

SHRISTI, ORISSA

Shristi is an evolving organization with ample substance and a treasure trove of doable ideas for the next generation. The organization was started and promoted by three graduates of the Institute of Rural Management, Anand with a great deal of experience among themselves in practising and researching rural development.

Over the years, the organization has been able to create its niche in the development sector. The thematic focus on micro-finance and access to preventive health practices, livelihood and micro-enterprise have evolved as the thrust areas for impacting change in the villages of Orissa. Creativity and efficiency is considered as the benchmark of its staff members. A group of distinguished advisors, drawn from academia, rural development and senior citizens, guide the organization.

“In the operational areas of Shristi – in tribal dominated Keonjhar and adjoining Dhenkanal district of Orissa – a majority of the rural population lives in abysmal poverty with a lack of livelihood options and do not have access to formal credit systems,” says Ranjan Mahapatra, executive director of Shristi.

What followed was the introduction of an innovative micro-finance model¹ by Shristi to enhance access to easy credit. In addition to this, it also expanded its activities to facilitate access to health practices.

During its five-year existence, the organization has been able to develop and promote democratized and viable village and gram

panchayat-level institutions and groups, which are truly owned, controlled and managed by its members. The uniqueness of Shristi’s approach in building people’s or community organizations lies in its belief and promotion of self-reliance and democratic governance. While building people’s institutions like women self-help cooperatives, farmers’ groups and forest protection groups, Shristi emphasizes participation and decision making by the members of these groups and ensures their partaking in the management of the institution. Shristi has promoted the first breed of women self-help cooperatives in Keonjhar and Dhenkanal districts of Orissa by taking advantage of the new self-help cooperative act of 2001 of the state. There is now a conducive environment for replication of women’s self-help cooperatives in other parts of Orissa.

The organization is guided by the core belief of infusion and diffusion of knowledge and technology for the holistic development of society. Shristi has been able to introduce and ensure the adoption of innovative, locally relevant, food security technologies like rice ratooning, multi-tier paddy cultivation, use of bio-pesticides and organic manures, etc. Simple technologies, which bring about improvements to the quality of life and livelihoods of the impoverished are nurtured and practised by all the staff members. The rice ratooning (a method to get a second crop from stubble which is popularly known as lock lodge rice ratooning) and tall rice-cum-dwarf rice



Rice ratooning demonstration in Keonjhar



Training program of women self-help cooperatives at Keonjhar



Juanga and Bhuyan tribals at the regenerated forest in Dinabandhupur, Keonjhar

cultivation system help to double the return from the same piece of land. Both the practices are being popularized among the farmer families in Keonjhar and Dhenkanal.

In-depth understanding of development and related issues precede all the interventions of the organization, and thus Shristi also participates in relevant studies and research that have a bearing in impacting positive outcomes in the life and livelihood of the poor. Shristi is the nodal agency for the scouting, documentation and dissemination of green grassroots technologies on behalf of the National Innovation Foundation (NIF), an independent body under the department of science and technology, government of India.

In keeping with this practice, Shristi has ventured into a comprehensive study of the Baitarani River Basin. This area has historically been neglected from the mainstream discourse of development projects. It comprises a highly marginalized community of tribals with alarmingly high levels of poverty and low levels of agricultural productivity. In addition to this, there are other complex issues of displacement and rudimentary agricultural practices.

The study – supported by the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust with a grant of Rs 4.07 million – is an effort

by the organization to bring about the durable and balanced development of this river basin in Orissa. The idea of commissioning a river basin study and developing a holistic plan has been appreciated by many because of its unique approach of triggering a basin-level dialogue among stakeholders. It also seeks to identify issues and problems in the basin, frame possible strategies to address them while keeping in mind the needs and aspirations of the local people and more importantly stimulating all the stakeholders into unleashing the full potential of the Baitarani River Basin for the next generation.

Networking and alliance building to disseminate these ideas, approaches and models are key areas of interest to Shristi. There have been very cordial and effective collaborations and partnerships with many NGOs, research institutions and government departments; and in addition to this, Shristi has been able to forge effective working relationships with national and international donors, government departments and research institutions.

¹ Known as the 'kothi ghar' model, meaning the 'common village storage house', it involves the formation and promotion of women cooperatives at the panchayat level.