

Reflections: My Journey as a Development Professional

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Tracing her journey from her roots to the present, the author reconnects with her deep desire 'to make a difference' to the lives of people and reaffirms her decision to work to help the underprivileged rural poor

Around 800 million people live in the villages of India; therefore, any account of India is incomplete without a reference to rural India. I have experienced rustic lifestyles closely during my childhood as well as professional life; hence, I have gathered, what I consider, invaluable experience of rural India. I often ask myself, have I in any way made a difference to the lives of the underprivileged and deprived people? Maybe yes and maybe no.

Everybody embarks upon this journey called life, full of ups and downs, happiness and sorrow, gains and losses. This trip may be exhilarating, exhausting and challenging in equal measure. Will the wealth that I am accumulating assure me happiness? Is the exercise of earning money beyond a point meaningful and purposeful? In spite of the vicissitudes of life, I would like to take out a moment from my life to think of helping out those who are oppressed and downtrodden. I closed my eyes and went down memory lane to the time when I graduated from Assam Agricultural University with a degree in Veterinary Science in 2002.

After clearing a tough selection process, I was selected to join as an apprentice in PRADAN, an organization devoted to shape the future of rural India. On the one hand, I was thrilled that I got the job, leaving behind many of my classmates; on the other hand, I was afraid of working in a naxalite-infested tribal village and staying more than a thousand kilometres away from North Lakhimpur district of Assam, which is my home town. Setting aside all my apprehensions and anxieties, I proceeded to a nondescript place in Barhi subdivision in Hazaribag district of Jharkhand.

As part of the year-long Apprenticeship Programme, under the guidance of a trained Field Guide, I went for my 'Village Stay' to a picturesque, tribal village, to experience and participate in rural life. The training format used the age-old technique of 'observation' and 'learning by doing'. I saw people

leading very primitive lives in small hamlets beside the jungle. They led isolated lives, cut off from modern civilization. I tried to introduce the women to the habit of saving through self-help groups (SHGs) and also modern practices, but they were very resistant to change. The process was very slow and, many a times, I lost hope and wanted to give up. But my mentor in PRADAN helped me to regain my lost confidence and guided me on how to achieve my goal. I took almost one year to understand the process—that phase of my life was most memorable. My experiences ranging from doing the daily chores of cooking, visiting paddy fields and vegetable gardens, collecting wood and water—to remember a few—were enriching.

I also visited the local weekly *haat* (market), where all the villagers come together to purchase essential items and sell off their surplus. These *haats* are the economy centres of the villages and the lifeline of the economy. The social aspects of weekly *haats* are equally important for villagers and are interwoven delicately, to form the fabric of village life. The primitive system of exchange of goods, or the barter system, was still prevalent in those markets. All types of goods are sold, including food products, cattle, clothes and accessories, and ornaments. The market place is also famous for *handia* and *mahua*—the country liquor consumed by tribal folks.

I went through a systematic learning process, which included fieldwork, foundation courses and home visit. The year-long programme, in

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the company of compassionate team-mates, is so well structured that I rarely felt I was away from my family and friends. I completed the programme successfully and graduated to become an Executive. I worked in PRADAN, and through its egalitarian learning environment, nurtured the skills essential for a

thorough development professional. Before I knew it, I had built a solid foundation. After spending almost three years in PRADAN, I left to join SEWA, Gujarat, and subsequently Deepak Foundation, Vadodara, and JK Trust Gram Vikas Yojana of the Singhanian Group.

Life after PRADAN was not as exciting professionally because my work was limited and bound within the prepared framework of the organization and there were not much interaction with the ultimate beneficiaries of all such programmes. There was very little freedom at the work space and no scope for value addition because acceptance within the organization was not very forthcoming.

When I joined IFFCO Kisan Sanchar Limited (IKSL) in July 2012, it seemed, life had come full circle. I am able to reconnect with the next generation of rural India. I am witness to the changes brought about by development projects (governmental and non-governmental) as well as to their challenges. I observe the difficulties and opportunities of livelihoods in rural India, and explore various government interventions, in areas such as housing, infrastructure, health, and education in villages, meet various stakeholders of these schemes and learn about the challenges in these schemes.

The mission of IKSL is to empower farmers and people living in rural India with pertinent and high-quality information and services, through affordable communication networks, in a sustainable manner. Telecommunications

is growing rapidly and has the potential to transform the Indian rural landscape. In recent years, it has demonstrated its potential by playing a vital role in contributing to the empowerment of people living in villages. One of the best tools, telecommunications can be used to disseminate information. Moreover, this is scalable and can be implemented successfully, with fewer resources.

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The Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative Limited (IFFCO), Bharti Airtel and Star Global Resources Ltd. formed the joint venture IFFCO Kisan Sanchar Ltd. (IKSL). Airtel has extended its network backbone to IKSL and also provides a sustainable income generating business opportunity to cooperative societies. The SIM card in mobile phones is also used as a medium to transfer information and knowledge, thereby empowering people living in villages. Such relevant and pertinent information is being provided by IKSL as a Value Added Service (VAS). At present, about 13 lakh active farmers are benefitting from IKSL's VAS.

I am working with IKSL as Consultant (Content Development) in the Gujarat team. My role as a content provider is to prepare messages and ensure that these are delivered within the stipulated time-frame. Further, a panel of eminent scientists at the corporate office monitors the quality of messages. We deliver free voice messages every day on areas of interest to rural subscribers and have a dedicated helpline for query resolution by experts. We also have a call-back facility, to hear voice messages again. We conduct mobile quizzes and phone-in programmes, seeking expert advice.

When preparing content, we keep in mind the farmer's socio-economic background, learning needs, priorities and opportunities as well as the economic barriers for adoption of technology. The beauty of this idea lies in the fact that these messages really help in spreading awareness of technology at the grass-roots level, by explaining facts and situations to the farmers in a language and context they understand.

That a series of messages can help transform the lives of rural people is perhaps difficult to believe. However, messages related to improved crop practices, weather forecast, mandi rates, etc., have helped farmers increase their farm production and income; prior to this, most of the farmers had little or no access to updates on such aspects.

Time has changed the rural landscape. To bring about further change, we need to enhance the knowledge base of people. Awareness leads to Action. I am lucky to be part of this movement for transforming rural India. There is much that modern science and technology can do to realize the vision of increasing rural employment opportunity, infrastructure, health and education. By building the capacities of rural people and supporting them, we hope to lay the foundation for enduring transformational change. Now when I wake up in the morning, it seems a long-cherished dream has come true. If things are not going according to plan, there is always an alternative that can be crafted. The wheels of change have been set in motion. Going forward, I hope to continue helping the needy and the underprivileged by imparting knowledge, to develop a healthy and ecofriendly landscape for them.