

# REMEMBERING BYGONE DAYS

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Looking back, memories bring alive the passion, drive, excitement, joy, total involvement and conviction about development work that each member of PRADAN shared... "We did it anyway!"

## Institution Building

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**T**he first time I met Vijay Mahajan, I was in for a rude shock. This was 30 years ago and Vijay was probably 27 years old. I thought he would be a big man with a big belly, probably between 50 and 60 years of age—hence, I was a little wary of meeting him. Nevertheless, when I did meet him, I thought, "*Arre, yeh to ekdum hamare jaisa hai—bindaas and ekdum laid back* (Hey, he's exactly like one of us—carefree and completely laid back)." I was relieved.

After our initial contact, he invited me to one of the project locations of ASEEFA, to explore the possibility of my joining there. The purpose of this in Vijay's mind, I think, was to understand this 'development *wallah*' and to gauge the level of his/her excitement to be in the field. In those days, there was a lot of lift irrigation work that was being

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implemented around Gaya and he wanted me to see that. Therefore, we started from Gaya in an old pick-up van kind of thing, which carried many other things besides us, including PVC pipes and other material. Through the journey, I realized that Vijay was not only a manager but also a hands-on worker. He was teaching things, telling people what to do, what not to do, training people on the job and guiding people all at the same time. He performed many roles at the same time, not content with being a mere manager.

As we travelled in this pick-up van, we stopped at many places, picking up people and dropping them, creating a lot of hustle bustle. As the van crossed a bridge, he asked me, "Look, Achintya, look at that stream. How can we measure the flow of the stream?" It seemed a very technical question. I looked at him and wondered how I should answer this question. I did not know his background. "Tell me your background, so that I can answer your question accordingly," I said. I thought that if he were a technical person, I would give him a technical answer; and if he were not, I would use a simpler explanation to help him understand.

He answered, "Well, I am a technically trained person." I said, "I do not understand." I thought, "*Arre yaar, yeh aadmi to bara gol gol jawaab de raha hai. Samajh mein nahee aaya* (This man gives such convoluted answers. I can't understand him)." I tried again, "So, what have you been trained in? Where and what have you studied? And what is the degree that you have?" He replied, "I am an engineer." I presumed he must be diploma holder or some such. "Are you a diploma holder or a degree holder?" my questioning continued. He said, "I am a degree holder." I said "*Achcha?* From which institute did you get your degree?" He said in a very nonchalant way, "I am from IIT." 'Oh my God!' I thought. He had never mentioned it before this conversation, through our whole ride together or through the entire day. I thought he could have very easily in the very first instance mentioned this and said, "Look, I am just like you, an engineer from IIT." But he did not. I was pleasantly surprised. I thought here was a person who saw no need to brag about the fact he is from a premier institution. I persevered, "So right after IIT, did you join this NGO?" He said, 'Well, no. After IIT, I worked for Philips for a bit

and then I went to a management institute.' My next question was: "Which management institute?" He replied, "IIM-A." I again went, 'Oh my God!' in my head. 'Not only was he from IIT but he also went to IIM-A.' And much later—much much later—I learned that not only is he from IIM-A, but he also was a gold medallist from that institute. I really got a glimpse of what made this person spectacular when we were travelling in the field. We travelled from one irrigation field to another, at noon, under the scorching sun in the month of May. He had no food the entire day; he talked to everyone, providing inputs, and was on his feet the whole time. It was very different from how I thought 'NGO work' would be done. The kind of looseness that is assumed would be there in a voluntary organization was not there. In the morning, we had four *puris* and two *jalebis*; in the evening, we had a cup of a tea. When we returned to where we were staying, he treated me to a scrumptious dinner of fish curry and rice. Vijay asked me to join the organization. I do not know what he liked about me but I think that after having spent the day in the field, we both started respecting and liking each other.

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On a later date, he mentioned, “Achintya, we have started an organization called PRADAN. It is an organization of professionals. We need to work with poor people; we need to help them move forward, to build livelihoods so that they can better their lives. However, in order to do this, we need to bring in professionalism, the same kind of professionalism that is there in large corporate companies. We need to bring in an understanding of better management systems in such organizations.”

I felt inspired and motivated. I wanted to do something to help the plight of the people. He added, “What we need is to look into institution building in a serious way.” Of course, institution building! I have knowledge of low-cost construction and building. I would definitely be able to help with that. My mind was flooded immediately with thoughts of construction material, sand and pipes, mortar, etc. I shared this with Vijay. I said smugly, “Boss, I know a lot about low-cost construction.” He laughed aloud and said, “No! No! Not that kind of institution, not a building but an institution of people.” At that moment, it struck me that I really do not understand Vijay.

That moment was amazing when I look back at it after so many years. Many months, probably years, later, I truly understood what institution building was. I understood that we, as PRADAN-ites, need to engage differently with our colleagues, stakeholders and, of course, with our work to attain something meaningful, purposive and large, which will change lives of the disadvantaged in a sustainable way and will continue to draw many more caring and capable souls to work towards this with a missionary zeal.

We continue to draw bright minds in doing this pathbreaking work. PRADAN today has the largest number of professionals outside the government set-up, working for development. What Vijay dreamt, practised and inculcated in PRADAN’s early days—we were able to work towards that and make it happen. The same ethos and processes have become the strongest pillars of foundation of PRADAN.

