

# LIFE AND TIMES AFTER PRADAN

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Reminiscences of a former PRADAN-ite bring back, the varied experiences, training opportunities, and personal growth that being an agent of change heralded....today someone who began his journey in PRADAN stands shoulder to shoulder with the best in the field

## **Inventing a new life**

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The day I left PRADAN (20 years back almost to the day!), I got a job offer—and a good one at that (as Deputy Head of a UNDP-funded program, with the implicit promise that I would be the head in a year's time)! This was the 'market value' that a PRADAN-ite carried even at that time!

I was clear I did not want to be in a formal organization; I wanted to work on my own.

Consequently, I negotiated with UNDP to let me do an Organization Development (OD) analysis of the very program they wanted me to join. I would, subsequently, decide whether I wanted to join that program. UNDP accepted my proposal, and I was off with my very first assignment as an OD consultant—something I have remained for the past 20 years of my life!

Despite the brisk start to my career (other assignments too followed fairly rapidly thanks to the

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many who trusted an experienced PRADAN-ite), there were two big challenges that I faced: the first, psychological, and, the second, intellectual.

The psychological challenge was that for the previous 13 years, I had viewed myself as a rural development professional, someone who worked directly with villagers and helped transform their lives. To a rural development professional like me, a consultant was a mere clever talker, somebody who was good at presentations and theory, somebody who, importantly, did not know the field and was quite useless for society and organizations. And here I was going to become one such consultant!

In order to come to terms with my new reality, it was important for me to re-frame my profession. This re-framing became: "I am a consultant because I know a lot about the realities of the field, of the village, of the government and banks. I have been working for 16 years, and I know from the inside how different organizations concerned with social transformation actually work. My consulting or advice, therefore, is based on this extensive intuitive understanding, and not just some

theory that I have picked up. In short, I am not a typical airy-fairy consultant, but a more solid, grounded and, consequently, a genuinely useful consultant for the sector."

All of the above was undoubtedly true, and helpful. Organizations were willing to hire me because they could see in their first interaction with me that I knew how the world worked.

Yet, I realized that this was not enough. Intuition and field understanding were not enough; I also needed to understand theory. And I needed to understand the practices of the world of Human Resources (HR) and OD.

### **Learning on Steroids**

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PRADAN had provided opportunities to build multiple skills and understanding. I had attended a three-phase Training of Trainers with PRIA, a Basic Lab on Human Processes with ISABS, a training on OD with Somnath Chattopadhyaya, Listening skills with Deepankar Roy, Recruitment and Selection with N.R. Jain, Case Writing with Ranjit Gupta and Personal Counseling with Fr. Fustere. Starting off as a consultant, I could evaluate my skills. Recruitment: Good (having

used it extensively in PRADAN); Training: Potentially good but, at present, rusty; Listening and Counseling: Usable.

The very first workshops I conducted were hugely stressful. I remember sitting up late in the night before the workshops, visualizing all kinds of questions that might be thrown back at me, and imagining all kinds of scenarios in various sessions.

Thinking about the questions, naturally got me to want to read up on theory. Reading theory, however, required books... and books on OD and HR were expensive. Nonetheless, I decided to invest in appropriate books; in the first year of my consultancy, I spent Rs 24,000 on books, which in 1999 was a princely sum!

Simultaneously, I started investing in developing skills related to OD and HR. I attended a certification course on administering MBTI and FIRO-B; attended over a dozen human process labs in the course of becoming a professional ISABS member, underwent training in using Systems Thinking, etc. I got selected to be a fellow of an international program called LEAD (Leadership and Development), and in the course of exposure to environmental

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and development issues in China, Canada, Moldova, Italy and Indonesia, I learned about Systems Thinking and Stakeholder Analysis.

### **A World of Social Transformation beyond PRADAN**

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Over the past 20 years, I worked extensively with donors, NGOs, CBOs, networks and government programs concerned with social issues. As a consequence, I have had occasion to work with organizations and programs on health, mental health, education, gender, children, environment, rights, rural and appropriate housing, and with those working on livelihoods and natural resources.

As I worked, I began to realize both the multiplicity of approaches that exist, and in the widening of approaches to social transformation in the sector.

Till the 70s, most NGOs working in India were either of a religious or Gandhian persuasion. The emphasis was on delivering good quality services (health, education, animal care), and/or on living an ethical life. In education, lest it cause any confusion, the focus was on delivering education where there

were no schools: there were no particular concerns about innovations in curriculum or ways of teaching.

