

# Once a Pradanite, Always a Pradanite

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*Looking back at the beginning of his journey with Pradan, the trials and tribulations, the highs and lows, an ex-Pradanite recalls the enriching aspects of his learning that he cherishes to this day.*

While studying rural management in Xavier Institute of Management, Bhubaneswar (XIMB), I was somewhat keen to pursue a career in health. I had done my summer and winter training in CARE and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Both these organizations promised many comforts to its employees. CARE and UNFPA deal with child and reproductive health. As an intern, I had to carry out a mid-term evaluation of their projects, namely the Integrated Nutrition and Health Project-II of CARE and the Integrated Population Development Project of UNFPA. The work setting provided for high pay, accommodation in good hotels, conveyance by taxi and AC travel in trains. These facilities were far better than those being offered by other corporate companies, where many of my batch-mates were undergoing their training. This deluxe lifestyle, which came with the job, became one of my primary incentives for wanting to join a plush NGO working in the area of health. The dream faded when no such NGO came to the campus for interviews. While I was pondering about my options, one of my professors, Shri. S.S. Singh, advised me to think seriously about organizations such as Pradan and the Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART). It was a difficult decision because my seniors kept telling me about the tough rural life that would be mine should I join such an organization.

I recall that when I was a child, one of my cousins used to work with Pradan. My father had once commented that it would be better for him to work in the government as a grade three employee instead of wasting his life in Pradan. Work in an NGO was considered lowly. The image of a social worker working in NGOs in the remote areas of Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj was of a jhola-carrying variety. NGOs were mostly thought of as organizations started by unemployed men, who would have an armada of vehicles, but were none the richer. Activist NGOs, on the other hand, were categorized as those that were primarily interested in finding faults with the system.

The first organization to step into the campus for recruitment was Pradan. The day before the placement I spoke to one of my close friends, to settle upon a strategy for placements because one had to step out of the list of placement aspirants once

a job was secured. That is, once recruited, the candidates were not allowed to appear for another placement. He advised me that I should think about Pradan seriously because this would be a great stepping-stone to funding agencies in the long run. That was it ... I did some research on Pradan, and decided to appear for the interview.

The night before the placements, I was very anxious. The interview went smoothly and I was selected. I requested my interviewer not to place me in Orissa or Jharkhand, both very near to my home. I did not want to stay close to home for many reasons, one being that I wanted to become self-reliant. I wanted to be posted in Dausa, Rajasthan, and this was confirmed by the HR department in Pradan. Soon after, I packed my belongings and left for Dausa, a good 2,100 km from my home!

I left by Hirakud Express from Bhubaneswar in a sleeper coach and alighted at the Agra cantonment station. From there I took an AC bus to Dausa. When I reached Dausa, on 28 May 2004, there was little doubt that it was the hottest day I had ever experienced in my life. I reached the office and expected that Pradan would give me hotel accommodation. I was asked about my preference—would I stay in the office itself or in a hotel? I chose the hotel remembering my training with CARE and UNFPA. That night, it started raining and the electricity went off. It made me happy in some ways to know that it rains in a desert. I always had the impression that Rajasthan never received a drop of rain.

The first day in Dausa was a reality check. A senior member from the team asked me as to what I wished to accomplish in Pradan. My

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answers were vague. I told him that I wanted to work for bettering the health of village folk. The senior reminded me that Pradan is not like college, which taught us everything. I am responsible for what I do, and I should be clear about what I want to achieve. I

thought this was a bit rude.

Three days after joining, I was sent to a village where I could not understand the dialect; nobody offered me food. Since the SHG there was newly formed, I was looked upon with grave suspicion. My staple diet comprised chillies and two-inch thick rotis that ended up giving me a bad stomach. Every morning, I would set out looking for a river or pond (so common in my native villages of Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj) but would come across none. I would find myself at the same marshy pond, where I would do my job and be relieved for the day. On Sundays, I would get away to Dausa.

Fortunately, after a while, the team took a decision to send me to a new village. The villagers were very welcoming and I enjoyed my stay there for about a fortnight. The first day I stayed with a very poor family, which prepared my food with a lot of interest. But I developed a bad stomach and suffered chronic diarrhoea over the next few days. There was no medicine available in the village and I had to sneak away in a milk van to Dausa in order to have myself examined by a proper doctor.

