



# AMAR ABHIGYATA-OUR EXPERIENCES

Stories of Internal Mentors of Assam





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*PRI - CBO Convergence project has given us an identity as an Internal Mentor and that has made all the difference in our life. From being a homemaker or an SHG member, to working in districts far away from our homes to empower other women to be independent and confident just like ourselves, we have all come a long way! Six years down the lane, we feel that it was all worth it!*

*- Internal mentors, Assam*

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Aajeevika  
National Rural Livelihoods Mission  
Government of India



Kudumbashree  
Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission  
Government of Kerala

## Kudumbashree - National Resource Organisation

### Foreward



Since its inception, the PRI-CBO convergence project of Kudumbashree NRO has aimed at creating a platform wherein the institutions of poor and the Gram Panchayats can collectively work together and tackle issues pertaining to development. Over the past few years, the project has burgeoned by combining the plethora of experiences from Kerala and our expertise acquired by working at grass-roots level in various Partner States.

We believe that good governance and active leadership from the community can steer them towards better participatory development. Therefore, the key component integral to the Convergence project is the capacity building of our various stakeholders, i.e. the Panchayati Raj Institutions, the Community Based Organizations and our community cadres. It is with this idea in mind that we have created an inclusive resource pool of active leaders from the community, known as the Local resource Groups (LRGs). Our LRGs are the foot soldiers who have worked extensively in their own Panchayats towards creating democratically safe spaces by increasing public accountability of state actors whilst empowering the community. Few of the LRGs have moved a step ahead and been promoted to Internal mentors working in different Districts of their State. The Internal mentors are selected from pilot locations to provide technical support to new cadres in expansion Districts. The selection of Internal mentors have not only ensured sustainability of the project but is also a true depiction of learning through shared experiences.

With immense support from ASRLM in the Convergence Project, what commenced with two Districts in the year 2014, has as of now expanded to 10 Districts in the State of Assam. The project has come a long way since then, so has the community cadres known as Internal Mentors. The year 2021 marks the seven years of Convergence project in the state of Assam. To celebrate the bond of mutual trust and understanding, we bring forward stories of these dynamic community leaders who chose the path less travelled with uncurbed bravery and utmost empathy.

Through this booklet we have tried to bring forward the journey of the first batch of 19 Internal mentors from Assam who have worked selflessly and reliantly with and for the betterment of their own community. I am hopeful that you will enjoy reading the stories as much as we enjoyed curating them.

*Harikishore S*  
26/5/21  
Harikishore S  
Executive Director





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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

- AAP - Annual Action Plan
- ASRLM - Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission
- BDO - Block Development Officer
- BMMU - Block Mission Management Unit
- BPM - Block Project Manager
- BC - Block Co-ordinator
- CBO - Community Based Organisation
- CLF - Cluster Level Federation
- CRP - Community Resource Persons
- DRDA - District Rural Development Agency
- DSR - Draft Status Report
- EAP - Entitlement Access Plan
- FC - Field Co-ordinator
- GP - Gram Panchayat
- GP2RP - Gram Panchayat Poverty Reduction Plan
- GPDP - Gram Panchayat Development Plan
- IM - Internal Mentor
- J E - Junior Engineer
- LRG - Local Resource Group
- MGNREGA - Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
- MoU - Memorandum of Understanding
- NRO - National Resource Organisation
- NRLM - National Rural Livelihood Mission
- NSAP - National Social Assistance Programme
- PAE - Participatory Assessment of Entitlements
- PRI - Panchayati Raj Institutions
- SBM - Swachh Bharat Mission
- SHG - Self Help Group
- SRLM - State Rural Livelihood Mission
- SSA - Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan
- VDC - Village Development Council
- VDCDP - Village Development Council Development Plan
- VO - Village Organization
- VOCC - Village Organisation Co-ordination Committee

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

The PRI-CBO convergence project envisages a mutually beneficial relationship between the Panchayati Raj Institutions and the Community Based Organisation in the process of implementing poverty eradication programmes.

Panchayati Raj institutions came to existence in 1993 through the 73rd constitutional amendment with a mandate of addressing rural poverty and ensuring social justice. The SHG network that has emerged alongside has been a huge social capital for the Gram Panchayat to work with for addressing poverty and ensuring social justice. Recognizing the need for an effective functional relationship between PRIs, especially Gram Panchayats and the SHGs of women, in particular the Village Organisations (VO), the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) and Ministry of Panchayat Raj (MoPR) came up with guidelines for increasing convergence between the institutions of local government and the organisations of poor.

Kudumbashree with its experience of strengthening local governance by converging PRI with SHG network in Kerala was mandated by MoRD to support states interested in implementing

similar model. This mandate led to setting up of Kudumbashree NRO. The PRI-CBO Convergence project is based National Resource Organisation on the premise that a synergy between both these institutions can be mutually beneficial in addressing the issue of poverty for the larger goal of socio-economic development of the village. Developing an entitlements-based perspectives for women's collectives is central to the strategy. To fulfil the objectives, certain set of tools and activities were also developed and to ensure effective convergence. The support placed on field are of two kind. One, Professionals from a development background and two, Mentors - Community Professionals who have had experience of developing the model in Kerala. NRO also developed the concept of two institutional platforms for convergence.

Kudumbashree NRO set out to attain this task in the year 2013. Since 2013, NRO has provided technical support to the states of Jharkhand, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tripura and it continues to provide technical support to the states of Assam, Tripura, Manipur, Mizoram and Uttar Pradesh with regard to the domain of PRI - CBO Convergence Project.





## PRI- CBO CONVERGENCE IN ASSAM

Kudumbashree NRO entered into an MoU with Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission with regard to the convergence project in the year 2014. It was the pilot phase of the Project and was initiated in two blocks - namely, Laharighat and Bajiagaon Blocks of Morigaon and Nagaon Districts respectively. The beginning phase of the Project had Mentors who were community resource persons from Kerala establishing relations with all stakeholders and selecting and handholding the first set of cadres-Local Resource Group. As the saying goes, the beginning wasn't easy. Laharighat being a minority block and a flood prone area was very underdeveloped and the Panchayats were equivalent to being non-existent. The Kerala Mentors toiled hard to build the capacity of LRGs to engage with their own Panchayats and work towards poverty reduction. The situation was such that the Mentors had to build a house to live and work in this Block. Similarly, in Bajiagaon there was a lot of political pressure which muddled with all the activities and processes involved in it. However with the hard-work and perseverance, these two Blocks were able to present phenomenal results with the development of the best set

of cadres who later joined as Internal Mentors. The participatory tools like Participatory Assessment of Entitlement (PAE), Entitlement Access Plan (EAP) and Gram Panchayat Poverty Reduction Plans (GP2PR) were also conducted in these Blocks which gave incredible results in the form of better access to entitlement and relationship with Panchayat.

The Project expanded to two other Blocks in Nagaon and Sonitpur in the second phase. In Nagaon it expanded to Barhampur and Lawkhowa Block and in Sonitpur, Dhekiajuli and Borcholla Block. The major activities remained the same, but the handholding support from the Kerala Mentors reduced and the Internal mentors took the centre-stage. Major achievement in this phase was the active role played by Village Organisation Coordination Committee (VOCC) in establishing efficient and effective relation with Panchayat and Departments. It spearheaded a range of innovative activities such as model kitchen garden initiative, female Literacy campaign, re-enrolment of drop out students, to name a few from the field which gave extraordinary results. The second phase also majorly focussed on

Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) and preparation of poverty reduction plans by the CBO fold, under which more than 3000 women were trained. A large number of demands from the SHG fold which were consolidated by the VOCC was submitted strategically during the three GPDP Gram Sabhas. A major portion of the work got incorporated and materialised on field such as demand for roads, culverts, community hall and even Children's park.

As a result, the Project underwent an expansion to 19 blocks of 10 Districts across Assam. 2 of these districts are under the purview of Schedule VI. Alongside the major activities, activities like infrastructure and resource mapping have already happened on field for integration to GPDP which resulted in coming up of demands from SHG fold in a more participatory and organized manner. An exclusive part of 2019-2020 GPDP plans were Social Development plans which have been accepted in Gram Sabhas and are in the process of getting incorporated as "No Cost / Low Cost" plans of the Panchayat.

## TIMELINE OF THE PROJECT IN ASSAM

Phase	No. Of Gram Panchayats	No. Of Blocks	No.of Districts	No.Of Kerala Mentors	No. Of LRGs	No. Of Internal Mentors
Phase 1 (January 2014- December 2016)	36	2	2	8	209	
Phase 2 (June 2017- June 2019)	51	4	2	4	284	36
Phase 3 (June 2019-March2021)	78 Panchayats and 3 VDCs	19	10	8	179	51



## WHO ARE INTERNAL MENTORS

To achieve the goals of the project, active individuals from the villages, known as Local Resource Groups (LRG) were selected in the pilot phase, who served as a crucial link between the institutions of PRI, line departments and CBO. The Convergence project in the pilot locations were initiated with the identification of LRGs who were selected based on their skill sets, aptitude and ability to relate their lived experiences in their engagements with the different stakeholders. In most of the cases the LRGs were either members or related to the SHG network. Being agents of change, series of theoretical and practical trainings were provided to the LRGs over the years, thereby enhancing their skills and outlook towards local development. They were also given constant handholding support by Mentors- Community Professionals from Kerala who were affiliated to Kudumbashree.

Well capacitated and motivated LRGs are then selected as Internal Mentors who takes up the responsibility to replicate the project activities in other Blocks and Districts within their own state. The internal mentors are a repository of

local knowledge that is utilised in new project areas. The Internal mentors mobilise the community for any activity of the project owing to the advantage of being a local. Internal Mentors are given the responsibility of one or two Gram Panchayat / Village Development Councils. Cadre identification, handholding and development is one of the major responsibility that lies with an Internal Mentor. As internal mentors, they strategise and plan the activities on field alongside the mentors and implement the plan on field along with LRGs. Moreover, the Internal mentors monitor the progress within a community and can take up the lead role in bringing about change in the community.

Currently Assam has a pool of 51 Internal Mentors from 6 Blocks. 19 of these Internal Mentors have been a part of the PRI-CBO Convergence project from 2014 and has been affiliated with the project right from the beginning in Assam. This booklet attempts to get a glimpse into the life and stories of those 19 Internal Mentors who have experience as IMs for more than 3 years.







“  
I realised that women  
are no less than men.  
Everyone deserves to be  
treated equally.”

Afiya Khatun

## Afiya Khatun

PRI-CBO Convergence project gave me an opportunity to step out of my home, to work for the society and to be financially independent. I am Afiya and I am from Bardubatup GP of Laharighat Block. My life had always been With in the four walls of my house, centered around my husband and children. Hailing from a flood affected area, the burden of household chores was more. I was a shy person who was very hesitant in speaking in front of a crowd. But this project changed everything around me for good. I started working in the project as an LRG member of Laharighat block. It was the first time after my marriage, that I stepped out of the house and that too, for a good cause.

