

Formation of corporate Goat-rearing Company by local women goat-rearers in India: The role of ODL and Lifelong Learning

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Introduction

The average farm size in India has declined from 2.3 ha in 1970 -71 to 1.08 ha in 2015 – 16. The share of small and marginal farmers increased from 70% in 1980 -81 to 86% in 2015- 16. The average farm size in the state of Tamil Nadu is 0.75 ha. Reduction in farm size results in agrarian distress. To enhance the income in agriculture farmers traditionally practice integrated allied activities like milch animals, goat rearing, backyard poultry etc. In real situation small and marginal farmers face multiple challenges for accessing capital, inputs and marketing facilities for their farm produce. Many institutional models are developed to support the local farmers to support for making farming as a profitable enterprise, one among them is ‘farmers collective’ to support the farmers in multiple ways like support the credit need, inputs supply for lower price and rescue the farmers from the clutches of the middle men and promote direct marketing and get higher prices etc. For the last one decade farmers are encouraged particularly small farmers to form farmers collectives like Farmers Producer Organizations (FPO) and encourage farmers directly to involve in business. Several govt schemes are introduced to support the FPOs primarily to provide financial support, planning and capacity building. Some of the major challenges the FPOs facing are lack of or inadequate knowledge in company management, technical skills, poor capital flow, insufficient infrastructure, strategies for marketing of the products and risk mitigation mechanisms to manage the crisis.

Agriculture extension is a crucial factor to bridge the gap between research labs to a farmer’s field, but in India the reach of the public extension is limited in addition it is burdened with non-extension activities such as the distribution of subsidies and inputs, with limited time left to attend to core extension activities like advising farmers to enhance adoption of new practices and techniques to resolve problems in the field (Reddy 2018). The other aspect is that agricultural extension in India is skewed towards crop production neglecting allied sectors, such as dairy, goat rearing and fishery etc which provide significant contribution towards farmer’s household income. In real context this gap is filled by the input dealers and agribusiness companies but unfortunately the primary objective of their extension service is for product promotion rather than support the farmers to provide the right information or technology to solve the problem. The data reveals that the amount spent it is just 0.7 per cent of Agriculture GDP during 2014-15 on agriculture research and education which includes extension and training. Therefore the massive learning needs of the farming community are left with inadequate opportunities to get addressed. Moreover farming practices are changing very fast due to multiple reasons like climate crisis, globalization, and demands from the markets, technology advancements etc., hence the farmers learning needs are changing fast. Increasing use of mobile phones, higher penetration rate in rural India and advantages of Mobile Learning made mobile phones an effective learning tool particularly among the women farmers whose mobility and opportunities for learning is restricted due to various socio economic and cultural factors.

In this backdrop the paper will discuss about the traditional women goat rearers who formed a corporate company called ‘Theni District Women Goat rearers company’ in Theni district in the state of Tamil Nadu, the characteristics of these women shareholders who became the life long learners, their learning needs, pedagogical approach adopted, learning outcomes, access and experiences of mobile phones for learning, gender constrains etc. The paper also discusses about the FPO management, how the women farmers become corporate literates and managing the company successfully.

Methodology

The data for paper was collected through participatory research tools like Focus Group Discussion with the selected shareholders who are active in the company activities and with the Board of Directors. Farm visits were made to meet and discuss with the women farmers. Open ended discussions were held with the managers of the company. The quantitative data are collected from the company records. Apart from these methods adopted for data collection,

the first and second authors have been working with the women groups for the last several years had opportunity to witness the activities in several occasions and to directly interact with the shareholders and the company management.

The evolution of Community based groups in to a Corporate company

FPO is a generic name, which means and includes farmer- producers’ organization incorporated/registered either under Part IXA of Companies Act or under Co operative Societies Act of the concerned States and formed for the purpose of leveraging collectives through economies of scale in production and marketing of agriculture and allied sector (FPOs Operational Guidelines 2020). If we look at the data in agriculture 73.2% are women compared to 55% men, and approximately 80% of the economically active women are employed by the agriculture, but critics say women are neglected and efforts are not made either for their participation in a mixed FPO with men and women shareholders or to form women farmers exclusive FPO. Azim Premji University study report (2019) estimated out of the total 7374 FPOs in the country it is only three per cent (220 numbers) were women FPOs. This reflects the poor representation for women in the FPOs movement.

