

Learning through Failures and Successes

MITALI

Every failure provides opportunities for learning and growth and can be stepping stone for development professionals endeavouring to bring about a change in the field.

What is more important, I would like to ask—our village and society or our self-interest and because of it envy and conflict? If the answer is the latter, there is no more to say. However, if the answer is our village and society, I would like to ask why people do not come together and have a shared dream for the development of their village? Is it not possible to think of the well-being of others?

A village is made up of many hamlets (*tolas*) and many people live in a hamlet. Some of these hamlets have Self Help Groups (SHGs) but not everyone is part of these groups. Some people have chosen to be associated with SHGs but not to belong to them. Why is this so? Why do they only want a tentative connection with the SHGs of their areas? There are many such unanswered questions.

In Godda district, Jharkand, there is a village called Barmasiya in Poriyahat block; it has many small hamlets, including one called Pandit *tola* where all the potters live. The people of this hamlet have adopted another profession, leading to improved living standards. Two SHGs (Laxmi and Maa Kashi), promoted by PRADAN, function in this hamlet. I worked on a development scheme with these villagers.

Before my first meeting with the people, I was apprehensive about the dynamics of the group. But I found that the women discussed many topics, including some developmental schemes. I thought that if the group members themselves were so enthusiastic and wanted to implement some of the programmes, PRADAN could also think of promoting some development schemes through the Swarnajayanti *gram* Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) Special Project. Keeping this in my mind, I called for a meeting in the village in which some women, who were not members of the SHG, also participated. They expressed their desire to form a group for themselves. I was in favour of the idea and suggested that they form a new group. So the Maa Durga *mahila* Mandal was formed in Pandit *tola*.

The SGSY Special Project was then introduced in the village. A combined meeting of three SHGs was called, which was attended by the men of the village too. People participated in a detailed discussion about the SGSY Special Project, the difficulties that might come in the way of its implementation and how the members could contribute in its execution. The men and the women both agreed that they would help to implement the programme and would participate in the development process so that their village could prosper.

I was delighted to see the active participation of Sarita Devi, Manju Devi, Geeta Devi, Samri Devi, Sadanand Pandit, Prakash Pandit and Bisheshwar Pandit in the discussions. A hamlet-level *sabha* called *Barmasiya gram Samiti* was formed and a day was fixed for the preparation of the detailed implementation plan. We visited the plots and fields in Barmasiya village, to assess where the structure (for example 5 per cent model, water harvesting tank, irrigation tank, field bunding, etc.) could be prepared so that all the villagers could reap its benefits. We reached the uplands near the village, owned by 18 to 20 villagers. Six or seven people used to cultivate potatoes, *kurthi* and maize on this land whereas the rest of the land lay fallow. During the discussions, the landowners began talking about planting mangoes on this patch of land. They thought that if they planted mangoes on those five acres, it would gradually develop into a forest and would be beneficial for them. The villagers were enthusiastic and unanimously decided to go ahead with the plan. Radha Devi, Poonam Devi, Sulochna Devi and Jyoti

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Devi were very excited with the idea of a mango orchard; Jyoti Devi especially so because she owned most of the land. Some problems did arise when selecting the schemes and structures but these were settled peacefully. Bisheshwar Pandit was selected as the accounts

keeper of the *samiti*, and was made responsible for completing the paper work for the project on time. We completed the preparation of the detailed implementation plan through this exercise.

Up until then everything worked out well; however, after this, internal conflicts began to surface. The first problem was that the book-keeper did not complete the paper work on time. The bank account, therefore, could not be opened and this delayed the transfer of money for the project. The season for planting mangoes set in and the villagers had to dig pits for this. The expenses for digging the pits were discussed with the villagers. Unfortunately, people's perception began changing. Money became their first priority. Because the soil was very hard, the villagers thought they would have to employ labourers and would have to pay them more money. This was a bad beginning. Somehow, we managed to persuade them to complete the digging of the pits. One family, however, was not at all affected by these disturbances—Ashok Pandit and his wife Jyoti Devi completed all the pits in their plot. Ashok was then chosen the new book-keeper by the villagers. Some villagers, who were related to Bisheshwar Pandit, were not happy with the selection of Ashok Pandit, and resentments began to surface.

The *tola* gradually became divided into two factions and more and more internal conflicts surfaced. With the arrival of fertilizers and medicines for the pit, the conflict among the villagers grew. Quarrels broke out over small things, including the distribution of the fertilizer. The book-keeper was labelled as dishonest and I spent a lot of time intervening in their quarrels. Somehow, in spite of the difficulties, we completed the process of filling the pits.

When the saplings had to be planted, disputes once again cropped up because the villagers present when the saplings arrived in the village chose thick and healthy plants for themselves. This led to serious quarrels with the other villagers, who thought they had been cheated. Further, six or seven plants were stolen from the village, leading to another dispute in which the villagers blamed each other. A *tola sabha* was called, which only a handful of villagers attended.

