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PRA in Malda district, West Bengal: a report of a training workshop for ActionAid India and Tagore Society for Rural Development

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· Introduction

ActionAid India and the Tagore Society for Rural Development are partners in a rural development project in the Malda District of West Bengal. Both felt that they needed to understand the villages in the project area from the villagers' perspective. This, it was hoped, would lead to plans in which the client group had participated. A PRA training exercise was organised which would cover 5 days (10-14 Dec 1990) by Thomas Joseph (Northern India, Field Director, ActionAid). Sam Joseph (ActionAid) was invited to conduct the training. Mr B C Chatterjee, the Director of Tagore Society, was personally involved in the training as a participant. Another NGO, the Tajmahal Society, sent three of their senior staff for this training.

The participants camped at the project base in Tapan. The training followed a pattern of discussion, practice and reflection. First, a method was discussed at the base. Then the participants divided into teams with the assignment to attempt specific methods. The teams visited selected villages and attempted the methods. They then met again at the project base, prepared their information on large sheets and present their reports to the entire group. Their presentations emphasised both the process and content.

This report is an English translation of presentations in Hindi/Bengali which were taped concurrently. The exercise started at village Chanduhati on the first day. However, the village was changed to Kharamdanga from the second day onwards. After the completion of the training, the Tagore Society staff have

used PRA methods to cover all their programme villages.

· Day one

The participants were welcomed and then introduced to PRA with an exercise on the classification of information - what are the differences between fact, opinion, hearsay, inference, assumption. It was also emphasised that villagers are experts in survival, and so different systems in villages such as soil, water, topography, cropping patterns, trees, animals, food-flow, labour-flow, credit-flow, knowledge, social organisation need to be known to understand a village. To know the village quickly, the first PRA techniques to be used are social maps, resource maps, transects and time-lines. The participants divided into 3 groups (social, resource and time-line) and then visited Chanduhati village in the evening.

· Day two

Social and resource maps

One group called on an elderly person and said they had come to learn about the village as a part of the training. Three more persons were also asked to help. It was explained that the team were ignorant of the village, and so needed help to draw a map. The house where the group was sitting was at first plotted on the sheet and then the neighbouring houses were plotted with names and members of households and then subsequently the road (east-west), ponds, cultivated land, burial ground, mosque, co-op society, etc. were shown. The local people also marked the

house/location of the quack doctor, panchayat member, maulvi, CHG, tube-well, ring-well, grocery shop etc. There was no school except an NFE centre run by TSRD. Electric poles were present without connections. The position of the village was located in reference to metalled road and surrounding villages. All the information was first obtained from one informant and then confirmed by other villagers present. The team left the place after thanking the informants. It was noted that:

- While locating the tube-wells, some of the outsiders drew attention to some locations which were ignored by the informants, and so these team members were requested by the trainers to be silent.
- At first they started with one elderly person who was not able to provide the information. When the junior members aged 25-30 came, the interview ran smoothly.
- The informants were Muslims, and so were not at first readily responding to the questions relating to the tribals. After 2 or 3 requests they gave the replies.
- When asked about the availability of doctor/health worker etc, they said 'no'. After some delay, they said in a lighter tone that there was one CGH, implying that the usefulness and impression of the CGH were not good.
- For education the NFE centre was all that was referred to. After repeating the question 2 or 3 times it came out that there was one primary school just outside the boundary of the village.

One informant led the group to the next village. During collection of information, the group realised this but as it was not possible to stop the information gathering, they kept on. After some time, one of the informants said that it would have been better had you come

during the day. On this suggestion, the team were able to move back to the site.

At Chanduhati the team started with 3 or 4 informants and asked them to help draw the outline of the village. The informants could not agree. Then the team started drawing from the house where they were sitting. The informants were Muslims and scheduled caste. While drawing the tribal area, they were found to be less interested though they were well aware. The team collected information on ponds, tube-wells, ring-wells, crops, etc. No land except areas adjacent to the ponds is cultivated for vegetables. Generally, one leading informant was replying, while the others were nodding approvingly. After the entire drawing was over, the team showed this to the villagers for their confirmation.

In another mapping exercise the team was helped by a boy of Class IX, who did the drawing. Other villagers were checking and if necessary rectifying the locations. The place where they sat was located at first, then ponds, tube-wells, ground-wells, etc. The facilities not available within the villages were also found out from the villagers.

The key lessons arising during discussions from this exercise were:

- the team asked no questions about the nature of the ownership of the ponds, names of cultivators in winter, availability of pumpset;
- if some facilities are not available in the village, questions may be asked about where and how local people could avail of them;
- one should start with the place of sitting, not with the village boundary; and,
- a copy of the map combining the two resource maps should be handed over to the village (display at NFE/panchayat).

