

# **Gender perspectives in case studies across continents**

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***Srihaswani* or Creative Manual Skills for  
Self-Reliant Development (CMSSRD):  
A gender case study, 1996-2012**

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## ***Abstract***

The case study looks at an initiative of grassroots development in nine villages of the District of Birbhum, West Bengal over the last two decades *from a gender perspective*. The initiative itself was not designed from the outset with any gender bias. Increasingly, with time, the activities dependent on the strong involvement and leadership of women and girl children showed better participation and results, based on their better understanding and sympathy with what was being attempted. The basic premise of Srihaswani was that the challenges faced by the local society from the current rural situation of increasing resource stress and economic uncertainty required a two-pronged response. While the 'mainstream' prong of monetization, commodification of village life, and increased dependency on external inputs and policies proceeded apace through market forces, the very survival and livelihood security of the majority demanded that what was left of the barter, subsistence economy and self-reliant skills of the village – where the women played the larger role – be strengthened and given fresh impetus through the programme. The paper seeks to show how, through an integration of concerns ranging from organic kitchen-gardening, artisan production, herbal medicine, basic education, to environmental resource protection and political participation, the women and girls in particular found the support to build up their self-confidence and collective voice, the willingness to question their status within the family, community and larger society and to work for their improvement. \_

## ***Introduction***

This particular development initiative was selected for a gender case study for a number of reasons: a) involvement of the same small rural population (**mainly, but not exclusively, women and girls**) over a long period of time – sixteen years. This helped to trace the gradual evolution of awareness and understanding in the same households and neighbourhoods b) the use of an integrated approach that was built on local village leadership, participation and self-help skills, with minimal reliance on external direction or resources c) a conscious effort not to pre-determine quantitative objectives and targets of a socio-economic nature, leaving the directions of intervention to emerge from a process of continuous dialogue and consultation.

### ***The location and the participants:***

The nine villages of the Srihaswani initiative are situated in the Bolpur Block of the resource-poor, rainfed Birbhum District of West Bengal State, in a 15-kilometre radial cluster around the university settlement of Shantiniketan. The area is some 160 kilometres North-West of the



metropolis of Kolkata (ex-Calcutta), in Eastern India. The participating village communities and neighbourhoods (“paras” that are, collectively, a mixture of the local Hindu, Muslim and Santhal cultures), self-selected themselves after being introduced to the basic concept of Srihaswani. In the case of the larger villages, the participating households have tended to come from low-income neighbourhoods, rather than from the village as a whole. The number of participating households has varied from approximately 400 to 600 over the years.

### ***The concept and premise of ‘Srihaswani’***

#### ***1. A period of rapid change and uncertain futures***

The period covered by this study roughly coincides with the period of economic ‘reforms’ introduced by the Indian Government since 1994 in order to remove the remaining barriers to free market transactions. Global economic integration has been embraced as the way forward, despite all its disruptive consequences for community and family life in rural areas. At the village level, this has meant an acceleration of the process of competition from factory manufactures and imports begun under British Colonialism, along with the earlier impact of the ‘Green Revolution’: the package of hybrid seeds, artificial chemical inputs and large-scale irrigation introduced in order to modernise agriculture since the 1960s. Access to credit and the level of rural debt has also increased markedly, leading to financial crises in many of the poorer households. Increased ‘marketization’ and consumerism has also led to the commodification and commercialization of many previously non-market services and mutual help benefits from within the village community.

The outcome, on the one hand, has been higher cash incomes for those who have been able to take advantage of the greater access to urban markets and new technologies for higher production. Bore-wells and submersible pumps have allowed a second rice crop to be cultivated, providing both employment and a rise in income. That, however, has been accomplished at a high price for the future, with underground aquifers drying up rapidly, along with a loss of soil quality. Moreover, men have been more influenced by (and benefited more from) greater commercialization and consumerism than the women, who are mostly confined to the home and its many routine tasks.



On the other hand, the largely self-sufficient, subsistence economy of the village has disappeared, becoming far more dependent on the uncertainties and fluctuations of market demand and prices. During this period, the Government’s ‘social safety net’ measures such as food rationing under

the PDS (Public Distribution System) or price ceilings, have been less effective than before, together with the looming spectre of agricultural input and fossil fuel subsidies being withdrawn. The demand for cash for essentials has become acute in the villages, especially for food, medicines and health care, and education 'tutorials' for their children. Recently, Central Government schemes such as the Employment Guarantee public works ('MGNREGS' or Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) and free Mid-Day meals for school-children have had to be provided to buttress the 'safety net' measures once more.

