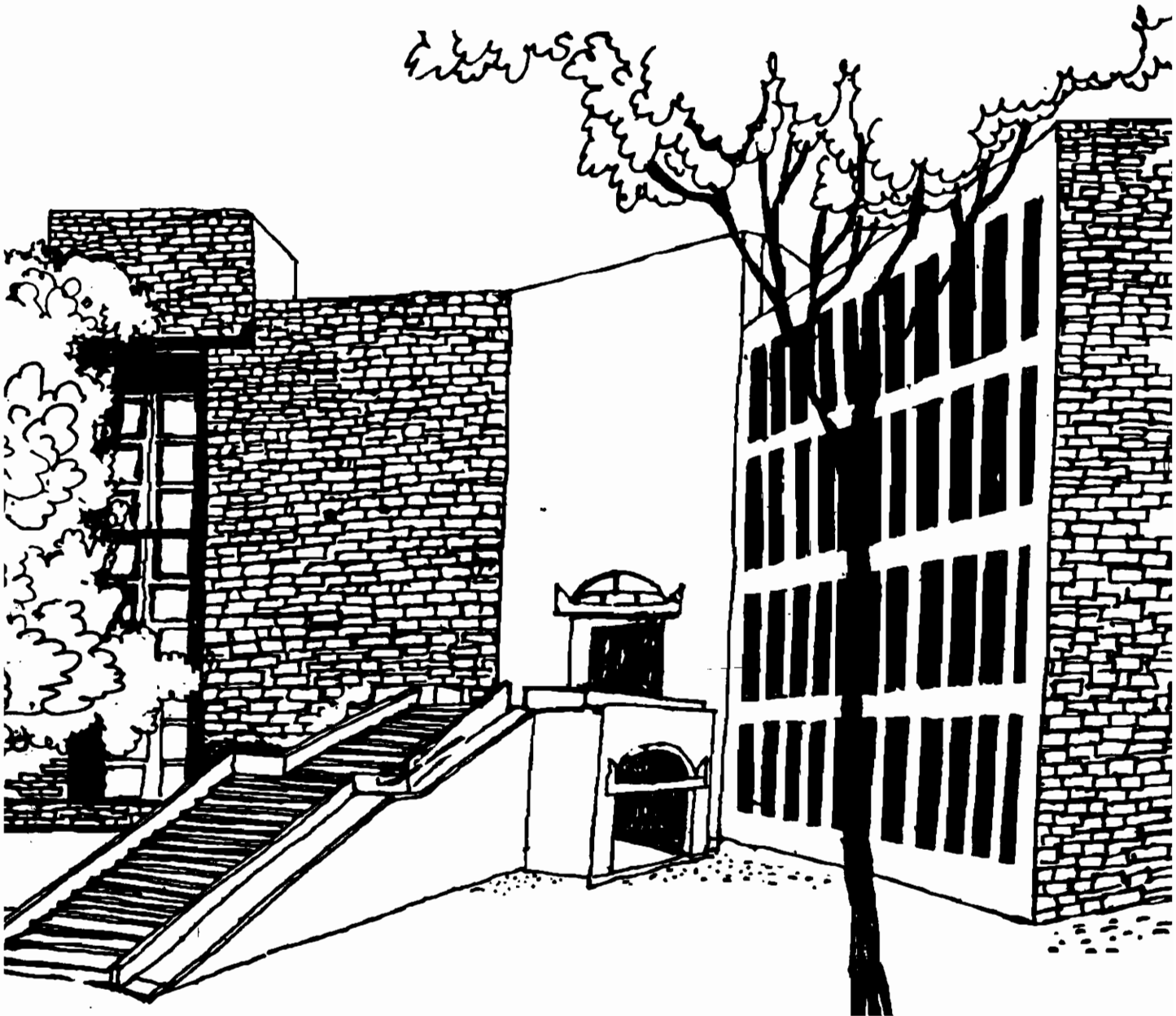




Working Paper



WHEN LITERACY CAMPAIGNS GAVE BIRTH TO A
WOMEN'S MOVEMENT: THE CASE OF JAGO BAHANA
IN DUMKA (BIHAR, INDIA)

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ABSTRACT

Total and Post Literacy Campaigns have launched incidental processes of women's empowerment in almost every district that witnessed this uniquely Indian innovation. However, these processes have generally tended to fade with the campaigns' closure. This has prompted suggestions that, if the incipient women's empowerment processes originating in the literacy campaigns are to become sustainable, they need to be linked to the women's movement(s). The central argument of this article is that while linkages with the women's movement(s) are desirable, they are not a necessary condition for sustainability, as demonstrated by the self-generated, self-sustained, and self-styled women's movement that was born from the literacy campaigns in Dumka, Bihar (India).

Jago Bahana (JB), continues to enhance its presence and power as a women's movement, in Dumka, even after the literacy campaigns that created it have ended. The case of JB is discussed in depth with a focus on the processes that created it, its internal structure, and the activities that earned it legitimacy at every level of the district. Lessons for sustainable women's empowerment are drawn, relating to the role of a gender-aware district level bureaucracy, the exclusive space carved for women's participation, and the tangible nature of the benefits delivered to women and families.

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(BIHAR, INDIA)**

Vaada Karo

*Ah ban hi gaya Jago Bahana yahan
Isko majboot karne ka vaada karo.*

*Chaar din ki sahel-saheli nahin
Umr bhar saath dene ka vaada karo.
Auraton ke huye kuch bhi mushkil nahin
Aisi himmat jagane ka vaada karo*

*Jahaan nahin ban paaya hai Jago Bahana
Vahaan isko banaane ka vaada karo.
Ek akele chalne se kya hoga fayada
Sabko leke saath chalne ka vada karo*

*Chaar din ki sahel-saheli nahin
Umr bhar saath dene ka vaada karo.*

Make a Promise

Now that Jago Bahana has been created here.
Make a promise to strengthen it

Four days' sisterhood is no sisterhood.
Commit to be a partner for life
Nothing is impossible for women.
Make a promise to awaken such courage.

Wherever Jago Bahana does not exist.
Make a promise to create it.
What is the benefit in walking alone.
Promise to take everyone else along

Four days' sisterhood is no sisterhood.
Commit to be a partner for life.