The mid-70s saw a different sort of organization emerging: those which began to look at society and societal issues more deeply. These respected and trusted the agency and wisdom of the community to a far greater extent. Among the first such interventions were those by Bunker Roy in Tilonia (see Barefoot College) and Dunu Roy in Shahdol (Vidushak Karkhana).

Others followed: Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program (which segued into EKLAVYA, one of the first to use experiential learning approaches for school children); Jagori (bringing feminist agenda centre stage), SPARC in Mumbai (the rights of pavement dwellers), PRIA (Participatory Training and Research), SEARCH in Bangalore (organizing and sensitizing farm workers), Behavioral Science Centre (use of behavioral science technology to work with Dalits); and, of course, PRADAN with its focus on livelihoods and natural resources.

When compared to the Gandhian and Missionary organizations, these organizations featured a new set of people: young,

energetic, highly educated and willing to explore new paradigms and approaches. It was thanks to the alternatives generated by these organizations that the Government of India started reconsidering the way it tried to deal with social issues. Over the next decade or so, inspired and learning from (many times, unacknowledged) the sector, the government set up Mahila Samakhya (Women's empowerment), Watershed Development, Wasteland Development, Poverty Alleviation Programs, Rural Health Missions, National Literacy Missions and so on and so forth.

By 2000, even as the NGO sector fell into some disrepute (organizations working only as sub-contractors; some clearly in only for money and not for any social transformation, etc.), and the traditional multi-sectoral NGOs (Sewa Mandir, ASSEFA, Chirag, BCT, MYRADA) seemed to be losing their mojo, a slew of newer organizations, with radically different and exciting approaches entered the fray. Thus, you had organizations as diverse as Video Volunteers (community using modern technology to deal with human rights issues), CREA (Feminist human rights), Azad (training women cab drivers), Magic

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Bus (sports for slum children), Vinyas (Building as Learning Aid, creating an intersection between architecture and education) FAT (feminist technology), Arvind Eye Care (low-cost, high-quality, large-scale eye care for the poor), Equations (Environmentally friendly and socially sustainable tourism), Nidaan (organizing street vendors), Aajeevika Bureau (ID cards and multi-level support for migrant tribals), Prayas (reforming the criminal justice system), and Banyan (mental health).

In short, the NGO sector had now become an interesting mixture of dinosaurs (old-style organizations), older organizations that continued to remain vital through re-invention (such as PRADAN and AKRSPI), the un-savoury or superficial ones, and exciting, innovative and new organizations that dealt with hitherto unrecognized issues in very different ways.

But this was not all, the energy for social change was also emerging from different movements and campaigns, as well as community-based organizations (CBOs) and cooperatives. Some of these campaigns such as Right to Information (RTI) and Right to Food (RTF) had a huge impact

on national policy (leading to the framing of the RTI Act, and legislation around food security); others, around women's rights movement (Nirbhaya campaign, OBR, We Can campaign) had a slow fuse impact on a range of issues such as domestic violence, representation of women in Panchayati Raj, dowry deaths, etc.

Other campaigns (Narmada Bachao, anti POSCO -Pohang Iron and Steel Company) have had an impact on policies related to displacement and resettlement of tribals (in particular).

Working directly with many of the above as well as by listening to others I was not otherwise directly involved with, my education about the social sector has been a continuous, ongoing process. And this education, has, in turn, led to a deepening concern about social change.

### **A Deepening Concern about Social Change**

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Getting to work, or know about many of these organizations, movements, CBOs, and even some of the newer government programs (such as the Kerala program Kudumbashree) was exciting because it highlighted the need for social change and

transformation, and what all was possible for that change.

In the course of these 20 years, my understanding of the nature of this social change (required and possibilities) has grown, not in a very defined step-by-step fashion but more through a process of diffusion and osmosis.

This growing understanding has been aided and moulded by a series of questions that either I have asked or have become aware of. Some of these questions have been as follows.

- How is it that whereas India has become a hub for medical tourism, thanks to the high-quality corporate hospitals in metropolitan India, the public health centres (PHCs) around the country are becoming increasingly dysfunctional? How is it that whereas a middle-class person in Delhi has access to the latest in medical technology (MRIs, laser surgery and high-end medicine), a woman living in an MP village cannot even be assured of a safe childbirth?
- How is it that whereas we now have air-conditioned schools in Delhi, where children use the latest computer technology to learn about the world, tribal children in Odisha are

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being denied education as the government shuts down schools one by one in villages, ostensibly because they are 'unviable'?