Perhaps most importantly, the rapid transition from independent small farmer and artisan to hired wage-labourer has meant a shift to the slums in the towns and cities or to more prosperous regions in the form of migrant labour, causing a huge increase of insecurity as well as a permanent loss of skills, dignity and identity. The social costs of this transition, borne by the farmers and their families, are largely ignored. Culturally, the onslaught of mass-media advertising and foreign-urban lifestyles has penetrated these villages as never before, mainly through television 'soaps' and mobile telephones, generating expectations - especially among the young - that stand little chance of being met, thus creating fresh tensions and frustrations within the family.

## **2. The promise of Srihaswani**

Srihaswani has been a countervailing attempt to encourage villagers to value their own knowledge and skills --- especially the fast-diminishing *manual skills* that they had in abundance --- and put them to use, particularly those that require 'mind-skills' as well, making them *creative*, such as organic farming and sustainable agriculture, nutritive food preparation, home construction using locally-found materials, the weaving and tailoring of furnishings and clothing, traditional crafts combined with artistry, the widespread use of medicinal plants and herbs for preventive health as well as for treatment, and aids to education of their children through vocational and apprenticeship training.



Mainstream government policies and market pressures will continue to strengthen the relentless drive to expand cash and credit transactions. But if creative manual skills can keep open avenues outside the market to buttress the provision of basic needs production and services at a low level of material costs, surplus labour and environmental stress, they can feed a healthy parallel economy that will help to meet survival needs without putting the future at risk. Their use

should also help to strengthen the self-confidence of villagers to engage with the globally-integrated market in a slightly less unequal manner.

In sum, the original premise on which Srihaswani was built was that domestic and local self-reliance was an essential concomitant of a healthy development process. Moreover, that indigenous knowledge and manual skills, conscious and aware of the broader context in which rapid changes were taking place, could be applied with benefit to meet many of their daily needs, in the interests of a fairer, more creative, self-confident and sustainable social transformation.

*A gender perspective and focus* has been a vital element of the Srihaswani design and evolution from the outset, not consciously at first but consciously growing in strength after the first three years. Simply trying to explain a concept and philosophy based on self-reliance found much greater resonance and receptivity among the women, than among their male counterparts preoccupied with their hunger for cash from external sources. Throughout this 16-year period, the women have kept their lead.

### ***The 'architecture' of the Srihaswani programme and the mechanisms of the process***

*A continuing dialogue* between the village participants and the external catalysts and local facilitators has been the central feature of both architecture and process. For the first two years, it was only dialogue, not 'intervention', a process of mutual learning through regular discussion and demonstration once or twice a week, using visual tools of drawing and image rather than literacy and reading/writing. Each of the participants of the process had to learn about the other, and about their selves as they were perceived through the eyes of the other. Men and women from normally separated communities, castes and cultures --- Santhal, Muslim and Hindu --- had to sit together and learn to trust and communicate. The women had to come away from their homes, and their men-folk had to agree to their doing so without feeling threatened.

The rules of dialogue are still being learned, slowly but surely, the art of expressing more abstract notions of choice and preference proving unfamiliar and difficult to acquire. Once acquired, however, the results are dramatic in terms of the strength and conviction of the views expressed. Each 'session' or meeting was remembered through symbolic images that took the place of literacy tools. One of the first psychological hurdles took a long time to navigate: what exactly was the Srihaswani programme in time and space, what *concretely* was it trying to do, how was it funded, and so on. It didn't bring any benefits of brick and mortar (a school a road, a health clinic), for



instance, to the village. It wasn't a government scheme or a Non Governmental Organization (NGO). Was it then subversive or exploitative?

