

Approach to Development: My Experience in Pradan

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An apprentice's reminiscences about his early days in PRADAN leads to a frank examination of the processes of intervention, the pitfalls, the initial failure, the mourning about the lack of depth in engagement with individuals because of the pressure of achieving targets and numbers, and the learning from early setbacks.

I resigned from PRADAN on 25 October 2008, to join AXIS Bank as an Agri Operation Officer. My responsibility is to look after the agri portfolio of four branches attached to the cluster so that these remain in a financially profitable position without any further accretion to the category of Non Performing Assets (NPAs). The job requires me to visit clients, who are irregular with repayment, and pose a threat to their status, thereby undermining the business of lending to earn profit. This was an entirely new experience for me; I was required to exert pressure on delinquent clients so that they fall in line and start repaying the debt they owe the bank. As I moved about in the villages, in an attempt to ensure proper recovery and to source potential clients, I was reminded of the days that I had spent in Hatgamharia, a sub-location of West Singhbhum team, Jharkhand. I remember the day I joined PRADAN vividly; it marked the onset of my professional career. When reflecting on my acts of commission and omission during the stint I spent in PRADAN, I find, though not surprisingly, several situations in which I could have acted/reacted differently and probably more creatively, thus triggering a more vibrant response from other significant stakeholders, including the community, that could probably have culminated on a different note. This is an attempt to spell out some of these situations in which I was in a dilemma and unable to chart an effective course of action towards the desired destination.

I grew up in a village. I had to walk more than 2 km, from class VI onwards, to go to a school. The school got electricity only in 1998; by then, I had completed the intermediate level in science. The road to the village was barely approachable by car or any vehicle in the rainy season. Barring four families, the remaining one hundred and twenty depended entirely on agriculture for survival. I went to different villages during the first phase of apprenticeship, accompanied by a senior PRADANite, to get a feel of rural life, and to observe the different developmental initiatives undertaken by PRADAN and the kind of rigour to which a PRADANite is

subjected. The main difference from the village I grew up in, in terms of the physical infrastructure, was the lack of a source of irrigation. My limited interaction with the villagers also gave me the impression that the major hurdle to their economic prosperity was the non-availability of any irrigation infrastructure. However, the villages I visited were endowed with rich forest resources that offered an additional source of livelihood. I thought that any project with a focus on the creation of irrigation infrastructure would usher in a brighter tomorrow. The villagers would also come forward to grab any such opportunity that allowed them to realize their dream of a better future. The team had also just then started implementing a watershed project—Jharkhand Tribal Development Programme—in two blocks, Tonto and Sonua, where the poverty was glaring. With a focus on land- and water-related interventions through floating various community organizations such as women's self help groups (SHGs) and programme execution committees (PECs), with the nodal agency being the *gram sabha*, the project gained such immense popularity that when a PRADANite stepped into the villages s/he was greeted almost by all, children, adults and the aged alike. It boosted my confidence to see a project that addressed the long-felt needs of the community being implemented successfully and without much difficulty. The physical stress did not worry me at all because I was used to it. I was looking to be given a task to put into operation on the ground, to prove my mettle. Finally, the opportunity came. I was excited.

The team decided that it would start by promoting vermi-composting with those farmers for whom agricultural intervention was being targeted. The first phase would begin with 25 families. After observing the result and responses, it would be replicated in

rest of the villages. Two villages, namely, Ramsai and Sosopi, were selected for this purpose. The rationale behind the selection of these two villages was that they were among the JTDP programme villages and community mobilization here was better as compared to others. Moreover, with the inordinate delay in the release of funds for the construction of water harvesting structures, it was necessary to start something new in that area, to sustain the momentum generated among the villagers to move towards prosperity. When the team leader asked me whether I would take up the responsibility, I immediately accepted the proposal. This was an opportunity for me to prove my worth and I thought the task would not be a difficult one, considering the target number of beneficiaries and the degree of community mobilization that I had witnessed there.

During my field visit, I had found that there were some persons in every village, who came forward to act as an interface between PRADANites and rest of the villagers; they were actually performing the role of development agents on behalf of various agencies. I chalked out a strategy to approach them, discuss with them about pros and cons of organic farming, the advantages of vermi-compost in ensuring greater productivity without any deterioration of the health of soil and, above all, about how they could act as catalysts in making their village an epicentre of organic farming, which would then show the others the path. Accordingly, I approached four persons—Deben Hansda and Harish Hansda of Ramsai, and Arjun Gope and Armiya Hansda of Sosopi. They were very active in their locality. Deben and Arjun were president of their *gram sabhas* whereas Harish and Armiya were animators for the JTDP project. In the initial discussion, I found all of them to be very enthusiastic.

They assured me that the 25 families would be easily identified and I need not be worried. They accompanied me when I visited some families and discussed details about vermi-composting. I was still very new to the villages. I was not aware about the resources the families possessed so that vermi-composting could aid in their better utilization. I had focused primarily on ensuring a 'Yes' from them. Somehow, we suffered a setback and it was not a cakewalk at all as I had thought.