— Poem. published in *Baha. Jago Bahana's* newspaper. January. 1996



INTRODUCTION

The Total Literacy Campaigns (TLCs) and Post-Literacy Campaigns (PLCs) are two Indian state creations and interventions that have enjoyed significant success (e.g., Joseph, 1996; Sengupta and Roy, 1996). Intended originally as a strategy to impart reading and writing skills to the masses of non-literate people, the campaigns have generally gone beyond this narrow focus to embrace issues of social change through people's empowerment and action. Women have been at the center of both these processes, primarily because they constitute a high percentage of the target population of non-literates. The process of women's empowerment was in some cases mostly incidental because the literacy classes created spaces for group interaction among women. In other contexts, the incidental processes were actively fanned and taken advantage of by

progressive forces of a supra-political nature, such as the vibrant non-governmental, voluntary, and women's movement(s) in India.

Sundararaman (1996) makes a perceptive argument that wherever incipient processes of women's empowerment were not linked consciously and actively with the women's movement(s), they were episodic in nature. One of the important lessons she draws for the women's movement(s) is to consciously blend itself with women's empowerment processes unleashed by the literacy campaigns to make them sustainable beyond the temporary nature of campaigns. The *Mahila Samakhya* (MS) or Women's Self-Reliance experiment in Karnataka state lends credence to such a strategic intervention. The MS activists supported and provided women elected in *Panchayati Raj Institutions*, mostly through the one-third reservation accorded to them via the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, with a feminist consciousness (Batliwala, 1996). Furthermore, these and other women were encouraged to contest non-reserved political spaces. In the absence of a feminist consciousness, the elected women were very prone to becoming puppets in the hands of men and their age-old patriarchal priorities and modes of functioning. The strategies of Mishra *et al.* (1994) represent a range of effective interventions in literacy campaigns by activists in the women's movement. One cannot underestimate the importance of strategic interventions by the feminist movement(s) in nurturing processes of women's empowerment. However, one cannot also deny the possibility that some processes of women's empowerment can show signs of sustainability with little or minimal support from organized feminist forces.

The case of women's empowerment through the literacy movement in Dumka district in Bihar state has itself spawned a sustainable women's movement. The potential of such a movement lies in its organic nature which offers lessons for other literacy campaigns that failed to hatch sustainable women's empowerment processes. The *Jago Bahana* (henceforth, JB; literally meaning 'awaken sisters') of Dumka further brings into question the inevitable decay of women's literacy-linked empowerment processes, in the absence of support from the women's movement(s). A significant implication of this questioned inevitability is that lessons from Dumka may point at ways by which the literacy movement can itself create a women's movement, with or without the direct

support of the women's movement(s). Undeniably, the women's movement(s) can enrich and buttress literacy movements in almost every context but, unfortunately, its presence does not effectively cover the vastness of India. Therefore, self-created and self-sustained women's movements have a pride of place. This article presents an indepth case on the various activities of JB and the lessons for achieving sustainable women's empowerment processes through literacy campaigns.

JAGO BAHANA: OVERVIEW

JB can be characterised as the backbone of women's mobilization that has crystallised in Dumka through the TLC (August 1993 and January 1995) and PLC (April 1995 to March 1997) phases.² The diversity of its activities as they have evolved and the circumstantial nuances through which the *Zilla Saksharta Samiti* (ZSS; District Literacy Committee) initiated literacy movement has traversed, provide a window on its development into a women's movement. Despite not having received any significant support from an organized women's movement, JB today continues to gather greater momentum and is best characterised as a social (women's) movement and not just a structure, because of the underlying dynamism that has driven it throughout.

There is absolutely no question that JB has become an extremely powerful movement through which many women have been and continue to be empowered. Its structure grew initially from the top but has gradually been implanting itself into the life of every village in Dumka. Currently, the movement has been operationalized at all four levels – district, block, *panchayat* and village.³ At each of the first three levels the JB executive committees consist of 11 women. They include three posts -- president, secretary and treasurer. The block and *panchayat* level posts were filled through a process of election in July, 1996; prior to the elections, women were nominated to the posts by consensus. Although the district level JB committee was the first one to be formed, it has yet to be created through an electoral process. Demands for this are, however, simmering from below. The movement is currently under a phase of expansion

to all the villages. It is reported that so far nearly half of them have formed JB committees by consensus, i.e., not through a process of election

Government activities related to women and children's development are increasingly being channelled through JB. For instance, the potential beneficiaries of any scheme are identified by JB through surveys, simultaneously informing and making women aware of possibilities and their rights. Subsequently it ensures that the women either tap the possibilities on their own or are guided through the required formalities

JB was not just conceptualised at a meeting or even a string of meetings. The movement has grown out of several governmental and voluntary initiatives that took women's concerns and concern for women as points of departure. Today's JB is an outgrowth of a process that began with the TLC, was expanded and strengthened during the PLC and continues to change and be refined through the dynamic interplay of action and learning. The situation when the first stirrings occurred among women as a result of the literacy campaign, presents a stark contrast to the enthusiasm that is apparent today. The turnaround for women has been much more dramatic since it necessitated mindset changes, not only of the women concerned but also of their extended families. Before TLC, a female educated government employee's sphere of activities was limited to the regular job and family. With the advent of the TLC and later PLC, many women teachers and other government employees began volunteering their time on and off the job. Thus, in this case the focus is on how JB itself evolved conceptually and was operationalized through its diverse portfolio of activities. Table 1 separates the evolution of the activities in the TLC and PLC phases. These activities are either connected directly or indirectly to JB and are discussed in the order listed. To present the pulse of this movement, it is important to pick up the threads from the beginning.

Table 1: Activities of and contributing to the formation of *Jago Bahana*

<i>Pre-Jago Bahana Activities</i>	<i>Status: TLC</i>	<i>Status: PLC</i>
Identification of Women Voluntary Trainers	Yes	No
Formation of <i>Mahila Saksharta Samitis</i> Via <i>Mahila Sammelans</i>	Yes	No
Women's <i>Kala Jatthas</i>	Yes	No
Community Based Convergence Services (CBCS)	Yes	No

<i>Jago Bahana Activities</i>		
<i>Didi Bank</i>	Initiated	Strengthened
<i>Mahila Samridhi Yojana</i>	Picked up	No
<i>Swasth Mela</i>	Initiated	Continued, strengthened
Government of India Schemes	A few picked up	Many picked up
<i>Indira Awas and JB Coordinated Construction Projects</i>	Initiated	Actively pursued
<i>Bicycle Scheme</i>	Initiated	Expanded
<i>Maintenance and Repair of Water Pumps</i>	Initiated	Strengthened
<i>Fruit-tree saplings to women giving birth to girls</i>	No	Yes
<i>Women's Sports</i>	Initiated	Actively pursued
<i>Campaign Against Arrack Consumption</i>	No	Initiated late in PLC

IDENTIFICATION OF TARGET GROUP OF LEARNERS AND WOMEN VOLUNTARY TRAINERS

In the beginning of the TLC phase, it was very difficult to draw women out of their homes or even talk to them. When compared to the *Adivasi*⁴ (tribal) regions, this problem was more serious among the Muslim and Bengali population. Consequently, very few were willing to be linked to the campaign. So a group of women was organised, including, teachers, village women, government officials and wives of certain officials. Only when this group began to reach out to village women, did they start responding to the campaign. For about 4-5 months one strategy pursued was that some Block Development Officers (BDOs) consciously brought their wives along during field visits. In addition, they were accompanied by other women literacy workers and teachers. While the BDOs performed their routine tasks, which mostly brought them in contact with the men, their wives would talk to the women in small groups. In this manner, besides raising general awareness of the campaign, some key women were identified -- women who were either enthusiastic to volunteer or seemed to have leadership potential. These selected women were then motivated further.