As the process of mutual learning and trust continued, and dialogue was accompanied by 'field' activity and demonstration, the architecture of the programme grew more defined and formal, with the village participants, their local facilitators (also drawn from the same communities and villages themselves) and the external catalysts, all functioning as interacting 'layers' without any obvious hierarchy. The village facilitators and participants had the responsibility for conducting informal surveys of the households in their villages, drawing maps of residences and scattered cultivation plots, places of worship and ceremony, roads and passages. Numbers of households belonging to different communities had to be ascertained, their differences of wealth, income and opportunity at least given some qualitative sense of magnitude – if not numerical precision. Each village's identity and history had to be learned from the elders and noted. Where were the markets and what commodities were traded, what were the 'external' balances of trade at the village level? The facilitators have the challenging task of combining their Srihaswani animation work with the daily chores and tasks of their village households. They, like the external catalysts who have more formal education and training, receive modest levels of remuneration consonant with Minimum Wage levels for the state.

In order to map the creative manual skills still alive in the participating communities and villages, and to demonstrate their current state of functioning, it proved necessary to construct three '**resource centres**' for each cluster of neighbouring participant villages. These physical structures built with village resources would be places to meet and discuss; also to collect, store and exhibit the Srihaswani resources and explain how to strengthen them. They were intended to become focal points for other village households to visit and learn from. To fund these resource centres, new sources of financial support had to be tapped.

Since that point, the Srihaswani programme has had a succession of benefactor bodies over more than a dozen years, varying in origin, size and duration according to the changing views and priorities of (mostly international) donor organizations. The continuity of management support for these donor funds has been ensured by the Ahimsa Trust, a Delhi-based body run by Shantum and Gitu Seth, with a Field Coordinator, Chandana Dey, based in Shantiniketan. She has provided both the intellectual guidance and inspiration, especially for the gender perspective, and has been the essential link between the external catalysts and village facilitators. Cushioning a small local initiative from changing



development fashions and donor pressures has been an important function. Coordinating with village-level Government-supported structures and schemes, especially women's Self-Help Groups, is of primary importance. Many volunteers – local and international – have been induced and mobilized by her over the years to bring their enthusiasm and commitment to the Srihaswani programme. Similarly, Chandana has fostered links between Srihaswani and a whole range of local as well as national organisations with similar or complementary aims, such as Manab Jamin and Traditional Medicine Research (FRLHT) and the Development Services Resource Centre focused on organic farming with many field locations in the state. Arranging visits by the village women and men to their activities in far-off states of India has provided eye-opening exposure and radical inspiration.

The external support has been crucial for the level of modest funding that has sustained the Srihaswani programme over this long period, as well as discussions on programme direction and the establishing of priorities. In the first 3 years it came from two phases of support from the Australian bilateral aid programme, AUSAID (2000-2004) through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for India; this was followed by funding from the Irish Government, through its bilateral programme for India, that provided support for the period 2005 to 2010. During this time, private donors have made a very welcome contribution in cash and in kind, especially welcome because of their own commitment and active work in the villages.

Since 2010, the external support has been less systematic and covered only particular components of the programme. As the funding has shrunk, the “strings” and paperwork have increased. The one continuing theme for the past decade has been the gender focus of the Srihaswani programme, with its central concern being the raising of self-awareness and livelihood capabilities of the women themselves, with special emphasis on mothers and their daughters. The primary instrument has been education and training, from home-based and pre-school right through adulthood.

### ***The growing focus on Women and Girls' involvement in the Srihaswani programme***

Among the first steps taken by the Srihaswani programme in 1997 was the conducting of an informal survey by the village participants with help of their facilitators of how the different household members spent a typical day (mothers, fathers, girls and boys, the grandparents and in-laws) with a time study of the hours devoted to each task. These were then charted for each of the initial nine villages/neighbourhoods to show the variations and ascribe reasons for the differences.

It became immediately obvious that against a typical *male* adult day of 7-8 hours, mainly in the fields and sometimes on other manual work such as construction, the *female* working day was twice as long, typically 16-18 hours, *and with almost no breaks*. This work was just as tedious and backbreaking, whether:

Potter/ Blacksmith/ Mason	Collection of "free" foods (vegetables,

in the fields for sowing and weeding; feeding the cows, goats and chickens; fetching water from long distances; collecting leaves and twigs as well as edible wild plants and berries for cooking; food preparation for many hours throughout the day; cleaning and washing; child and parent care; treating ailments; engaging in embroidery or other craft work to bring in a little cash; or helping the children attend to their school home-work even if, as in most cases, they were illiterate themselves.

