

STRENGTHENING INDIA'S VILLAGES THE SUSTAINABLE WAY

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India's strength lies in its villages, an oft-spoken factor that is seldom considered in the development agenda. Most development interventions tend to address individual rather than collective needs. Take, for instance, interventions towards economic development. Livelihood assistance, whether from the government or from development organizations, is targeted at enterprising people in the community, and not necessarily at the person who is economically the weakest. The leaders (the power holders) decided who should get housing and other assistance. In general, the voice of the poor is rarely heard. There is no investment of time and energy to get that voice heard. There are few instances where poor communities are enabled to come together to improve their quality of life, where they believe they are in control of their destinies, where the people are proud and can handle on a sustainable level everything that matters to them.

Poor living conditions and absence of economic opportunities in rural areas today are destroying the social and economic fabric of villages. Poor people are driven away from their villages in an often futile search for prosperity. Thus splintering villages, they are forced to migrate to cities for sheer survival, where they live in sub-human conditions like vermin in slums and shanties. Cities are bursting at their seams and are ill-equipped to cater to the ever-increasing demands made on them. Even basic amenities like drinking water and shelter are denied, not to speak of education and health services.

To reverse this trend it is essential to address the problem at its root, and engineer a process of 'reverse migration' from cities to villages. This is possible only if basic services, economic opportunities and living conditions in rural areas are improved and there is an enabling environment to induce poor communities to move beyond the threshold level of existence and aspire for a better quality of life.

Decentralizing Governance

The problems in the current scenario are compounded, and perhaps perpetrated by the fact that in the years after independence, the government wrested all initiative from the people in practically all spheres of life – be it control over forests, wastelands, infrastructure development, health systems, revenue generation and utilization. Limited development resources and a seemingly huge demand have meant that only a few benefit, often not the most deserving. In the absence of reliable measures of assessing poverty, the 'system' is forced to make subjective assessments and is driven largely by political patronage and bureaucratic concession.

The realization that the top-down approach was not effective came early, but remedial measures have been slow to come about. In 1993 the Panchayati Raj and Nagarpalika Bills were

introduced through the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution. The prevalent ‘system’ is, however, slow to change and in most states the proposed devolution of power remains on paper, with little difference at the grassroots. A lot needs to be done to make the real spirit of democratic governance effective at the grassroots. This requires a long and patient process of handholding and accompaniment. People have to first be aware, to be able to assert their rights. The imperative is greater when it comes to fighting the all-prevailing monster called ‘corruption’, which has become integral to the ‘system’. Pressure groups need to be organized to demand transparency and accountability from elected representatives and government functionaries.

A very high level of innovation is needed to make local bodies sustainable. Local bodies must be able to generate adequate revenues utilizing local resources and skills, and here we must learn from successful community-based institutional and management systems. At the same time, innovative approaches for revenue generation need to be identified, drawing upon advancements in technology, especially in power generation, information technology, biotechnology, etc.

A Regenerative Process of Improving Quality of Life

All this implies the need for a paradigm shift when it comes to addressing empowerment process. For community action to be effective, the people must have first reached a ‘threshold level of quality of life’. Communities should have satisfied the most crucial basic needs of life and be in a position to dream of further improvements. Issues like food and income security, health and medical care, education and literacy, safe and hygienic habitations, basic infrastructure etc., need to be addressed effectively to this end.

Thereafter, for these communities to move ahead, it is essential to influence the external environment and gain a favourable bargaining position vis-à-vis the state or the market. Such a position can be gained only through a rights-based approach, where large numbers of communities unite and demand their rights. This united movement will have the ‘critical mass’ necessary to force governments, political organs, private sector enterprises and other civil society organs to react to communities’ demands.

Poor People Can and Will Pay, But there are also Social Costs

The worldwide shift in focus of development action by voluntary agencies from the welfare approach to more participatory processes is amply clear. There is evidence of community initiative and action, which goes against the prevalent paradigm that development interventions can work only through subsidies. The poor can and will pay for products and services that they believe will improve their quality of life. At the same time, we cannot be blind to the double standards being applied by the government and multilateral agencies, when it comes to treating needs of urban and rural areas.

