News*Reach*

Inside

Transformation in Amagara

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Amidst kilometre upon kilometre of parched, barren land lies the tribal village of Amagara—a verdant oasis of crops and vegetables—the result of the efforts of the farmers, who dared to risk and experiment with new ideas, methods and technology.

SNAPSHOT OF RURAL POVERTY IN EAST INDIA

Farmers without irrigation facilities in East India are almost invariably poor and at the mercy of the weather. The tribal village of Amagara in Purulia district of West Bengal is no exception.

When Avijit Choudhury from PRADAN went to Amagara in 1999, he found a community of 148 households, with the average family landholding being less than half a hectare. They grew little other than *kharif* rice, which provided them food security for only six months. The small area of boro rice in wet, low-lying areas mainly benefited wealthier families. Only a handful of families were sure of food sufficiency through the year. There was a high level of distress migration and school attendance was low, especially of girls, because parents could not afford the few necessary books, and children were often required to work in the fields.

Rice in the lowlands is normally a safe crop; however, the pressure of the increasing population has forced families to depend more and more on terraced and bunded uplands, where cultivating rice is risky; poor farmers know of no real alternatives to rice.

The need for water, both for irrigation and personal use, is vital. When asked what they need most, these farmers like others always say, "First give us water; then we can do anything."

THE EXCITEMENT OF WATERSHED DEVELOPMENT

Avijit commenced watershed development work in Amagara. He looked forward to seeing the local area bloom with the new opportunities that water harvesting would provide. He mapped the social, economic and natural resources with the community carefully. He developed a watershed development plan with the villagers; this was implemented in 2002–04, with funding from Sir Ratan Tata Trust. In a 'ridge-to-valley' approach, the most degraded uplands were treated with the 30 x 40 model, developed by PRADAN, and Arjuna plants were planted there. A

better quality upland patch of 7.4 ha owned by 34 families was planted with Amrapali mangoes to turn the unused fallow land into a horticulture orchard. A large community pond was renovated and new ponds constructed to catch runoff water; 5% pits provided for 'rescue irrigation', and seepage pits were dug in drainage lines and low-lying areas to provide a private water resource for a second crop after rice.

Beyond a curve in the road, and a failed irrigation scheme dating back to 1960, lies a verdant oasis—a 'new' Amagara. Every drop of water in the large pond is been used for irrigation. The last crops are being harvested before the farmers take a break to prepare for the coming kharif. Sukumar Hembrom is about to take his crop of bottle gourd to the market, the fourth successive crop over 10 months. Others have grown a second or third crop after rice. A group of four farmers cooperated to grow half a hectare of early tomatoes that fetched a high price, putting a smile on every face. Tomatoes, bitter gourd, pole beans, cowpea, radish, cabbage, cauliflower, cucumber, bottle gourd, chillies and some leafy vegetables have been harvested over 10 months, along with the traditional rice. Some mustard has been harvested in the low-lying land that drained well after the previous monsoon. It was irrigated only twice.

CHANGES IN PERCEPTIONS AND CAPABILITY

In 2005, every farmer said that their best land was the lowland (*bohal*) if they had any; next

Farmers have learnt that previously unproductive uplands and medium uplands can be their most productive land, given the right crop and good management. This change in perception has been one of the prerequisites for changing lives.

Carefully designed learning activities build knowledge, skills and confidence; these are also prerequisites for changing lives.

were their medium lowlands (*kanali*) or their medium uplands (*baid*). Today, the same farmers say that their best lands are the uplands, where vegetables can be grown almost year-round, with the careful use of the new sources of irrigation. Perceptions of the value of land have changed. Perceptions about the self have also changed; many farmers say now that they believe agriculture can provide a decent livelihood. Self esteem has gone up.

Dungi Tudu speaks with pride for many women and recalls, "I started my journey as a member of my Self Help Group (SHG), which encouraged me to take up new initiatives." She was speaking of the time when vegetable cultivation was introduced in her village as part of the research project. As an SHG member, she ardently followed every training activity such as workshops on the use of pesticides and fertilizers; she participated in meetings and shared the results of the experiments, in spite of having no land. "I always dreamt of cultivating my own plot as I worked in others' fields," she recalled. The SHG took up a role i n project implementation; therefore, all S HG members were involved and participated in meetings about agriculture, and were greatly influenced by the new knowledge they acquired.

Dungi adds, "I am thankful to the ACIAR experiments that introduced us to vegetable cultivation. After seeing other farmers take up vegetable cultivation, I gathered the confidence to do so too. Today, my situation

has improved because of that. Now, my daughter and son go to school regularly and I have bought a bicycle for them. I am also repairing my house. I can take proper care of my goats and purchase fodder and medicine for them from the money I get by selling vegetables. Now I have stopped going to Burdwan altogether. If I go to Burdwan, who will take care of my crops and goats? I am trying to buy a small patch of land so that I can cultivate my own land. It gives me immense pleasure working in my own village and deciding on my own about when to work."

The changes go well beyond growing new crops such as vegetables; the cultivation of rice too is regarded differently. Subodh explains how he planted an early crop of direct-seeded upland rice in his poorest sandy *baid* in 2009 and harvested a good yield (4 t/ha) when most rice crops failed across East India (except in the lowlands) because of widespread drought.

1. THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN

An important learning of the project is that women and women's SHGs can play an important role in making decisions that impact their livelihoods—their role need not be confined to issues around micro-finance, gender and health issues. Although women typically do much of the agricultural work, neither they nor their husbands see them as farmers. By engaging women in planning new agricultural activities and in training, they change these self perceptions: "I too am a farmer," one woman said in a focus group meeting. The men were surprised at what the women could do. "We did not know they could engage in farming," one man commented while the others nodded in agreement.

Women need not be mere conduits for planning en masse or for credit availability. They need to be continually engaged with, to build their knowledge and confidence. Continued effort is needed to ensure equal participation in decision-making and planning, as well as in agricultural activities.

With agricultural intensification in Amagara, the work load has increased; the women, however, say they are happy because they know that this is going to improve the economic condition of the family. They are also happy and ready to share the workload because they are equal parties to judicious decision-making as a family. Women have a stake in success.

An important observation is that the 'space' for the woman in the family domain has grown, without causing any direct conflict. It appears that the menfolk have accepted the changing roles of women in the family. We see roles changing when the husband shares tasks that are typical of the woman's domain such as preparing the children for school, bringing water for household chores, and sometimes cooking in the absence of women. This is not yet regular, but it is a beginning.

2. HOW PERCEPTIONS WERE CHALLENGED AND CHANGED

Deep change occurs when farmers engage in activities that challenge their perceptions about the value of their natural resources. Changing these perceptions is the starting point of changing behaviour, that is, changing what is planted, and where and when it is grown. In Amagara, the challenge was to help the farmers opt for more productive ir remunerative cash crops, other than paddy, in the uplands. Although farmers in Amagara had seen the nearby non-tribal villages

growing rain-fed vegetables in the uplands, they were simply reluctant to change their traditional practices.