The villagers engaged in mango plantation believed that there was a lot of cheating so did not want to participate in the meeting. The villagers, who were not engaged in the activity, did not feel the need to participate in the meeting. I began to wonder how the people who were earlier talking of development and prosperity in their village had lost their enthusiasm so completely. These signs were disturbing. I met the members of the *sabha* individually, to convince them to plant the saplings in their plots. Finally, the planting was completed; the mortality of the saplings, however, was high because of the delay in planting.

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Fencing the orchard was another struggle. Initially, I had suggested to the farmers that they should fence their individual plants. The villagers rejected this saying that they would not be able to plough the rest of the field. All of them then decided to fence all the mango plants in one patch. Soon they began to argue because they thought that the landowner, who had more plants than

the others, would get more money than them. The farmers with fewer plants questioned why they should fence the plot when they had only 10 plants. All the responsibility of fencing, therefore, was left to the book-keeper because he had the maximum number of plants. From then onwards, the people did not work together as a team at all. When the bamboos were brought to the village for fencing only the book-keeper did the fencing. The other farmers only fenced their plots after his work was complete.

I held several meetings with the villagers but they were not interested in fencing their plots. In almost every meeting, money became an important issue for discussion. I became very annoyed with the villagers when on every issue they started discussing money as if that was the only important thing in their lives. The bickering continued. Some of the villagers did fence their plots and when the bamboo finished, the book-keeper was asked to get more. The bamboo was procured but with it came another point of contention and endless quarrels. The book-keeper, it seems, had got rotten bamboos for fencing.

The selfishness and pettiness of the people also stalled the activities of the village. The villagers who were earlier resentful of the book-keeper now became very angry with him. At every opportunity, they highlighted his dishonesty. The villagers were now not ready to fence their plants, even with good bamboo. They began to blame me because they thought that I was supporting the book-keeper. I became frustrated and even began to question myself on whether I was right to trust the book-keeper blindly. I remembered, however, that the SHG members had selected the book-keeper. I called for a meeting immediately; as usual, only 8–10 villagers showed up. I forced all the villagers to participate in the meeting. It was decided in the meeting that the book-keeper would not be changed but would compensate for the loss. The money for filling the pits was also discussed, but the villagers were adamant—the book-keeper should pay for that too. It was decided in the meeting that the villagers would do the fencing.

The decision taken at the *sabha* did not seem to be of any relevance because even six months after the plantation, the fencing was not completed. During this period, I went to the village a number of times. The SHG also held several meetings. The plantation of the saplings was discussed at all the meetings but there was no resolution to the conflict. The saplings of many of the farmers, especially Ashok Pandit, were stolen over and over again. The villagers began complaining about each other openly. Some of them threw away their plants in anger. Nobody cared for the remaining plants in the plots. Inputs such as fertilizers,

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medicines or water were not provided to the plants. Gradually, people became apathetic to mango cultivation. On an adjacent plot, a farmer working under another scheme had completed the levelling of his

land without any disturbance because there was no collective work involved.

On the mango plantations of Pandit *tola*, on the other hand, animals were allowed to graze, and all the leaves were eaten and only the stems remained in the field. But three farmers among the fifteen—Ashok Pandit, Prakash Pandit and Tribhuvan Pandit—understood the importance of the plantations and tried to save the plants by fencing them. The results were promising and their plantations were very healthy and green.

Amidst all the bickering, the SGSY Special Project lost its importance. It became limited to the mango plantation only. Work began on other projects but was stalled midway. For example, the construction of a small water structure was initiated but the work stopped after only two feet of work; the villagers had initially shown an interest in vermi-composting but this community activity too could not be carried out because of quarrels over trivial issues such as the distribution of bricks, cement or the cost of labour. Each time the issue involved was money.

The villagers, when I had first met them, said there were no developmental schemes in their village and had enthusiastically agreed to the formation of the *sabha* and the implementation of programmes through the SHG. Sadly, they were not able to reap the benefits from the schemes introduced because of petty conflicts and quarrels.

Instead of supporting each other and working towards development, their competitiveness and selfishness took priority. I have spent a lot of time introspecting on the mistakes I probably made. I wondered where I had gone wrong and what I could have done differently. When I went to Pandit *tola*, I had no idea about the community I was going to be working with. Gradually, I got to know them and also came to understand their internal issues. I got an opportunity to know what people think of each other. I also realized that I had made several mistakes and that these have paved the way for my further learning.

During my career as a developmental professional, I have resolved many issues and gained confidence as I have gone along. The mango plantation in Barmasiya village became a big source of learning for me. My greatest learning was that initiating any

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activity without knowing the villagers well leads to many problems. I was not able to develop five acres of mango orchard in Barmasiya. This was my dream. This is just one example. The dream could belong to any development professional who wants to get results and who faces such hurdles along the way.

In the end, I reasoned that even though I did not get optimum satisfaction during this intervention, I was happy that at least two *bighas* of the total plantation were safe and healthy. After the mango plants grew, some more people became interested in mango plantation; even if a few become motivated, nothing else is important.

Success and failure are two faces of the same coin. We need to remember our learning from our failures after we become successful. After all failure is the mother of success.