Later, when I approached a senior of the team to discuss my problems, he was somewhat unconcerned. He asked me what had prompted me to leave the village and come this far to Dausa in search of treatment for a

minor ailment. He told me that there could have been better ways of handling the situation. I felt angry. My senior noticed this and added that there was no reason for me to feel bad. He hinted that I should instead think of the plight of the villagers, who face such situations on a daily basis.

Over the next few weeks, I was again moved to a hamlet of Scheduled Caste (SC) people, who had been running SHGs for about 6 years. I remember the family that hosted me. It had nothing except onions to offer with *rotis*. They always prepared a stew of onions. The children of the house were amazed to see a person, who could not eat more than one *roti* and whose stomach was absolutely intolerant of chillies. It was also peak summer and the *loo* blew continuously. Apart from my struggle to get used to the food, I had to stay outside the house for the most part because of the lack of space, except when it rained. Owing to the fact that I had to sleep outside in the wind and cold, I fell sick. I went to the nearby village to see a doctor. But I only found quacks, who treated patients with steroids and almost all fluid loss cases with saline injections. On any given day, I would have preferred to take the advice of Pradan's veterinarian than approach any of those quacks!

Notwithstanding this, once I began to look beyond my personal condition, I got to observe the different caste dynamics that were being played out in the village. The social setting before me was very different from the tribal communities that I had observed in Orissa, where women are not subjugated to such extremes.

In Dausa, there was no escaping three questions. The first and foremost question would be about my caste. At times, I

wondered what would have happened to me if my father's full name didn't have a 'Panda' in it—by a strange coincidence, 'Panda' was a common surname in Dausa. The second most likely question would be about my marital status, and the third whether my parents were still alive. The last question always came after I clarified that I was all of 23 years old and (still!) unmarried. This would most often make people assume that I am probably single on account of having lost both my parents. Perhaps, people in Dausa linked my single status to my being an orphan because child marriage of young girls and boys was a common thing unless, of course, you had lost both your parents. But despite such intrusive questions, I enjoyed the slow paced life of the villages fully. I was happy to sleep beneath the neem tree and to be surrounded by so many peacocks. I started writing my daily diary, required of us during apprenticeship. I completed my first phase without much difficulty despite the constant, gnawing thought that people are so poor and miserable. I came back from the seven-day home stay and joined the orientation programme in Kesla.

Just when everything seemed to be falling into place, the orientation programme threw up challenges of a different kind. I was deeply disturbed by the gender training. I wasn't the only one. Some of the issues were really new to me. I had never considered them before. At times, it appeared as though the facilitator was being rather forceful in trying to change us. And yet, at the facilitator's prodding, I was made to acknowledge many unseen facts of my life, such as how I had been accustomed to ordering my mother around for a glass of water. What was being expected was a role reversal, much different from my earlier beliefs and notions. Regardless of the way I felt initially, I carried

forward lessons from the experience and came to respect the extra effort my women colleagues had to make to break barriers. All this was a revelation.

During this time, I also got to learn a lot from my senior colleagues. I learnt about village study and watershed. I was quite a chatterbox at that time and they tolerated my innumerable questions. One of my senior colleagues was from the Institute of Rural Management, Anand, (IRMA) and was able to provide me with deep insights. With their encouragement and guidance, I finally decided to carry on in Pradan.

As I began to work actively in the villages, the community members would often call and complain to my team leader that the thin and long person with spectacles is dumb because he can't even write in Hindi. As a result, I learnt Hindi while in Dausa. With time, I began to handle a few SHGs in the second phase of apprenticeship with the help of a senior team member. Earlier efforts under the District Poverty Initiative Programme (DPIP) had been so successful that it was a cakewalk for me to form SHGs in the area. I gave all my energy in nurturing the SHGs that I formed. I regularly went to the meetings, gave them all I could. There is little doubt that I was very protective and possessive about my SHGs. There wasn't a single defunct SHG in my area. The major learning for me was to love and nurture an SHG like one's own child. When there were difficulties in facilitating groups, my team leader would intervene directly. She would look into the entire matter, the entire string of events leading to the discord and then work out a solution.

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Where money was found to have become the primary binding factor amongst the group, she would warn the members of the pending danger of the group going defunct. In addition, she would gently reorient the group to its foremost values of unity and solidarity.