In one example of how this challenge was met in Amagara in 2006, PRADAN helped a group of eight farmers plan for cultivating vegetables. They planned to grow vegetables during the monsoon, to benefit from the high market prices. This was no easy task; yet the farmers were successful in doing so, leading a farmer called Sushil to declare to a group of 30–35 farmers, "Now I am a good farmer; I can sit with my father-in-law." PRADAN's intention was not to 'teach' or 'train' farmers or to provide them with a technological package for growing vegetables. The aim was to provide a situation where farmers would 'learn' about themselves and their resources, as well as gain some new skills and knowledge.

Once the farmers understood the value of growing vegetables in the uplands by way of the income generated, their perception of the value of the uplands changed. Low-lying lands have always been considered valuable for growing rice, which ensures food security; the other lands, they came to understand, have value too, especially for cash crops.

The activity of vegetable cultivation was a research activity on 'changing perceptions'. It began with focussed interviews of the participating farmers on their knowledge, attitude and perceptions about themselves and their resources (various land types). The activity concluded with a second round of interviews to assess changes and to share

Engaging women in planning new agricultural activities and in training changed their self perceptions; men also have seen and have learnt to appreciate what women can do. These findings are also re-defining how the Purulia team interacts with families, to improve agriculture-based livelihoods.

experiences. The activity gave the community a chance to engage in vegetable cultivation. Such experience, in which success was inconceivable, challenged age-old beliefs, as well as provided valuable knowledge and skills, in both women and men.

3. CREATING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

This was a research project; the team wanted to develop new scientific knowledge on appropriate technology for the region and to learn how to improve the processes used in rural development. In addition, they also wanted to help farmers build on their know-how. This is the spirit of true 'participation'. The team was careful not to make prescriptions and avoid being the 'expert' on whom the farmers depend. When specific questions (such as how much fertilizer is needed) were raised, the members of the team often replied that they do not know the answers and suggested, "Let's find out together." This is liberating for both the farmer and the professional.

Ashok Kumar, now based in the Ranchi office, explained that the experience of growing vegetables at Amagara built the capacity of farmers to develop their own knowledge of the local conditions. Each family owns different resources; therefore, it is impossible to make prescriptions that can be applied to every one. Farmers need to learn how to develop their own knowledge and techniques, often by adapting what they have seen elsewhere. This builds confidence and self-esteem. Ashok Kumar talks about 'co-travelling'

with farmers in a learning journey, that is, the 'Action Learning Cycle'.

The Action Learning Cycle begins with all participants reflecting on their present situation. In Amagara, the families were asked why they don't grow high value crops and what are their perceptions of themselves and their land? Most farmers said, "We are poor tribal farmers; our lands are poor. Vegetables are grown by koeri farmers (traditional vegetable growers), who can take more risks; they have better skills and lands. For us, growing vegetables is very risky; if the crops fail, we will be in big trouble."

Following this reflection and discussion on what the farmers would like to be able to do, they were helped to turn this reflection into an action plan. In Amagara in 2006, eight

Empowerment of farmers means providing space for farmers to learn and not offering standard prescriptions. The professional also grows in the knowledge of technical matters and development processes. The farmers and the professionals are free of the 'NGO-dependency' syndrome.

farmers were willing to take the perceived risks of growing four types of early season vegetables in the uplands. The inputs and training as well as rigorous follow-ups were planned and provided for by the ACIAR project. The next step was to turn the plan into action by doing. As the plan unfolded, important observations were made about the farmers' beliefs, attitudes and behaviours; data was also collected on the inputs used, processes followed and outputs delivered. The data were later shared with the farmers, who were encouraged to think about what had happened. From this reflection, the farmers were encouraged to plan again, this time taking lessons from their experience—lessons about themselves and their resources, as well as about growing vegetables. And so the learning cycle begins again.

Saral Training Academy: ICT Training for Rural Youth in India

B. UMESH RAI AND SMITA RAWAT

Tapping into the enormous potential of the school dropouts and the youth of the rural communities, the Saral TA courses in ICT training seek to transfer knowledge and skills in the basic management of specific applications, tailored to the needs of the rural ICT projects, thereby empowering them and stemming, to some measure, the flow of migration to urban areas and giving back to the rural communities valuable assets in the form of trained ICT personnel.

I. INTRODUCTION

India has an estimated population of 1.15 billion, of which more than 70 per cent reside in rural areas. The mainstay of the rural economy is agriculture but this sector has been growing at less than half the pace of overall GDP. According to one estimate, the average income of an urban dweller is four times higher than that of a rural dweller. Even in the social development sector, there is huge disparity between the urban and rural areas. Most striking is the disparity that exists in urban and rural literacy numbers. In 2001, the urban literacy rate was 80.06 per cent whereas the rural literacy rate was just 59.21 per cent.

The disparity in rural and urban living is not unusual for a post-colonial country like India. Policy makers, in recent times, are sincerely trying to bridge these disparities through the improvement of infrastructure and the introduction of technology in rural areas. The Indian government is investing over $35 billion in its flagship Bharat Nirman programme, the largest rural infrastructure development programme of its kind. However, access to infrastructure and services may still be limited not due to lack of capacity to pay for the services but due to lack of trained personnel to man the services. The governmental efforts to bridge the infrastructure gap, especially the digital divide, are discussed in Section II.

Despite the low income of rural communities, there is significant money reaching them through government schemes as well as the wages sent home by migrant workers from urban areas. This money then goes out again for services or goods brought from urban areas. If a second-tier economy of self-sufficiency in an ICT (Information and Communications Technology) service economy within rural communities can be created, the money outflow can be partly arrested. As part of an effort towards this end, government and Non Government Organizations (NGOs) are trying to create rural centres that connect people to information sources, government services, etc. There is also an attempt to introduce ICT

solutions in daily rural life in order to empower local rural communities. In Section III, some of the more widely known efforts in this direction are discussed.

For these centres to work efficiently, trained human capital with requisite knowledge and skills is an essential requirement within the rural communities. The Government of Tamil Nadu is setting up an ICT academy, ICTACT (ICT Academy for Tamil Nadu) with an initial investment of Rs 20 crores to provide such manpower. The Academy will provide training to 5,000 faculty members across Tamil Nadu over the next three years so as to benefit more than 250,000 students indirectly. In contrast to this approach, SaralTA aims to train rural youth directly in ICT for a more immediate and tangible impact. In Sec. IV, we argue as to why the direct approach is the preferred way to go.

The training module for rural youth has to be different from the typical training module of the computer training institutes available in urban centres. Emphasis will be on training a student to a standard whereby she/he can comfortably work with the hardware and software resources available to him in the rural area. The objectives of the training are discussed in Section V. The availability of ICT human resources in a rural community enables a user controlled, owned and managed ICT network that will emerge as a consequence of various ICT initiatives. Through Sections VI to IX, the objectives, present methodology and the road ahead for imparting ICT training are discussed.