Figure 28. Social map of Kharamdanga village

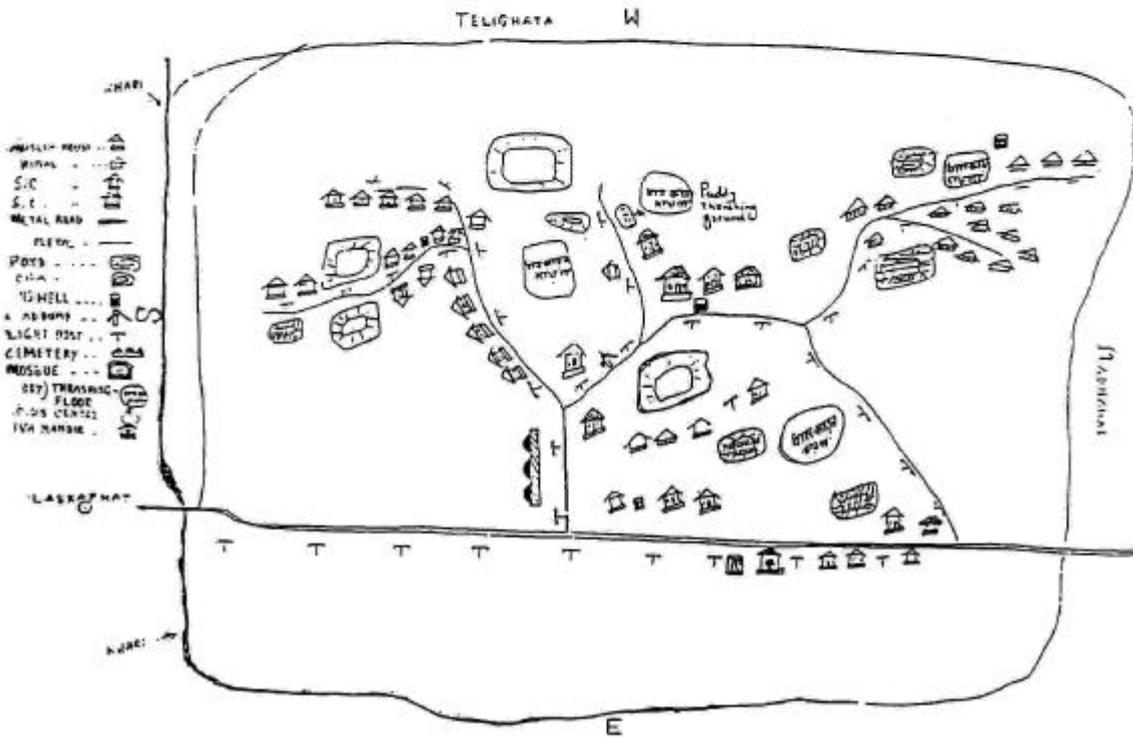
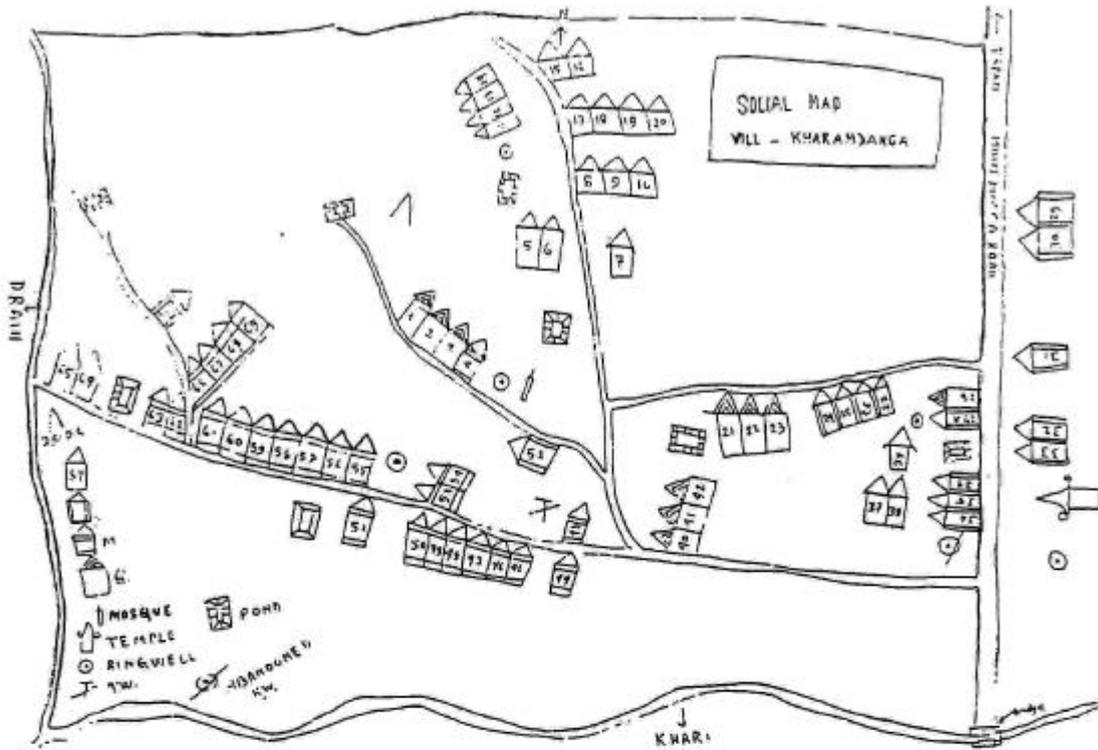
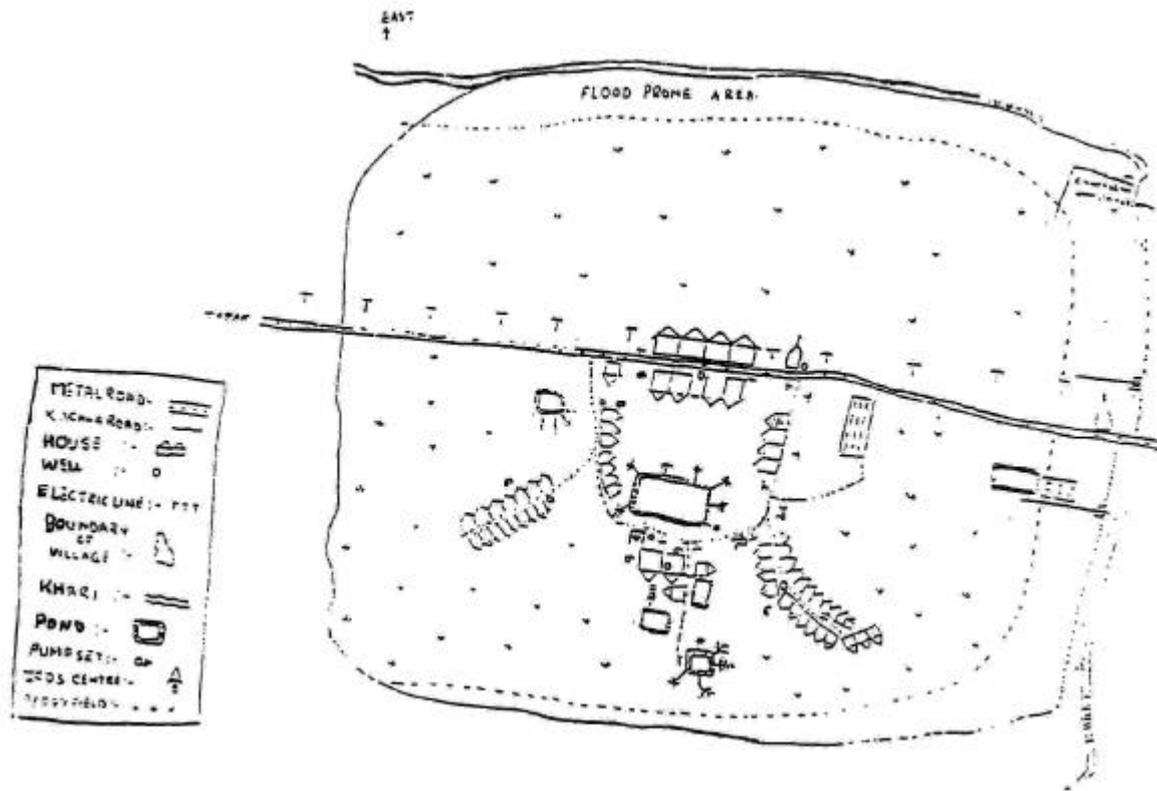