Prior to the start of TLC, a door-to-door survey was conducted by some government employees, especially teachers, to identify the target group of learners -- non-literates in the 10-35 age group -- and literacy volunteers. Roughly 225,000 (56.2%) female learners were thus identified, out of a total of 384,000. Identification of Voluntary

Teachers (VTs) was through self-selection during the survey, a process which eventually yielded roughly 7000 female VTs. But this was accomplished with some effort. Many of them had to be accepted as VTs despite their low levels of formal schooling (around grade VII or VIII), due to the general lack of formal education among village women. In addition, the ZSS identified around 100 women from those who had performed well during the survey, by observing such things as their motivation and ability to submit reports in a timely manner.

THE SEED FOR A WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION

The first training of Key Resource Persons (KRPs)⁵ was held on Jan. 14-16, 1994 at the district level. Out of the 125 KRPs trained, there were only 26 women. The idea for a Women's Cell first emerged at this training. Prior to it, a "super-class" women's committee was formed at the district level, a committee which included the principals of the Women's College as the president and St. Theresa Mission High School, as secretary. This committee, however, is reported to have stayed inactive. Prompted by this, the women KRP trainees from different blocks decided to come together, mainly through informal discussions at night, to organise women in their own blocks. At the end of the training, a proposal to form *Mahila Saksharta Samitis* (MSSs; Women's Literacy Committees) of governmental employees and others at all levels – district, block, *panchayat* and village -- was put forth before the Deputy Commissioner (DC). Top level officers were reported to have been encouraging of women's participation right from the beginning and so the proposal was approved in principle with little difficulty. The early formation of MSSs proved to be a challenge at all levels (but more so at the district than at the block level) due to the fact that some "educated women did not support the idea, viewing it as a farce". Still sufficient faith had already been instilled in the campaign due to a useful strategy mentioned earlier, one that had involved the DC's and BDOs' wives in the campaign. The first MSS⁶ was then formed in Jan. 1994 itself, at the district level. It included the DC's and other higher up officials' wives and other women, including the *saksharta* secretary, some exceptional teachers and a few NGO workers.

FORMATION OF MSSs VIA MAHILA SAMMELANS

In Feb. 1994 a *Mahila Sammelan* (women's festive gathering) was organised at the district level. Primarily due to the efforts of the KRP women, roughly 5000 women from all blocks participated. The *sammelan* had no specific agenda, except to gauge women's response, and hence, it turned out to be an open forum for women to sing, dance, perform, and speak their minds. Many important issues emerged from the ground and prompted the idea that such *sammelans* be organised at the block level as well. Over the next two months, 14 *sammelans* were held. A major benefit of the round of *sammelans* that took place at the block level was that many women workers not only got sifted through the process but their individual capacities came to the fore -- some were good as managers, others spoke and faced audiences well, and still others became known to analyse issues critically. Subsequently, the KRP women were directed to form MSSs in their blocks based on their observations during the *sammelans*. The nature of the MSSs at the block level was such that the post-bearers -- president and secretary -- tended to be government employees (e.g., teachers, medical staff, Integrated Child Development Scheme -- ICDS -- staff, etc.). Through a similar process of *sammelans* at the *panchayat* level, members of the block level MSS then helped to form *panchayat* level MSSs.

MOTIVATING ADIVASI WOMEN

Mass involvement of *Adivasis*, especially *Adivasi* women, did not occur for some time. Perhaps the biggest hurdle was one of mindset since women's literacy was not seen in their own social milieu as something necessary. This prompted the women in the district level core group to begin addressing the problems of women as a way to motivate them. For instance, village women were told that literacy would bring them greater respect and help them in the running of their families. In order to attract the *Adivasis* to link themselves with the campaign, dance competitions were organised at block and *panchayat* levels. While the dance competitions attracted a large number of *Adivasis*, they

were instrumental in generating a congenial climate for women's participation since women have long occupied a central place in such activities. One of the problems in the *Adivasi* villages was that many women were reluctant to learn from male VTs. Others were reluctant to learn from VTs who were much younger than them

Several awareness-raising questions were probed with the women. Do men let them leave their homes? Do they allow them to study? Do they even let them sit in the meetings of the *Panchayat*? This last issue was reported by a ZSS core group member to have struck a chord among the women in the *Adivasi* villages. As in most other places, the political culture in these regions discourages women from being present at *Panchayat* gatherings, let alone speak. Reflection and awareness raising around women's rights as equal representatives of their own families and therefore deserving greater rights to political participation, was a key factor in changing their attitude toward literacy. While initially it convinced and motivated many women to link themselves with the TLC, later on it encouraged some to participate in the creation of women's organizational structures at every level, from the district down to the villages.

WOMEN'S KALA JATTHAS

Although the MSSs were formed at the district, block and *panchayat* levels, many women were still unclear as to their role. One goal was clear -- there were many non-literate women who had to be made literate. Meetings held with the various MSSs to discuss their other objectives, those around social issues, were not perceived to be very effective in enthusing the members. Therefore an idea to form a women's *Kala Jattha* emerged, through which, songs and short plays dealing with women's concerns would be performed by women themselves and to the extent possible, for women primarily. A *Kala Jattha* of about 20 women was formed at the district level. Since ready-made songs and plays were not available, a 15 day training of the women's *Kala Jattha* team was conducted. Following this, the group toured all the 14 blocks for two months, putting up 31 performances. At a time, they performed at pre-planned gatherings, especially of women, from 4-5 *panchayats*. These performances are reported to have had a

tremendous response, on occasion moving some women to tears. Photographs of women covering their faces with a *saree* while speaking into the mike are testimony to the report that some who may never have spoken publicly, did so on their own at these performances.