When I started working as LRG, my son was only one year old and my family was not ready to function without me all the time. But I managed everything. In the beginning, it was difficult for me to address women and talk to them as an LRG. The mentor from Kerala used to sit with us and give us trainings before all the activities in field but she used to speak Hindi and the only language i knew was Assamese. However, the mentor used to take extra efforts to sit with me and clarify my doubts. The work was interesting and I became an informed person after working in the project. I came to



know what is happening outside my house. I started to interact with other LRGs, and I began to establish regular contact with our GP president and ward members. Even with regard to entitlements, I came to know about certain schemes only after joining the project as an LRG. My outlook transformed from thinking that Panchayat is a space not meant for women to becoming a person who mobilised hundreds of women to Panchayats for Gram Sabha.

After 3 years of working as an LRG, I got selected as an Internal mentor. The selection process was tough. But I was sure that I will

be able to crack it because of the trainings that I had received as an LRG. I got selected as an Internal mentor and got placed in Dhekiajuli Block, Sonitpur District. Leaving my family was difficult for me initially. I was not even sure how will I manage family and work together. But I knew that this is one good opportunity for me to grow personally and also to help the people around me. So I held tight and continued working in Dhekiajuli. I realised that this opportunity which I had got is one that many women aspire for. So I managed my family by visiting them whenever I got time. The work was different and difficult too. In field, each



activity and trainings were held one after the other. In between all of these, we were asked to collect, consolidate and compile all the data from field. I was managing more than 5 LRGs at a point in Dhekiajuli. Later, I picked up the pace and started working hard. I used to sit till late night to verify so as to give the correct data of activities in my Panchayats.

After working with the PRI-CBO convergence project, one achievement that I hold close to my heart is starting kitchen gardens in Basbera GP with proper trainings and regular follow up from the Agricultural department. It was for the first time that SHG women started having kitchen gardens and they were thankful that they saved some money on vegetables and were also able to consume fresh and nutritious vegetables. More than money, they were happy about the fact that they started doing something for themselves, by themselves.

Now I am an internal mentor of Dholongghat block in Nagaon district. I handle 3 GPs here in the block. I get to interact with BMMU often. Each activity conducted so far has been done so with proper trainings from both the mentor and SPC. Therefore, I believe, I am doing my work well.

I know the remuneration that I get being an internal mentor is not much but we worked

without money as LRGs. Whatever amount that we get now, is because , the state recognised our work. Now I can contribute to my family, financially. I am taking care of the needs of my children and also contributing towards the education of my children. This feeling is priceless. When I started earning, my position in the family also changed. They listen to my opinions these days. Isn't that the best reward that any woman can ask for?

Now when I think about the journey I had with PRI- CBO Convergence project, seeing the mentors from Kerala, looking at the FCs, I realised that women are no less than men. Everyone deserves to be treated equally. And there is no point in holding back yourself from any work just because you're a woman. Being a part of this project for the past 6 years, I believe that if the project asks me to work in a different state, I am ready to go now.

Being an internal mentor changed me altogether. From being an introvert to an Internal mentor who gives trainings to hundreds of SHG women, from a house wife to a financial contributor to the family and from being a silent person to a person who gets to share her opinions in her own family, everything has changed. No one is less, everyone is equal!







“  
I feel so proud saying this aloud, that I have been able to make the GPs understand that the CBO is not a restraint but in fact a resource for the village's development.”

Anuwara Begum

## Anuwara Begum

Laharighat block, which is my parent block, stands as one of the poverty-ridden areas in the state even today. I belong to the Rajagadhwa GP of the block and my journey from Laharighat to Tinsukia would never have been possible without the PRI-CBO Convergence Project. My guiding light in this journey has been my eldest sister, (baido) who before she left us for heavenly abode, taught me all that I know about life today.

Ever since I was in school, I was encouraged by my baido to speak in public and be as independent as possible. The importance of being self-sufficient was taught to me by my baido and even before I reached the 7th standard, I had been saving each rupee and paisa which my father used to give me in a water gourd vessel. I had saved up to Rs. 4000 and with that, I opened the first savings account of my life. This was just the beginning. With the remaining amount, my mother bought me a goat, along with duck and hen to rear on my own. I went on to buy a cow when I was in the 9th standard. As my savings doubled, sustaining myself and my siblings became a routine affair for me. It was that same year when I made myself independent in terms of educating myself until

I graduated from Mangaldai College in Darrang district. Having been trained in tailoring as well, my passion towards starting something of my own also grew to a great extent and to reach out to more individuals who were trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty.

As I returned to my GP in the year 2014 to take care of my ailing younger sister, I got to know through the Jeevika Sakhis and BCs that a new project is being introduced in our GP and they are looking for local cadre. At this same juncture, I was also working as a teacher under the SSA scheme in the GP. Swapna Baido from Kerala entrusted me with the responsibility of being an LRG member and in the year 2014, yet another chapter was added to my life.

One of the first tasks for us as an LRG member was to understand how the Panchayat itself works and in what ways we can help poor BPL Households access their rights from this institution. What came to my mind then, was that I have once again found a purpose in this Project, where I can exercise my passion for building something for the society. I remember how I would manage my job at the school, work as an LRG member the rest of the day and even complete all the orders for stitching clothes at

night. Month by month, rupee by rupee, my dream was shaping in front of me and in spite of not being the eldest in the family, I had an equal stake at supporting the household alongside my elder brother. In fact, my greatest achievement in my GP had been opening a Tailoring Unit where I myself arranged for the machinery in consultation with the Panchayat, DRDA and BMMU, who helped me to a great extent in providing with the knowledge about how to procure a loan for this. 40 women were a part of the Unit, where we tried to create a small-scale industry with bulk orders. The initial setting up and training was my task and once they took off, the rest was managed by the women themselves.

The two-day Internal Mentor selection training held in Nagaon is still afresh in front of my eyes. I was delighted when we were told that I was selected as an Internal Mentor for a different district as it validated all the beliefs and efforts, I had put into those two years of the Project. It had been extremely difficult to leave behind my family, the unit and the community itself which had accepted me with open arms, and move to Borsola Block in Sonitpur district. I got various kinds of experiences after working



with different kinds of Block Officials and at each stage, the Project unraveled the various aspects of working as an Internal Mentor in the area.

My experience in Tinsukia in particular has been challenging as it took us time to understand the vibe of the people in this region of Assam. Initially, with the constant support of Radha Baido, I remember days when we had to mobilize the SHG members door to door for meetings, only to get empty meeting halls afterwards. However, today I stand in a position where as I speak, people actually listen and try to understand what I am saying. Another lesson learnt from this experience has been that it is very difficult for the poor to trust – having been betrayed by the local governance systems and informal micro-finance schemes in these rural areas, people found it difficult to trust an Internal Mentor who had come all the way from Morigaon for their village’s development. Days and nights of worrying and strategizing made me realize this fact and thus, I got the patience and hope to carry on without hitting a dead end. There were voices from not only the community, but also the Panchayat, which

also told us things like, “Assam is not Kerala. These things won’t work out here...”, among issues of social stigma where women from particular communities are not even allowed to sit on equal positions to men in the public. Keeping all these hinderances aside, what was important was to just march on and today, I feel so proud saying this aloud, that I have been able to make the GPs understand that the CBO is not a restraint but in fact a resource for the village’s development.

Had I not been a part of this Project, I would have probably continued my life as a primary school teacher, along with being an SHG member in my GP. However, PRI-CBO Convergence Project’s trainings, reviews, activities, opportunities of interacting with officials across the Blocks, District and even State level, being guided by Kerala Mentors and mentoring other LRGs in the same path – these have shaped my life towards the same values which my Baido had left me behind with. These are values of knowledge, service, courage and wisdom and I am grateful to it for I have seen a fraction of multiple realities which exist all around the world.







“  
As small a step as  
learning their language  
has helped me build  
rapport with the  
community and then I  
learned to work around it

Barnali Borah Das

## Barnali Borah Das

I am a resident of Sutargaon Gram Panchayat, Bajiagaon Block, Nagaon. My husband is a teacher in a private school and I am a mother to a 7 year old son. I have always been an outgoing person and passionate towards learning new things. Unfortunately, I had to discontinue my studies after class XII due to the financial issues in my family and was soon married. I have been providing tuitions since I was in class VII to children in my neighbourhood and continued it even after my marriage. Earlier it was to support my family and after marriage, it was to support my new family. I was glad to do it as I got to interact with many families this way and I was also in constant touch with books and learning.

I was introduced to the PRI CBO Convergence Project when a Kerala mentor had given orientation in my VO. Despite the language barrier we had, I asked quite a lot of doubts and questions regarding how such a Project can unfold in our panchayat. That's when I was asked by the Mentor if I'd like to work as a Local Resource Group member for the Project and my VO members also urged me to tryout as an LRG. I understood that I would be continuously taught and mentored by the Kerala Mentors and I knew I would learn quite a lot from them.

Even though I was always an outgoing person, working for the CBO and Panchayat had me nervous. Initially, our panchayat members were also very unsupportive and that was very discouraging. There was a time I wanted to quit working as an LRG but that is when my husband encouraged me to continue for a while longer. He pushed me to try more with the panchayat members for acceptance of the outcomes of the Project activities. With consistent efforts and determination from all LRGs, we managed to create a space for our voices to be heard in the Panchayat. We started being invited to their meetings, helping in identification of beneficiaries for new schemes, etc. Even the Block recognised our contribution and asked for our help for few other activities on field.

By luck and hard work, I have been selected as Internal Mentor in both the expansion phases of the Project. I have grown with the Project as an LRG, as an Internal Mentor and also as a person.

In the first expansion phase, I was posted in Dhekiajuli block in Sonitpur district. I initially looked after one panchayat and by the end of the Project phase, I was looking after two panchayats. Dhekiajuli holds a special place in

my heart as it was here that I truly learnt about the project, the skills that I should possess as an Internal Mentor and also the ways to convince Department officials to be a part of the project activities. Indeed there were days when strategies of any kind would not materialise on field and a feeling of disappointment would exist. But, there were also days when things came around so effortlessly that it made us all happy. Planning and strategising are two skills that have helped me get selected again as an Internal Mentor for phase three.

In the second scale up, I was posted in Majuli district where I looked after all the five panchayats for the first three months and on I looked after two Panchayats when new Internal Mentors joined the team. Though shifting to and working in another district was a new thing for me, I found my comfort with the community in both the new places I have worked in.

Majuli has a very strong cultural space for us in my family and when I got placed in Majuli, I thought it was a blessing. But Majuli was a little tough for me as there were panchayats that were completely inhabited by the Mising community and it was the first time



I had problems in communicating with the community as they speak a different language. I was a lot apprehensive as well to work in a Mising dominated area. They understood Assamese but were more comfortable with their language - Mising. Initially during the orientations, when I used to say Namaskar in Assamese, I didn't get much of an excitement from the community. Then, I started greeting them in Mising and I immediately sensed a feeling of warmth seeing the smiles on their faces. So, I made efforts to learn their language and seeing me take efforts, made them feel more comfortable around me. As small a step as learning their language has helped me build rapport with the community and then I learned to work around it. Over the years, I have become more meticulous and patient. I feel for things very passionately and hence I respond very hastily to some claims or issues. But by being involved in this Project, its activities, with different mentors and LRGs I have learnt

to think before speaking at certain occasions and that has been good for me. I miss my son and husband every day when I speak with them, but I like bringing them over to my work district on their vacation. I have found friends through this Project in my Mentors and fellow colleagues.