Figure 29. Resource map of Kharamdanga village

Figure 30. Map of village of Kharamdanga



• Day three

Social and resource maps

Better social maps were produced on the third day, in which all households were identified and named (Figure 28). A second social map was drawn by an informant, who at first plotted his house, and then the house was located in reference to the pucca road. The team then went to an adivasi family to draw a resource map. The drawing was done by the informant whose choice of scale meant that two pieces of chart paper had to be added to accommodate the map (Figure 29). To cross-check findings, another resource map was drawn by informants from scheduled castes. A

NFE teacher (from the next village) drew the map starting from the house where the interview took place (Figure 30).

A time-line was produced during an interview with an informant of 105 years of age (Figure 31). To make this time line better, it was agreed that indirect questions should be asked to avoid past glorification, and approximate dates with each event given.

On the third day some of the groups could not complete the field tasks for want of informants who were away for their 'hat' (weekly market). The group was reminded that embracing-error and flexibility are central parts of PRA.

Figure 31. Time line fro Kharamdanga village

- 1930 - 1940
- 10-12 families
 - 1 mon (40 kg) rice available
 - Rainfall up to expectation
 - Single crop
 - Law and order better
 - Famine - government and Zamindar distributed money and rice respectively
 - Epidemic after famine - many people died
 - 1/2 mon rice to be given back in place of 1 mon to the Mahajan (hoarder)
 - There was gunje (big market). They used to carry fish by boat, coconuts etc. from Dacca, rice from here
 - No bank. Money and all valuables kept in house
 - Dacoity took place once
 - No hat nearby. No caste bar
 - Marshy land full of wild tiger, jackals etc.
 - Bullock carts used for transport
 - Torch used at night
 - Water from ponds used for drinking
 - Treatment from fakir available
 - Dowry to be paid for marrying a girl
 - Women folk used to wear Halmu, men to wear lungi. No use of tailored dress
- 1941 - 1950
- Price of rice rose from Rs 1.25 to Rs 20. It created mass unrest which ultimately turned to freedom movement
 - Cycle came to village after independence
 - Dug well introduced
- 1951 - 1960
- Tailor made dress introduced
 - Barpan came into existence
- 1961 - 1975
- Change in cultivation, change in festivals and food habits
 - Exchange of assets after Bangladesh war
 - Fishermen, potters in community withered away
 - Rise in population
- 1976 - 1990
- Abolition of purdah (veil) in Muslim community
 - Havoc + loss due to flood
 - Change in consumable items
 - Polygamy started
 - Deterioration of law and order
 - Absence of mental peace

• Day four

Transects

One group located an informant willing to accompany them for the entire process. Even though they started from the north, eventually their transect was from west to east. The findings are recorded in Figure 32. The second transect was only partly completed as the informant was in a hurry to go to the market.

Seasonal analyses

This exercise with a group of 4 or 5 women started with cultivation. Once again we could not complete this exercise, as the women became busy with their household chores (Figure 33). This diagram could have been bettered by drawing a continuous line for one crop from sowing to harvesting; using separate lines for each variety of fodder, fuel etc; and identifying the festivals, special occasions, etc

for verification of the month; a suitable picture could be drawn above each month; each problem should be thoroughly investigated before going to the next. Coming out in the course discussion were major problems, including unemployment, gender-based wage differences, animal diseases, human diseases in the rainy season, and food availability; and the opportunity for double cropping.