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II. DIGITAL DIVIDE IN INDIA

A digital divide separates those privileged with access to information technologies (IT), with the skills and resources to use them from the rest of the society that suffers from either the lack of access to IT or lack the skill to use them or both. Individual ownership of digital resources, particularly access to the Internet, is generally accepted as the measure of the digital divide between communities. However, this approach magnifies the divide because rural communities have mainly collective ownership of digital resources. Surveys have shown that the lack of availability of skilled manpower in the rural community is one of the major constraints in the utilization of the digital resources available with it.

Several measures have been taken by the Indian government to bridge the digital divide and transform India into a Knowledge Society. It commissioned the National Task Force on Information Technology and The Software Development (http://www. it-taskforce.nic.in) and the Planning Commission drew up an IT Action Plan (http://www.planningcommission. nic. in/); these were major policy initiatives towards this end. Policy makers have realized that IT is the best tool to address problems in the social sector such as education, health and rural development. IT can act as a facilitator for bringing in transparency, good governance and empowerment.

In the rural telecom sector, digital data transmission facility within 5 km of every village is the stated goal of the government. A mix of technology options is employed to

achieve the goal. Depending on local conditions, one among the following bundle of technologies will be used:

- Terrestrial wireless
- Satellite technologies
- Wire-line technologies

III. E-RURAL PROJECTS

Parallel to the effort of the central government to improve the digital infrastructure of rural India, efforts are also being made by the state and local governments, private sector, and not-for-profit organizations for using ICT by improving connectivity to improve the informational empowerment of rural communities. A few stellar efforts are listed below:

- **Grameen Gyan Abhiyan:** This project of the government aims to achieve the ICT enabling of 6,37,000 villages of India. The stated goals are:

1) To make a paradigm shift from resource intensive agricultural practices to more of a knowledge-led movement for rural prosperity by making two-way knowledge linkages between the families living in rural areas and their service providers.

2) To develop a knowledge-led rural society as the backbone for national productivity and growth in an inclusive and sustainable manner.

- **Akashganga:** This is being used at the Dairy Cooperative Society (DCS) in the state of Gujarat, which is a farmer-owned, grass-root level unit in the cooperative structure. IT tools are used here to facilitate collection, weighing, quality segregation and timely payment for the sale of milk. A database is maintained and expert husbandry services are also rendered. This has resulted in higher profits for rural milk producers.

- **Akshaya:** This project nurtures entrepreneur spirit of people living in the remote areas of Kerala state. An entrepreneur is trained to set up an e-payment service platform to serve the local community.

- **Gyandoot:** This is an intranet service in Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh state, connecting rural cybercafés that cater to the everyday needs of the masses. It disseminates information on various government schemes, generates certain government certificates, gives access to the latest market price for the rural produce, etc. In effect, it attempts to empower the rural community with reliable and fast information.

- **Warana:** Warana is a cluster of 70 villages in the western state of Maharashtra. In the Warana project, the National Informatics Centre (NIC) developed a highly user-friendly information system in Marathi for marketing of agriculture produce, with a number of online features for selling the produce of village cooperative societies to wholesale outlets in Pune and other cities and towns in Maharashtra. Information is updated daily with the help of villagers themselves.

- **e-Choupal:** An Indian corporate, Indian Tobacco Company (ITC), has set up a network of terminals in villages. Typically, these terminals, named e-Choupal, serve a cluster of 10 villages. The farmers can use the computer to access daily closing prices on local markets, as well as to track global price trends or find information about new farming techniques. They also use the e-Choupal to order seed, fertilizer, and other products such as consumer goods from ITC or its partners, at prices lower than those available from village traders.

All the above efforts and several others are being carried out simultaneously in different parts of rural India. Although the end goal is the same, that is, empowerment of the rural community by making available real-time, need-based information through communication tools, each project is unique in its own way. A few years down the line, a comparative study may have to be conducted on these projects to arrive at the best model to exploit the potential of ICT at the village level. The final solution can emerge through the people, who are actually involved in using this technology at the grass-roots level.

One of the key findings of a study conducted by Saral Services on the application of ICT in rural India was that IT adoption by rural-based DCCBs, PACs and MFIs is handicapped due to inadequate supply of IT-trained persons

IV. THE NEED FOR SARAL TA
A key asset for a member of a community in India is his social capital. Social capital refers to networks of mutual support that exist within and between households, extended family and communities. A strong social capital is also converted to political capital in a democratic society. This critical asset is lost when a member of the rural community migrates to urban areas, mainly in search of employment. This is also true for the reverse urban-rural migration but due to better opportunities available at the urban centre, a member of the urban society will rarely exercise the option to migrate to rural areas. In rural areas, to meet the financial service requirement, there exists a network of institutions such as District Credit Cooperative Banks (DCCBs), Primary Agriculture Cooperatives (PACs) and Micro-financial Institutions (MFIs). These financial institutions are getting progressively computerized in alignment with their urban counterparts although on a much smaller scale and level of sophistication.

One of the key findings of a study conducted by Saral Services (http:// www. saralservices. org) on the application of ICT in rural India was that IT adoption by rural-based DCCBs, PACs and MFIs is handicapped due to inadequate supply of IT-trained persons. Now, with the coming in of further ICT initiatives (listed in Section III), the unavailability of ICT skilled manpower is becoming a critical constraint. The problem of finding IT-trained people in rural areas has to be tackled immediately or else the rural ICT initiatives will fail to have a positive impact. Failure of projects in the initial period of ICT revolution in India, may lead to reluctance in taking up such ICT initiatives in the future.

As pointed out earlier, there is adequate availability of literate manpower in rural communities; but because they have not completed their education to a point that is needed by the urban employment market, they are largely unemployable in urban market. However, the rural employment market is not as demanding in terms of ICT skills. And with the urban youth with ICT skills anyway reluctant to work in rural areas, a school dropout in the rural community, reasonably trained in ICT skills, can be easily employed in his own rural communities.

Saral Services, an NGO from Hyderabad city of India has launched an initiative, Saral Training Academy (Saral TA) to identify such unemployed rural youth and give them ICT training, tailored to the needs of the rural ICT projects, so that these youth go back to their rural community and man the various ICT initiatives in their areas. The initiative is in collaboration with Safal Solutions Private

Limited, a software company and a close associate of Saral Services. Saral TA was launched on 3 January 2008.

In essence, Saral TA aims to make the youth employable by giving them the required exposure to ICT and training them in the basic management of specific applications that are being used in the organizations and institutions working and located in the rural areas. The attempt is to match deployment with catchments, to ensure that the requirement of ICT technical personnel is met from within the rural community. This creates other non-farm livelihood option for a rural community and also partly stems from the flow of money and manpower from rural to urban areas.

V. SARALTA OBJECTIVES

SaralTA training modules are designed to impart the following skills to the participating trainee:

- **Computer Literacy:** Ability to assemble a computer by parts to the required specification. Skills to load an operating system on the newly assembled computer. And, finally, the skill to identify and load office and home software, to make the computer ready for use.
- **Package Deployment:** Ability to set up a specific package on a system, with an understanding as to what organizational process is getting digitized.
- **Trouble shooting:** Skill to troubleshoot minor hardware and software problems, but, more essentially, ability to report to the headquarters, the major problems, concisely, precisely and quickly.