The success of the district level women's *Kala Jatha* inspired the formation of one in every block; the team at the district level trained those at the block level. At the *Panchayat* level the *Kala Jatha* formed included both women and men. The women *Kala Jathas* played a crucial role in raising awareness among women (it is claimed the message reached around 80% of the women) that the literacy campaign's aims were to move far beyond the development of skills pertaining to the three R's of reading, writing, and numeracy into the realm of social development. Therefore, non-literate women were of course expected to join the programme as learners, but also, everyone had something to benefit from and contribute to it. Thus, besides the focus on learning centers, several other ideas and activities began to be planned. However, there was a shortage of funds for the latter. How the processes of awareness raising and empowerment set in motion by the *Kala Jathas* could be sustained, thus, became a major issue of concern for the district level MSS and ZSS.

COMMUNITY BASED CONVERGENCE SERVICES (CBCS)

Fortunately, a programme of the government of India focusing on women's development arrived in Dumka. It was called Community Based Convergence Services (CBCS). Due to the congruence of goals between the CBCS and MSSs, this development presented a golden opportunity to transform the existing MSSs into committees under CBCS, with some readjustment. One of the important CBCS stipulations was that the committees formed under it had to be registered separately and its executive committee had to be of 11 members only; other women could join as part of the core group. There was no such upper limit on the number of MSS members and it could even go up to 20 or more women. In addition, the president, secretary and treasurer, could not be government employees. Thus, the directive was issued from the district that all the

government employees in the MSSs, and there were many such at the block level, had to withdraw. The assessment of the current ZSS members is that about 60% of those who had to withdraw accepted the change gladly, as something inevitable. But understandably, about 40% were somewhat reluctant. Nevertheless, they relented after a month or so through a process of dialogue that conveyed to them that these positions were ultimately for people emerging from the bottom.

With the arrival of the CBCS, the MSSs became history as a formal entity and it was decided to form new committees under the rubric of “Jago Bahana ” The name itself grew out of suggestions made at a district level meeting of the core group. At the district, block and *panchayat* levels, meetings of KRPs, MTs, VTs and learners were called to explain the transformation of MSSs into JB. The women were then invited to form their committees through consensus, based on their experience with the MSSs and their own assessments of deserving individuals. Several criteria were put forward. Only those women were to be selected, who could devote around 12-14 hrs. per day, could work alongside other men, and were in a position to travel and stay away once in a while from their families. Some women self-nominated themselves and some were nominated by others. In this process, a JB committee of 11 women each was formed at the district, block and *panchayat* levels. Currently, the JB structure having been created in all the 14 blocks and 282 *panchayats*, is undergoing a phase of expansion in the villages. Out of the 4000 or so villages in the district, the ZSS estimates that JB committees have been formed in half of them.

DIDI BANK

The first major activity taken up by JB was *Didi Bank*. The basic concept for *Didi Bank* -- to set up a women’s self-help group of around 15 women who would save regularly, meet frequently to pool their savings, take loans from the common pool and pay back with or without interest depending on the time elapsed -- was already mentioned in the CBCS project. Solely based on the guidelines therein, meetings to start *Didi Banks* were held at the district and block levels. But because the concept itself was not clear, its

implementation failed in the first phase. One of the reasons cited for this failure was that *Didi Banks* proliferated far too fast. In one year about 600 groups were formed in the entire district. A considerable amount also got accumulated (roughly Rs. 900,000).⁷ With the benefit of hindsight, the ZSS members feel today that in the first phase:

- a) considering the time needed for people to understand the basic concept, even with good effort only about 100 such effective banks could have been formed in one year;
- b) many *Didi Bank* members were under the impression that the government would match their deposits and they would somehow be eligible for a loan from a revolving fund. Care should have been taken to prevent this impression from being created; and
- c) mostly women from relatively affluent backgrounds became *Didi Bank* members, women who were able to deposit around Rs. 50 per week and hardly needed to withdraw any money. Hence this money would not rotate and became blocked. The basic concept of *Didi Bank* that it was for women of low economic status who not only needed to save but were also constantly in the clutches of the money-lender at high interest rates, was not well understood in the beginning

Today, in the second phase roughly 400 out of the 600 banks have closed since many of the more affluent women realised that this was not helping them. The 200 that exist from the first phase are in the process of being reorganised. The relatively richer women are being encouraged to withdraw completely from this activity. Following the implementation problems of the first phase, a couple of ZSS members underwent training. A trainers' and *Didi Bank* group leaders' training was subsequently organised at the district level. Through this effort, a total of 120 new groups of women who were not involved in any *Didi Bank* in the first phase, were formed in five blocks in four months (March through June, 1997). The current aim is to form at least one *Didi Bank* in each one of the roughly 4000 villages in the district (e.g., see Box 1).⁸

Box 1**Paripa Didi Bank**

Paripa is a small village with only 49 families. Most of the families belong to one caste which is classified as an 'Other Backward Class' (OBC). The rest belong to the Scheduled Castes. In May 1995, three young women of the dominant caste, influenced by the *Jago Bahana*, took the initiative to form a *Didi Bank*. They became the group leader, secretary and treasurer of the bank, and with seven other women, pooled together Rs. 62 as the initial savings of the group. The women met every week (except during the peak agricultural season) to collect the contributions that ranged from Rs 2 to Rs 10 per member. Each woman's contribution was noted in her passbook and the cash kept with the treasurer. Periodically, the money was deposited in a State Bank of India account operated jointly by the group leader and secretary. By the end of 1995, the group membership had gone up to 15 (the upper limit prescribed by the ZSS) and the savings up to Rs. 1838. In early 1996, the group decided to lend the money it had saved to its members. Two norms were laid down: (a) no interest would be charged if the principal was returned within a month, but interest at 2 percent per month would apply thereafter. (b) all lending decisions would be taken by the group. The interest rates were perceived to be attractive in comparison with the prevalent rates of 25 percent per month charged by money lenders on emergency borrowings. No other norms — repayment schedules, maximum amounts that could be borrowed, penalties for non-repayment — were specified.

The receipts and payments (from May 1, 1995 to June 30, 1997) are as follows:

<i>Receipts</i>	<i>Rupees</i>	<i>Payments</i>	<i>Rupees</i>
Members' contributions	5878		
Loans returned	5604	Loans given	9265
Interest received	411	Balance on hand	2628
Total	11893	Total	11893

The women, most of whom have a history of borrowing from money lenders, have borrowed from the *Didi Bank* to meet emergency expenses related to illness or marriages. Repayment of principal and payment of interest have been erratic. The small capital base creates its own problems. Two members have dropped out because the bank did not have money when they wanted to borrow. The sustainability of the group and the links that it needs to develop with credit networks are issues that will become important in the future. There is scope for one more *Didi Bank* in the village, but the menfolk have not allowed the setting up of another group.