Wealth ranking

The informant was a housewife. After sometime her husband replaced her. As he had to go elsewhere, another informant was brought in. Cards were prepared with one name per card, the names having been derived from social map. However, 20 names could not be identified. The informant arranged cards in many groups but the team chose to reduce number of groups. On reflection, it was felt that informants should be permitted to choose as many groups as they like.

Figure 32. Transect of Kharamdanga

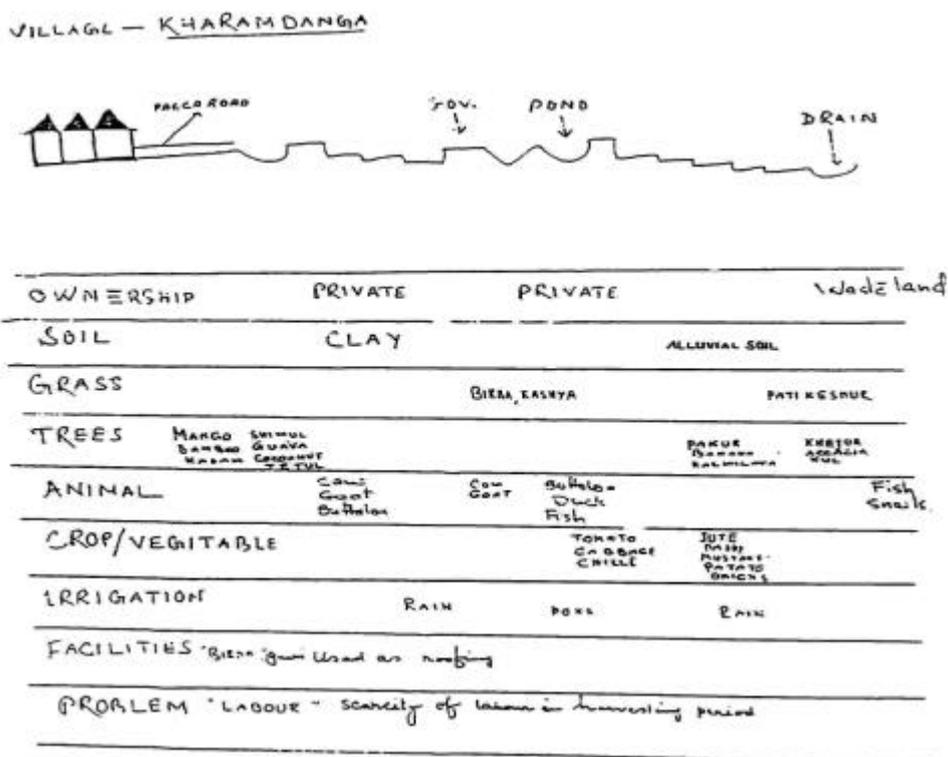
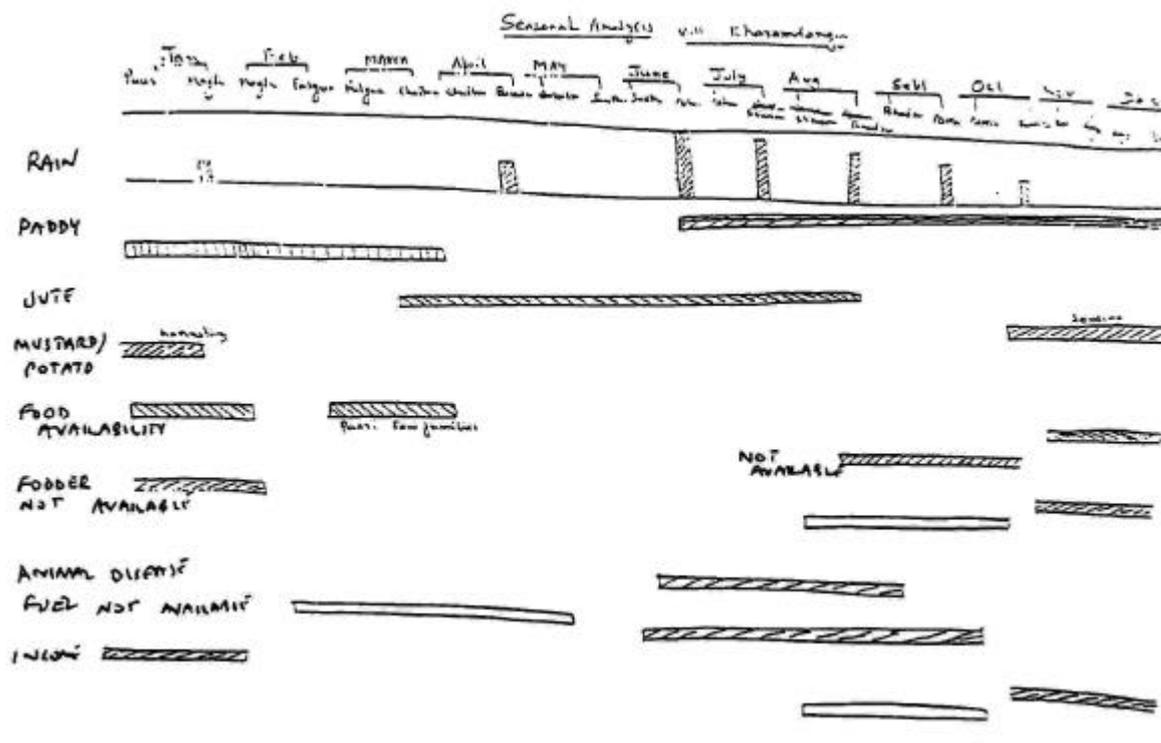


Figure 33. Seasonal analysis of crops, animals, fuel and income in Kharamdanga



• Day five

Wealth ranking

One team went to a house where many people assembled, but the wealth ranking did not work. After abandoning that interview, the team selected a separate informant. The justifications were also noted before putting each villager into a group. The informant was well-off and aged around 45. He could not recognise 5 names. Cross-checking was made. The entire exercise took 30 minutes. The informant's name was included in the ranking, but it was subsequently felt that this should be avoided.