Do city dwellers pay all costs for construction of roads and bridges, building schools, laying of telephone lines and setting up exchanges, power generation systems, sewage disposal systems? There is a tax concession when the rich construct houses; another form of subsidy. Governments

subsidize, directly or indirectly, all services and facilities for the rich. The question is whether or not there is a social cost in ensuring that the rural poor have access to these facilities as well?

The government needs to pay for its social obligations, in ensuring adequate efforts in making basic services, infrastructure and technology available to the poor in rural area. And if the government does not have the resources to pay, bilateral donors and financial institutions must contribute towards these services. We are certain that communities need to contribute as well, so that necessary ownership and stakes are created within the communities.

Gram Vikas's Experiences in Sustainable Development

Starting in the mid-70s, Gram Vikas has worked with indigenous communities and other marginalized people in the hinterlands of Orissa towards improving their quality of life through various development interventions. Our accumulated experiences over two decades were brought together in evolving the Rural Health and Environment Programme (RHEP), an integrated rural development intervention initiated by Gram Vikas in the mid-90s. The RHEP aims to harness the physical, natural, social and human capital in every village through convergent community action, to create a spiralling process of development.

At the start of the programme each family in the village contribute Rs. 1,000 on an average to Village Corpus fund. The fund is placed in a term deposit and establishes a financial base, which takes care of the same facilities being available to all families in the village at all times. In a few villages, contributions of the poorer families are partially subsidized by other families in the village. Communities raise over 60% of the investment for construction of infrastructure as well.

Policy of Total Social Inclusion

In almost all development projects, whether undertaken by government or even NGOs, the bottom 10-25% in a village is most often marginalized and excluded. They get little or no benefits from these schemes and projects. This has happened over such a long time that these people have internalized a low image of themselves and almost believe and behave as if they were sub-human.

Gram Vikas believes that any development effort in a village has to be one of 100% social inclusion, taking special care to nurture the social inclusion of those previously excluded. RHEP is a project and process by which the socio-economic inclusion of 100% of a village community is ensured. Of course, this is no easy task and we have faced difficulties in many villages. One of the significant factors in reaching a consensus is the involvement of women. The Programme touches their needs directly and their interest in seeing RHEP happen is often greater. In some villages, women have threatened to close the kitchens if consensus is not reached. Women have also spearheaded anti-liquor campaigns in villages, and this has been turning point in this consensus.

RHEP aims to transform the momentum created through such community action into sustainable community owned and managed development systems. Today 5,070 families in 67 villages are witnessing significant changes in their quality of life. Sanitation infrastructure and supply of piped drinking water all through the year to all houses is the entry point and the core rallying element that brings people together, cutting through barriers of patriarchal systems, caste, politics and economic differences. Old RHEP villages often play a key role in motivation of new ones. One of the reasons noted was that families wanted their daughters to be married into villages where similar facilities existed – piped water supply, toilets and bathrooms, etc, - but more importantly a stable and secure environment with adequate economic options and reduced conflicts.

The turning point in each RHEP village comes when 100% consensus is reached and the entire village agrees to contribute and partake in the programme. Gram Vikas staff accompany people through this process, sharing their anxieties, identifying resource options for raising contributions, mediating in conflicts, preparing them for collective action and sustaining the unity. The immediate effects of RHEP, visible in the villages, are described below:

Social Assets

- There is enhanced village unity, as all families are shareholders of the Village Corpus fund and have an equal stake in decision making.
- There is significant alleviation of the drudgery of women, who used to spend at least 4-5 hours every day fetching water for household chores. The saved time is used variously and some have started new income generation activities. Women are able to play an active role in the community.
- Women play a key role in management of common assets, ensuring that all activities are conducted efficiently. Over time there is greater acceptance of their views in matters that affect the entire community.
- In most of the villages, people have started their own creches so that working women can leave the children in the creche in the morning, where they will be fed and looked after, and the children can be collected in the evening.

Financial assets

- In many villages the Village Corpus fund has already doubled. The original corpus deposit of Rs. 5.2 million in the 67 villages covered by RHEP is today worth Rs. 7 million. The villagers need no longer depend on Gram Vikas for support for extension of toilets, bathrooms and water supply systems to ‘new’ families¹.
- Most credit needs of the villagers, for production and consumption, are met within the village through women’s savings and credit groups, who have raised their own funds of

over Rs. 1.2 million. Significantly, the dependence on exploitative money lenders is ended.