MAHILA SAMRIDDHI YOJANA (MSY)

MSY or Women's Self-Reliance Scheme was created by the central government to encourage poor women to open accounts in the local post-office. The advantage was that they could open an account with four rupees only and could deposit in multiples of four. Any woman who was successful in depositing Rs. 300 in a year, was to obtain a bonus of Rs. 75. The ZSS core group decided to link it to the TLC, routing the scheme through the by then established network of JB. But many women got confused by the fact that JB were urging women on the one hand to put some money into their *Didi Bank* and were

simultaneously telling them to deposit money into the post-office. In sum, they were encouraging them to double their savings, when their earnings were already meagre. Reacting to this concern, the idea was then given to the members of all the 400 or so *Didi Banks* which existed at the time, to take loans from *Didi Bank* and then deposit them in the post-office under MSY. This idea immediately caught on among the *Didi Bank* members since it enabled them to borrow on low or no interest and enjoy the MSY bonus at year end. Almost all of them took advantage of the scheme. Seeing large numbers of women opening accounts, others unconnected with *Didi Bank* too began to follow. The overall response in the district was tremendous, requiring additional forms to be printed. Over about four to five months women went to the post-offices in large groups. In fact, it is reported to have been a trying period for the person who wished to merely buy a post-card or stamp. In certain places regional camps had to be held since the regular post-offices were unable to routinely handle the large numbers of interested women. Totally about 60,000 village women took advantage of MSY, collectively depositing over Rs. 10 lakhs.

Besides the bonus in MSY, there were also some psychological and other non-monetary benefits. Many women went to the post-office for the first time, got familiarised with a simple governmental process of filling a form, standing in line, signing, observing how stamps are sold, letters are posted, and so on. The women went in groups, thereby generating a festive atmosphere around a literacy campaign activity. They got an account opened in their name for the first time and received a pass-book with their name on it. This by itself was the beginning of an empowering process given that most women, prior to MSY, had never had any account. It was always in their husband's or some other male family member's name. Owning individual pass books had a tremendous symbolic meaning for the women. If the arrival of CBCS was instrumental in creating JB, MSY was the first major scheme that was successfully routed through its by then established network. Dumka district won a national award for JB's MSY effort.

JAGO BAHANA SWASTH MELA

Concerned with the overall health situation of women and children, JB conducted an impressionistic survey through their representatives at the *panchayat* level. They were asked to find out in their villages how many women were suffering from what kind of illness and how many pregnant women and children had not been vaccinated. It was observed that most pregnant women (around 90% it is reported) were not being vaccinated. It was also found that a large number of women were anaemic, based on the observation of symptoms. An idea emerged to then undertake a JB *Swasth Mela* (festive gathering for health) in all the 282 *panchayats*. At a district level meeting it was decided that this had to be done in three phases due to the limited availability of medical staff, vaccinations, medicines, Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS), etc. A period of canvassing by the block level JB ensued to inform people of the dates when the Mela would be held in which *panchayat*. For his part, the DC convinced the civil surgeon to support the *Swasth Mela*. Thus, the medical staff and all the medicines and vaccinations that came to the district, were made available to JB. For instance, a large number of iron supplement tablets that are normally supplied to districts but are not effectively distributed (or worse, may even expire in storage or be black-marketed), came under JB's control. Finally, from early June to end of July 1995, five phases of the *Swasth Mela* were held. The emphasis was on vaccination of children and women but check-ups were also performed and iron supplements distributed. Information on ORS and bleaching powder was given but the packets were not distributed. The block level JB were given these two with instructions to put bleaching powder in every well of every village with the help of the *panchayat* level JB. Through such initiatives, it has been claimed that 100% of the eligible children in the district have received the pulse polio vaccine. The most widely prevalent health problem of the district, diarrhoea, has also received serious attention. Besides providing information, ORS banks have been created at the village level for immediate availability of the packets.

JAGO BAHANA AND GOVERNMENT OF INDIA SCHEMES

In the PLC phase, JB became central in helping women and families benefit from the various schemes of the government. They had to tell people about the schemes, identify beneficiaries, and help them or convince them to complete the often lengthy formalities of schemes that people were mostly not taking advantage of. For instance, there is a scheme under which a woman would receive Rs. 200 on the birth of her first child and Rs. 300 on the birth of the second. The paper work for each award had to be completed before the child's birth, at the office of the designated block official. The money also had to be collected at the block office. This made it possible for medical staff to provide pre and post natal care and certify that it was indeed the first or second child. In practice, many women complained that when they went to the block headquarters, sometimes doctors were not available for check ups and/or the required officials were not present. Literacy workers then put pressure on the block administration to ensure that at least on two days of the month – usually the 14th and 28th – doctors and officials were absolutely required to be present. With this stipulation, the problem of women having to run around on their own to obtain certificates from doctors, which sometimes involved kickbacks, was reduced.

Another scheme which JB helps to implement relates to the accidental death of the main income earner of the household below 49 years of age. In this case the family is eligible to receive Rs. 10,000. But many formalities have to be completed, including obtaining a First Information Report (FIR). A survey to identify widowed women was conducted to enable them to benefit from the National Social Security Assistance Programme. In addition, the district administration is reported to be offering loans and helping them find work. Similarly JB is contributing to identify and benefit older people under the national social security programme and women under the maternal and family benefit schemes.

INDIRA AWAS AND JAGO BAHANA COORDINATED CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

Indira Awas is a central government scheme to provide housing to homeless families. JB put in a demand that they take over the *Indira Awas* scheme completely. They suggested that the agreement be in the woman's name and the construction be supervised by JB. When it was in the family's name, men still owned the house psychologically. As a result, the husband could easily send his wife packing to her parents' house, especially following heated exchanges. To minimise such occurrences, the above suggestion was made. To press their demand JB even took out processions. Finally it was accepted and today, the houses built under the *Indira Awas* scheme, are all in the woman's name.

JB further demanded that they be given some construction projects. On a trial basis, each block and *panchayat* level JB committee was asked to identify a project. Relatively bigger projects (approximate budget Rs. 75,000 to 125,000) were given to the block and smaller ones (upper limit of Rs. 25,000) to the *panchayat*. For instance the building of schools and *Yatri* Sheds (resting places along the road) were taken up by the JB at the block level. At the *panchayat* level, the JB mainly selected women-based projects. Among the things they chose to maintain or construct were hand-pumps and the cemented area around them, wells, pot-holes that were of concern to women, drainage, a cemented place to de-husk and collect grain (normally roads are used), etc. One advantage of giving these projects to JB was that they identified issues that directly affected their everyday lives. It has been reported that the various tasks -- purchasing of raw material, hiring of labour, construction and supervision were divided up well among the 11 member committee. The most interesting part of this experience was that the labour hired was almost exclusively women, except for specialised skills for which a woman was not available (e.g., the chief mason). In Dumka, generally men tend to get the jobs of labour.