Another team went to a tribal house where there were three persons. One person went out. 63 out of 73 names were recognised. During grouping, land holding and other assets were noted by the team. Questions were asked "why is this family being placed in this group/category?". Some details like number of members, land holding, etc. may be included.

Social organisation

One group went to the house of a scheduled tribe, to discuss social organisation through the use of chapati diagrams. The informant called two others to join him (one SC and one ST). The team intended to use chalk (for circles) on the ground used for threshing paddy. The informants were very articulate and considerable information was discovered about conflict resolution in the village and the different options open to different groups. When there are disputes, for arbitration STs go to Moral (Chieftain) and SCs to Hiralal Chowdhury, general castes to Natai Babu, Muslims to Tamijuddin (who is Panchayat member as well). When different parties are involved Netai Babu holds the highest authority and then Tamijuddin and after that Hiralal; ST Moral not so much. But the group of women informants put Natai Babu and Tamijuddin at par. Mahila Samity was not mentioned by the male group. Usually all disputes are settled within the village (Figure 34). In the place of circles (chapatis), marks (out of 10) can be utilised. Distance represents usefulness of the institution.

Figure 34. Venn diagram of social organisation

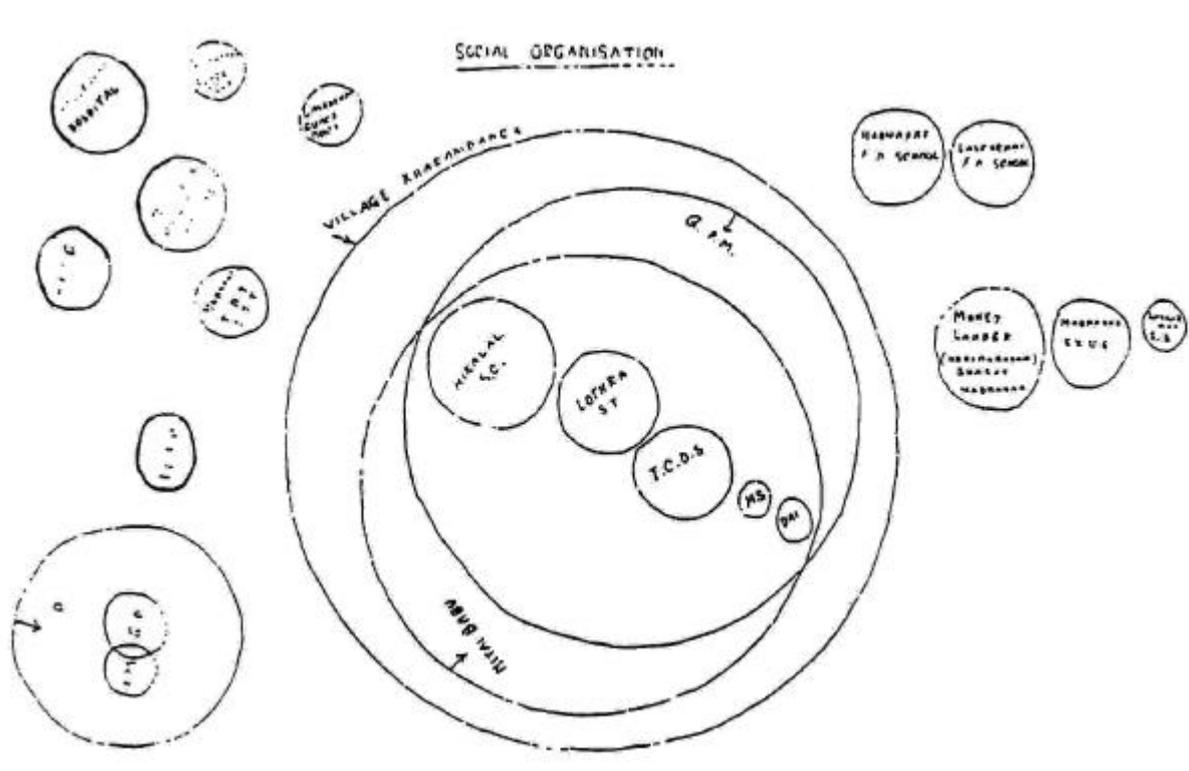


Figure 35. Seasonal analysis of crops, employment opportunities income, expenditure and credit of a scheduled tribe farmer. Note horizontal scales differ between top and bottom sections