Boys would be out playing games; the girls were mostly indoors from early adolescence, helping their mothers or tending to the livestock, or looking after younger siblings. Early marriage for girls was the norm, from 12 to 18 years of age, and often entailed a life of virtual bondage in the husband's home, at the beck and call of the mother-in-law and paternal grandmother. They would be the first to serve the meals and the last to eat themselves - whatever was left - with rarely much thought for their own needs or satisfaction.

Men, on the other hand, had recourse to numerous forms of entertainment, rest, and relaxation. If their husbands left the household in search of manual wages elsewhere, the conditions of their wives would almost always deteriorate, living at the mercy of the in-laws, with the full responsibility for bringing up the children and feeding them and the in-laws, from whatever meager remittances were made – erratically and uncertainly – by their absentee husbands.

With the help of the volunteer doctors and village facilitators and the village literate volunteer teenage girls who took part in the programme, the health condition of the women and girls has been assessed periodically, with large numbers of women recording problems of under- and mal-nutrition, anaemia and iron deficiencies, serious child-bearing and pre-natal disorders. This awareness has had a major impact on village and household sensibilities and raised fresh queries as to the causes.

## **Three consistent programmatic threads, with a gender focus, over the 12-year Programme implementation period (2000-2012)**

### ***A: Nutrition and income at the household level***

The first of these has been a nutritional improvement programme based on the organic cultivation and Creative Manual Skills involved in over a hundred **kitchen gardens** run by women in all the villages, where a combination of fruit trees, lentils, and protein- and iron-rich vegetables have been grown alongside medicinal plants and herbs. Located within the homestead, the women have been able to take over this programme with a great deal of enthusiasm and pride, once they were assisted with the free supply of seeds, technical advice on inter-cropping, organic fertilisation and pest-control, and on the processing and cooking of the fresh output for themselves and their families. Those who managed a small



surplus, were eventually organised into small groups that formed part of the “Ajoli” women’s cooperative, producing preserves, fruit juices, seeds and herbal teas and medicines, all for sale in the Shantiniketan-Bolpur markets. The fresh possibilities of income-generation, and bringing in extra cash resources to the family, have been eyed with favour by the men-folk. An important part of the training was conducted through guided visits to larger-scale cooperative ventures in other states. A key inspiration was provided by their brief stay and tours of the FRLHT in Bangalore, which has extensive testing and research infrastructure at the national level related to the Ayurvedic and Yunani schools of Traditional Medicine.

In the last few years, a new prong has been added to these efforts in better coping with the effects of climate change, through more adaptive micro-practices and knowledge of soil and water depletion. The Resource Centres helped women’s groups spread and internalize the training on organic farming and kitchen gardening. Many women also attended Melas or Fairs and spoke on the need for self-reliance and self-sufficiency in food security, health and the environment. A horticulture development programme has added to the capacity building of both men and women to grow and nurture fruit trees so that rural children can add fruit to their daily diets. ‘Environment’, thus, has been added as the third prong below, with Education and Empowerment, as a specifically designed “Three-E’s” integrated programme of awareness for the emerging women.

### ***B: Education, Empowerment and Awareness-Raising in the context of the family as well as of society at large***

Initially, education was entirely non-formal, conveyed vocally and through images, and related at first to their own natural and social environments. Their gradual understanding of especially

women's conditions in the cities and in other parts of India and other countries meant opening their eyes to their own situation in ways and areas they had not explored earlier. In this way, a whole new generation of young girls, although very limited in total numbers, has also grown through the Srihaswani programme and used their new-found knowledge to become much more articulate, self-aware and self-confident in dealing with those inside and outside their homes. A few have even been helped to complete their formal schooling and been able to enter 'college', a *revolutionary first* for their own villages.



From the mid-point of the programme period, especially after 2008 when external funding became more limited, the push to expanding the vocational training schemes in craft employment, as well as efforts to facilitate the entry of children to the formal school system found a ready response among adolescent and teenage girls in particular. Getting the more educated older teenagers to serve as volunteers in pre-school education ("Home-Schooling") for the ages 2.5- 5 years, in conjunction with the supply of nutritional supplements to them, proved encouragingly easy, and raised their status in the eyes of their own families. Adolescent girls completed a two-year training programme in pre-school education and learned about child rights as well as different facets of child development. The 'Home School' education syllabus combines sensorial, environment-friendly teaching materials and attempts to make teaching and learning as fun and imaginative as possible.