- How is it that Reliance has been able to build up its giant commercial empire on cotton, even as over 1000 farmers growing cotton commit suicide every year?
- Why is that the various state governments hush up farmer suicide deaths? A recent example is in Punjab, where every week farmers' bodies are fished out of the Bhakra canal.
- Why is it that every month 3000 children land up at the New Delhi railway station, having run away from their homes? Why do we as a society remain blind to children employed in restaurants and tea-stalls, about child rapes, and child sexual tourism (the highest in India being in the temple towns of Puri and Tirupati).
- Why do state governments hush up or ignore reports on bonded labour (another term for slave labour)?
- In 2014, almost 2.6 lakh people were killed in traffic accidents and another 25 lakh were injured. A disproportionately high number of those killed

and injured were pedestrians and cyclists. Why is it that our countries (and cities) keep on investing in super-highways and fancy flyovers without investing in pedestrian bridges and subways or bicycle tracks? Why is it that there are no campaigns for safe driving, or stringent checks by the police for wrong driving? See the number of trucks driving back on the wrong side on highways; cars jumping red lights in the city; or fancy cars weaving from one lane to another as if they are in a James Bond movie.

- Why do middle-class colonies ban the movement of people living in poorer areas through their colonies? (Clearly, there is no counter ban!)
- Why don't people carry cloth bags for shopping? Why do they insist on getting their grocery in polythene bags? Used polythene bags litter our cities and roadsides: quite apart from looking ugly, these end up by choking our drains, and killing cattle which consume these bags.
- Why do people insist on buying bottled water, rather than depending on our municipality water for drinking? That water in plastic bottles is somehow purer and cleaner than municipality water is one of the

biggest marketing scams, and all of us have seemingly fallen into the trap of buying water, which should be, otherwise, available to us for free?

- Why are slum people evicted from the Yamuna plains (in the name of protecting the flood plains), whereas, at the same time, the construction of the Akshardham temple and other such massive concrete structures at the same place has been allowed?
- Why is it that we allow the construction of huge energy guzzlers such as gigantic airport terminals, malls, flood-lit massive stadiums, diesel guzzling SUVs, even as we struggle with the climate change impact of high carbon emission? Some of the biggest culprits of high carbon emission are the coal-powered thermal power plants. Encouraging high energy guzzlers (is IPL more essential than irrigation?) ensures that we cannot do without coal-based plants. So much so that we are rapidly setting up mines in prime forest areas, both destroying forest cover essential to absorb the carbon in our atmosphere and displacing the tribals living there. I am amazed that the Government is unable to

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see the obvious process by which we are destroying the environment at both ends (increasing use of energy while decreasing forest cover) and unable to bring in any coherent policy to deal with these.

A bigger question is why are so few of us concerned about questions such as the above? Why is the majority of the middle class more concerned about IPL bidding, and the marriage of film stars, the building of bigger and flashier airports (huge energy guzzlers) and not with communal amity, inclusiveness and a sustainable environment?

### **Against Stupidity the Gods Themselves Contend in Vain**

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As time has gone on, I realize that two concerns have grown within me. The first concern is with the culture of thoughtlessness, short-term thinking and immediate gratification that seems to have pervaded society. The second concern is with the heartlessness and extreme self-centredness of those who are well off. The second is even more troubling because the upper middle class never had it so good in terms of material comfort: ACs, SUVs, regular air

travel, foreign vacations, and the best of health care.

These concerns make me angry, sad and upset.

What makes me upbeat is when I come across organizations that are thinking about these issues and trying to resolve them. There is profound satisfaction for me in working with these very organizations and helping them improve their internal processes, the way they structure themselves, the way they solve conflicts, the way they build a culture of greater inclusiveness.

The way I look at it, organizations that are concerned with social change need to deepen a culture of reflection about what they are doing, both inside and outside the organization. In many cases, organizations that are thinking of, say, education or livelihoods, are not aware of other processes in society, which can lead to destroying those societies in the long run. They may set up School Management Committees (SMCs) or Water User Associations but not recognize the caste conflict in the village that prevents parents and others in these committees from working effectively with each other.

In a similar fashion, organizations may be sensitive in dealing with the community but not realize that a culture of authoritarianism inside the organization de-motivates the community workers and others. The mismatch of stated and practised values ultimately harms the effectiveness of these organizations as social transformation agents.

To summarize: there is a huge need to reflect on what development professionals and workers are doing as individuals, as colleagues and bosses; as teams and departments; and, finally, as organizations. They need to reflect and be able to recognize processes that strengthen working together as well as those that destroy trust, and those that end up by destroying our future.

My role is to help organizations to learn to reflect and get society at large to reflect; and to become wise, in the course of such reflections. Only when enough of them actually do become wise will I be convinced that my two-decade journey, post-PRADAN, has been worthwhile.

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