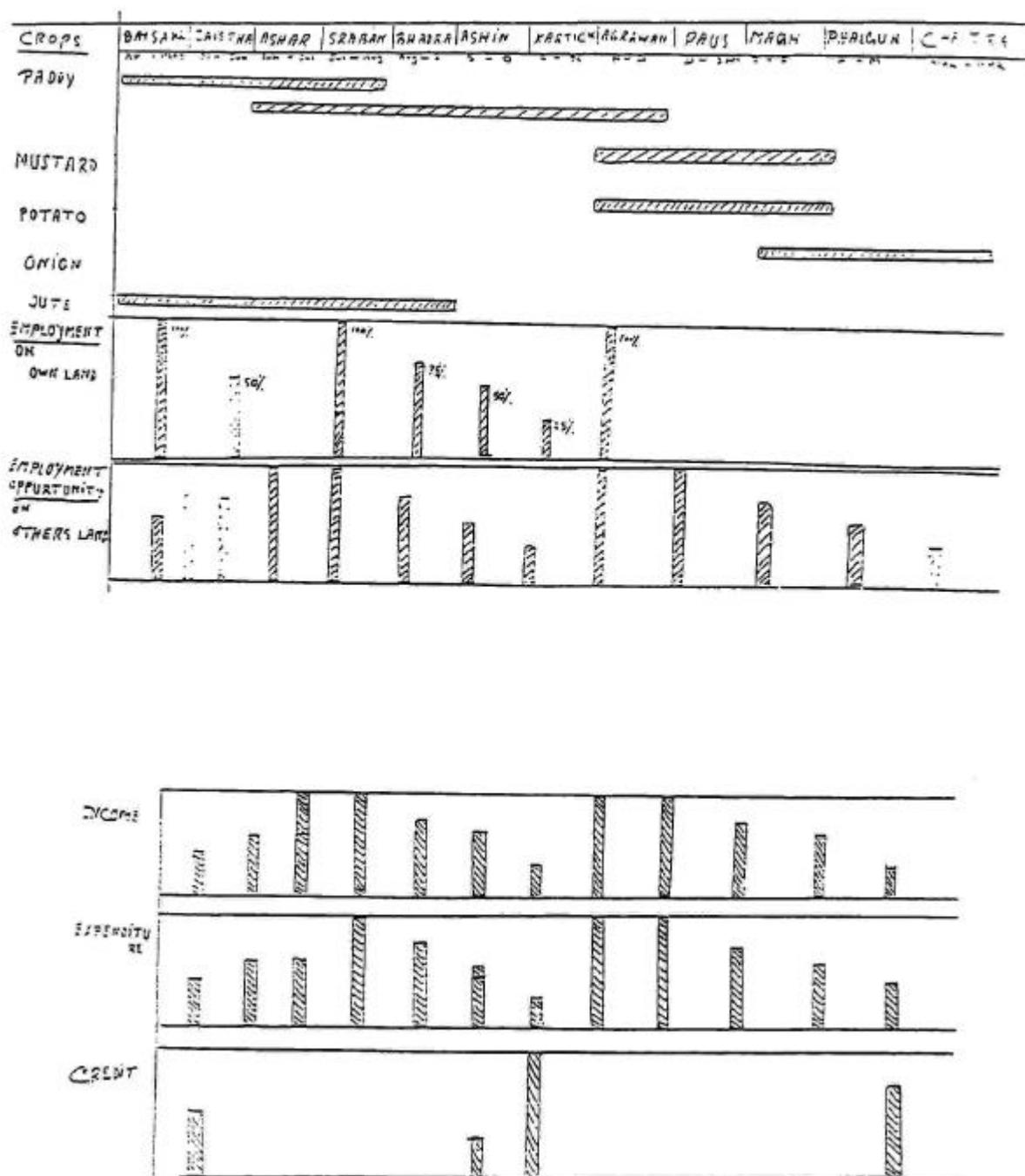


Figure 36. Seasonal analysis of crops, labour income, fodder availability and purchasing, and happiness and unhappiness