The Theni Women Goat rearers Company is a registered company, it was registered in the year 2015 with 1050 women goat rearers as the shareholders. Vidiyal NGO and the National Bank for Agriculture and Development (NABARD) mobilized the women goat rearers and registered as a Farmers Producer Organization (FPO). Now the company is managed by a set of women goat rearers. If we look at the background of the women shareholders, these women goat rearers were formed in to Self Help Groups (SHGs) roughly 25 years backs, around 12 to 15 women members from the same hamlet came together and formed in to savings and internal lending group. Vidiyal the local NGO facilitated the group formation and capacity development of the group members. The group members were trained on book keeping, leadership, conflict resolution and developing partnership with banks. Social capital in the group is built through group culture, strong norms and collective social behavior of the members. Later in the year 1995 when the number of groups reached scale there were converted in to SHG Federation and named as Vidivelli. A major section of the Federation members are traditional goat rearers and each woman goat rearer manages a few goats and this situation creates a limited marketable surplus, hence they get only a few marketable goats and depend on local markets and middle men to buy the goats, it is not helping them to get higher prices this situation needs an institutional mechanism to get the scale and also to enter in to direct marketing.

To increase the number goats and strengthen the goat rearing practice Vidiyal NGO facilitated partnership with banks. In the year 2009 around 300 women goat rearers who are members of Self Help Groups received credit from a commercial bank for buying goats, Each woman got 11 goats (10 female and 1 male) for the loan amount of Rs.43000/-. The trust and credibility strengthened the bond with the banks and helped the women to receive continuous credit support. This helped the women to purchase more goats and the number of goats owned by the group members increased rapidly. The basic asset building behaviour of the women farmers also played a role to add and expand the number of goats in the farm. In general the rate of default and NPA is Zero, if there is one or two defaulters, the Self Help Group or the SHG Federation will support and rescue them and later collect the amount from the member. To address the capital need the apart from the banks loans they receive now the company is providing capital for the purchase of goats and increase the number in the farm, A shareholder can get upto Rs. 200000 for buying goats, this should be repaid in ten instalments. Many shareholders are availing this service to increase the size of the farm.

The number of goats owned by the women have increased rapidly with the bank support the first batch of women groups received 3100 goats in the year 2009 and now the number goats owned by the women share holders of the company is **29655** and village wise details is provided in the table given below.

Srl.No.	Name of village	No. of shareholder	Goat	Sheep	Total
1	T.Puthukottai	89	2714	1907	4621
2	Ramakrishnapuram	24	765	50	815

3	Pottipuram	52	1148	384	1532
4	Thimminayakanpatti	36	1132	398	1530
5	Chinnapottipuram	37	2518	1894	4412
6	Rasingapuram	15	542	203	745
7	Silamalai	131	98	692	790
8	Sulappuram	142	2855	2235	5090
9	Maniyampatti	37	166	114	280
10	Sillamarathupatti	59	821	592	1413
11	B.Sundararajapuram	75	829	1092	1921
12	Visuvasapuram	12	45	142	187
13	Bathrakalipuram	67	984	1556	2540
14	Dombuchery	101	602	1621	2223
15	Bodinayakanur	173	891	665	1556
	Total	1050	16110	13545	29655

(Source: records of Goat rearers company)

ODL to promote goat rearing and corporate literacy

Farmer Producer Groups play extremely important role in extension in the respective regions. This support results in reducing the cost, increased profitability, information access and reduce the transaction cost there by facilitating farmers to achieve higher price realization. The NGOs and FPOs led extension models are relatively efficient and exhibit sensitivity to local priorities and to address the learning needs of the local farmers.