As a member of SHG and VO, I knew about women's access to low interest finance and how it had helped us in meeting expenses on our own. Now, I know how to utilise these funds in a better way by aiding the livelihoods of people in a sustainable way. Also I have learnt more about the entitlements of a citizen and the Powers and duties of a Panchayati Raj Institution.

I am very proud to have the designation of an Internal Mentor attached to my identity and I believe I have worked as a leader towards the development of my village.







“  
When I still meet people from my old GP they remember the eye camp and express their gratitude that such a camp was once arranged in their GP which has benefitted many elderly people with free surgery for Cataract and other problems that were detected.

Deepti Das Gupta

## Deepti Das Gupta

I was a member of Prarthna SHG of Sampavathy VO in Rangagurah GP, Bajiagaon, Nagaon when I was introduced to the PRI CBO Convergence Project by a Kerala Mentor during the VO orientation of the Project. Though I was an active SHG member, I did not have much knowledge regarding the importance of being in an SHG. For me, SHG was limited to the function of thrift and credit. But with the Project I have gained knowledge on panchayat, entitlements, and community demands and I have also learnt resilience. When I started working as LRG, I found it very difficult to mobilise women for any activity let alone Gram Sabha, which was actually the first task for me as an LRG in the training period. At the same time, without the support of SHG members, it became very difficult to establish relation with Panchayat. Continuous meeting with both stakeholders and through different trainings of the Project, my Panchayat started recognising me as an LRG and the work I do.

I was then selected as an Internal mentor to work in Barhampur block, Nagaon in the second phase of the Project and I am currently working in Khushdowa block, Goalpara. From handling one panchayat to handling five panchayats and reporting to BMMU, I feel I have personally grown in leaps and bounds through my involvement in this Project.

My family, who has always been very supportive

of my involvement and work, held me back only in one instance during my work tenure. This was when I had met with an accident and had to be on bed rest for about a month. After a month's time, when the mentor came to enquire about my well being, I expressed interest in joining back, but that is when my family asked me to rest for a few more weeks. But after assurance from the mentor that recovery might fasten if I start moving around a bit, I resumed work on field.

One of the biggest opportunities, that this project has given me is the chance to visit Kerala. This was the first time that I was travelling long distance. But, the journey was fun-filled as we Internal Mentors were travelling as a group. It was nice to see that a team had come to welcome us at the Panchayat office and it was not just Panchayat Members but it also included Kudumbashree SHG members. One of them was the CDS chair person and they welcomed us with so much respect. It was refreshing to see SHG women and Panchayat members in the same platform and I knew for a fact that this is what I have to achieve in the Panchayats where I work. And taking lessons from there, when the new Panchayat body was inducted, in Assam we had encouraged the VOCC members to officially welcome the Panchayat body to their office and this helped the VOCC interact actively with the Panchayat body.

The Panchayats, be it in any of the three phases that I have been part of, have always been apprehensive toward the project. Therefore, the support from their side was also minimal. But, seeing our efforts to mobilise people for Gram Sabhas, helping women identify the right beneficiaries and by organising various camps for the persons who are in need of it, they have changed their opinion about the project.

The innovative activities that I was able to arrange and conduct in Barhampur block has left a mark with several families. The first time we conducted an Eye camp in Puranigudam GP, many families benefitted from this camp. When I still meet people from Puranigudam GP they remember the eye camp and express their gratitude that such a camp was once arranged in their GP which has benefitted many elderly people with free surgery for Cataract and other problems that were detected.

Working has helped me solve family financial issues that we earlier faced and this contribution makes me feel very proud. I have learnt how to talk and maintain relation with women from different communities, panchayat members and also with higher officials such as the BDO, BPM and officers of various departments. The recognition that I received in my older GPs and also new GPs because of the work and activities that I have engaged in with the community is what keeps me happy.



## Training Sessions







## Grama Sabha







“  
The Block Development officer,  
Junior Engineer and BMMU  
started believing in my skills  
and I was asked to become  
a member of the VDCDP  
committee so that I can assist  
them in preparing Draft Status  
Report and Annual Action Plan of  
the VDC.

Edward Khalid

## Edward Khalid

My name is Edward Khalid Ahmed and I am 34 years old. I am a resident of Baralimari GP of Laharighat Development Block in Morigaon district, Assam. Laharighat is the most flood affected block in Assam and development in Laharighat was like a setting sun which will never rise again.

I was married at the age of 27 and was working as a shopkeeper at local market at my place. From our marriage, we had a son. We used to live with my father, mother and sister. My father is a farmer by profession. Although it was quite difficult for him to manage the family with his meagre income, he was not in a position to sustain our needs. My mother struggled hard and managed to fund for our education and bring us out of poverty by working as a CRP in our Village. I saw my mother struggle and wanted my family to come out of it. I was a bright student but due to my poor financial conditions, I had to drop out after class 12<sup>th</sup>. My career had taken a dead end for me.

Just after passing 12<sup>th</sup> grade, I started managing a computer shop to enhance my livelihood. The shop was running fine, but the work wasn't satisfactory. However, I had to continue working in order to provide for my family. One day while I was working on my shop, my mom informed

me about PRI-CBO Convergence Project and the work of LRGs. She motivated me to be a part of this Project as an LRG as she knew that I wasn't happy with the work that I was already doing. It was on 17<sup>th</sup> June, 2016 when I along with some other SHG members were invited for the selection process. Though I am not from the SHG fold but I belong to the family of an SHG member. As it is a minority dominated area, there were issues around women joining as community cadre and special change in policies were done to select male cadres. I guess that was the turning point of my life. Three others and I got selected as male cadres for the project.

Once I got selected as an LRG and after attending training for three days, I was scared to talk to people and realised that I did not have the proper knowledge of what a Panchayat is. Initially, we didn't get much support from the Gram Panchayat. Also the Panchayat representatives didn't give much importance to us. But, I didn't give up and gradually the Panchayat representatives started supporting us during the daily course of our work. I became part of the Panchayat meetings and even the identification of beneficiaries for different schemes was done in joint consultation with us. With the active support from Gram Panchayat,

I am proud that we have managed to bring women out of poverty up to an extent. During my work as an LRG, I used to get a very small honorarium first Rs. 100 for 20 days (3 months) and thereafter Rs. 250 for 20 days which was sufficient to meet only the basic needs of my family.

A major leap came in September 2017 when I was part of the selection process for Internal Mentor at Nagaon. I got selected based on my merit which was a happy affair. But, at the same time I was also scared about how will I manage the work in a new block single handedly. Team NRO engaged me at Dhekiajuli block BMMU and I was given the responsibility to monitor three panchayats. This was made possible only with the active support from the Kudumbashree mentor.

As it is rightly said, hard work always pays off and in the third expansion, I was given the charge of Karbi Anglong, which is a sixth schedule area. Initially due to my identity of being a Muslim, I was scared. People said various things and I felt uncomfortable in even saying my name. However, today I feel that I have come a long way. With the continuous support of the Mentor and FC. I think I have learnt to work independently and manage adverse situations.



One of the most memorable moments for me was, when in my block, Langosmepi, Karbi Anglong during GPDP 2020-2021, I was called with the Mentor to attend the GPDP training. With the experience I had previously, I started doing the gap filling and by the end it so happened that the entire training was facilitated by the Mentor and I. This made a huge impact. The Block Development officer, Junior Engineer and BMMU started believing in my skills and I was asked to become a member of the VDCDP committee so that I can assist them in preparing Draft Status Report and Annual Action Plan of the VDC. Since then, I have been continuously in touch with the Block team and VDC and have helped them throughout the process. I could have never imagined that a boy next door would some day come in such close contacts with the Block level officials and they would look up to me to understand the nuances of the GPDP process. I can never thank NRO enough for the skills that they have taught me, which not only helped me earn accolades but also recognition.

Working as a male cadre does not come easy, the community takes time to accept a male but with consistent conversation, somewhere the ice-breaks. In this journey of my work life, I have also come across a number of problems pertaining to my religious identity. There have been days when I have been scared to go out of the house, fearing someone can kill me as well. But you know, our work is such that once the cadres and the community get along with us, there is no going back. This shows how everywhere and in every community you will get people who will admire you. I am glad that NRO has given me the platform to work under PRI-CBO Convergence project. Today, I am proud that I have the designation of Internal Mentor as an identity and I am hopeful that I would be able to change the lives of many women to become the future leaders of this country. I am grateful to NRLM and NRO and its representatives for providing me a platform to uplift my standard of living.







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I believe that one of my biggest strength is my adaptability to situations and my ability to maintain relationship with anyone, be it with the Panchayat, the VO or even my LRGs.  
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Hoshnara Begum

## Hoshnara Begum

I am Hoshnara Begum from Bajiagaon Gram Panchayat which falls under Bajiagaon Block, Nagaon. I was the book keeper of my SHG, as I was one of the only educated member of my and SHG. Later on, I was selected as a Master book keeper from my Panchayat. As a Book keeper or Master book keeper, my engagement with the concerned SHG or VO was limited to only maintaining the books of records or training the SHG to maintain books. In the year 2014, with the commencement of the project, a new chapter began in my life.

I was selected as an LRG from my Panchayat to carry out the activities of the project. I was entrusted with two Village Organizations comprising of 28 SHGs. Gradually, as the project activities rolled out, I started interacting with more VO members and mobilising them for Gram Sabhas, which in turn initiated a conversation with the Panchayat officials. I had never thought that I could go to the Panchayat office on my own and demand for anything. I always felt that it was a space only for men. Through various trainings on the various Centrally Sponsored Schemes and State Sponsored Schemes, my knowledge increased. As a woman who had just started working in the public front, I was nervous. The mentor

helped me a lot to make me understand the objective of each activity, the importance of woman participating in Gram Sabha, importance of placing demand in Panchayat. Other than scheme related help, Mentor has also helped me overcome my fears and taught me to be more confident. I was able to carry out PAE, EAP and GP2RP in my Panchayat and helped women access their entitlements.

Since my work then was mostly in my own Panchayat, my family was very supportive especially my husband. The various trainings had definitely pushed my confidence and I was able to put forward my thoughts and opinions in household related matters as well. I am also proud of the fact that I was able to help my child in his studies and was able to nurture him well.

In the year 2017, I got selected as an Internal Mentor and was placed in Barhampur Block, Nagaon. As I became an Internal Mentor, my responsibilities changed. I was now responsible to mould LRGs, negotiate with the Panchayat in a better manner and had to strengthen the functioning of VOs as well. I used to get a lot of training as an LRG. Now I was in charge of training others. I had to train VOs, LRGs, the

Cluster level Federation and this was a new experience for me. I was not a very vocal person. My mentor worked with me to give me the confidence to train others. I used to practice a lot at my home for the same.