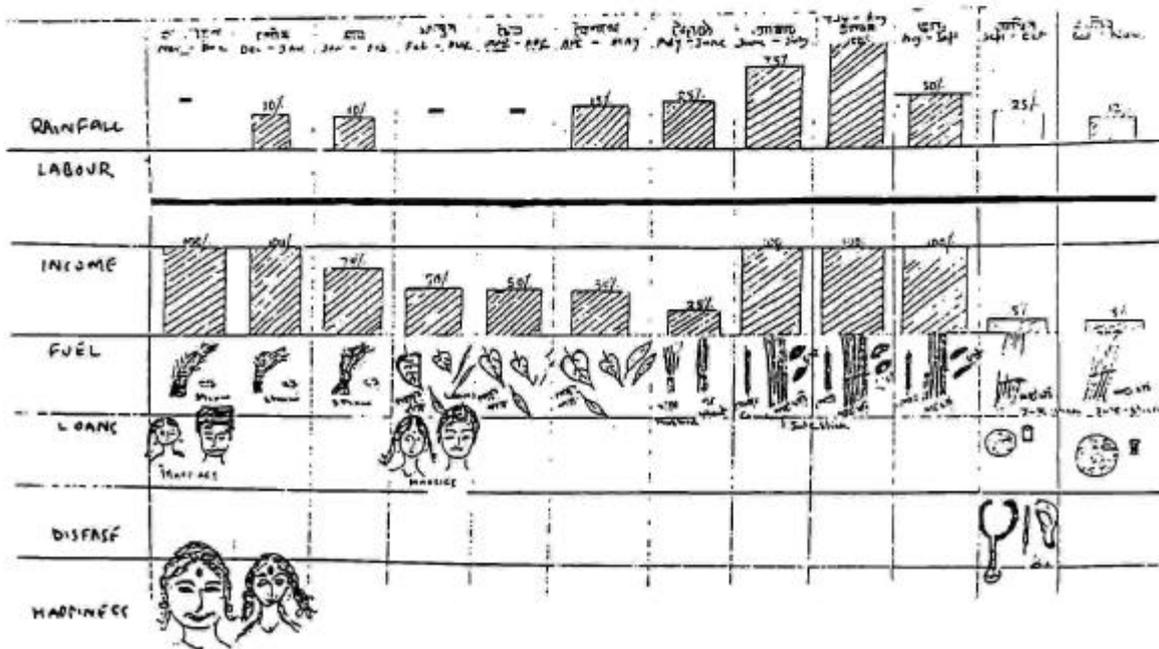
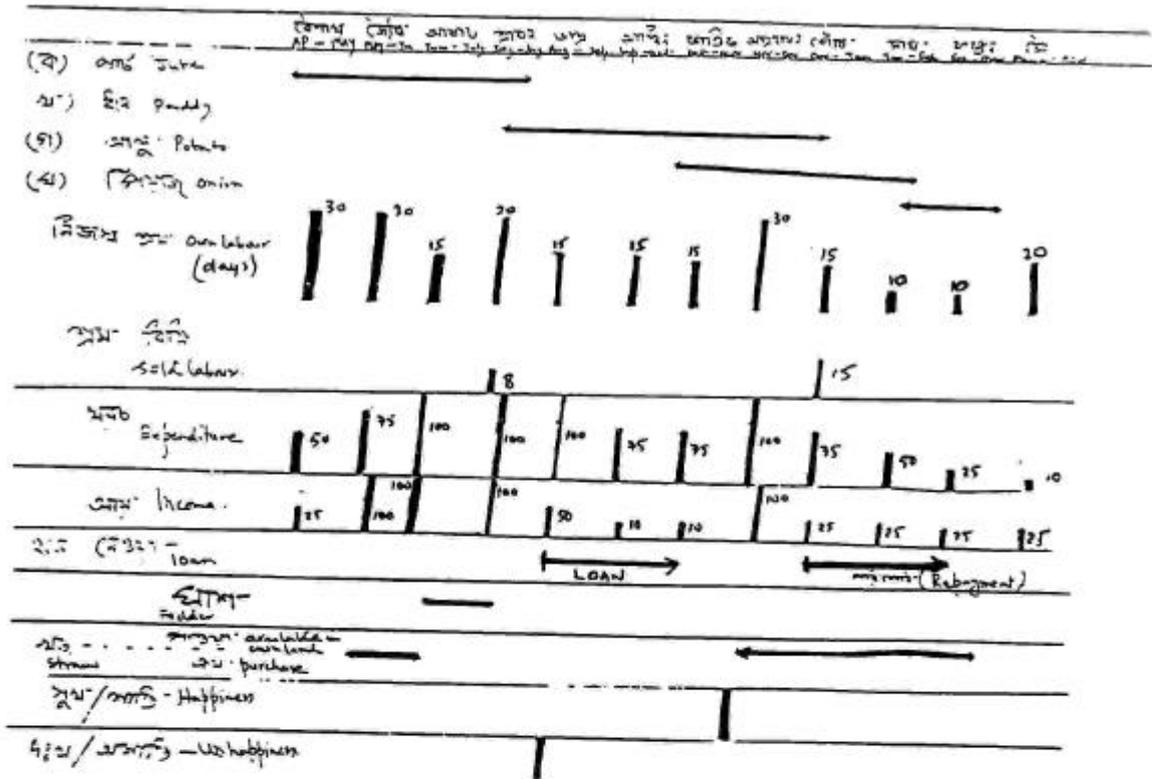
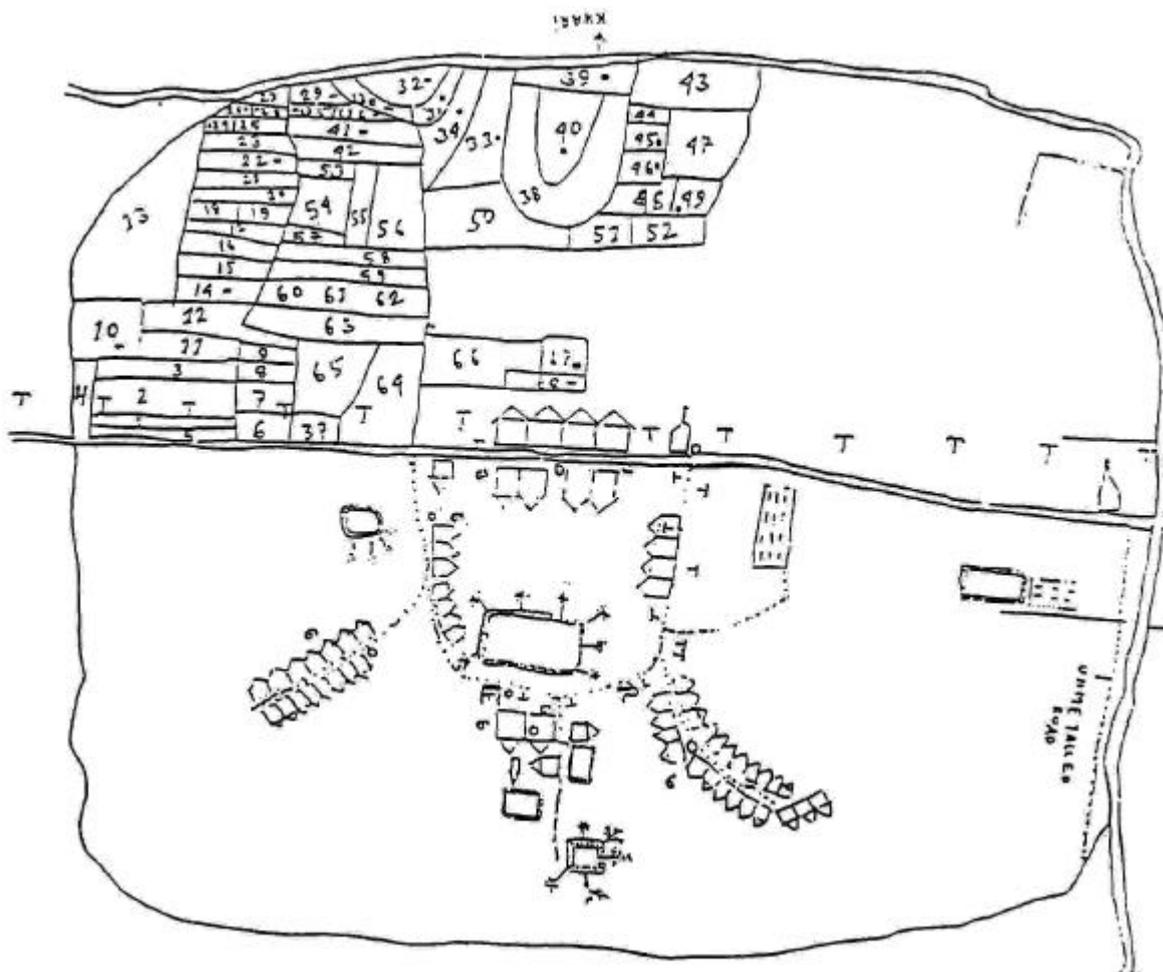