Physical assets

- There is uninterrupted supply of protected piped water to individual houses in each village throughout the year, with connections to the kitchen, toilet and bathroom.
- In tribal areas where there is no electricity, gravity flow systems are established to harness water and provide piped water supply to houses.
- Sanitation systems are fully utilized in all villages, with each village having its own norms for monitoring, effecting penalties, etc. There is empirical data of reduction in water borne diseases and general improvement in the health status. Gram Vikas has no involvement in operation and maintenance of the infrastructure systems.
- Over fifty 'new' families have built their own toilets and bathrooms without assistance from Gram Vikas.
- Over 3,000 families have taken loans from the Housing Development Finance Corporation and other sources for construction of disaster-proof houses.

Economic assets

- Other development activities have gained strength as direct result of RHEP. This includes development of common assets, irrigation infrastructure, diversification of livelihoods, revitalization of schools, better functioning of health centres, involvement in Panchayati Raj.
- There is increased access to development funds from the government. Over Rs. 5.5 million was accessed from the government by these villages in 2000-01. External contractors now rarely undertake development work in the villages. The villagers now play a proactive role in accessing these monies to develop their village. These contracts are also used as a means of augmenting community funds, as all families contribute to the work as well. The unspent money from the contract accumulates to the village fund.
- Villagers who earlier migrated in distress, seasonally and for long periods, to nearby cities like Mumbai and Surat in search of employment, no longer do so, as the options for income generation in the village have improved.
- Women have also entered and found acceptance in non-traditional areas of work, such as pisciculture, masonry, etc.

Redefining Local Governance

- Above all, RHEP has played a crucial role in revitalizing the social fabric of villages, creating an environment of inclusion in a predominantly patriarchal, caste-and classridden society. Many villages had common funds prior to RHEP, but today there is greater transparency and accountability, with the leaders playing a proactive role in sharing information. Village committees are reconstituted every three years and an environment of democratic functioning is slowly being actualized.
- An interesting development is the interest from Members of Parliament, Government of India, and Members of Legislative Assembly, Government of Orissa, in collaborating in the implementation of RHEP. They have given assistance from Local Area Development discretionary funds to five villages of RHEP Phase 2, as support towards construction of toilets, bathing rooms and water supply systems.
- An agreement has also been reached in districts where government sanitation programmes are implemented, that the related subsidies will accrue to all eligible families in villages covered by RHEP.
- The government finds the village unity and institutional arrangements in RHEP villages conducive to extending other development funds, and RHEP villages have been able to attract large amounts.

A process has started to set up village industries using the local resources in each village. This will attempt to absorb the totally, marginally and seasonally unemployed people of the village. With the quality of life improving and with assured employment, these villages are beginning to experience reverse migration.

The RHEP is poised to reach out, directly and through networking with other non-government organizations, community-based organizations and Panchayati Raj institutions, to 100,000 poor families (roughly 1% of Orissa's population) in the state's hinterlands by 2010. These families, bound in clusters, will be a critical mass which can influence development processes through a people's movement: a movement with political overtones, which aims to create an enabling environment for a politically assertive community; a people's movement capable of assuming identity where each individual in the community is represented and where they can assert themselves in the true Panchayati Raj and be in a position to influence and thus steer the larger policy framework in development.

Role of Voluntary Agencies

Voluntary agencies have played a key role in demonstrating alternative paradigms for development – in social mobilization, resource mobilization, environment management, appropriate technology, habitat development, education, health, etc.

The role of voluntary agencies lies in being motivators of communities and conscience keepers of society. It is important that this role is recognized by the government and the rest of civil society as well. An environment of trust will ensure that there is greater creativity and positive action. Voluntary agencies can demonstrate at a tangible level, and on a scale which matters, replicable models of development action based on community action, and social and gender equity.

For voluntary agencies to stay relevant it is important that they move away from centerstage and give to the people the power to make their own choices. Voluntary agencies can play a critical role in instilling among communities a high level of initiative and confidence to engineer a process of functional grassroots democracy through active people's self-governing institutions.