For better management of goat rearing and to ensure profit these women showed interest to learn about improved management practices. To meet the demands of the women goat rearers Vidiyal an NGO and Vidivelli the SHG Federation together introduced mobile based Life long learning for Farmers (L3F) programme with the support of Commonwealth of Learning. The lessons were disseminated through simple button phones as voice messages on daily basis. The loan application form submitted to the commercial banks includes a low cost and basic mobile phone for the women farmers as a part of the credit sanctioned for goat rearing. This helps the farmers to buy and use mobile phones to address their learning needs i.e for better farming practices and management of the enterprises. To become a mobile learner, farmers have to enrol in the mobile network already created by Vidiyal. Learning duration for each learner is three minutes every day (it is divided into three one minute voice messages) and for five days in a week. Thus every month a learner listens to the content for 75 minutes. In addition to hearing voice messages on a daily basis, the members discuss the relevant points in their regular group meetings of SHGs or JLGs held once in a month. This process facilitates collective and collaborative learning among them. Some of the major learning needs identified are the quality animals, feeding practices and fodder management, increase of productivity, disease management, understanding about the markets local and regional level etc. The total number of voice mails prepared about goat rearing till now based on the learning needs of the goat rearers and disseminated to the learners is 2364.

Mobile based Massive Open Online Course (MobiMOOC) on Corporate literacy was conducted to promote the learning about the basics of the corporate company for the semi literate and illiterate women shareholders of FPO. It is a technology based on Interactive Voice Response (IVR) helps to cover large number of learners. The course was delivered as a free structured course in audio format. Before starting the course village level awareness meetings were conducted to the shareholders with the technical support from Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kanpur. The course contents were developed based on the learners needs assessments conducted, the topics covered are primarily related to areas like the important roles, responsibilities and duties of the shareholders, the benefits and services the shareholders could get from the FPOs, the importance of business plan for FPOs and FPOs supporting the shareholders to sell their farm produce. The lessons are in colloquial style and dialog mode for easy

understanding of the farmers. Each lesson is for around one minute, only a few exceeded the duration of one minute. To help learners a hand out in vernacular language with step by step details about how to operate the mobile phone to activate, navigate and participate in the quiz etc was printed and distributed to each learner. In the end line survey conducted 95% of the respondents answered that they become aware of the uses of FPOs, 87% answered that they learnt the roles and responsibilities of the shareholders. A Mobile app was also developed for the course for those own a smart phone to download the lesson and store them for future reference.

For the farmers who own smart phones, the other social media platforms such as Facebook, Youtube and Whatsapp were effectively integrated to promote the learning activities. Printed booklets covering different topics related to these enterprises are distributed to the learners to support the mobile learning; they can read and look for relevant information whenever necessary. The same voice messages used for the mobile learning are reused for preparing audio visual contents with pictures and clippings taken from the real field condition and distributed to the learners who own video player or a personal computer at home.

In the mobile learning the learners are continuously engaged, the process starts with learners need identification, this is done through several methods, periodical Focus Group Discussions (FGD), learners needs list prepared during the Self Help Groups and Joint Liability Groups (JLG) monthly meetings, problems observed and information gathered by the field staff of the company during their field visits. Content preparation through collecting information from several sources and validated by experts from agriculture and veterinary universities and training centres affiliated to these institutions. This process helps to bring the current scientific ideas to address the needs of the learners and follow improved practices for change in content preparation. Selected learners are involved to give their opinion about the style and language to ensure its farmer friendliness. After dissemination again the learners are requested to give their opinion and feedback in the group meetings, and later shared with the NGOs staff. A study attempted to delineate the gender dimension in the use of the mobile phone as a learning tool among the women involved in the goat-rearing enterprise concludes that ‘ the appropriation of the mobile phone in the context of bank credit and lifelong learning has helped to create an identity for the phone as a learning and business tool. Using mobile phones while managing animals, listening to audio messages and voicemails and recording messages for discussion and peer review, sharing the messages in the neighborhood, workplaces, and SGH meetings, discussing the various aspects of goat rearing, all these have strengthened the objectification, intensification, and conversion processes’ (Balasubramanian K et al 2010).

The Self Help Groups in which they are members introduced a new loan scheme for purchase of Android phone, the women member will receive Rs.10,000 and it is interest free, she has to pay back each month Rs.2000 and close the loan in ten months period. Due to this support extended from the group now it is reported around 70% the members have Android phones.