Figure 37. Seasonal analysis by women of Kharamdanga

Figure 39. Village field map of Kharamdanga



Seasonal analysis

One group went to a ST family having 23 working members who work in the fields of others. Bengali months were known to them. The team made use of the technique of breaking lengths of sticks to represent relative quantities of employment and income (Figure 35).

We noted an information gap in the month of Ashar (June-July), and it was agreed that the method is best when fully participatory. For this reason, the process of information collection should be within the villagers' sight. The gaps should be filled up with information from village. Only after that may our opinion be used.

Another seasonal interview began almost at dusk. The informant was working in a potato field. The team members helped him to bring a heavy battery (used for tape recorder) to his house situated next to his field. First a bench was brought for the team, but they asked him to bring a mat instead. The interview began with the questions "When did you sow potatoes?"; "When will you get potatoes?". The answers confirmed his knowledge of Bengali calendar months. One member was drawing the information on the ground while another was taking it down in his notebook. When it was too dark, the chart paper was utilised. At first he did not agree that he took a loan. On analysing the income and expenditure it was found that was greater expenditure in Bhadra and onwards. He then confirmed that he takes a loan for the above months. The

informant was fumbling in response to direct questions on income and expenditure (Figure 36). There was direct relationship between income-expenditure and happiness. We reflected that everybody would fumble when asked about one's income-expenditure. Hesitancy is normal.

Another group discussed seasonality with a group of Muslim women. Bengali months were known to them, which was confirmed by identifying months with different festivals (Id), activities (rain) etc. As women are not directly connected, the information on income collected was based on the perception of the women (like purchasing pattern of the man). Being responsible for fuel, informants provided considerable details for fuel (Figure 37). Additional information included family planning, rainfall, happiness, diseases, loans, times for marriage.

Preferences for fish

One group found a fish eating person and took him to a ST house. The interview started with questions like "How many and what type of fishes have you seen eaten or eaten?", etc. In the course of such informal discussion eight different fish were identified together with seven attributes. These were ranked in a matrix ranking exercise (Figure 38). This was a most important learning for our staff. There was clearly a need to plan to release a mix of fish, rather than focus on just high yielders.

Field mapping for ownership

One group focussed on land ownership by interviewing a group of informants. The panchayat member started with pencil from a corner of Resource Map. He proceeded after getting confirmation from another informant. To save time and space in resource map details, notes like names of share croppers, etc were taken separately by the team member. The final product was a detailed map of fields, locations and ownership (Figure 39).

Conclusions

ActionAid's relationship with TSRD and TM is for sustainable poverty alleviation. PRA is not only research. It is a strong weapon for

achieving the above. The principal methods that should be used are:

- Social Map - to locate the villagers, various organisations/institutions;
- Resource Map - to know the location of all the facilities available in and outside the village;
- Time-Line - to know which helps in understanding each other (villagers and project people);
- Wealth Ranking - 7-8 variables may be considered to find out the target group. It will also avoid confusion and misapprehension in the minds of the villagers;
- Social Organisation - to understand the interacting forces involved in village management;
- Transect - opportunities/difficulties are known. Possible and feasible are assessed;
- Field Mapping - land ownership and access are known; and,
- Seasonal analysis/Preference ranking/Flow chart - very useful if collected through different cross-section.

In PRA all the information collated is taken to village and planning emerges through their involvement. The information is open, not closed and this makes it most potent.

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NOTES

The participants of the workshop were:

B C Chatterjee, Kalipada Haldar, Aparna Saha, Sadhana Mandal, Bijali Das, Suren Biha, Habibur Rahaman, Hamidur Rahaman, Jiten Barman, Sachin Sarkar, Ramesh Chakraborty of Tagore Society for Rural Development (TSRD); A C Qadir, Mohim Molla and Trishna Jana of the Tajmahal Society (TMGBK); Sam Joseph, Thomas Joseph, Nilim Baruah, Meenu Vadera and Tarun Debnath of ActionAid.