The teaching method emphasizes the learning-by-doing method, and theory is used only as a back-up to practical training. The trainees build their knowledge and skill base by working on project work. They hone their communication skills by giving PowerPoint presentations and participating in classroom discussions.

VI. A TERM AT SARAL TA

Saral Services have co-opted organizations working in rural areas as partners. These organizations are encouraged to identify suitable candidates in the area of operations. Eligibility for enrolling in the Academy is X grade pass in the age band of 18 to 24. The partner agencies conduct the first level of screening through a selection test provided by Saral Services, and send the answer sheets to Saral Services for evaluation.

The second and final screening is done by Saral Services. The methodology of selection is a written examination, followed by a telephonic interview. The batch strength is kept at a maximum of 10 students. The course is called Saral TA and is fully residential. The expenses for the four-month course are Rs 40,000 per trainee, all-inclusive. Saral Services has tied up with a financial institution for student loans for the full amount. There are regular reviews of a trainee's performance. Based on the review, participants are counselled from time to time and appropriate action initiated. On successful completion of training, placements are guaranteed.

VII. TRAINERS AND TRAINING MATERIAL

Both permanent and part-time training faculty are available. They are MCA or engineering graduates, with field experience. The training curriculum has a three-week field training module. Here, the trainees are sent to projects, similar to the projects they are likely to work in. Thereby, the trainees get 'hands-on' experience on projects, guided by field practitioners. The Directors of Saral Services are also involved in volunteering time to the trainees. English and Maths classes are

taken by two directors. Another director, who is a trained counsellor, counsels the trainees. It is very likely that the trainee has moved out of rural environment for the first time for such a long period. Thus, he may have not acquired the skills to be comfortable in an urban environment. The Academy, therefore, lays special emphasis on imparting soft skills required for urban living, such as basic etiquette, telephone manners and hygienic living, as part of the course. English classes are also undertaken to improve the communication skills of the trainees. When imparting English language skills, it is emphasized that English is taught as a medium of communication and should not be learnt as something superior to the local language. Yoga, for relaxing the mind, is mandatory for all trainees as a morning exercise ritual.

Trainees attend a week-long training called Jeevan Vidya (life skills), which enables the trainees to remain grounded and connected to the world around them. Care is taken to ensure that the trainees are comfortable in the new environment and are productive.

VIII. FINANCIAL SUPPORT AND PLACEMENTS

SaralTA trainees are provided Vidya loan by BASIX, a non-banking financial company. At the end of the training they are given placements, and afterwards they return their loan in installments. Thus, a SaralTA trainee does not have to put in a single rupee for his/her training upfront. In three to three-and-a-half years, this loan can be returned. Provision exists for early payment of loans if the trainee so desires. Efforts are now on to link SaralTA to government banks, to give the trainee more options.

Thirty-two trainees have successfully completed Saral TA training and are all employed. Safal Solutions has been instrumental in absorbing most of them. They are placed in rural projects in rural areas. Nine are working in rural Bihar, with Bihar Rural Livelihood Development Programme (BRLP), six with Common Service Centres in Orissa, one with Deepak Charitable Trust in Gujarat, three are in PACs in Kareem Nagar in Andhra Pradesh and three in PACs in West Bengal. Two are working with Aajeevika, an NGO in Uttarakhand. Some trainees, who desired to work in an urban milieu for some more time, have been placed as such—one is looking after Saral TA Ixx trainees, three are working as testers in Safal Solutions, one is working as accounts executive in Safal Solutions in Hyderabad. Some trainees have been placed in Hyderabad for more exposure to the projects and for enhancing their skills in areas such as testing and accounting. The ones working in Hyderabad will eventually move to their areas. One trainee opted for self employment and is running a photo studio in his village whereas one has joined a retail outlet in his area.

IX. FUTURE PLANS

Five batches of successful trainees have passed out from the Academy. Some of the trainees from the earlier courses have started pursuing academic courses to upgrade their profile. They are in the process of completing their studies, from which they had dropped out earlier. The Saral TA course seems to have given them the confidence to achieve something bigger.

The enthusiasm shown by Saral TA Ixx trainees, has encouraged Saral Services to launch a pilot training programme named Saral TA 2xx, which is a six-month course in software programming. In this course, the rural youth, who have successfully completed Saral TA Ixx and display an aptitude for programming, are initiated into programming

with C language. The trainees will learn C, PHP, HTML and JavaScript, and do live project work.

The induction of female trainees has begun with one girl in Saral TA 201. More women trainees will be inducted in later programmes. Since the duration of Saral TA 2xx is six months, the loan amount is Rs 60,000. The training is loan-based. There are plans to expand the training to other centres so that training is held near the catchment area. Thus, more training centres will be started in North India, to cater to the demand in that part of the country.

X. CONCLUSION

The Saral TA model has been a success both for participants and the partners involved in the project. One of the factors for success is the choice of Hyderabad as the location of training. The city of Hyderabad is one of the leading software hubs in India; therefore, there is an abundance of manpower for imparting ICT training. Rural India is a reservoir of dropout students, who have the talent but lack the opportunities to tap it. Saral TA hones their talent such that despite not having degrees/certificates, they are given a chance to join a technical course. The role of grass-roots agencies has also been crucial in identifying such youth with potential.

The rapid ingress of the ICT initiative into rural India makes the need of such academies not only desirable, but a necessity. The challenge is to replicate this model elsewhere in India and also in other developing countries, which may not be as advanced as India, in the field of ICT. SaralTA success shows that if the participant can be temporarily shifted to a comfortable surrounding where trainers are available, the trainees imbibe sufficient skills and become tools for ICT proliferation in rural communities.

TESTIMONIALS

"In rural NGOs and institutions, many of the office boys and office assistants are not graduates; NGOs can send them for Saral TA training. After training, these boys could be absorbed in the same organizations as computer assistants, and their earlier positions could be given to other unemployed undergraduates. Offices will, thus, get reliable staff to handle their computers." Madhu Khetan, Programme Director, PRADAN

"Saral TA is a professional, IT-based, residential training academy that provides training to rural youth in ICT, support services and managing specific applications. I am among the first batch of candidates that underwent training and am now working in Hyderabad. Saral TA trained us in basic hardware and networking; software and software testing; Accounts; RDBMS and LINUX and one of the live projects of Safal solutions, which allows us to work in the field as ITFT and make our living. Most important, it enables us to live a life of dignity by providing us the requisite training and jobs thereafter. I am thankful to the Academy." Uddhaba Chandra Lohar, Teaching Assistant, Saral Training Academy

"Saral TA, a residential training academy provides ICT training to the rural youth of India. I learnt to work in the IT field here. In addition, the Academy has a schedule for developing a good personality." Chittaranjan Mohanta, Saral TA lOl, Batch-OS.