Cadre development being an important task, og an internal mentors I had to capacitate the LRGs. I faced a lot of difficulties in this regard as my assigned GP was mostly a tea garden area and the women from that region are not that well educated. So, my LRGs were also slow in understanding various concepts. However, they were determined to work hard and this motivated me.

One of my LRGs was so nervous in the beginning, that she could not even introduce herself confidently. I was also tensed thinking about it. But, I made it a point that I would spend time with her and teach her with patience. Now, I feel extremely proud that she is a Bal Sabha Resource person of her Panchayat and she is carrying out the Bal Sabha activities well. One another LRG was also very weak. Now she got selected as an Internal Mentor and I am so happy that I was able to train somebody and I could bring them up to a position of being an Internal Mentor like myself.



As an Internal mentor, I also got the opportunity to visit Kerala as a part of the Panchayat Apprenticeship Program (PAP). My younger son was only two years and I had to leave him behind for almost 10 days. It was painful but the exposure that I'd receive in Kerala was also important. I really liked the concept of ASRAYA Project.

I shared my experience with a few VO members in my Panchayat and it helped them identify such old and destitute women and help them.

In this phase of the project, we focused on strengthening relationship with various line departments. The Panchayat I was in charge of faced issues of elephant attacks as it was a Panchayat close to a forest area. After several rounds of discussion with the mentor, my LRGs along with a few VO members and I decided to approach the Forest Range Officer regarding the same. We were told that Elephant trenches would help in keeping out elephants from public places. The same information was discussed across all VO and during the preparation of Gram Panchayat Poverty Reduction Plan (GP2RP), I encouraged VO members to demand for building elephant trenches from the Panchayat and it got accepted in the Gram Sabha. I consider this as one of my biggest achievement.

I am a mother, a wife and a daughter- in - law and the responsibilities that come along with it are different. The support that I received from my family, especially from my in laws can not be described in mere words. They have been great. I have learnt to manage my time in such a way that I am able to handle my household work as well as my duties as an Internal Mentor. My mother - in- law has helped me so much in this regard.

Now that I am in a different District that is almost ten hours away from home, I feel lonely and worried about my family. I was so tensed that I felt I would not continue. But, my husband has given me so much of emotional support and my children have also not complained much that it has become easy for me to be in Dhemaji District. Now I handle 3 GPs here.

I believe that one of my biggest strength is my adaptability to situations and my ability to maintain relationship with anyone, be it with the Panchayat, the VO or even my LRGs. I hope to overcome all my difficulties with a smile on my face.







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Now, I have also started sharing the responsibility of doing household chores. I always make sure that I get up before my wife and make tea for both of us in the morning. Taking care of our daughter's daily needs is a responsibility shared by both of us equally.

Imam Hussain

## Imam Hussain

I was seventeen years old when I got married. However, post marriage, I continued my education and finished my graduation only to join as a school teacher. I used to receive merely eight hundred rupees per month as my salary. With this money, I could barely manage to fulfill the basic needs of my family. I was always looking for new opportunities. The only deterrent being that I did not want to go out of Assam in search of job like my other friends and neighbours.

I got to know about PRI-CBO convergence project through my mother who is a SHG member. She participated in the orientation programme of the project where she got to know that the project required to select some people within the community to work with them. Even though the LRGs were supposed to be SHG members I was given the opportunity to be a LRG by the Bajiagaon Gram Panchayat President since my mother was part of SHG.

I was absolutely clueless about what the work would be like and when I got to know it required to work closely with SHGs and Panchayats, I found it interesting. But I was very hesitant to interact with women. After my selection as an LRG, I was fumbling even while introducing myself to the VO members. Gradually, with the help of the Mentor I learned about the work. These learnings not only helped me professionally but also had an impact on my personal growth. I think I have become a better person now.

My interaction with so many women about different aspects of their lives made me realize things about women in my own family which earlier I was ignorant about. Almost all the women I have interacted with as part of work mentioned how they face difficulties as they have no one to share the household chores. It made me reflect upon how only my mother and my wife had been responsible for taking care of cooking, cleaning, washing and everything else for the entire family. Now, I have also started sharing the responsibility of doing household chores. I always make sure that I get up before my wife and make tea for both of us in the morning. Taking care of our daughter's daily needs is a responsibility shared by both of us equally. I am also encouraging my wife to complete her graduation.

Working with the diverse communities of women has been an enriching experience, but has definitely not been smooth. Since I belong to a minority community, I was looked at very suspiciously. I could also sense that women were not very comfortable with my presence. With time and persistent efforts, I built rapport with them and was accepted by everyone whole heartedly.

My first posting as an Internal Mentor was in Barhampur Block, Nagaon District. In the beginning, I was very apprehensive to lead a group of 7 LRGs as I was also just an LRG a few months back. However, with constant support from the Mentor and SPC, I was able to catch up. What can be cited as my biggest achievement

is that one of my LRGs of Kathonigaon was immensely motivated by the project that she gained the confidence to contest as a Panchayat President in the 2018 Panchayat Elections. It was also an achievement when she won the Elections. I feel proud that I was able to mentor her and teach her aspects about Panchayat, its roles, responsibilities and the functioning of the various committees of the Panchayat.

I have been working with the project for more than four years now, serving as an LRG initially and now as an Internal Mentor. During the process, I have learnt about various things like how panchayat functions in Kerala through our exposure visit and also about Gram Panchayat Development Plan. I have also learned about various schemes and programmes that is to be implemented by panchayat through our activity of Participatory Assessment of Entitlements. Through the project I have engaged in so many interesting activities like vaccination camps, health awareness camps, and awareness about impact of alcohol consumption etc. These activities helped me gain a better understanding on the significance of Panchayat and Line Departments for development which would have otherwise not been possible, if not for the Project.

I might come across a little over-confident when I say these things, but if I get an opportunity to become an Elected representative of my Gram Panchayat in the future, I will know how to fulfil my responsibilities efficiently.





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As a male in a society, I thought I was aware of what a panchayat is and how it functions, but when I started learning about our right and entitlements, the different types of schemes that come to the panchayat and how the beneficiaries ought to be selected, how funds come and are allocated by the panchayat and the concept of participatory democracy through the project

Jainal Ud Din

## Jainal Ud Din

My wife has been an active member in the CBO network from the time it began in our Bowalguri GP, Laharighat Block, Morigaon district. She is her VO's president and also works as a CRP cadre for the BMMU. When the PRI CBO Convergence Project started, she had been in contact with the Kerala mentors since the time they had come to the Block. Because of her involvement in the CBO, I too knew how SHGs, VOs functioned because of my interactions with her. She got the chance to be in Kerala for exposure visit as a representative from our village and she came back very inspired by the Kerala model of Panchayat and CBO systems. Since she was already a member of CRP cadre, she couldn't work as an LRG, even though she wanted to. Despite not being an LRG, she was close to the Kerala mentors.

When the Project required few male members as LRGs to work, my wife and the BMMU encouraged me to sit for the tests. Working as a male in a womens' group is a very difficult task and I was initially very doubtful if I could do it. But my wife and the Mentors mentored me well about body language and how to speak in gatherings where women were in larger numbers so that I could gather their attention. Many a times I had doubts whether working amongst women as an LRG was something I really wanted to do and also thought of dropping out but I continued with my wife's encouragement.

As a male in the society, I thought I was aware of what a panchayat is and how it functions. But when I started learning about our right and entitlements, the different types of schemes that come to the panchayat and how the beneficiaries ought to be selected, how funds come and are allocated by the panchayat and the concept of participatory democracy through the project, I realised what a misinformed member of the society I was. The activities of the Project helped me spread this information, which I had newly learned, amongst the other members of the society.

When I got selected as an Internal Mentor in the expansion phase, I was very reluctant to leave home, where my parents and wife stayed, and go to a new Block. I was hesitant about the new team of I Mentors, Mentor and FC I would be working with. But after a meeting with the team and BPM of the new block, I felt a little relieved.

I was posted in Lakwhowa Block in Nagaon district which was very politically influenced. Before joining in the new Block, several people had told me of the difficulties I could face in the Block. It was difficult to start off work in this Block, but gradually with constant efforts from all Internal Mentors and Mentor, we were able to start slowly there. Conducting innovative activities along with the regular Project activities was a highlight for me in this Phase.

Under the Project, we were able to conduct Medical health camps and veterinary camps for

the first time in the Panchayat. I felt very proud of the success of these camps.

After getting selected as an Internal Mentor in the scale- up phase, I was placed in Jorhat district. I had to look after five panchayats and be corresponding with BMMU in this phase and it was a big challenge for me. I was farther away from home and the work pressure was higher, which made me nervous. But, I have managed to do what the Project required of me with the support of Mentor and FC and BMMU officials. Now I look after two panchayats in North West Jorhat block of Jorhat after two new Internal Mentors have joined the Block team and hence I feel better that I am able to give better attention to these two panchayats.

My major few achievements through the project is that firstly I have assisted the community in my village and other villages in different districts in making poverty reduction plans for GPDP and entitlement demand plans from VOs. The panchayat I used to earlier work made their own poverty reduction plan for GPDP this year. Secondly, an LRG that I had mentored has qualified to work as an Internal mentor in the Scale-up phase of this Project.

It is difficult for people to grasp the objective and importance of the Project initially. I believe that once people see what work and awareness is unfurled through the different activities of this Project, everyone agrees that this Project bring changes to the society, which is very important and for the good.





From Left to Right: Kabita, Anuwara, Afiya, Paritosh, Sufiya, Reziya, Mafida, Seema, Bornali, Hoshnara, Simi, Nomi, Deepti, Kunjo, Monjila, Imam, Jainul and Phaninder Pathak.



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I believe I have come very far from being disregarded by Panchayat to being recognized by BDOs and frontline officials of various departments.

Kabita Bora Saikia

## Kabita Bora Saikia

Laharighat, the block that I come from, belongs to one of the most backward districts of Assam. It is highly flood prone. I have lost my land and house due to floods. Part of the Tulsibari GP that I used to reside in with my husband and daughter has been flooded and drowned by the Brahmaputra River. We then resettled to Burbandha panchayat, Burbandha Block in Morigaon district. I joined the NRLM's SHG fold in 2013 where due to good performance of my SHG, we were aided in starting a tailoring unit. In 2014, the VO orientation for PRI CBO Convergence Project influenced me to be a part of the Project. Hence I gave my name for LRG and was then selected as an LRG along with five others from my GP. Through the different trainings we received as part for the Project, I learnt about the power of Gram Sabha as a platform, what all panchayat can do for the community and how community as a collective is strong. It was through these trainings that I got to know about the eligibility and details of Central and State sponsored schemes like MGNREGA, NSAP, SBM, about which I kept spreading awareness amongst my SHG members.