### ***C. Closer linkages with government schemes and local democracy at the village level***

The last decade has seen a more concerted effort by the Central Government, systematically encouraged by civil society groups, to ensure that more financial and direct support is provided for rural employment, credit, and health (including reproductive health) through schemes such as the "Anganwadi" and "Asha" for the health of women and children, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (one of the most ambitious programmes of wage



support for public works that the world has seen), and widespread and fast-expanding use of the mostly women-run Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and credit cooperatives. This has been

combined with minority reservation efforts for increasing the representation of women as well as minorities in positions of power among local authorities and elected bodies (the “Panchayats”). The increasing participation of women in SHGs and in panchayats has motivated younger women to follow the lead demonstrated by their seniors. In addition, almost all adolescent girls help their mothers with income generation schemes such as needlework and also keep some of this money for themselves. Many young women try and pay for their own studies by taking on younger children as students in ‘tutorials’. All these have been seen as exciting opportunities for the Srihaswani Programme to contribute to, especially through the female cadres that it has helped to build up.

### ***The role of External Support***

The Ahimsa management of the Srihaswani programme, and its local coordinator in Birbhum, have always taken the “self-reliance” aspect of the title seriously. The spirit, from the beginning, was to understand that this was an activity by and for participants, and that they would benefit from the very process and participation rather than through material gains. The very modest coverage of the Programme in terms of household and village numbers has also been deliberate, so that the experimental nature of an intensive effort of awareness raising through dialogue, and its purposefully gradual and participatory expansion would be safeguarded. The international donor support from Australia and Ireland it received was concomitantly modest, never exceeding \$25,000 in any year, but it was involved and committed. Even at this level, however, the pressures to show short-term quantifiable results and obtain financial support in limited and uncertain tranches have been a challenge and a distraction, since it was essential to maintain the continuity of the village facilitators and their predominantly women volunteer supporters. This last has undoubtedly been the biggest strength of the Programme, and the joys of working together for a cause, jointly believed in and fought, will sustain many unsung, perhaps unknown, efforts going into the future, no matter what the immediate fate of this particular Srihaswani Programme initiative may be.

### ***Ongoing Debates for a “Work in Progress”***

***What do the participating women and girls themselves now aspire to, emerging from the Srihaswani experience? (as articulated by them)***



They see that the biggest gift they received from the existence and continuing support of Srihaswani through these years was the “liberating effect”. Quite literally, it allowed them to step out of their homes, out of their ethnic, religious, and caste identities and the often-

claustrophobic confines of their homes and neighbourhoods, to experience new vistas and make new friendships, and to freely express their concerns and questions and lack of understanding of many issues. Voice and mobility were gains of great importance, even if temporary and uncertain.

It allowed them to see how gender-based most of their constraints were, and how these constraints increased rather than diminished with age and life situations. They were not interested in acceptance --- in taking things for granted. They would always want to know the reasons “why” roles and hierarchies and gender perspectives were what they were, why men who had made the rules should get away with unjust and unfair practices. They would like to have much more say in the choice of future partners, or, heaven forbid, not get married at all! From the moment of an unwelcome birth (not the dreamed-of “son”) to the living prison of widowhood and old-age, there was little of joy to be expected from life unless they took matters more into their own hands and joined in the struggle for change. Education was the biggest instrument, but so too were paid employment and Panchayat politics. Greater self-reliance in consumption and care would give them a stronger basis for market-based endeavours. They saw a distinctly brighter prospect for the future that they would carve themselves than what their mothers had experienced – they would see to that, using whatever means they had. Presently women, including single women, have started looking forward to acquiring some social security schemes like pensions that will give them some measure of security in their old age.

***What possibilities are offered by the ‘slow-but-sure’ changing relationships between men and women?***

An original Srihaswani premise was that both men and women would have to be approached simultaneously for the Creative Manual Skills that had managed to survive the onslaught of machine and factory, and that men would be more interested and capable of spreading an interest in production for barter in local and regional markets than the women. But we had not foreseen the extent of the rot that had set in: of crass consumerism and extreme individualism (not to call it outright selfishness) in many village men, combined with the craze for cash and dependence on Government input subsidies and its system of crop off-take and public distribution. There was very little male interest in the economy of self-subsistence and self-reliance. They were therefore canvassed equally, but it was the women who showed more interest in these small initiatives through dialogue.