Training and Development for Growth

SUJATA NATH

Having clarity on the objectives of any learning process that is being offered helps to meet both training and developmental needs thereby ensuring greater opportunities for systemic change.

From the earliest times, living beings have progressed step by step, learning to live life. Birds learn to fly, animals get trained in the art of hunting and human beings learn to talk and walk. The family becomes our first school of training. Our life's experiences are our training ground; every experience imparts some learning to us, enriching us and adding value to our lives.

Training, thus, is an integral part of our life and, at every stage, we play the role of either a participant or a trainer. In PRADAN, where we are engaged with people, creating their agency. It is important, therefore, to learn the basics of training, which will help us make learning a less difficult proposition for others whom we are supposed to help. This article is a sincere attempt towards understanding the basics of training.

Training and development are often used as interchangeable words, training leads to development of some sort and developmental needs spur our training needs! However, there is a subtle difference, and understanding this will help us decide which 'needs' require more attention and what should drive our training objectives. Training is more about acquiring a skill and knowledge whereas development is about the growth of the individual/group/society. Training is the systematic development of the attitude, knowledge and skill patterns required by a person to perform a given task adequately whereas development is the growth of the individual in terms of ability, understanding and awareness. For example, the ability to read/understand the entry in a SHG pass book by a member is a training need whereas the ability to build understanding, confidence and awareness of the fact that, in spite of having a little or no education and despite always being led by the man of her family, the SHG member can do this task efficiently, is a developmental need. As Pradanites, we focus on the growth of the individual member; however, being aware of this subtle difference, shapes the design of our module and methodology.

To make a training more meaningful, all teaching, training and learning must be aligned with individual potential and the wider life development needs; this wide, flexible, individual approach to human development is vital for any workplace be it a multinational or an NGO. I would prefer to substitute the word 'training' with 'learning' because this will belong to the learner, whereas training traditionally 'belongs' to the trainer or the organization, which is conducting the training.

Based on the focus and the outcome of the training module, there are primarily two kinds of approaches to training—trainer-controlled and learner-controlled. In the trainer-controlled approach, the trainer guides trainees through a series of lessons, exercises and activities to achieve the final objectives. The trainer controls the overall speed and direction of the training. This approach is best suited when training needs to be completed quickly and the trainees are motivated to learn a particular skill.

In the learner-controlled approach, the learners have the freedom to choose the topics and the lesson plan, and provide feedback when necessary; although they are not in full control, they have considerable degree of freedom. This approach is more suitable when the learners are a diverse group and require time to learn the content.

Training needs to focus more on the holistic development of the person in focus rather than only transferring skills and knowledge. An effective personal development must consider the individual potential (natural abilities often hidden or suppressed),

The thumb rule is that the 'need' for the training should be felt by learners and they must articulate the same in clear terms. Learners' commitment starts from here.

individual learning styles and whole person development (life skills, in other words). Whereas training or teaching seeks to develop people (rather than merely being focused on a specific qualification or skill), their development must be approached on a more flexible and individual basis than in traditional paternalistic (authoritarian, prescribed) methods of design, delivery and testing. Thus, choosing a mixed approach (both trainer-controlled and learner-controlled) is more likely to give us a balanced outcome.

The thumb rule is that the 'need' for the training should be felt by learners and they must articulate the same in clear terms. Learners' commitment starts from here. In the context of PRADAN, this requires more effort on the part of the facilitator. Prior to the actual training session, many sub-groups/individual interactive sessions are required to help the trainees clearly articulate their needs. From these flow the objective and design.

Feedback and evaluation are essential for people to know how they are progressing and for the their confidence. People's commitment to learning relies heavily on confidence and a belief that the learning is achievable; therefore, the way the tests and assessments are designed and managed, and how the results are presented to the learners are very important parts of the learning and development process.

Many practitioners are focusing today on the return-of-investment model in the arena of training. In simple terms, this is the value that any organization is deriving out of the

training that has been imparted. In PRADAN, we have to look at this model in terms of how the trainee is finally benefited from the process and what value additions have happened in her/his family life and social status.

Evaluation of the learning imparted, in terms of how well that has been acquired, honed and implemented in the real work-life situation, is the key. But before embarking on evaluation, it is important to know how trainees assess themselves on a particular skill or knowledge before the training (pre-training assessment), followed by a re-look at this assessment after the training. This will give the trainer a clear picture of the trainees' real assessment, which can be mapped against the post-training self-assessment. For example, a participant may give a score of 6 out of 10 on a certain skill set in the pre-training self assessment. Later, when asked to review the same score after the training session, there are chances that the participant will change the score 6 to 4 or even 3 because when the participant gave that score, s/he did not have a very clear picture of what constitutes that skill set. After attending the training, s/he gets a clear picture, and her/his own assessment about the pre-training self changes. There are chances that the same rating may go up; but often, it goes down. A comparison of this with the post-training self assessment helps us understand how far, in the participant's own view, s/he has been able to learn from the training.

Based on the assessment, an evaluation plan can be developed, in consultation with the field supervisor. It has been noticed that

during the training session, if the action plans are well formulated, following these when the participants are back in the field/work place will ensure application of the learning. These action plans should include a description of the action intended, comments on how they intend to implement it, a timescale for starting and completing it and any resources required. A detailed action plan always helps the learners to consolidate their thoughts. The action plan will have a secondary use in demonstrating to the trainers, and anyone else interested, the types and levels of learning that have been achieved.

The field of training and development is vast and many eminent thinkers have expounded various theories. Depending upon the objective and the purpose of a particular training setting, one can make use of these. Here are a few general tips for designing and delivering a training programme.

After the Need Assessment is done, we need to:

- **Define the objective of the pro-gramme:** This is of utmost importance. The objective of any training pro-gramme is that the participants achieve specific skills or knowledge after participation. When writing the objective, ensure that it answers the following principles:
- An observable behaviour expected from the trainee.
- Condition under which the per-formance should occur.
- The degree of performance expected of the trainees.

For example: In an SHG meeting, members should be able to recall the amounts loaned and repaid by each member, without the accountant's assistance. Here the observable behaviour is the ability to speak/share these details in public. The 'condition' here is 'in SHG meetings' and the 'degree of performance' is 'without the accountant's assistance'. In this objective, the developmental need is the ability to speak/share in public. An increase in the confidence level of the members and an increased awareness that they have the ability to clarify and confront.

- **Develop a lesson plan:** A lesson plan comprises elements such as the content to be covered, the sequence in which it is to be covered, the time duration for each activity, the instructional methods to be used and the type of media to be used. A lesson plan acts a guide to the trainer during the actual delivery.
- **Select a training strategy:** The trainer decides how s/he wants to proceed further with the training schedule. Whether it will be a trainer-controlled approach or a learner-controlled approach needs to be decided first. A combination approach works well too.
- **Select a training delivery method:** Depending upon the experience and situation of the participants, training can be delivered either 'on the job' or through 'classroom' sessions. On-the-job situations provide the trainees with real work situations, opportunities and problems and these lead to real experiences. It also is an opportunity for learning through day-to-day interaction with the stakeholders and seniors. Classroom sessions can be further detailed into five methods, namely:

o Lecture method: By giving lectures to the trainees about a topic or a subject.
o Computer-based method: By using computer software/web-based technology as a resource to make the participants understand and practise any topic/subject on which the training is imparted.
o Discussion method: By informal/formal discussions among the participants and the facilitator to clear concepts.
o Experiential method: By providing simulated experiences for the participants to learn from.
o Audiovisual method: By using audiovisual technology.