Coming from a very orthodox family and

community, it was not easy for me to even work as an LRG, let alone working in two expansion phases in two different districts for the Project. Earlier lot of questions were raised to my family regarding their daughter-in-law working outside the premises of the house. When I shed the habit of wearing Mekhela chador (the traditional Assamese costume) and switched to kurta and churidar, my family was questioned yet again on the change in my manner of dressing. Though my family did support my interest in working for the Project, it started becoming difficult for them to handle the comments from the neighbours on a daily basis. But slowly, with the increased awareness I gained on the Panchayat, rights and entitlements of citizens, people's view point regarding my work changed. It has changed so much, that in the last panchayat elections women from my village asked me to contest for elections for the post of President of the Panchayat. Not only women, a lot of male members of our community came forward and asked me to contest, confessing that very few people in the Panchayat had a true idea of how a Panchayat should function and the works to be carried out. I was humbled that the same

people who had raised fingers at my work initially, had recognised and acknowledged that I could be a Panchayat President. But I refused the offers as I was interested to continue working in the Project as it was a platform where I could gain a lot of knowledge.

In phase II of the project, we did concentrate a lot on Bal Sabha formations and trying to make Bal Sabhas sustainable. Therefore, we had selected one resource person for Bal Sabha per VO and gave them training on activities that can be undertaken under Bal Sabha. One of the experience that stays fresh in my mind is the Bal Panchayat and Bal Parliament session that we did. In Bal Panchayat, we encouraged children to create a Panchayat like set-up where there would be a President, Secretary, Ward members within the children who would come forward to discuss on social issues in these sessions. In Mock Parliament session, a teacher helped the VOCC members and Bal Sabha resource person to come up with a script to enact a parliament scene amongst the Bal Sabha children. The Bal Sabhas of two Panchayats conducted this together and it was nice to see how children presented the entire skit and how they made efforts to add a few



parts in the skit on their own so as to recreate a real Parliament debate.

When I was assigned Goalpara district during Phase III, I was very anxious. I had never been to Lower Assam which had a very different culture, dialect and inhabitants. As I started working, my first struggle was to manage four GPs where language was my biggest challenge. But with perseverance, I started understanding their dialect and it became easier to converse with the community.

This Project has taught me everything I know about public relations, network building and image maintenance. The need for Panchayat sub- committees, the difference between preparing Five Year Plans in GDP and preparing AAP, the social welfare aspect that VO's have a major role are among the few things that this Project has taught me. It gives me immense pride that even the BDO of my Block know me by my name. I believe I have come very far from being disregarded by Panchayat to being recognized by BDOs and frontline officials of various departments. I give due credit to the mentors and the opportunities this Project has provided me with. It gives me great joy when I work for the objectives of the Project towards the betterment of my own people.







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In order to overcome the various problems faced in life, there are two things which are of utmost importance which are those of faith and patience.

Kunjo Neog

## Kunjo

I am a resident of Samaguri GP in Bajiagaon Block, Nagaon district. Through the advent of the project in 2014, I got acquainted with my Panchayat and its relevance. Prior to my selection as a Local Resource Group Member in the Project, my social circle only included the residents of my neighbourhood. This project expanded my knowledge as well as my reach to the people from all 10 Wards of the Gram Panchayat. This journey started from learning how to help people, how the Panchayat's resources can be used for helping people accessing their basic rights as citizens and entrusting this same faith in the members of all VOs in my GP. Apart from my own Panchayat, I also got acquainted to people from the 11 other GPs in Bajiagaon Block which distinguished me from a resident of the village to an active citizen from my village.

The next stage in this journey was a rather challenging one for me, when I represented the Project as an Internal Mentor in Lawkhowa Block. Challenges such as dealing with completely unknown people, new faces and voices, new culture and even political pressure and interference were right in front of me in this stage. However, I was lucky enough to have

found my guides and immense support in the Mentor, BPM, BC and JeevikaSakhis who stood tall with me and together. With a strong VOCC body, I was able to pull through each obstacle in this stage. I can recall one such instance from this block, which affirmed my confidence even more. In one of the GPs, a widow resided, who was outcasted from the society and she lived with very meagre resources with her young daughter. It was difficult for them to survive in such circumstances and being outcasted also resulted in her inability to earn a livelihood. After much consultation with the GP President and the woman herself, we managed to arrange a small donation from the GP's side for opening a petty shop near the Panchayat premises. From this experience, I learnt an important lesson- In order to overcome the various problems faced in life, there are two things which are of utmost importance which are those of faith and patience.

These same qualities of keeping faith and being patient were always reinforced in us by the Kerala Mentor Baidos who are our role models. School re-enrolments and Literacy campaigns, according to me was one of the best initiatives that I could take up in the Blocks that I have

worked. Identifying the students who have dropped out of school, understanding the reason behind and meeting with their guardian were the steps involved in School re-enrolment process. Through re-enrolment in schools, we have also managed to revive the School Management Committees. Encouraging women to learn to write their name has also been a unique initiative as we had identified active women from the VOs and from the Bal Sabha children who would volunteer to teach these women to write their own name, their SHG's name, VO's name and also their Panchayat's name. Along with this, helping VO members open up Micro Enterprises as well is something that I enjoyed doing. The Micro Enterprise being an important component of GP2RP was well received by the VOs and they came up with ideas of their own. As an Internal Mentor, I was able to guide them regarding feasibility, availability of funds and standing throughout with them in visualising their dreams.

One of the lowest point during this entire journey for me was when I met with an accident and had to stay out of field for a few months. I was very anxious during this phase thinking about all the activities that would be



happening on field. This somehow gave me the energy to bounce back well.

The biggest transformation for me was that apart from being able to communicate in an entirely new language of Hindi, I also learnt another language - that of structure and poise in our speech. Right from the time I was an LRG member, we were trained on how to plan our agenda, structure our points and how to present them to the Panchayat. With practice in this, came a rise in confidence to interact with Department Officials, Block Officials and so on. As I look back on my journey, I feel happy that I was able to initiate the process of change in the lives of the people that I have worked with. I hope to see more and more people get access to their rights and entitlements.







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The veil of doubt has lifted. I know that I am not being able to give much time to my son and my husband but it is all for a purpose. It is for the upliftment of my son's life who needs to learn that he also has to work for his society like his mother. Now, I am the decision maker of the family. I am the one who is approached when things go wrong or there are things to be discussed. I will not call it a role reversal, but certainly shifting of roles.  
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Mafida Begum

## Mafida Begum

I am Mafida Begum. I from a very small village of Laharighat who had huge aspirations but limited resources to fulfil them. What do you expect from a woman of a minority community married at 16, a school drop-out, having a child at 20, living in the worst flood affected regions of India from where people are migrating every day to rescue themselves from the sorrow of Brahmaputra? Yes, like many other women coming from deprived background and with the double burden of being a woman, I was being a wife to my partner and a mother to my child without much say in my family decisions until PRI-CBO Convergence gave me the opportunity to prove my skills.

Once NRLM came to Laharighat, I had joined the Self Help Group. I was the President of my SHG and I engaged myself in the weekly thrift and credit activities of the SHG. In the year 2013, I came to know that a few Baidos from Kerala had come. I was very excited to meet them. They came to my VO and attended my SHG meeting. It was after this that few of us were invited to the Block. When we went to the Block, we had a two day selection process after which I got selected as a LRG. I think, I will never forget that day.

I did not know back then, what it meant to be an LRG. However with a poverty which seemed never ending, I wanted to work for the poverty stricken families of the village. I was trained on my roles and responsibilities and was motivated to visit my Panchayat. The Kerala Mentors had also accompanied us in going to the Panchayat. Before, the Kerala Baidos arrival in my life, I had never visited a Block Panchayat. Both me and my husband were very poor and we always thought that Panchayat was not for the powerless. Due to my poor condition, I also never got the respect from the society and the community which I desired for.

Once I became a LRG, the journey did not come easy. I did not know Hindi. I could barely understand what was told by Mentors in the training. It was then, where my husband played a crucial role. He used to stand outside the training hall and listen to all that was shared and when we used come back home, he used to teach me. We both were committed that the Project will help not only us but the people in our village.

I actively started visiting the departments. The Mentors taught me how to speak to officers and also how to engage with the community,

especially the women. Previously, I was not equipped to talk to people, but now I knew that treating others with respect was the only way to earn respect. I met officers from various departments and approached them to help the people in my village. The community started having faith in me and I was very happy. Almost all profession helps one in earning money, but working as an LRG helped me gain social status as well, which I was deprived of being a woman. Seeing my hardwork and willingness to learn new things, I was selected through an exam to become an Internal Mentor. I was sent to Lawkhowa Block in Nagaon District. I whole heartedly contributed two years in building up the capacity of women like me who were poor and deprived there as well. Currently I am working in a tribal district and I consider it as a humongous opportunity. The reason being, now I am not only aware about the systems in Panchayati Raj but also the District Council of Sixth Schedule areas. I am professionally learning to build strategies which are more relevant to people who are living here. When in Karbi Anglong we had started with the GPDP process, I was really scared but then, I started slowly approaching the Block and the Gram Sevak. For few days, the FC and the



Mentor came with me and now I am constantly approached by these officials. It is not a small achievement. They are educated people who have much more experience than I have, but them approaching me enhances my confidence to work more and interact more. As I belong to a minority community, in phase two, I was given Lawkhowa block which was a minority block. In Lawkhowa also, I worked for the upliftment of the Minority groups but now even those shackles have broken down and I am working with different tribal groups. I think now I am also out of my own comfort zone. My responsibilities have increased from handling one or two VOs to one or two Panchayats and now I work in one VDC which is equivalent to five to six GPs. Looking back I could have not imagined that I would come such a long way. Coming from a village where I only spoke my native language to working in a District where I don't understand the language of Karbis and the people of Dima Hasao, hasn't come in a day. I have toiled hard to be where I am with the support of Mentor at every step. As a woman when I was leaving home to become an Internal Mentor, there were many raised

eye-brows. Yet, my husband supported me throughout. But gradually with my experience, now when I go back, people happily accept me asking questions about work.

The veil of doubt has lifted. I know that I am not being able to give much time to my son and my husband but it is all for a purpose. It is for the upliftment of my son's life who needs to learn that he also has to work for his society like his mother. Now, I am the decision maker of the family. I am the one who is approached when things go wrong or there are things to be discussed. I will not call it a role reversal, but certainly shifting of roles. My husband takes care of my son and here I am living alone, working alone and being the independent woman who is trying to balance it out.

In Karbi Anglong, I was also pushed by my Mentor and FC to learn sending reports via e-mail. I was so scared to try it but then with mistakes and consistent efforts, I have now managed to send emails for my reports. Even while mentioning this, I am smiling as I could have never imagined I will do all of this on my own one day.







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Till date, I feel this as my biggest achievement as I was able to initiate this kind of change in a minority dominant Panchayat. I also managed to complete my Master's in Assameese amidst all my other work and three of my LRGs are now working as Internal Mentors in different districts.