The setback in implementation of plan to introduce vermi-composting was bitter to digest. I realized that I was basically seeding the concept among some selected persons, who are already identified by the community/PRADAN for doing activities on their behalf, and this may not have worked well. Being new to the area, the community and these selected persons, perhaps I was not able to inspire them to try vermi-composting as a profitable proposition. I had adopted the approach of not interacting with individual beneficiaries mainly because of two reasons. First, I was not familiar with the community, so was somewhat reluctant, rather apprehensive, in dealing with them directly. Second, I thought a target of 25 vermi-beds with 25 families was not a huge one that would require me to interact at the individual level. So, I relied solely on these selected persons for whom the task of identifying 25 families would be quite easy.

My first attempt to prove my worth as a development worker and trigger long-term change in agricultural practice of the locality in long run met with a setback. I myself had not visualized vermi-composting as a potent tool that could bring about discernible change in the life of the community. I had also resorted to these short-cuts half-heartedly. I

attempted to seed the concept through the persons already identified rather than involving myself with the task fully. This not only prevented me from getting to core of the process but also pushed me to introduce the new concept with some families, which did not have enough resources to set up a viable unit. In the process, I persuaded Dadimo didi of SHG of Sosopi. In fact, she was the first one to buy the idea in her village. Later, I came to know that she belonged to a landless family, with no livestock; her major source of income was from a shop she was running in her village. The first bed she prepared was from dung collected from roads and fields. Obviously, this was not a proper way to get my feet into developmental activities.

I realized the danger of over-reliance on some select few people. Whom should I target for this? Groups or individuals? I thought the primacy of a group prevails over its constituent individuals. So, I chose to actively interact with women's SHGs, the key community organization that PRADAN floats. I attended group and cluster meetings more frequently, interacted with group members and tried to first build a relationship with the group that would enable me to enter their frame of reference. Gradually, I found myself better equipped to relate to the groups; in turn, the groups responded to my ideas with enhanced reciprocation. This increased my confidence, in the sense that I was better placed to understand the needs of the group and, therefore, plan interventions accordingly. I decided to intervene in *kharif* agriculture with all the SHGs (there were 18 SHGs at that time), with a target of increasing the household income by Rs 5,000 on an average. Agricultural intervention had been started in the location in the previous year with 85 farmers in 6 SHGs of Nurda cluster. I

chalked out a plan, fixing the deadline for each step, so that I could reach 250 farmers. This number was very important for me because I believed that for an intervention to be effective it must have a certain scale of reach. Although, as far as numbers go, 250 farmers would not be very influential, it would certainly lay a sound foundation for a larger scale for the coming year. The first round of meetings, regarding concept seeding of kharif agriculture, was completed with all members of the 18 SHGs, the men in their families and whoever else were interested. Mamta Koda, an SHG member of Asha ki Kiran Mahila Mandal of Edalsai, was associated with me in all the meetings. From the response we got from the groups, we were confident that we would achieve our self-imposed target and even thought of exceeding it! We were also ahead of two other locations of the team in completing the first round of meetings. Our morale at the location was high. Everything was running as expected. However, when the deadline came, I was surprised to find that only about 50 members had turned up with their list. We had received positive responses from all the meetings. Therefore, we were in a fix.

Unable to understand the reasons for the lack of response, I decided to organize a second round of meetings, this time only with group members. Some members, who had said an emphatic, "Yes" at the initial meeting, were reluctant and somewhat apprehensive about the seed-varieties that had been promoted, some about the broad spectrum insecticide, Phorate, and some with the process of dry bed raising nursery and transplanting. In the initial meeting, no such apprehensions had been expressed; rather all of them had shown a kind of proactive acceptance. Therefore, when such apprehensions came to the surface, I became irritated. When answering

their queries, my attitude was that of 'I know more and so I understand better than you tribals'. This did not help at all. One evening, I met Mamta *didi*. We discussed the issues raised by the members. I realized then that I had ignored these apprehensions that had been raised by a few members in the first round of meetings itself. It would have been better if I had paid heed at that time. I also felt that the decision-making process of a group and that of family differs. There is every likelihood of a member saying, "Yes" in a group and finally saying, "No".

Although I was not absolutely clear about why the members changed their minds, I accepted it as a fact. Maybe in a group an individual did not get enough space to express his/her opinion, which was different from the opinion of the group. Therefore, from the group's context, a problem may not have had much relevance, but the same may have enough significance from the point of view of the individual. In the end, it is the individual, who takes the decision on behalf of his/her family, not the group.

I had found a striking example of this in Sarasoya, a hamlet of Balijodi village. There were around 40 households in the hamlet with two SHGs—Asora Marshal Mahila Mandal and Unnati Hora Mandal. The latter had been formed one year after the former. Both the groups sit together and the accountant of Asora Marshal Mahila Mandal also maintains the accounts of Unnati Hora Mahila Mandal, without demanding anything in return. The initial meeting of concept seeding had been held jointly with both the groups. Although the members were asked to invite the male members of their family, no one had turned up for the meeting. Mamta *didi* and I were present to at the meeting. Mamta *didi* was from the adjacent hamlet of

the same village. We discussed the problems they faced with their age-old agricultural practices and the low productivity of traditional varieties. We also discussed how things could be different with high-yielding varieties. The members present readily agreed to the idea of adopting new practices, maybe on a smaller piece of land. I was satisfied with the way the discussion had progressed. We expected at least 30 farmers to sign up. Instead, only nine members from both the groups finally agreed to try the new methods.