In the intervening period of the Programme, it would appear that there is a slow groundswell of change in the men’s view of future agricultural developments, welcoming more experimentation on organic cultivation, and testing new multi-cropping and early-planting systems that minimize risk in the context of the rapid and unforeseeable impacts of



climate change. For the first time, farmers' groups willing to try out different techniques have been working with the Programme, and supported by NGOs partnering with Srihaswani who have long been working on alternative systems. Srihaswani farmers' groups have begun on the journey to provide food security for their families and cultivate a wide range of food crops, essential for nutrition and health. With reduced yields from paddy, farmers are now switching to different pulses, sugarcane and various types of mustard and sesame that are essential for a balanced diet.

Seeing the intimate trust and easy working relations that have developed between their wives and daughters and the Srihaswani team, the men have also expressed their concern regarding the current lives of women with their exhausting, debilitating and essentially deadening daily routines. Many have shown their preference for marrying educated women and would like them to be less subject to the exploitative treatment by in-laws and grandparents that the bride experiences the moment she enters her new home. They want them to be much better educated for a variety of reasons: to help educate their children and support completion of their school assignments; to bring in cash through their own employment and supplement family income; and, not least to provide a higher level of companionship than heretofore. Fathers and mothers have seen that the support they expected from their sons in old age can no longer be relied upon; it is the daughters and daughters-in-law who appear to be more caring and dependable.

These changes have been matched by the greater assertiveness of the women themselves, manifest especially among the younger women, as mentioned above. With greater access to the visual media, to jobs, to communication with other girl friends and women through mobile telephony, they have begun to see that it is a rights issue, and that they can reach out to allies outside the village, even in Government, to fight for those rights successfully. Where they encounter violent opposition and repression, divorce has started to become an option in the villages, even a return to their own family home, without it being seen as a curse if they can hold on to their sources of independent income. Current thinking within the Central government also focuses on the rights of single, unmarried women and a slew of proposals meeting these needs have been taken on board. (2012)

### ***Concluding Remarks: Srihaswani in tomorrow's external environment***

As significant improvements in women's lives appear more promising, the hard-won gains achieved face being overturned by a much more uncertain and hostile external environment that is looming over all rural lives. One is the natural environment, with its dwindling resources of fertile soils and clean water, where the climate is clearly more uncertain and unfavourable to steady harvests. Government policies have also shifted in favour of reducing and eliminating subsidies in agriculture and health-care, and allowing greater corporatization of farming and food retailing and processing, while job opportunities are being sharply curtailed, especially for

school graduates. Rural healthcare is in crisis, viral epidemics are on the rise, and families are being forced to sell off parts of their remaining land in order to meet the escalating costs.

In this context, the original Srihaswani principles applied to home- and local community-based production of goods and services assume much greater significance. While the programme has been unable to move ahead much in these areas for lack of adequate funding, promising initiatives have demonstrated positive direction, the processes and local leadership have shown their strength. It has also proved possible to now count on the active involvement of the farming men as well, and an additional educational and training effort applied to adolescent and teenage boys – as has been done with girls very successfully – has every chance of producing excellent results.

Another Srihaswani feature with proven progress has been the friendly mixing of villagers from different ethno-religious backgrounds: Muslim, Santhal and Hindu, in all these educational and other related areas, and it would be a great pity not to build further and wider on that path of comradeship.



The gender focus should remain because it has many insights and mutual support strengths to offer, demonstrating how Creative Manual Skills can indeed produce Self-Reliant Development. All over the world, people and some political leaderships are discovering the importance of the ‘local’ as opposed to, or alongside, the ‘global’, valuing natural resources for simpler, healthier, and happier forms of living that will not destroy life as we know it on this little planet. The Srihaswani experience has

a useful story to tell for this challenge.

### **References and Acknowledgments**

We thank all those who supported the *Srihaswani* initiatives over the decades, and notably the participating communities themselves. The authors drew in particular from intensive interactions with the villagers from 1995 onwards, and from numerous *Bhab* Initiative and Ahimsa Trust studies and reports. Specific gender case study interviews were organized in Birbhum District in 2004, 2010 and 2012. The core *Srihaswani* Team shared numerous insights, all contributing towards our first ‘*Srihaswani: A Gender Case Study*’, a subsequent ‘5 Years On’ Update, plus this current paper.