Monjila Khatun

## Monjila Khatun

I was in my first semester of Bachelor's when I got selected as an LRG. I was also an SHG member from Kannuamari Panchayat, Bajiaga on Block. Getting married at a very young age of 15 years, I had very little hopes of coming out of my marital responsibilities, let alone completing my studies. But, I was committed to complete my schooling and therefore, convinced my husband to let me stay in my maternal home. When the project had commenced in our Panchayat, I felt happy when I saw that a Baido has come all the way from Kerala to Nagaon and she is staying with us to help us improve our lives. Being an active and educated member of my SHG, I was selected as an LRG. Being an LRG not just contributed towards building my knowledge on schemes, but also to build my confidence.

Though breaking the ice and striking a conversation with people was an easy task owing to my cheerful nature, however, my public speaking skills was not adequate. During PAE, we were also taken to other Panchayats as well which was a first time experience for me. For me, being an LRG was not just about building my knowledge on schemes and activities, but it was also a grooming session for me to improve my soft skills. I really enjoyed

the training sessions that we had because each and every training had a game or an activity that had a message in it. I danced in front of my LRG friends for the first time. Alongside this, I was determined to complete my Bachelor's degree without having a particular subject as a major. It was at this juncture that I got selected as an Internal Mentor for phase two.

I got placed in Lawkhowa Block which was close to home which meant that I could manage to enrol myself for Master's while working. As an Internal mentor, the main task ahead of me was to handhold the LRGs and I had six female LRGs and 1 male LRG. It was difficult to work with the male LRG as he felt that a women is not entitled to his respect and that I am someone who is less than him. I discussed the issue with my Mentor who advised me to talk to him and deal with him patiently. Slowly there was a shift in his behaviour and by that time, I got transferred to another Gram Panchayat. The new Panchayat was extremely far from my home and was a Minority dominant Panchayat.

One of the speciality of this Panchayat-Bhatiakali is that one can spot a Masjid within a distance of every 4 km. The Musaliyar of every Panchayat used to scare us saying that, "it is not good to mobilise women and bring them

out of their homes. The position of a women is inside her home and anybody found outside will not be forgiven".

That is when my LRGs decided that they will change their attire and started wearing Burqa , the prescribed dress for Muslim women, when they came for mobilisation or VO meetings. I asked my LRGs to hold meetings in any SHG members house as it is safer and we shall start every meeting by reciting verses from the Holy Quran, the sacred book of Muslims, as it will help in breaking the ice and it will give the women some confidence. Slowly our strategy worked and through these meetings we convinced women that it is of extreme importance that women come out to voice their opinion. During this time, there was notification to conduct a Gram Sabha and we mobilised women for the same. On the day of Gram Sabha, when women reached the Panchayat office, they found out the President cancelled the Gram Sabha in the last moment saying that, "This is not a Mahila Gram Sabha. We don't want women to participate and want only men". This was not taken very well among the women and all of us decided that we will buy a new lock from the market and lock ourselves inside the Panchayat premises and demand for Gram



Sabha. After some time, the President came up and asked us to open up the lock. But, the strong women of Bhatiakali Panchayat said that they shall not open the lock until and unless the officials conduct the Gram Sabha for which they had done all the announcements and arrangements. The Panchayat President had to succumb to the pressure and conduct that Gram Sabha. Till date, I feel this as my biggest achievement as I was able to initiate this kind of change in a minority dominant Panchayat. I also managed to complete my Master's in Assamese amidst all my other work and three of my LRGs are now working as Internal Mentors in different Districts.

After working as an Internal Mentor for 2 years, I got selected to work in the Phase three blocks and currently placed in Dhemaji District. I was very scared in the initial phase as I was moving out of Nagaon district for the very first time

and I was concerned about the difference in dialects and speech.

My responsibilities also increased as I was in charge of monitoring five Panchayats. The Panchayats are in the deep interior and the VOs are located even further apart from each other. I had to cross many rivers to reach a VO as there was no alternate transport facility. However, my fear was vanished in a matter of days as I got to mingle with the people easily and I have started learning Mising language which is predominantly spoken in my Panchayats. I believe that my ability to plan a task or activity has improved. I have hopes of achieving results in these panchayats too. I hope that I develop my LRGs into capable Internal Mentors like myself. I aspire to become a development professional like my FCs and for this I wish to study Social Work.







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There were times when I really felt like I cannot continue, many a times we will not find vehicles to reach our destination and would have to walk in the scorching heat ,many a times our honorarium would be delayed leaving us with no money in hand and at times like that, I would not know what to do.  
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Nomi Borah

## Nomi Borah

I started working in the project as an LRG from the year 2015. My knowledge about SHGs was limited to their thrift and credit activities, and I did not know much about the objectives and functions of SHGs and their federation. I had never seen the Panchayat office and was not aware of who was the GP President or ward members. We never knew that these things are important. It was only after I started working with PRI-CBO Convergence project that I learnt about the importance, roles and responsibilities of both the PRI and CBO network. Being an introvert, I was not sure how I would be able to perform as an LRG as the work requires interaction with so many stakeholders on a daily basis. Now, when I look back I can see that I have changed a lot and changed for the better. People of my village who have seen me grow up as a child still cannot believe the fact that I address large gatherings of both men and women, even though they have seen it for themselves.

I feel fortunate to have had a chance to be a part of the project since the beginning. I worked in Niz Bhelouguri GP, under Bajiagaon Block in Nagaon District as an LRG and moved to Sonitpur as an Internal Mentor. It has been a wonderful journey. Now when I look back at my

journey in Dhekiajuli Block of Sonitpur District, I feel happy that I was able to make a difference in the lives of many women. Kherukunda GP in Dhekiajuli Block was my responsibility and after the initial set of activities, when we formed VOCC, we got an active VOCC Co-ordinator - Junali Sundi, who did not have much knowledge with regard to the schemes of the Panchayat and departments. But, she was active. She wanted to learn more and most importantly she liked working with people. When the 2018 Panchayat Elections were announced, the members of VOCC, VO and others encouraged her to contest for the post of GP President. And, by God's grace, she won. I feel so good when I see that women with whom we worked are doing so well. It is like an achievement for me. As the GP President of Kherukunda, Junali Baido referred to the GP2RP Plans submitted in 2018, while formulating the GPDP for 2020-21. She was determined to include the works demanded by VOs as she herself knew the difficulties faced by women in the society. One of my LRGs, Meena Daimary became Panchayat Councillor. I feel happy when women who had very limited knowledge about their Panchayat came up and took up positions of responsibility and are carrying it

out with exemplary grace and dedication. The panchayats that we worked with continue to hold regular Gram Sabha meetings and SHG women also participate in them, even though we are no longer there. They involve the SHG members in their overall functioning. Seeing all these outcomes of the project I feel more motivated towards my work. I feel like I have contributed well towards the development of our Assam.

There are SHG members who I worked with in Sonitpur who received their pension, or their instalment for PMAY, or benefits through various schemes and they would often thank me, as they would think it is because of me that they have got their entitlements. It feels good when people appreciate my work. These words and gestures of appreciation keeps me motivated to work away from my home, family and friends, for a long duration.

When my relatives and neighbours got to know that I will have to move to another district as part of my work, they were all very concerned. They told me I was unmarried and going away from home and that would not be safe and might not be liked by any probable groom's family. I was also fearful about the fact that I



will be staying in an unknown place, working with unknown people. But I thought of our mentors who travelled all the way from Kerala to Assam, where everything right from food to language is different from theirs. That is when I also felt confident to give it a try.

There were times when I really felt like I cannot continue. Many a times we will not find vehicles to reach our destination and would have to walk in the scorching heat ,many a times our honorarium would be delayed leaving us with no money in hand and at times like that, I would not know what to do. My health also deteriorated after I moved from my parent block as I didn't know how to cook and I started skipping meals. There were many challenges, but the learning and the experience that we have received and which I still continue to receive is something I would always cherish.







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After becoming an internal mentor I realised that I should continue my studies. So I applied for Diploma in elementary education and completed it in 2019. Now I want to study BA Political Science and plan to enrol myself this year.  
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Paritosh Das

## Paritosh Das

I am Paritosh Das. I completed higher secondary and dropped my studies due to the situations at home. My mother is ill and I have a younger brother to look after. He was a student then. Being the elder one in the house, my mother and my brother was solely my responsibility. I was always fond of working for the community, and because of that, I used to participate in the community services of our Namghar.

I heard about PRI-CBO convergence project through our Panchayat, which is Kanuwamari in Bajiagaon block of Nagaon district. At that time, I used to help the panchayat in some works. It was said that only SHG members can be a LRG. But I always liked working with people and Panchayat. So, my then GP President gave me a chance to be an LRG under PRI-CBO Convergence project. I got selected as an LRG and the first activity I did was a VO orientation. That was the first time I stood in front of a group of women and gave them a training. The beginning was hectic. Mobilising Panchayat for a programme, or convincing them about the demands from the SHG women was difficult. But slowly, I build a good rapport with the whole GP and started interacting with them on a regular basis. That helped me gain the trust of my Panchayat members. Slowly, we started working together for accessing the entitlements of the SHG households. It was my first opportunity to work together with Panchayat and community directly. I have done many odd jobs in my life, but as an LRG, I felt that I was actually working for the needs of people. For the first one and a half years, we

worked without any honorarium, but gained a lot of experience.

We made good connections with people and gained knowledge. We were getting regular trainings from Kerala mentor and that built the confidence in me.

The mentor from Kerala, as the designation says, mentored me and other LRGs so well and equipped us to work along with Panchayat and SHG networks. But working as an LRG was difficult especially along with having the responsibility of the whole family and my sick mother. But, I learnt to divide my time for the works that required my attention. I used to get up early in the morning to finish the work in our agricultural land, and also do odd jobs at night after the working as an LRG during the day. It was not about money, but was about the satisfaction that I used to get by working in this project. After serving as LRG for 3 years, I got selected as Internal mentor for PRI-CBO Convergence project. But after selection, we had no update about the project, so I continued working as an LRG member in my Panchayat.

After almost 8 months, we received our first training as Internal mentor. I was placed in Borcholla Block of Sonitpur district, but I could not work there because of my mother's health conditions. So I asked for a transfer and I was shifted to Lawkhowa block of Nagaon district. Working as in Internal mentor was different. We were a set of LRGs looking after a panchayat, but now I had an entire GP and later, more than one GP to look after. We started to interact with GPs more, not just the President, but with the Secretary and the members. And when I look at it, I realised that as an Internal mentor the

nature of work also changed. Not just going to SHGs or VOs, but ensuring the capacity building of LRGs and convergence with different departments for activities. The stories and experiences that our mentor had shared about Kerala and its convergence between Panchayat and CBOs were fascinating. As an IM, I got a chance to visit Kerala and was fortunate to see the working of a Panchayat in Kerala. That was also a once in lifetime experience. For the third phase, I am currently working as in internal mentor in Khagorijan Block of Nagaon district. I am in charge of 3 GPs in the block now. The number of LRGs in this phase are compared to the other two phases. So I am learning to work with less LRGs. And now I know that it's my responsibility to build the capacity of my LRGs. It is exciting that I am learning something new every single day.

