

A WILL... AND A WAY

Joe Madiath and Sudhi Mohanty take people down the path of self-help

Mattamukundapur once used to repel visitors. Situated southeast of Behrampur in Orissa, it was a maze of mud huts, with dirty streets reeking of human waste, uncultivable land and unhealthy people.

Today it presents a totally different picture—streets and houses are clean, and the villagers greet you with a happy smile. And why not. Every villager has a full crop of vegetables or flowers. There is plenty of water, clean sanitary facilities, and a school, thanks to Gram Vikas and its rural health and environment programme (RHEP). Same is the story of several villages in Ganjam district in south Orissa.

Gram Vikas, founded by volunteers from Chennai-based Young Students' Movement for Development, came to Orissa in 1971 for cyclone relief work. That was on the invitation of then Chief Minister Bishwanath Das who had met Gram Vikas founder Joe Madiath during the latter's cycle tour of the country. Joe and 40 colleagues worked in the cyclone-devastated areas in Kadripat district for about a year. The colleagues returned to Chennai, but Joe stayed on to work for village development. Some of his friends eventually rejoined him to work for the tribals.

"Ganjam district" collector D.P. Bagchi, who is now the chief secretary, invited us to start a dairy development programme for the tribals," said Joe, who last year became the second Indian to win the Global Development Network award. That did not work. Joe found that the tribals considered drinking milk a sin. Taking milk from the cow, they believe, is like denying a child its mother's milk. It was then that Joe turned to health and environment programme.

He implemented the programme in five villages in Ganjam and Bargarh districts in 1992. Today it covers 20,000 families in 500 villages in 12 districts in the hinterlands of Orissa. The programme aimed at improving the villagers' health and economic opportunities. "Whatever a tribal earned was gobbled by the landlord, moneylender or liquor merchant. Most of the able bodied men and women were in bonded labour," said Joe. A tribal took 20 years repaying a loan of Rs 20; so high was the interest rate.

It took two years for Joe to win the tribals' trust. They then persuaded the landlords to return tribal lands and made the moneylenders relent. All loans except recent ones were settled. The tribals got back their lands, trees and bullocks, and every bonded labourer was released.

But Joe faced another problem. "The tribals knew how to obey, but once they became masters the dynamics changed," said Joe. "It required the changing of mindset, and cultural practices had to be altered. These people had to be taught what to do with their land and even how to till it." Besides, they were sickly largely because of poor disposal of human waste, which contaminated drinking water. Joe and his colleagues built toilets and bathrooms in every house, provided potable water and cleaned village ponds. Village committees with equal representation of men and women were formed to sustain the programme, and each family contributed Rs 1,000 to a fund whose inter-

est was used for extending the facilities to new families. "This ensured 100 per cent coverage in future," said Joe.

Even before Gram Vikas began RHEP they had been encouraging the villagers to use biogas fuel and this has helped control deforestation. The first biogas plant came up in a remote village in 1981. By 1994, Gram Vikas constructed 54,000 plants in 6,000 villages and in the process it trained 6,000 tribal youth as masons and another 600 as technicians.

Participation of women was a key factor in the programme's success. Women were provided basic literacy, and trained in health care. To overcome generations of subjugation in a patriarchal system, a separate forum was created for women. And they were encouraged to save money and gain confidence. As Annapurna Reddy of Mattamukundapur says, "We never thought we would sit on the same mat as the men, but now things have changed. We no longer draw the veil over our faces, we can talk with the men as equals." Inspired by the success of women, men have also started their own savings groups in some villages. These credit groups have replaced moneylenders in several villages.

Today the women monitor the water supply and maintain toilet blocks, resolve conflicts and enforce programme codes. And the men have grown to respect the role women play outside the four walls of their homes.

If Joe Madiath has turned round a sick system, so has Sudhi Ranjan Mohanty. The change he brought about can best be seen at the Maharaja Yashwantrao Hospital in Indore, Madhya Pradesh. This mammoth structure with beautifully landscaped lawns, spotless interiors and modern equipment was, until late 1994, a patient's nightmare—crowded, filthy and flush with rats. Then the plague struck Surat in neighbouring Gujarat and Indore seemed vulnerable as people fleeing Surat passed through it.....