When I discussed this separately with the groups, I found that a majority of the members of Unnati Hora Mahila Mandal were either landless, or had marginal land holding. Agricultural intervention for them had little or no importance. However, they did not say so in the initial meeting because they had hardly any scope to do so. I realized the mistake of not doing resource analysis of individual households prior to venturing into land-related interventions. I had hardly any time to listen to the issues of each and every individual of a group. I had to reach the numbers I had committed to. I decided to prevail upon the group as a whole and tried to persuade as many members as possible to adopt PoPs of improved paddy at least on an area of 25 decimals of medium upland or lowland. The idea was that if a family got a good yield from a small patch of land, it would be easy to convince the family the following year to adopt modern practices on a larger area. Finally, we generated a list of 185 farmers from the 18 SHGs in two clusters.

The following year, we were able to diversify the intervention in agriculture with more than 750 families from about 70 SHGs. Although no statistical analysis has been conducted on the impact of this agriculture intervention,

there is hardly any doubt that it has augmented the family income, introduced high yielding varieties of paddy such as Swarna, Lalat, Jaya and Pankaj successfully, ensured acceptance of nursery raising and transplantation of around two-week-old paddy seedlings in the community, and resulted in a rise in consumption of potash fertilizer, to list a few. We had achieved our target and were buoyant over the fact that the number of families under agriculture intervention had increased from 85 to more than 750 in just two years.

However, there was a grey side to it, which I had grossly overlooked in the process of reaching these numbers. I had not done anything for the landless families and those with marginal land holdings in the SHGs. It was not that I was not concerned about them, but actually I had not any idea about what to do and how to do on a large scale. Despite the attempt to bring families with homogeneity under the ambit of an SHG, there were differences among them in terms of resources, socio-economic conditions, etc. The magnitude of these differences was greater in the context of a cluster. But, we had intervened with all the groups across clusters with more or less the same approach, that is, an approach that lacked flexibility and with a focus on some pre-selected crops and varieties. This had naturally excluded the landless and marginal landholding families. Our frequency and intensity of interaction had increased with those who were under our intervention. This had further accentuated the degree of exclusion and gradual isolation of these landless and marginal landholding families. This did not pertain to agricultural intervention alone.

The same deficiency was present in our key intervention activity, that is, the promotion of

SHGs. The location boasts of more than 90 SHGs. As the number of SHGs grew, the intensity of interaction with individual groups and individuals within the group decreased.

My usual proclivity was to interact more with those members of the group with whom I was comfortable, and I found some kind of resonance. One of the basic reasons was that they were always the first to come forward to accept an idea and implement it. They were placed better financially as compared to their peers in the groups. So the risk of experimenting with a new idea was less for them. I realized this as I introspected over the agricultural intervention in the location.

More than 60 per cent of the members, who had adopted new scientific PoPs, had more than 2 ha of land. So, the risk of trying new PoPs on an area of 25 to 50 decimals of land was negligible. Had it failed, the resultant impact on their overall grain production would not have been very severe. For the marginal farmers, on the other hand, it was a higher risk. They were, thus, either excluded from the process or, if at all they tried the new PoP, it was on less productive area of their landholding. As a result, both production and productivity of the comparatively better-placed families got a bigger fillip than that of the marginal farmers. The net impact may not have accentuated differences between these two sections but it had certainly started the process. This was true for a number of activities we had undertaken with the groups at the location. This is my interpretation of the experience; others may differ with me.

When increasing the scale of intervention, it is practically impossible to be in constant touch with all the groups and its constituent

individuals. Can we find some suitable alternatives? The last few weeks in PRADAN was quite enriching in this regard; I was involved in micro-planning of the district under the Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF) scheme of the central government. The task was to impart training to the district machinery at various levels so that all the departments sit together to work as a coherent unit to prepare a holistic plan for development of their respective villages, blocks, wards, etc. No organization can work in isolation now. It is also not possible for a single organization to address the entire gamut of issues of development of an area. An important task, therefore, is to ensure effective coordination among all the stakeholders, so that the synergistic effect of the sum total of efforts is more than the sum of their individuals.

When I recollect my days in PRADAN, I find that I had a lot of pride being associated with an organization with an impeccable record of integrity. This had gradually made me feel superior to others working in some local NGOs. I did not, therefore, develop the kind of rapport with officers of other line departments simply for the same reason because I doubted (of course, sometimes not without base) their integrity. This obviously harmed the implementation of the projects undertaken with grants from these departments. Was criticizing the only way out to protest? Could we work alone? My brief experience in BRGF planning changed my way of looking at the line departments. The potential of working in close collaboration with different line departments of the government is huge and beset with a lot of possibilities although the way to harness this potential without compromising one's integrity even slightly is challenging.