BICYCLE SCHEME

With the increasing number and scope of activities, the need for JB and other women involved in the *Didi Bank* to be able to commute from one village to another quickly became an important issue. There are many routes and villages where no buses can go. The request for bicycles first came from Raneshwar block and the other blocks supported it. Each block estimated their need and collectively, they put in a request to the ZSS to provide 230 bicycles (Raneshwar asked for the highest number of 40). The ZSS for its part accepted the idea in principle. For JB's work in MSY, the ZSS had also received Rs. 100,000 as an award so it decided to use this money and some other funds to create a revolving fund. From it, interest free loans of Rs. 1150 for every bicycle were given to interested JB or *Didi Bank* workers. The scheme was not open to other women. Per month, Rs. 100 had to be returned and those who did not default on payment would at the end of it, get a 20% subsidy. Currently about 300 bicycles have been bought under this scheme but most women have not been able to plough back their monthly Rs. 100.

MAINTENANCE AND REPAIR OF WATER PUMPS

A programme was launched in the TLC phase to teach women how to maintain and repair the ubiquitous water pump, used much more by women. A dysfunctional water pump and the delays in its repair impose serious hardships on women and children who may then have to fetch water from long distances. A month's training was provided to 15 women from each block; five *panchayats* were represented with three women from each. Though the idea was good in principle, in the first phase its implementation was successful only in three blocks in which, after the training, women actually went around fixing the pumps. In the PLC phase, two rounds of training were conducted with the help of UNICEF. Following this, women in five more blocks became active hand pump repairers. A message was spread through the campaign that these women, although they did not charge exorbitant rates which were paid earlier to others who came from outside, deserved to get something. Hence, contributions were encouraged from the families that

had benefited. This way for every hand pump repair, the woman began making anything from Rs. 10 to 25 and in one day she could do about three. Currently about 200 trained female hand pump repairers have received the necessary tools for their job. There are six blocks where hand pump repairing by women has not caught on. In some cases it is due to the fact that it is difficult for the repairer to commute. While some women are receiving monetary benefit and families are receiving timely and cheaper assistance from this activity, its psychological significance for women's empowerment is tremendous since it challenges stereotypes of what women can or cannot do.

FRUIT-TREE SAPLINGS TO WOMEN GIVING BIRTH TO GIRLS

A scheme was initiated to give fruit bearing tree saplings to women who gave birth to a girl child. In 1996, JB helped in the identification of 5,477 such women who were subsequently honoured at public events with the distribution of saplings. This was intended to address the social negativity surrounding the birth of a girl child.

SPORTS

Sports is extremely popular in the Santhal areas but women's participation was low. JB is popularising women's sports, for example, through inter- and intra-block football and *kabaddi* competitions. Many *panchayat* level teams have been created. In one football competition in Dumka block, a woman cow-herder is known to have played in her traditional dress, a *lungi*. Apparently, she kicked the ball very well and ran very fast. After the match, she was offered a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. She is reported to have said, "I have never worn these but it's OK, I'll try." Through the activities of JB, it is clear that many women are trying out things they would never have imagined.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND OTHER SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS

JB has organised rallies, seminars, and discussions to raise the issue of violence against women. This has not only helped to generate a debate but also contributed to the creation of a very visible pressure group. Several problems that women are unable and/or even unwilling to share with their families or husbands, are being voiced through JB. Regular group meetings of women have become comfortable outlets for the expression and resolution of personal and family problems. Certain matters even warrant visits to the families concerned by the JB. In the context of violence against women, the independent "JB newspaper" called, *Baha*, which appears irregularly at two and sometimes six month intervals, has been very crucial in highlighting both their concerns and accomplishments. Especially reported are cases of extreme violence against women. In addition to the ones mentioned in Box 2, cases of dowry deaths are frequently covered. *Baha* also plays a motivational role for women's participation in the various activities of JB (e.g., through the publication of creative songs) and covers a range of events and issues in the larger literacy campaign as they impinge on women's lives. It was sold for one rupee.

Box 2: Examples of *Jago Bahana's* activism

• Ramgarh (Based on report in *Baha*, June-July 1996)

Bichhiya, a 10 year old girl, was peacefully sleeping one night with her mother. All of a sudden, she woke up amidst a frenzy of screams and loud noises. What she saw was incredible and unforgettable. Her drunken father was cutting up her mother to pieces with a sharp weapon. She was stunned. The moment she tried to get up, her out of control father took a swipe at her with the weapon. It missed her neck but landed on her shoulder, completely severing her left arm from the body. With amazing courage and presence of mind, Bichhiya picked up her limb with the right hand and ran for her life, screaming and alerting the entire village. The others reached her house only to find Bichhiya's mother's hacked up body in a pool of blood. The father had run away. As soon as the news reached the president of the block level JB, she arrived on the spot. Immediately a police complaint was filed and first aid was organised for Bichhiya. The next day Bichhiya went through an operation in Dumka hospital and her mother's post-mortem was conducted. The mother was found to have been pregnant. In the aftermath of this gory incident, the responsibility for Bichhiya's future was assumed by the district level JB committee. After her physical recovery, she was enrolled in a school. Her medical expenses were taken care of by the block level JB committee.

• As recounted to one of the evaluators

A girl and a boy from different castes were in love with each other. Although they were in favour of getting married, their families were against it due to the inter-caste nature of their bond. The situation was further complicated by the girl having become pregnant. Clearly, if the marriage did not take place,

life would become difficult, especially for the girl, to get married to someone else. The boy's resolve to marry her had already weakened under pressure from his family. This is when JB stepped in by actively persuading both of them to run away from their homes (apparently the boy had to be "strongly" persuaded) and get married. Finally, the couple did so and tied the knot in the presence of *panchayat* level JB and a member of the police. Later, both the families accepted their marriage.