After becoming an internal mentor I realised that I should continue my studies. So I applied for Diploma in elementary education and completed it in 2019. Now I want to study BA Political Science and plan to enrol myself this year.

One thing that I overcame during the project was my stage fright. I was scared to face a crowd and talk. But I gained the courage to do it during the course of the project. Also I learned to interact with officials. Now, I directly talk with my BMMU for work related activities.

This project gave me opportunities. This project gave me courage to face my fears. This project gave me knowledge. And I am proud to say that I am an internal mentor under the PRI-CBO Convergence Project of Assam.



# Photos from the Field







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I understood how important it was to give power in the hands of women. I was motivated to bring up women as Panchayat leaders through my work.”

Phaninder Patak

## Phaninder Patak

I am Phaninder Patak. I am a resident of Bharaguri GP, Bajiagaon Block, Nagaon District. My family was primarily engaged in farming, it being the major source of livelihood. My wife has been a part of SHG fold and was working as a Community Resource person with ASRLM. I have a daughter who is pursuing her studies. convergence project helped me to develop as a better human as well. The Mentors were continuously supporting me in whichever way possible to learn new skills. They understood our family issues as well and always pushed us to do better.

The recurring floods in Assam with rising debts and the income getting meagre day after day, I had to finally quit farming in the year 2012. I was extremely demotivated with my situation. It was an emotional turmoil for me and my family. It was then that I decided to associate myself with developmental activities. I was associated with an NGO which used to spread awareness on sanitation. However, there was no one to monitor me. The voluntary work however was not sufficient for my family's sustenance. At a time when I thought that now I won't be able to contribute anything to my family economically, PRI-CBO Convergence Project came into my life. Our BMMU informed us that a project had come which aimed at working with Panchayati Raj Institutions and Community Based Organisation.

It aimed at giving people entitlements and also in spreading awareness. My wife motivated me to apply for in it. Luckily, that year they were accepting few male members and luckily, I got selected. I would say that every organisation teaches you to work but the Convergence project helped me in moulding myself to be a better person.

Initially when I started working with my own GP, I could mobilise the VO members to meet the District Commissioner, Nagaon and the line Departments to demand for schemes and benefits from departments for which they had submitted demands repeatedly. My biggest achievement was when I mobilised both the VO and GP to set up a committee which was called the "Poverty Eradication Committee." It was a community led initiative, where SHG contributed a minimum amount and also the Panchayats. It aimed to work for the benefit of their own members who were in the vulnerable category.

Under this project we work with women. While working with them and continuously being guided by the NRO mentors, I slowly started understanding the nuances in the life of a woman. Previously also my wife worked and I used to help her in daily chores but now I was able to think beyond it. I understood how important it was to give power in the hands of women. I was motivated to bring up women as Panchayat leaders through my work. As a male when you work with women, there are



chances of you being questioned for it. However, because of the constant support of the Mentors, my family also believed in my work and I was always confident of my approach towards the SHG women.

Now my work has not only helped me in my professional enhancement, but also given me a social status. I was one among three to work in the most difficult district, West Karbi Anglong where we had no experience. I feel extremely proud to be able to learn new skills.

Now I am called for developmental related meeting conducted by the villagers as well as Panchayats.

Previously, I was just a normal individual in the village, but now I am an Internal Mentor. This position gives me immense respect and honour as I have improved as an individual. Punctuality has now become my core asset and I have also stopped eating betel nuts, because of the Mentor's motivation. All of this might sound like a small initiative but for me it is not only bread and butter but my life.





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It was not easy in the beginning to stay away from my family, especially my children. But then I started to adapt with the situations and learned to be happy wherever I am.

Reziya Sultana

## Reziya Sultana

I was married when I was 16 years old. I was a child and I had no idea how to do household chores when I was married. I always stayed inside the house. Being from a minority background, the family was very orthodox and never allowed me to step out of the household. It was a huge deal that I got to be a part of SHG, from there I become a part of VO and the president of my VO. It was then, my Jeevika 2Sakhi informed me about LRG selection and she invited me also for participating in the selection. I was happy when I heard that I got selected as LRG. But I was scared on the other side, thinking how to convince my husband and mother-in-law. It was very difficult to tell them about this job. But finally they agreed to it. I remember, it was 2017. As always the floods had devastated the village and the mighty Brahmpautra had washed away our house. We had no other option than to move out. With the small amount of money that I earned as an LRG, I contributed towards buying a land for ourselves. After that, it was easier for me to have a conversation about this work with my family.

Working as an LRG was interesting and less difficult comparing to what I am doing now. It was our own area and our own people and most of the things were familiar to me. But Panchayat was something that I had no idea about. Gram Sabha was considered as a platform for men. Panchayat was considered as an institution of officers who provides us with schemes. It was only after joining the project, I understood what Panchayats are and what are

the services that are provided from Panchayat. And I entered a panchayat office for the first time after becoming an LRG. I realised that the schemes that panchayat provides are our rights, that it is something that we are entitled to. That awareness was a change maker, not just for me, but for the entire SHG network. They started approaching the Panchayat, they started attending Gram Sabhas. The wave of change started there. After 3 years of being an LRG, I got selected as an Internal Mentor and I was placed in Borcholla Block. The role changed when I joined as an Internal Mentor. From being an LRG to an IM, I realised that responsibilities have increased. I had a set of LRGs to work with, I was giving them constant trainings, there were new knowledge that was given to us as part of the project. We started planning for our GPs. It was my first time preparing a plan of work activities for the GP that I worked in. Since then, it was I who planned. The plans were submitted to the external mentor and she used to give the feedbacks of the plan prepared. That was a huge learning for me. Looking at the time constraints, we planned everything without losing any day in field. We started making presentations in front of officials. We prepared charts with list of activities, achievements and data.

It was then I decided to continue my higher studies. As an Internal mentor, I felt that I should complete my studies to be a role model or an inspiration for at least one woman to complete her studies.

After Borcholla, I came to Raha block to work as an Internal mentor. In the beginning I was handling 5 GPs of the block. Now I am handling



two GPs in the block after the new IMs joined. In this phase, I got to work and interact with BMMUs often. I have a set of LRGs to work with and I know that their capacity building is my responsibility.

I think that there's always more to learn. So I know that I have to develop so much more. But still, now I am confident about myself. I am confident while talking to officials, I am confident when given trainings, I am confident when doing any activity in the field. But as I mentioned, I am still learning. My major strength is my ability to adapt to the situations. I developed that strength. It was not easy in the beginning to stay away from my family, especially my children. But then I started to adapt with the situations and learned to be happy wherever I am.

I am contributing financially towards my family, I even bought a bike for my husband from my savings. He was so proud of me when I did that. I am aware that the opportunities that I received to work with different sections of society is huge. I am aware that I have to learn more and work harder. And I can assure that I am ready for learning and I am trying to collect new knowledge in all possible ways.





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Gradually the resistance turned into acceptance when the Panchayat realized that the intention behind our work was to aid the Panchayat and not cause any hindrance. Simultaneously, the support from our Panchayat not only increased our efficiency but also enhanced our problem solving capabilities.  
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Sima Begum

## Sima Begum

Nomoskaar! My name is Sima Begum and I hail from Sutar Muslimgaon in Sutargaon Panchayat in Bajiagaon Development Block, Nagaon. I belong to a middle class family with my father being the only earning member in our little family. Due to financial constraints, I could only complete my education up to higher secondary but that did not deter my spirits. With little help that I could provide, I used to contribute in my father's business. Even with both of us working laboriously in the business, we could only earn enough to make ends meet. In 2014, I joined the SHG network and started saving funds through it. Then, my sole aim was to save money so that I can contribute to the family finances. Through SHG and with the help of my VO, I availed money from Revolving Fund, Community Investment Fund and bank loan with which I was able to open a small shop in my home's courtyard. This not only improved our family's financial situation but also boosted my morale.

Later that year, mentors from Kerala visited our VO to inform us about a project called PRI-CBO convergence. They instructed us to give out names of few active members from our VO and asked us a few general questions which I avidly answered. This prompted my VO

members to suggest my name as an active member. I had been involved with the SHG with a little over six months, hence, I was hesitant to give out my name for the post of a Local Resource Group (LRG) member. A certain degree of anxiousness engulfed my mind so as to the kind of work I would be required to undertake. On our first day as a LRG, we were called to our Block office for introduction. This was the first time that I had stepped into the Block office but the presence of my mentor calmed my nerves a tad bit. Upon being asked my name by the BPM, I could not even properly utter my name. This instilled a fear within me whether I would be able to deliver in the field when I could not even speak properly among my own peers. Our mentors encouraged us to not think much about the outcomes but work honestly and consistently in the field.

After getting trainings on our roles and responsibilities as on LRG, we started our work in the field. Initially, we did not get acceptance by the Panchayat. They considered us as intruders interfering with their work but with constant support and motivation from our mentors we kept on working closely with the SHGs and VO's in our Panchayat.

Gradually the resistance turned into acceptance when the Panchayat realized that the intention behind our work was to aid the Panchayat and not cause any hindrance. Simultaneously, the support from our Panchayat not only increased our efficiency but also enhanced our problem solving capabilities. I also got an opportunity to work as a trainer in eleven other Gram Panchayats where the project had been running. This reduced my fear of public speaking and helped me connect my Panchayat to other Panchayats. Little did I know that the opportunity of becoming an Internal Mentor will help me overcome the fears that I had, while initiating the Project.

After working as a LRG in my Panchayat for three years, I got an opportunity to appear for Internal mentor selection process. My happiness knew no bounds when I cleared the exam. For someone who has not had an opportunity to complete her education properly, this was the first achievement in my life. I started my journey as an Internal Mentor from June, 2017 in Dhekiajuli Block of Sonitpur District. Leaving behind my only family member, my father, alone was the biggest challenge but I tried to immerse myself in the project activities. I carry



the confidence that I have gained throughout these years with pride and this is the only thing that has kept me going. After working in Sonitpur for around two years and another selection process, I became an Internal mentor in Binnakandi Block in Hojai District. This Block majorly has women from my community but the environment that these women grew up is quite different from my village's environment. Women stay within their houses and even while being elected as representatives and restricted on their mobility to participate in public spheres. They also speak a different language than ours. Creating awareness through PRI-CBO convergence project has enabled a lot of women and equipped them with courage to come out and participate in Gram Sabha. I also come across a lot of women who are not very educated but want to contribute to their household finances in any manner they can. This is the kind of zest and inquisitiveness

that I had started with. Over the six months that I have worked with women in Binnakandi Block, we have managed to create a certain degree of awareness among women. Women in the community have come up to me and said that I inspire them with my courage, in the same manner when we as LRGs had found our courage through mentors. Through the project, I was able to work as a leader towards not only the development of the community but also my own development. I derive my motivation and inspiration from other women and vice-versa. Eventually it is the women lifting each other up. This project has given me the opportunity to not only escalate my self-confidence but also improve my standard of living. With Internal mentor as my identity, I hope that I will be able to create an impact in the lives of other women and motivate them to be future leaders and motivators.