Sometimes, combination of methods are used in a single training module.

Once the training session comes to an end, it is important to get feedback from the trainees on how beneficial the programme has been, and develop an evaluation and application of learning plan with them.

Learning is a continuous process and the wheel keeps on rolling, only the participants are different. Today's participants become tomorrow's trainers. A trainer too learns something from every training and, thus, s/he is a participant too in the learning process. Simultaneity of both roles is the essence of this process.

Sukhsingh's Learning Journey

KUNTALIKA KUMBHAKAR

Using the resources of the land and experimenting with different kinds of crops and vegetables helped one enterprising villager of Amagara to become self-sufficient, without having to migrate for work as agricultural labour or unskilled labour on construction sites in big cities.

Sukhsingh Mandi is a young enterprising farmer from Amagara, who has invested heavily in vegetable cultivation since 2008. Prior to 2005, he had never contemplated becoming a farmer. Rather, he wanted to settle in a city where job opportunities were aplenty for skilled and semi-skilled labourers. To realize this dream, he used to migrate to nearby cities and do all kinds of odd jobs. But his life took a different course. Let us see what happened.

To understand Sukhsingh, one must know Amagara. Amagara is just like any Santhal tribal village in the East India Plateau region. It comprises 148 households and has a population of 686, of whom 320 are literate. The sex ratio is 971 to 1000. The villagers primarily depended on wage-labour and migration, with the yield from their own lands, providing them food security for 6–9 months. Most families own an average of around 1.5 acres, comprising mainly uplands and medium uplands, which they use for cultivating rain-fed kharif paddy—the only produce in Amagara. The farmers in these villages migrate to the agriculturally developed districts such as Burdwan and Hooghly, where they work as agriculture labour, transplanting paddy, including boro paddy, and work in the potato fields. Some youngsters migrate to places such as Jamshedpur and even Bangalore, to work on the construction sites. Middlemen recruit young boys for this.

The lack of water has been a problem in the area; it made the villagers largely dependent on rain for cultivation. So, in the initial days, all efforts of PRADAN were directed at how to get water all through the year, thereby increasing food security. To ensure a meal a day, the women and men had to travel very far if not to other districts and cities for work. The women had to finish all their household chores before going out to work as daily labourers, leaving their children behind. On returning, they had to resume all the household activities without any leisure time.

Two years back, Sukhsingh's family was no different from the other families in Amagara. His is a joint family, comprising his mother (60 years old), his brother, sister-in-law, a nephew (9 years old) and a niece (4 years old). Their primary source of livelihood was wage labour. With a 0.16-acre homestead, 1.5 acres of uplands and 0.3 acres of medium lowlands, the family had rice available for six months. Later, they bought one *hapa* (a large structure for watershed) of 50x5*50x*10 size under the watershed development program. This now provides irrigation to the uplands.

For 7–8 months, two of the family members were engaged in wage labour. Sukhsingh himself went to cities such as Jamshedpur, Mumbai and Bangalore for 6–8 months at a stretch, to work in construction sites as wage labour. He earned around Rs 3,000 each month but he had to spend considerable amount to live there. When he came back, he would bring home about Rs 5,000–7,000. In keeping with the trend in Amagara at that time, they could grow nothing more than paddy and potato in some 1 acres of land. So the two brothers worked hard as wage labourers to maintain the family. Sukhsingh, who was unmarried, was the only person in the family, who could migrate, which he did with some other young boys. He is still not married, because he fears they will not be able to feed an additional mouth in their family. They have also planted mango in the homestead land.

But Amagara has changed today and so h Sukhsingh. After working for some years in various cities, he returned to his village when his father died. He intended to return to the

Water harvesting and better cropping systems for the benefit of small farmers in watersheds of the East India Plateau'. The focus in Amagara was agronomic practices.

city when the rituals were over. Once he reached home, he felt reluctant to go back. The long working hours with the heavy physical work and the horrible living environment in the workplace was becoming unbearable. His brother insisted that he cultivate their fields, but Sukhsingh was not at all confident because of his inexperience and also because the state of agriculture was known to him. What he could not see and feel was the growing buzz in village agriculture. This happened with the implementation of the ACIAR project— 'Water harvesting and better cropping systems for the benefit of small farmers in watersheds of the East India Plateau'. The focus in Amagara was agronomic practices.

And this critical change was initiated by the village resource person (VRP) in Amagara, Sukumar Hembrom, who was also Sukhsingh's friend. Sukhsingh started spending considerable time with Sukumar. He attended the Village Core Committee meetings as an observer, in which agricultural experiments with different fertilizers and types of irrigation were discussed avidly. He became aware of the details about the experiments on cropping and irrigation options, and fertilizer trials. These interested him; and when Sukumar, the VRP, offered to help Sukhsingh in cultivation, it was the beginning of Sukhsingh's journey. It helped him overcome his hesitation in taking up cultivation.

He started attending agricultural meetings and learnt every process meticulously. He observed the ACIAR vegetable experiments very keenly. These experiments, mainly to do with agronomic practices, were proposed by

the villagers on some cole crops and solanaceous crops such as tomato and brinjal. The results were overwhelming; whereas in other areas, tomato failed because of disease and pest infestation, the experiments were a huge success giving as much as profit of Rs 20,000 in .3 acres of land. This was unthinkable for the villagers because they regarded their

The areas of experiment were jointly decided upon by scientists and the community. The farmers were guided through the precision and rigour of experiments by providing on-field handholding support.

Sukhsingh was an ardent participant in these meetings and field visits. This helped to shape his ideas on the use of fertilizers such as phosphate and potash in addition to urea. Now, it was his turn to apply this knowledge. He tried his hand on tomato cultivation for the first time in post-*kharif* 2007.

uplands as the worst of lands, where vegetables could not grow. The experiments unveiled to Sukhsingh the viability of taking up vegetable cultivation as a source of livelihood.

These experiments were conducted by consciously following the learning cycle (Observe-Reflect-Plan-Act). The cycle was initiated in workshops on the use of fertilizers with the farmers, leading to participatory explorations of the most important problems the farmers are facing. The areas of experiment were jointly decided upon by scientists and the community. The farmers were guided through the precision and rigour of experiments by providing on-field hand-holding support. Field visits were made to make observations and to analyze these jointly. This was a regular process that encouraged analytical thinking among farmers and triggered serious questions in the farmer's mind about every detail of agronomy practices, starting from weeding to dosage and combination of fertilizers to controlled irrigation. At the end of the experiments, a joint review of the results of experimentation were made in the community, to understand what went well, what failed and why.