• **Nala (Based on reports in *Baha*, February - March and April - May, 1996)**

A five year old "*Harijan*" girl was raped. Upon getting this news the district level JB and other *Saksharta Samiti* officials visited the girl's house to ascertain the situation first hand. The girl was horribly cut up and had not received adequate medical attention. The father informed of a complaint he had filed at the Nala police station. After checking that a proper complaint had indeed been filed at the Nala police station, JB collected contributions totalling Rs. 1200 for the girl's medical treatment and the father was directed to take her to Jamtara hospital. The lady doctor at Jamtara hospital assessed the girl's condition as extremely grave, recommending that she be treated at Dhanbad hospital. Dhanbad hospital too found the case difficult to handle so the father returned to his village, having spent most of the money given to him by JB. Investigating the matter further, JB found that the lady doctor's report at Jamtara was not neutral. She had attempted to diffuse the case by not accurately documenting the girl's serious condition in her report. As a consequence, it was difficult to file a strong case against the alleged rapist. Angered by what they saw as her complicity, and more so since the doctor happened to be a woman, JB filed a complaint with the Deputy Commissioner (DC) to make the following demands: a) that the district medical board examine the girl's condition, b) she be given proper medical attention, and c) an investigation and judicial procedure be initiated. Meanwhile, JB surrounded the alleged assailant's house and launched protest rallies demanding his life imprisonment. Outrage was also expressed at the doctor for underplaying the gravity of the girl's injuries. When the young man surrendered himself, he was paraded half-naked through the streets, his face blackened, while some women are reported to have spat and splattered urine on him.

In large measure due to JB's activism, the young man was ultimately found guilty and sent to jail but did not receive life-imprisonment. From the jail he has apparently threatened to seek revenge, upon his release, on some key JB leaders who had led the protests.

CAMPAIGN AGAINST ARRACK⁹ CONSUMPTION

Jharkhand Mukti Morcha's leader, Shibu Soren (an ex-member of parliament), had in the past attempted to address the problem of arrack abuse among the *Adivasi* population but had met with little success. In fact, this is one of the important reasons attributed to his loss in the elections. When the arrack issue was taken up under literacy's wing in the later stages of the PLC, a meeting of some politicians and literacy volunteers (including JB) was called at the district level. It was decided to approach the problem in two ways. First, a district-wide environment building campaign was launched with the help of all the literacy volunteers. Their objective was to paint slogans given to them from the district and block levels, including their own, on as many walls as possible in the villages. As a conscious decision, no other dialogue took place with the people

themselves, just the slogans were painted on a mass scale. Second, a decision was reached that JB would become a central protagonist in the fight against alcoholism while other literacy volunteers would play a supporting role. Several reasons are offered for this. A noteworthy characteristic of the village-level arrack trade in Dumka is that its makers and vendors are mostly women while the consumers are predominantly men. This situation has contributed to problems, both at the family and the larger society's level. JB's main concern with alcohol-related family problems has to do with domestic violence against women and children and the diversion of scarce resources toward unproductive ends. At the broader societal level, the concern is with the harassment and sexual exploitation of women arrack vendors.

On June 30, 1997, JB organised a torch (*mashaal*) rally in which 2000 women from all over the district participated by shouting slogans and holding posters¹⁰. After a round of Dumka town, some of it in the rain which extinguished the torches, a *sammelan* of about three hours was held into the night. At the *sammelan* several strategies were agreed upon: i) similar events at the block and *panchayat* levels; ii) a village-wise survey to learn about women's involvement in the preparation and selling of arrack and to ask them to suggest income-generating alternatives; iii) *panchayat*-wise meetings in small groups with only those women directly involved in the arrack trade, encouraging them to give it up. The alternatives being explored, include, making machines available to a group of women to speed up the process of making plates, bowls, and so on, from *saal* leaves (usually made manually). This group would be formed in any village in which there were quite a few women arrack makers/vendors. Another idea was to offer labour cards to enable women to find work in government projects. Still others called for assistance to start micro-enterprises around pickle, *papaad*, candles, soap, and so on. Some women have, apparently, withdrawn from the arrack trade directly as a result of anxiety generated by the survey itself.

The *sammelans*, slogan-writing drives, and surveys launched a district-wide campaign against the consumption of arrack while also establishing the central role accorded to JB. At the district administration's level, instructions were said to have been given from the top to all the BDOs and police stations to raid road-side liquor vending

points in an effort to create a climate of fear and wrong-doing around this trade. Other instructions were given to make it difficult for people under the influence of alcohol, to get their requests, petitions, schemes, etc., be taken care of in the various government offices. The campaign against arrack has several difficulties to overcome. Many women earn a significant income from this trade. Arrack consumption is seen to have become an integral part of *Adivasi* culture (mostly excluding those of Christian faith). Men who consume arrack or benefit from the trade constitute a powerful lobby that has attempted to malign the anti-liquor activities of the JB. One of the informal incentives that has been voiced by the ZSS to encourage people to give up arrack is the announcement that any village that rids itself of arrack consumption would have its proposed development schemes implemented rapidly.

GENDER SENSITIZATION AMONG MEN

The JB movement has challenged many long-held stereotypes of women's abilities. Although this issue was not explored in-depth with men, informal conversations with a few of them do suggest heightened respect for women overall. It is clear that in practice and as a consequence in people's psyche, if there is any social category that is at the center of the literacy campaigns, it is "women" (through JB). One learns from women that many men who earlier may have defined the sphere of women's roles in and around the home, are now more accepting and even appreciative of their literacy linked activities away from home. Women's membership in a *Didi Bank* has been known to meet the family's emergency needs for money. Their ability to repair hand-pumps has brought immediate benefits to the entire village, besides carving a trans-boundary role for women (i.e., a role which would not normally fall under the purview of women's activities). Women's cycle rallies, marches, and sporting events attract a lot of general attention. The sight of women playing in sporting gear (shorts and T-shirt) is noticed on Dumka's landscape. Put together, these and other factors are contributing to a shifting terrain of male understandings of what women can, cannot, and should not do.

Greater confidence in and respect for women is also supported by the reported nature of the *Janata Darbar*, an open meeting of people directly with the Deputy Commissioner (DC). *Janata Darbars* are reported to be held twice weekly on Mondays and Fridays. The ZSS core group members have observed that at these meetings attended by around 200 people on average, 75% are women. Of the women, half of them, it has been claimed, come on their own and the other half are accompanied by men. But these men choose to wait outside the meeting with the idea that their concern would receive greater attention if expressed by the women. In a context in which, not too long ago, people had trepidation about an audience with the DC, for men to put their women forward indicates on the one hand, greater confidence in women, and on the other, a feeling that the government system is more sensitised to requests expressed directly by women.

The women in the ZSS core group too noted a significant relaxation in male control between the TLC and the PLC phase in terms of being able to step out of their homes. It was also mentioned by one of the women,

During the TLC we did not have much involvement in shaping policies. Our ZSS, perhaps, did not have confidence that a woman can also give a better opinion, that women can also think seriously about the campaign. Although we used to attend the meetings, we sat at the back and just listened. But today the situation is drastically different. There are four post-holders in the ZSS, including a woman. Today if any decision has to be taken at the policy level, we are necessarily called. First, women are asked what they think.

This indicates transformations that JB is bringing about, not only at the grassroots, but also within the ZSS.