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A lot of people ask me how I have managed to leave my young daughter of 3 years age at home and work in this distant place. However, my daughter is my biggest strength and supporter.  
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Simi Borah

## Simi Borah

If you ask my fellow LRGs, panchayat members and Kudumbashree NRO team who have seen me through the first phase of the Project, they will tell you that I was always the most silent LRG out of the six LRGs of Bhoraguri GP, Bajiagaon block, Nagaon. Even though I was a silent person, I was very observant. Through the first phase of the project, I learnt thoroughly about the project from continuous observation of how and what others spoke about the project and how they framed their sentences. Till the end of the first phase of the Project, I spoke very little and even when I did, I would depend on other LRGs to complete the topics I spoke about.

When I got selected as an Internal Mentor in the expansion phase of the project, I told myself that this was a great chance for myself to let go of my fear of public speaking. I had to work in a different district, and thankfully my husband and our families were supportive of me taking up this new opportunity. When I started working in the new block, it was much more difficult than I had thought because I was living away from home and my new born child. I was living alone for the first time and had a

whole new team and mentor and very few familiar faces. But once I became comfortable with the new team, things started easing up for me. Once things became a little familiar for me in the new block, I brought my 5 month old child and my mother to stay with me. They stayed with me for most part of the second phase of the project.

We were often shuffled between panchayats, which was a very difficult task to get comfortable with because it meant I had to pick up after what another Internal Mentor had done there. In one of the last shuffles, I was made Internal Mentor of a GP where the GP committee was not very supportive even towards the end of the Project and hence I had a very difficult time working there. However, one of the positive aspect during this time was that the newly elected GP President was an SHG member who had seen me and my LRGs work for them. Therefore, when she assumed office, things became a little bit easy for us as the committee became very approachable. My LRGs who still work there are now being involved in certain Panchayat level and Ward level committees which is a good thing.

I had met with an accident right before PAE was about to start, which left me with a broken right hand. It took me about 3 months to recover and hence I had to miss the training and the activity in my panchayat but my team was very supportive and covered for me in my absence. When I got back after these three months, I found it very difficult to restore my contacts and ways of working. But I was very determined in reinstating my work condition as I had left it and hence after a long struggle things came back on track for me. I started taking up initiative to volunteer to take the most important sessions in any of the trainings. During the GP2RP process, I was extremely happy that I could complete the activities in both my Panchayats on time inspite of having less number of LRGs and more number of VOs. In the scale-up phase of the project when I was selected as Internal Mentor for the second time, I was very proud of myself and so was my husband and family. The third phase of the project was a huge leap in terms of work as I had to look after 5 panchayats on my own for the initial 3 months. There were many days where I doubted myself and it seemed impossible to look after all 5 panchayats together with just



my two eyes and running around all of them with my two feet. I questioned myself when things went bad, but I've somehow managed to pull through the bad days.

Continuous encouragement from the mentor has helped me build my confidence and better my public speaking skills. From being one of the most silent LRGs to looking after 5 GPs in a block on my own, I marvel at how I've grown. A lot of people ask me how I have managed to leave my young daughter of 3 years age at home and work in this distant place. However, my daughter is my biggest strength and supporter. She had to come with me to field in both my blocks and as she grows, I see her imitate me sometimes with a bag on her shoulder and with my dialogues. This gives me a lot of joy. When I have bad days, I ask myself what I can do to avoid the same set of problems from arising again. I try to learn every day and become a woman that my daughter can look up to when she grows up.







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If I had to categorize my learnings in NRO, firstly it will be knowledge and second is punctuality, the importance of time, followed by kindness, courage, language and determination which has brought us to the position where we are today.

Sufiya Khatun

## Sufiya Khatun

My journey in the PRI-CBO Convergence Project started from being selected as a Local Resource Group (LRG) member for my Panchayat in the year 2014. Prior to this, I was an SHG member and moved on to become a VO member, from where I got the opportunity to sit for the LRG selection process and got trained for the same. Our work as LRG started as one ridden with difficulties at many steps - Our Panchayat was not supporting us, no one in the village had an understanding of Gram Sabha. Moreover, SHG and VO members would not come out of their homes. We could not even speak in Hindi, which also made it difficult for us to communicate with Kerala mentors. Over time, we have learnt to speak the language. But after much efforts from our side, we could overcome all these problems over time. Being selected as an Internal Mentor made me more aware of the NRLM structure and the Project as a whole. Many details ranging from the basic structure of CLF-VO-SHG to the details about livelihood development component under NRLM were learnt during this promotion from an LRG to an Internal Mentor.

I got the opportunity to work as a Social Worker in the community. Prior to this, my identity remained limited to being a member of my

family or as an SHG member. I got a new identification under this project, a new phase in life with this project. I have seen personal growth in the last five years by being a part of this project, learning at each step and achieving so much more than I had ever thought I would. Certain elements such as the value of punctuality and discipline, communication skills and how to apply them at various levels, how to disseminate knowledge and the importance of it, have been internal. Knowledge about the society we live, humanity beyond the constructs of caste and religion and knowledge about Kerala and its culture have been fundamental to my experience of working with the project. I developed an ability to conduct myself with different mannerisms in formal settings and got an opportunity to work and interact with people belonging from different religions and communities, which I otherwise would have missed out upon. I have gained the capability to walk into government offices and interact with officials at various levels. Today, we have the power to empower other women. Together, we learnt the importance of working together and the importance of collective action.

It took time for the Panchayat body to understand the concept of Convergence and

the importance of the Project. Once they understood about the PRI-CBO Convergence project, they were able to understand its significance in their GP. As for the CBO, it was not until we went and interacted to the SHGs and VOs about their rights and entitlements that they realized, that in order to make their GP the “Aadarsh Gaon” or “Ideal Village”, the women need to come forward themselves and show their unity as one unit. For instance, in my own Gram Panchayat, the Secretary’s post was vacant and this is when the SHG women came forward and went to the BDO sir, forwarding an application for the same and as a result, a secretary was arranged for our GramPanchayat.

My personal growth during the last 5 years has been immense. I have always found my inspiration in my Kerala Mentor *Baido*. When I was an LRG member, I used to look up to the mentors, who had come from other states and were guiding us so patiently. I had a dream of being a mentor too and spreading this knowledge as far and wide as possible, which came true in the year 2017. We became Internal Mentor in other districts, first in Sonitpur district and today, I work in the farthest district from my hometown, Tinsukia. I can recall a time when I was not even able to interact with



the CRPs in my SHG. But as an Internal Mentor, we were steadily exposed to FC, Mentor, BDO, BPM, BC and department officials and the various surroundings these officials would work in. This was all very new to me. They belonged to various strata, castes, religions and regions and many a times, it was my responsibility to be accountable to them and even make them understand a number of things in those local settings. I realized, I had been gaining much more confidence and courage to not only talk to them, but interact with them on various issues. If we lacked knowledge about certain issues, we were supposed to learn about them and even make them understand about it with utmost patience and courage. Today, I am in a position where as and when I see a big crowd, I can interact much more with them and share knowledge, judging the crowd; when it is a small crowd, I know how to limit my speech accordingly.

If it had not been for the PRI-CBO Convergence Project, my identity would have been limited to those of being a member of my family and that of being a mother. But after becoming an Internal Mentor, an entire new facet has been added to my life. If I had to categorize my learnings in NRO, firstly it will be knowledge and second is punctuality, the importance of time, followed by kindness, courage, language

and determination which has brought us to the position where we are today. I have been to different places and met people with vibrant cultures. My growth has been multi folded in this journey, with me knowing not only my own GP, but also other blocks in other districts. In Bajiagaon and Borsola block, we used to get the constant support and time from the BMMU officials like the BPM and BCs, since our work culture was very different and we maintained the timeline given to us under the Convergence project.

Today, in Kakopothar block in Tinsukia district, even though the BMMU officials have not been able to give that much time to us, they have been supporting us to the best of their capacities by being present in our LRG meetings and Gram Sabhas. We have been able to introduce the importance of Convergence to them, with the Panchayati Raj Institutions and the 29 subjects in which they can extend their activities and this has been possible only after being a member of the PRI-CBO Convergence project. My personal achievement, I would say was when I got the opportunity to share my experience of carrying out the GP2RP process in our block as well as clarify doubts in front of a large audience during the North East PRI- SHG Convergence write shop in Guwahati.





## About ASRLM

National Rural Livelihood Mission is being implemented in Assam by the Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission (ASRLM) with the objectives laid by NRLM for enhancing the social and economic empowerment of the rural poor of Assam. It is an independent and autonomous body under Society Registration Act XXI of 1860, and established by Panchayat & Rural Development Department, Government of Assam on 11th Nov'2011.

ASRLM is implementing the DAY-NRLM in the State since November, 2011, with the objective of enhancing the social and economic empowerment of the rural poor in Assam. It has been designed as a multi-pronged approach to strengthen livelihoods of the rural poor by promoting SHGs, providing skill development and placement for youth for wage - based occupations in different private/business organisations as well as imparting self - employment oriented training.

ASRLMS has undergone various phases of learning and has demonstrated significant successes till date in terms of formation of quality Self Help Groups and in their financial assistance and sustainability. Attention has been given on the assessment of the status of SHG movement in the state, bringing good SHGs into Village Organization and Cluster Level Federation fold, further support and facilitation required, on bank linkages to SHGs and on how the programme is to be implemented in a mission mode in a phased manner.

ASRLM has also been actively implementing the Deen Dayal Upadhyay Gramin Kaushal Yojana (DDU - GKY), the skill and placement initiative for Rural youth, of the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India (MoRD). Apart from the PRI - CBO Convergence project, ASRLM has numerous programmes within its ambit like the Mahila Kissan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) to empower women in the agriculture sector, promotion of Water Hyacinth products as a sustainable livelihood option and the Million SoUL program to assemble and distribute solar study lamps in rural areas. The cadres of ASRLM include Jeevika Sakhis , Krishi Sakhis, Pashu Sakhis, Bank Mitras



## About Kudumbashree NRO

Kudumbashree NRO traces its roots from Kudumbashree - the State Poverty Eradication Mission of Kerala. Kudumbashree works around the principles of Social , Economic and Women Empowerment and focuses on the fact that poverty is not just absence of financial support, but also the absence of entitlements, rights, equality and the political rights as well. The three tier structure of Kudumbashree was developed strategically within each Gram panchayat along the lines of attaining rights, entitlements, livelihood opportunities and financial support. Based on Kudumbashree's achievements, the Ministry of Rural Development recognised it as State Rural Livelihood Mission (SRLM) in 2011 under the NRLM.

Kudumbashree NRO provides technical as well as implementation support to the SRLMs who would want to work on the following two models:

- Panchayat Raj Institutions - Community Based Organisation (PRI - CBO) Convergence Project - Promoting the SHG federations to work alongside local Governments so as to enhance local governance
- Micro- Enterprise Consultant (MEC) Project & Start - Up Village Entrepreneurship Programme - Promoting Enterprises through a community based support system

At present KS NRO has been extending its support to twenty states and one union territory.