He was given all the information and on-field support by PRADAN and Sukumar. The critical steps that brought success to him were good selection of variety, raising a healthy nursery on time, timely transplanting, seed and sapling treatment, adequate prophylactic measures, correct dosage and combination of fertilizer application, and attention to any emergent problem immediately. The rigour and meticulousness in doing things on time made all the difference; this is something that is neglected usually. The other factor that contributed to the wonderful change was the knowledge that Sukhsingh gained. In all these endeavours, Sukhsingh's brother and sister-in-law were most supportive and joined hands with him to maintain the rigour in the agronomy processes. His sister-in-law took a loan from her SHG for the necessary expenses. With all this, the family got a substantial return of Rs 16,000 in their first attempt. This was a particularly encouraging experience for the family. The family opted for DSR paddy cultivation in the medium uplands, where the *hapa* is located. They got a good yield of paddy, that too harvested early; after that, they cultivated tomato in the same plot using the water from the *hapa*. The medium uplands, considered the worst

of lands, are primarily mono-cropped with paddy. But Sukhsingh made a good earning from paddy and the vegetables. This boosted Sukhsingh's confidence.

His success led him to take up vegetable cultivation on a large scale. But lack of land proved to be a formidable constraint for him. He had only two acres of land, of which 1.5 acres was under paddy cultivation; this provided him food security. He converted 0.2 acres of his land from horticulture to an agro-horti plot. This left him with a small portion of land for vegetable cultivation.

However, this did not deter him from extending his vegetable cultivation. He compensated for the shortage of land by forming a partnership with Sailen, a fellow villager and friend. Sailen had land available for vegetables, but was diffident about cultivating it. Thus, they agreed on shared cropping, in which Sailen provided the land, both invested for inputs equally, Sukhsingh was the main supervisor, and both gave equal shared labour for field operations. The profit was shared equally among the two.

They grew cucumber, radish, cowpea and okra in the summer of 2008. Sailen said, "Sukhsingh is efficient and understands the nutrient requirement of the soil. He earned me good profit with cowpea, radish, cucumber and okra. Our partnership will go a long way."

In 2008–09, Sukhsingh cultivated cowpea, radish, cucumber, cabbage and tomato and earned Rs 21,700 in *kharif* only. He made good profit with mustard too. The most interesting part is that these were cultivated in the uplands and medium uplands, the category of land that was, till then, written off as unproductive.

In 2009–10, there was a shortage of rainfall; hence, the number of crops cultivated was less. Apart from paddy, potato and mustard, Sukhsingh and Sailen cultivated tomato. Soon Sailen's cousin joined their venture. Together, they earned a profit of Rs 76,000, considered a sizeable profit. Earlier when Sukhsingh used to migrate for work, he used to earnonly Rs 6,000–7,000. Moreover, he had to suffer the pain of staying away from home.

In 2010–11, Sukhsingh plans to cultivate DSR paddy in .6 acres of land, following which he will cultivate mustard, potato and tomato. He had planned a pre-*kharif* crop; but there was no rainfall, hence the plan did not materialize. He is cultivating tomato in shared cropping on 0.6 acres. He plans to cultivate pulses as well.

Today, Sukhsingh is a confident young enterprising farmer, who believes agriculture is a better option for livelihood than migration. He has purchased a pump set with his earnings. When asked, "So now, are you going to marry?" he smiles shyly and says, "Mother is looking for a suitable match." We wish him all the best.

NREGA: A Challenge for Civil Society

DEEP JOSHI

Allocating financial resources to the rain-fed areas in the country will result in the country reaping huge dividends; organizing people to use the legitimate space that NREGA allows could be civil society's way of meeting the challenge of transforming the de-humanizing poverty in rural areas

If the poor of India were a separate country, they would form the third largest country in the world, according to the World Bank data. And according to the Government of India data, the poor of India would form the fourth largest country in the world. The data also show that 60 per cent of the rural poor are farmers; this means that the poor have lands and they plough it and grow crops. The data on agricultural people show that two-thirds of our farming is rain dependent… rain-fed.

There is zero investment in the rain-fed areas because of the poor techniques of farming. In fact, there is a lot of disinvestment—the cutting of trees and the ploughing of fields that are not worthy of agriculture. Two-thirds of the *kheti-badi* (farming) is actually in a terrible shape in this country. I have pleaded with the Planning Commission, "Please, please, let's make some investment in rain-fed areas. Why is it that you can invest more than Rs 2.5 lakhs per hectare of irrigation potential in big dam canal projects such as Narmada or Bhakra?" In those places, for every hectare of irrigation potential that is created—I don't know the current numbers—the amount some time back used to be more than Rs 2 lakhs per hectare; this doesn't benefit individual farmers. And I say, "Can we increase the investments in rain-fed areas and the national watershed programmes?" These were launched during the 90s and are under the Ministry of Rural Development now. The rates of investment in these used to be Rs 4,000 per ha; after a great deal of haggling, it was raised to Rs 6,000. Several of us from the NGO community pleaded for it to be made Rs 20,000. After much debate, it was said that the sum would be Rs 15,000; then we discovered that the ministry had already quoted Rs 14,000 to the parliamentary committee, that is, Rs 14,000 per ha for rain-fed areas and Rs 2.5 lakhs per ha for dam canal irrigation!

Somehow, the planners themselves don't seem to be convinced about investing in rain-fed areas. Instead, there is the conviction that there is no development on a piece of land unless you have a line of water coming from a dam to irrigate the land. There is plenty of evidence to the contrary in small experiments, including one by a farmer near Jalgaon, who has been practising rain-fed farming for the last 15 years and has earned Rs 1,00,000 per acre or Rs 2,00,000 per ha. He does not get affected by drought because he practises a particular kind of agriculture. He has made some amendments to the land: he has created bunds, dug some small pits and so on and so forth, so that all the water that comes from the 'rain god' stays there.

There are places in Rajasthan such as Anantpur and there are places in this country where, whatever you do, you can't produce much because the total rainfall may be 250 mm per year or 500 mm per year, and two out of three years there is drought. However, there is a large part of India where the gods are quite generous. We get rainfall of more than 700–800 mm all way up to 2,000 mm but most of it just runs away. So there is need to harvest rainwater where it falls in the field. My guru of many years ago, Mishra*ji*, famous for his Sukhomajri project, used to say, "Catch the rain where it falls when it falls."

If one did that, in most of the rain-fed areas in India, I think much of the poverty would go away. These arguments somehow still haven't convinced the powerful people, who take decisions. However, through some mechanism, we have a scheme—NREGA— through which we can actually do the same thing that some of us have been pleading for many years. Most of my working life I have spoken of the great injustice that is done to

the rain-fed areas and have pleaded for intervention. In an unwitting way, the Government of India has actually created a vehicle through which we can transform rain-fed India and with that we can get rid of much of the de-humanizing poverty that we have in this country. If the goals of NREGA are met—and there is actually a key there for the goals to be met…which is that this is not a scheme, or a budget or a project…this is law. If, somehow, we could take advantage of that fact, and that's important for those who work in NGOs and civil society, we do not have to depend on others. Some officers are at least willing to hear an NGO *wala*; they may not agree with you but they will be willing to listen. Most of them, however, don't. We don't have to worry about that anymore because we can get the money through the law.