The literacy movement in Dumka, to its credit, launched a women's movement through JB. JB's existence will, no doubt, further the cause of literacy. The changes introduced in women's lives have been at the personal, social, organizational, and institutional levels. The movement continues to change the mind-sets of women and to some degree men also, especially around what is possible and not possible for women to accomplish. Through the literacy campaigns, the JB of Dumka and other women have become capable teachers, learners, researchers, micro-bankers, implementers of all kinds

of projects, planners, deliverers of benefits to women from government schemes, socially conscientious people willing to fight for their rights, and last but not the least, sportswomen. This movement has already demonstrated its sustainable nature long after the TLC and PLC phases, benefiting not just the women but all of Dumka and perhaps, by example, other districts in the country.

LESSONS FOR SUSTAINABLE WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Sustaining women's empowerment processes sprouted through the literacy campaigns has been a major challenge in most districts of India. The JB of Dumka achieved this primarily through its internal dynamism, actively supported by the district administration at all levels, including a series of three committed DCs at the very top. JB's links to other women's movements has thus far been insignificant. Why did JB succeed in creating a sustainable women's movement on its own in sharp contrast to the experience from many other districts?

A gender-aware bureaucracy

Clearly, a mix of factors are responsible for JB's strength and sustainability. From the very beginning of the TLC, the then DC put women's empowerment squarely as a central focus of the campaign. Two successive DCs recognized the importance of women's centrality in ensuring the success of the campaigns and encouraged it with total commitment. Continuity of commitment and purpose was, thus, crucial. The deeply hierarchical nature of Indian bureaucracy ensured that the DCs' encouragement of women's agenda was taken seriously right down the hierarchy, quite possibly because the seemingly utter lack of women's power in almost every sphere, public or private, never posed any serious cause for concern. Who could have anticipated that all this would lead to a powerful women's movement? This is not to suggest that individuals with feminist leanings were not present within the bureaucracy -- in fact they definitely are. The lesson from the campaigns in Dumka is that the government bureaucracy's commitment to women's cause is vital at every level, from the very beginning and throughout the process.

Changes in administration, which frequently occur at the top brass, need to consciously maintain a continuity of general objectives such as women's empowerment. In this context, a gender-sensitization of the ZSS at the beginning and at specific intervals could go a long way. The idea that the campaigns' overall success is closely intertwined with women's empowerment and participation must become apparent at all levels.

A space exclusively for women's participation

Through JB, a formal space for women's participation and empowerment was created. To some extent this prevented women's participation in unreserved spaces. However, it is only a matter of time before the empowerment generated through interaction in an exclusive space spills into other openly contested arenas. Literacy campaigns do not always consciously create a space solely for women's participation. Given the deep-rooted patterns of male-female power dynamics and interaction, exclusive spaces for women invite their participation and nurture individual, group, community, and regional empowerment processes. JB created such a space at all levels from the bottom-up -- from village to *panchayat* to block to district. Furthermore, JB members emerged through a process of selection and election at all, but the district level. Soon, however, the JB committee at the district level would also have to succumb to democratic election initiatives from below. Thus, the JB case would not only recommend an exclusive space for women, but also that its structure grow from below at all levels through an election/selection process that grants its members legitimacy and exacts accountability.

Range of activities with tangible benefits

Nothing acts as a catalyst as immediate and tangible benefits. The rich and expanding portfolio of JB activities may have concretely benefited and emotionally touched a chord with practically every woman and girl in Dumka. That is a very significant achievement. In comparison to immediate gains, assurances of long-term benefits are weak in enthusing people's participation. JB creatively and aggressively took advantage of the plethora of Government of India schemes that are seldom known by individuals, and if known, can hardly be tapped due to the bureaucratic procedures involved. Economic self-reliance was promoted through micro savings and credit among women. Besides providing tangible benefits, at a psycho-social level many stereotypical roles and images of women were shattered through women's sports, bicycle rallies, hand-pump repair, and so on. Examples of JB's activism to bring justice to perpetrators of crimes against girls and women was reported widely in newspapers, instilling collective confidence in the growing movement. The most recent battle against alcohol abuse and its associated problems faced by women, must further contribute to a sense of belonging to JB. Campaigns, thus, need to pay attention to immediate and long-term benefits that are material and psycho-social. Encouraging their delivery through women's structures/spaces, will strengthen the sustainability of women's empowerment.

To conclude, it needs to be emphasised that JB was to a large extent a self-created and self-sustained women's movement nurtured by a government bureaucracy. That this is indeed possible is in itself an eye-opener since the state is generally positioned in opposition to progressive forces of social change. When the state provides an umbrella for women's empowerment their enthusiasm to create a movement, as was the case in Dumka, can be very forthcoming. However, the real test will come when the women's movement nurtured by the state takes up issues that may go against what the state sees as its own interests. But if the state is truly open to people's empowerment, as it seems to have been in Dumka through the TLC and PLC phases, it may also see its own interests in consonance with those of change agents such as JB. JB, for its part needs to walk a tight-rope – maintaining its credibility by continuing to work in an un-coopted fashion with the state, without compromising its ideals and aims. The sisters have awoken in Dumka and

show promise to never sleep again. The Indian women's movement(s) has another partner to celebrate, support, and learn from.

NOTES

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² This article is based on a PLC evaluation report (Kothari *et al.*, 1997).

³ Administratively, Dumka district is hierarchically divided into 14 blocks, 282 *panchayats*, and 4105 villages. A sizable population, over 45%, is tribal (mostly Santhali speaking).

⁴ *Adivasi* implies indigenous or tribal peoples. The term is preferred throughout since it precisely translates as 'age-old-inhabitants,' avoiding the ambiguity in 'indigenous' and the pejorative connotations of 'tribal.'

⁵ Key Resource Persons (KRPs) train Master Trainers (MTs) who then train Voluntary Teachers (VTs) who finally teach the non/neo-literates.

⁶ The *Mahila Saksharta Samiti* was also known as Mahila Cell in popular parlance.

⁷ At the time of the evaluation, the exchange rate was approximately Rs. 38 to a US\$.

⁸ JB has also undertaken a survey of child labour and made an attempt to start *Didi Banks* among their mothers.

⁹ Arrack is locally brewed alcoholic beverages.

¹⁰ June 30 commemorates the Santhal *Hool* of 1855, an uprising against the British state and local landlords. The *Hool* began in July, 1855, led by Sido Majhi, who was later betrayed to the British in August, later that year. His brother, Kanhu Majhi, took over as leader and was captured in December, 1855. Both Sido and Kanhu are venerated as heroes and martyrs in the Santhal region.

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