### **The Selection Process**

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In those days, and I am talking about 30 years ago, telecommunication was non-existent. We used to write letters,

primarily postcards, to each other. One day, Vijay Mahajan wrote to me about a person called Vinod Jain, who went to IRMA. During the IRMA selection process, the selection committee told him that he need not join IRMA; instead, he should work in the grass roots and join an organization like PRADAN. Vinod Jain met Vijay Mahajan. Vijay described Vinod later. He said, “*Yaar*, this boy looks like a *lallu* (fool). I have my doubts whether he can work in the field.” Vinod came to Vijay, who took a liking to him after a few discussions; he sent Vinod to where I was to help him see the field.

One morning, Vinod came to Gaya. It was the rainy season then. Vinod asked me for directions on how to reach the village from the main road. I told him that he needed to get off the jeep on the main road and then walk in. I asked him to walk a 7 km dirt track. It was slushy, slippery and extremely arduous. His clothes got soaked in the slush, he lost his footwear and slipped and fell several times before finally making it to the village. He looked like a ghost covered in filth from head to toe. I made him traverse this 7 km path on his return journey too to the office. When he finally

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reached office, he looked like some unrecognizable muddy monster. “How was it?” we asked him. Vinod replied, “Oh, great! It was great fun. Of course, it was difficult but I got an opportunity to explore and see so much. I have to admit it was a real learning experience.” Vinod was serious. We could see from his face that he did, in fact, have fun, and the challenge and hardship of the visit to the village had not deterred him in any way. We were pleasantly surprised.

This is how our professionals were selected then. Post that episode, Vijay asked Vinod to go to Delhi, to complete the formalities of joining. If not, Vijay informed Vinod that he would be passing through Kanpur and that Vinod should come to the railway station in Kanpur and meet him to complete the formalities. The train would pass through the station at midnight. The train chugged into the station at two in the morning. Vijay got ready to get down at the station. A colleague from the development fraternity, Loganathan, who was travelling with him, asked him where he was going. Vijay told him that he had to meet someone at the railway station. Surprised, Dinabandhu, another colleague, said, “What? At this

time? Who do you have to meet at this time at the Kanpur railway station?” Vijay replied, “There is an engineer who wants to join PRADAN. I have to meet him. I asked him to come to the railway station so that I could confirm his joining the organization!” Loganathan said, “You must be mad! No one and that too an engineer in his or her right mind will come at this time to the station. You said that he does not even know which compartment or bogey you are travelling in. That means he will have to search the entire train for you. I really do not think he is going to come.”

This is how offers were made to professionals then. Total madness. However, that madness had to be matched with a passion and excitement to do something. And have fun while doing something; most importantly, do something with a vision. There was a method in the madness. Vinod, of course, did come; he passed the litmus test with excellence twice. There is really no need to add that post the ‘selection process’ he continued in PRADAN for 20 odd years or so and carried the responsibility of building PRADAN as a member of the top leadership group over a decade.

What PRADAN looks for in a person is not only good academic grades but the zeal, enthusiasm and ability to take on the hardship that this profession offers. Head, heart and hands—all three move in symphony. We used to say, “The head touches the sky and the feet touch the ground.” This philosophy guides us in the selection and grooming of our co-travellers and makes us a unique organization of development practitioners.

### **Mainstreaming and Collaboration with the Government**

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I went to meet the Block Development Officer (BDO) of Guruwa block in Gaya for some work. As was typical, I spent the entire day waiting outside but did not get a chance to meet the official. Every time I would remind the peon that I was waiting outside, I was told, “*Sahab ke paas time nahi hai* (Sir is busy).” I was adamant. I decided that I was not going to leave without meeting him. After all, I had spent the entire day waiting and if I now felt frustrated and left, it would not only be a waste of my day, it would make me appear to lack perseverance. I kept hounding the peon until I saw the *bada sahib* emerge from his room.

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I had noticed that he was not busy the entire day because he was gossiping and whiling away his time inside the room.

I finally offered a cup of tea to the people to get an entry to the BDO's office. He obliged and we started chatting; in this way, I made headway with my work in that office. When we used to go to government offices initially, we used to crib. I would say, "Why do we need the government? The officers are so corrupt; they are not going to do anything. Why waste our time?" To this, Vijay would reply, "The government is the largest development body in the country. If we don't collaborate with them, how will we mainstream our efforts? We need to sit across the same table and negotiate with them. After

all, they handle the taxpayers' money. Why should we not engage? We must engage with them if we want our efforts to be sustainable." It made sense.

From a very early stage, PRADAN has maintained the ideology that puts mainstreaming and collaboration with the government at the heart of its efforts and work. Today, PRADAN is the largest and biggest NGO in every aspect to collaborate with the government and other mainstream organisations, often bringing in changes in programmes and policies, making these more appropriate for whom the programmes were intended. We are, perhaps, the largest in terms of numbers of collaborations, number of

stakeholders (departments), places (districts and state), financial volume and the coverage of families, in the field of rural livelihood programmes. Those were the days...lots of excitement about changing the world, doing some unconventional yet purposeful and meaningful work for the country and the people. We did it because we enjoyed doing our work. Our work was intended to bring joy and happiness to the poor in the villages. It was and still is all fun, joy, excitement, passion and madness. We did it our own way. Who cares for acknowledgement or a legacy...we did it anyway!

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**Achintya Ghosh** joined PRADAN in 1983. He served as Executive Director of PRADAN from 1997-2002. He is also the founder of Kabil - a not-for-profit society.