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**Photo Captions:**

Explanation of the Cover: This terracotta art piece was designed by a local artist, Subir Ghosh, from the village of Bandhnavagram, West Bengal. Each segment shows a different form of self-reliant work from farming to health, from functional crafts to the arts and creativity that engage both women and men who work for themselves and the good of the community.



P. 89) This embroidered tapestry is an artistic rendition of village resources by the *Srihaswani* team

P. 90) A *Srihaswani* team-member boosting village education

P. 91) A medicinal plants demonstration

P. 92) The Bhab (“Thought”) House, for village-*Srihaswani* team interactions

P. 93) Chandana Dey regales the village women (July 2012)

p. 94) Table of men’s (left column) & women’s (right column) workloads, Shantiniketan, West Bengal, India

p. 95) Lush kitchen garden

p. 96) Coaching preschoolers, with a mid-day meal to follow

p. 97) Three women leaders conversing with case study interviewers Brenda Gael McSweeney, Chandana Dey, and Krishno Dey in West Bengal

p. 98) Once ‘hidden’ women in a village outside of Shantiniketan are both visible, and vocal on issues of access to education and work opportunities



p. 99) The village men, too, speak out for girls’ education (though they happy that they were born male!) – monsoon season, 2012

p. 100) Gender Group in artistic mode – Shantiniketan, Nov. 2010

At right: Youngsters’ faces augur well for a bright future.

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## Contributors

**Krishno Dey** spent his early childhood in Kolkata, India. He developed his first interest in rural development traveling around villages with his father, then West Bengal's first Development Commissioner. After studying economics in the United Kingdom at Oxford and Manchester Universities, he worked with a variety of different United Nations organizations (under Salvador Allende) with the UN Development Programme, and ending with the United Nations Volunteers in Geneva. His work has been concerned mostly with formulating and managing new programmes at the country level, and with evaluations and policy analysis at a global level, always with a focus on low-income households. He returned to India in 1995 to pursue his interest in development in a voluntary capacity, all the while being tapped to undertake assignments for a range of international organizations. He co-founded 'The *Bhab* Initiative' in Shantiniketan, West Bengal, and now also manages "*Mitali* Homestays" in Shantiniketan, which also hosts DesignAsia, thus promoting the livelihoods of local handloom artisans.

**Chandana Dey** studied History and International Relations in India and the United States. She has worked as Project Coordinator in West Bengal, India of the Ahimsa Trust since 2000, and earlier for the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) in Geneva, Switzerland. Committed to facilitating grassroots development change, she is co-founder of The *Bhab* Initiative. Her work covers almost all aspects of development in a number of villages in West Bengal; a particular focus in the past decade has been to raise nutrition levels among poor families through increasing multiple crop production on small farms and homesteads. She is keenly aware of the importance of women's contributions to development processes through her work on gender and self-reliance. She has a long-standing interest in education for underprivileged children, and is keen to facilitate their potential in creative ways. Presently, she also lives in Delhi and is searching for ways to make a difference for the poor and marginalized in cities.

**Brenda Gael McSweeney** is Visiting Faculty at Boston University's Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program where she teaches Gender & International Development, and is Resident Scholar at the Women's Studies Research Center (WSRC) at Brandeis University, both in Massachusetts, USA. She served with the United Nations for 30 years in executive positions including in West Africa and the Caribbean; in Europe heading the UN Volunteers programme; then in India as the United Nations Resident Coordinator and UN Development Programme Resident Representative. The Government of India with the UN System designated gender equality as the UN area focus. Brenda holds her Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. She was the recipient of a Fulbright and awards from the Governments of Germany, Jamaica and Burkina Faso, as well as two honorary doctorates. Her research focuses on female education and empowerment in Burkina Faso, and a gender perspective on livelihoods in West Bengal, India (see related papers at [The Global Network of UNESCO Chairs on Gender](#) and at [brendamcsweeney.com](http://brendamcsweeney.com)). She initiated the [UNESCO/UNITWIN Network on Gender, Culture & Development](#).