The company activities are more visible, now have retail marketing points, company leaders facilitate collective marketing of goats for the merchants from outside and also to meet the local needs such as festivals, functions etc. The FPO management believes their capacity to promote direct marketing of goats is still limited and the main reason perceived is the inadequate capacity for risk taking and mitigation. Two years back the Institute of Management (IIM), Ahmadabad supported the FPO to prepare a business plan, it adopted an interactive method to help the management and staff of the FPO to know and learn about the business plan. Now the company is running successfully, making profit every year and provided dividend to its shareholders for the last four years.

The business turnover of the company for the last seven years is given below:

S.No.	Financial year	Turn over/INR
1	2015-16	319211
2	2016-17	1286389
3	2017-18	2300435
4	2018-19	4970058
5	2019-20	5210466

6	2020-21	4021432
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(Source: records of Goat rearers company)

The FPOs has created permanent assets like buildings, machineries, the table given below provides the list of major assets created till now for the company through investing their own capital and also mobilized from the govt schemes and subsidies.

Srl.No.	Asset	Cost	Source
1	Land (1.20 acres)	13,00,000	Share amount + Loan from directors
2	Seed Processing Unit		Grant from TNSFAC Rs.600000/-
	Building	81,12,000	
	Machineries	17,02,000	
3	Product outlet building	5,76,500	Grant Rs.500000/- Business Development Assistant from NABARD
4	RAWA Cattle Feed Machine	90,500	Directors loan Rs.54300/- Subsidy from Agriculture Engineering – Rs.36200
	Total	1,17,81,000	

(Source: records of Goat rearers company)

The company is emerging as a model in the region, other 12 such FPOs in the district have joined with this and created a consortium of FPOs for mutual learning; develop partnership with different agencies/organizations and to leverage the scale in the business.

Analysis and conclusions

The impact of mobile learning shows that the women shareholders of the FPO are effectively using mobile phones for continuous learning, efficient management of the enterprise, increased productivity and profit, asset building of poor and marginalized households and asset ownership by women farmers. Majority have shifted from simple button phone to smart phone and started using multiple methods for learning. Learning through mobile learning about the good management practices about health and disease management, feed supply, reduce the mortality etc., is helping the women farmers to increase the goat number and farm size.

Professional management of FPO is an important area the leaders of the FPO need to develop more knowledge and skill, the course conducted on 'Corporate literacy' and no doubt the trainings on the same aspect has helped but this is an area of continuous capacity development.

Inadequate marketing linkage is one area the company needs to concentrate in the future, which the company particularly the management needs the capacity development, more data about markets, prices of companies and retailers need to be collected regularly. The company is well versed with the use of ICT for outreach and continuous learning, the same need to be effectively used for improving the marketing of the products.

The team needs support to work on the value chain, this is very essential to prepare/update a very realistic business plan and also develop multiple channels of partnership.

Generally the organically evolved FPOs are better equipped to adopt market oriented practices and equipped with risk mitigation mechanisms, the women goat rearer company need to develop the capacity on this area, the dependency on the NGO is making unable to scale their business.

The women shareholders have fairly strong financial management skill; this is due to the long experience of their hands on experience of the financial management of SHGs, Federation of SHGs and now a Corporate company.

Following are some of the statements made by the women shareholders of the company:

Now we have self confidence because we manage an enterprise (goat rearing) which helps us not only to earn income but also we can get money when we are in need or even to support others. Our fears about how to manage our basic needs in life is reduced, we have created assets and we are feeling secured that the assets we have created will support us to meet our future needs.

Our past experiences are different, only males in the society are respected, the educated are respected but we are females and illiterate or school drop outs but due to our knowledge, skill developed in enterprise management and also the economic security achieved the men folks at home and also in the public space started respecting us, we were consulted, allowing us to participate and contribute in discussions and decision making in some situations we were asked to provide advice to solve problems.

Bank officials are now treating us respectfully as dignified customers, it was not the case in the past; when we visited the banks in the past we were ignored and treated as ignorant illiterate women.

These women are now life long learners and familiar with the ODL methods, hence there are chances for them to remove some of the constraints indicated above and similarly the above statements they have made based on their life experience will be further strengthened.

The learnings from the experiences of the Theni Women Goat rearers Company shows the strength of the ODL for improving the knowledge and skill of the semiliterate and illiterate shareholders of the FPOs, hence the approach can be integrated in the policy and programme of the FPO's development by the promoting organizations.

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