In the past three months, I travelled through the Bundelkhand area both on the Madhya Pradesh and the Uttar Pradesh sides; everywhere I asked about NREGA, about the old-age pension and things like that. And everywhere I was told that these are not working. The poorest people, say, the Ahirwars, do not have job cards; their job cards are invariably in the pockets of the *sarpanch*. I asked these questions in Hamidpur in UP, Mahoba in UP, Banda in UP and in Chhattisgarh, in Tikamgarh and in Panna. These are villages where PRADAN is not working so I do not have any links with them. Nobody in these villages knew I would be coming. I was conducting a study with some other colleagues of the Bundelkhand region. Everywhere I was told the same thing. The slightly better-off people, who can speak up, had their cards. The cards of the poorest, for who this programme is most valuable, were invariably with the *sarpanch*.

The good thing, however, was that people knew about this scheme. People did not know all its intricacies, for example, that one is entitled to 100 days of employment and that one can demand work. The procedure was not known but, by and large, nobody in all these travels told me that he/she did not know or had not heard of the scheme. They all seemed to know about it, albeit by different names.

I think the challenge, therefore, before civil society is to organize the people so that they will get the money because it is the law. You don't have to plead on their behalf, and you don't have to go to DRDA chief or the collector or the state secretary, and say, "Please sanction this money for some small watershed." If the poor people are aware, they can demand 100 days of work and they can use it for developing the land that they own or work on. If you have a village with 100 families, you can get Rs 10,00,000 per year for as long as you need that money to develop your land and water resources. I think that's the challenge for civil society. Can we do this? Can we organize people so that you and I, the English speaking people in civil society, don't have to go and plead with the *sarkar* because of our connections. People can actually get the money and that's what is required, especially in places such as Bundelkhand, which is a dark area because the *sarpanches* are all erstwhile exploiters. The *sarpanches* very clearly don't want the Ahirwars to develop their own lands or have an assured source of income. For example, a Tiwari*ji*, who is the *sarpanch*, may have 15 acres of land and yet he is not a 'rich' man. He would like the Ahirwars, nevertheless, to plough his land. If these Ahirwars begin to get whatever little land they own developed and get an assured source of income, where will the

sarpanch get his labour? This is what I was told by the people themselves. So that I think is where the test and challenge for civil society is. Are we up to it, can we organize people and help them get their rights? Mind you, in this country neither you nor I, nor even probably the Prime Minister, if he went incognito, can get his rights. Those of us, who have tried to get a driving license, passport, or whatever, know how difficult this is. This is a fantastic country, with fantastic people, who make fantastic laws. No other country has something like NREGA, which has earmarked Rs 18,000 crores a year, and which is expected to increase. There is no other place in the world that has such fantastic laws. However, there also are not too many places where it is so difficult to get what is your due, to get your right, to get laws implemented. The only way you can do this is by organizing people, by making them aware and having them demand what is their due. For me, in some ways, NREGA actually is a test for civil society in this country, for those who are working in rural areas for promoting livelihoods. If we are technically competent and capable, we will be able to draw on this programme and transform rural India as far as the economic front is concerned.

NREGA will also enhance democracy. Not only it is going to provide temporary employment but it is also going to pave the way for other democratic mechanisms and forums. And, it is not going to happen by training *sarpanches*, believe me, neither will it happen by giving an engineer to the *sarpanches*. It will happen only if those who need this wage are organized enough to demand work and wages, knowing that this is their right, and that you will give it. And if

that does not happen, an application can go to the government; and, hopefully, the government will put together some mechanisms sooner or later to address that.

It is also a challenge to our technical capability that we make good use of this money. If we start digging a pond on the top of a hill where there is no water it is counterproductive. Even if all of us do the same, it is not going to make any difference. You will not get rid of poverty then and people will be more and more deprived. So, both in terms of our technical capability as well as our engagement with the people, we should resolve to make use of this programme, simply because it's a law and it is the law that gives you the money; there are very few laws that give you money to do the things that you want to do in a village. That to me is the biggest challenge for civil society.

During my travels in Bundelkhand, I came across a young man, who told me that if this scheme does not get implemented properly for several years, there is going to be a naxalite in every district of the rain-fed area. This young man in Bundelkhand made me cry. He said that it was his bad luck that he was born in this state. He is a wage worker and migrates to Delhi every year; so he has seen life that is slightly different. And in the back of beyond, that is, in Bundelkhand, things are very different. He said this with an anger and passion simply because he knew that there exists such a law, that there is money for him to use, which his *sarpanch* is

eating into…he knew that. When a large number of very poor people become aware that money that is actually meant for them is not reaching them…it's not a question of whether your name is in the BPL list or not, that's the interesting thing about it, it's not the BPL list. The *sarpanch* can say that your name is not there in the list so what can he do. If you want to dig earth, there is money and the people know this. There is rampant migration from Bundelkhand; people who come to Delhi work as construction labourers and carry bricks and mortar. These people have now become aware. I think the government must check the nitty gritties of this fact. Because if the government implements the law well, it will change things in a positive way; if it is not done well, I am afraid that it will go to the *sarpanches* and *sarkari babus*. I see the increasing anger because when people don't get what they know is theirs, how long will they keep quiet? At some point, they will say, what shall we do? That is the other side. If you don't make use of this programme properly now that people know that there is something that is meant for them is not coming to them, people will begin to get organized and will, on their own, begin to do things which are not good for them, for society, or for the nation.

From the speech delivered at the workshop on "NREGA: Beyond Wages to Sustainable Livelihoods" held on 21 November 2008, New Delhi.

Deep change occurs when farmers engage in activities that challenge their perceptions about the value of their natural resources. Changing these perceptions is the starting point of changing behavior, that is, changing what is planted, and where and when it is grown. In Amagara, the challenge was to help the farmers opt for more productive/remunerative cash crops, other than paddy.
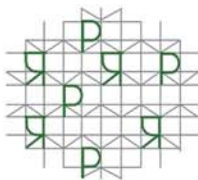
Extract From Transformation at Amagra. Page 3

Pradan is a voluntary organization registered in Delhi under the Societies Registration Act. Pradan works through small teams of professionals in selected villages across eight states. The focus of Pradan's work is to promote and strengthen livelihoods for the rural poor. It involves organizing the poor, enhancing their capabilities, introducing ways to improve their income and linking them to banks, markets and other economic services. The professionals work directly with the poor, using their knowledge and skills to help remove poverty. News*R*each, Pradan's monthly journal, is a forum for sharing the thoughts and experiences of these professionals working in remote and far-flung areas in the field. News*R*each helps them to reach out and connect with each other, the development fraternity and the outside world.

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