Though there was a lot of enthusiasm on my part to help the poor, dealing with the more influential Gurjar and Meenas was always a dilemma. They were keen to take the fullest advantage of the loopholes in the DPIP programme. It was heartrending to see that people, who owned tractors and flourmills, had infiltrated the below the poverty line (BPL) category. During my initial village study, I remember coming across an elderly couple without any offspring or land, who were not included in the BPL category. I noticed that for powerful castes such as the Meenas, Gurjars and Brahmins, it was easy to join an SHG. Once they became members, they would create a mess by trying to interfere in the financial transactions, especially in the bank dealings. The men would offer zero support and not let their women participate in the purchase of assets. Besides, they would try and make decisions on behalf of their women counterparts in the groups.

Within the team, attrition was a worrying factor. There was an apparent paradox. Many of the older team members would prod me with questions such as, "*Kitna door tak dekhte ho?*" meaning how far ahead can you see, how much of foresight do you have. But the same members would readily leave the organization for higher pay scales. A few of my batch-mates said that if Pradan could

offer better pay, this trend could be curbed. Attrition was also the result of the frequent swapping of working areas and SHGs among the staff. Like many others, I was uncomfortable with swapping responsibilities. I never liked the idea of handing over my groups to someone else. Sometimes, I didn't even trust my colleagues with my groups. On the other hand, DPIP entailed the collection of a lot of personal and household-level data. It also involved a lengthy set of procedures for the release of grants. Having to switch SHGs every now and then and having to fulfil a great many administrative responsibilities at the same time made me somewhat scatter-brained. I took on many tasks and completed only a few. Noticing this, one day a senior member of my team took me to the field and insisted that I finish all the work in one given location before moving to the next. He also encouraged me to take the help of other colleagues when required. In this way, I learnt to prioritize my work and coordinate my activities during the day. This was a timely and valuable lesson.

Pradan started an operation in milk marketing. As part of our efforts, we had to frequently stay back in the villages for the night. We had to sleep outside in the freezing cold nights and wake up and commence collecting milk from individual households as early as four in the morning. Painstakingly, we used to carry the milk to the collection centre in Dausa from where it used to be distributed to the localities nearby. With time, the quantity of milk began to increase and it became more difficult to collect and transport the milk personally on one's two-wheeler.

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Transporting milk in this way would most often result in delays and the customers in Dausa would complain, "Der se aaoge to purana dudhiya ko laga denge," meaning that they would switch over to their older milkman if there was any delay in the future. The project, being anchored by a few individuals such as me, could not be sustained in this manner for long. We identified the different reasons for the failure of the project. We thought of an alternative model, with greater participation on the part of the communities themselves. The strategy was altogether different from one that was spoon-feeding the beneficiaries to one that perceived the beneficiaries as equal participants in the process of change. With support from the Sir Ratan Tata Trust (SRTT) a Bulk Cooler was installed. In addition, livestock support services were made available centrally in Dausa. The entire value chain of operations was reorganized to heighten the participation of local communities. In retrospect, the experience taught me the importance of participation, of involving local communities at every stage. It taught me both, what must be done and what shouldn't be, to ensure the success of a livelihoods initiative. All this learning would not have been possible without the inspiration I drew from my role models in Pradan.

In the development sector, there is never a dull moment. With success come a different set of lessons. When I finally became an executive, pride began to get to me. Without realizing it, I started ordering around my juniors and assistants. Fortunately, Pradan is reasonably non-hierarchical in its functioning

and my juniors pointed out my fault. I immediately rectified myself. I realized that a leader is motivated by a will to serve, not to dominate. Thereon, I began to give my full support to the development apprentices (DAs), who joined the team. I helped them as much as I could. Even when DAs were found to be disinterested in their work or were performing very poorly, I would try and understand their reasons rather than expel them summarily.

However, after two years in Pradan, I had a feeling that I was learning nothing new. I was performing tasks on a routine basis. The zeal and enthusiasm to work was fading and my health was failing. I seldom had breakfast or lunch during my tenure. It was the same with almost every other person in the team. We rarely had the luxury of having food in the field.

By June 2005, I was among the three remaining executives. I had to handle about 50 DPIP SHGs for which I needed to purchase small and large animals through camps in Ajmer, Bhilwara, Haryana, Jaipur and Dausa. I did the task efficiently with the only glitch being that my SHG meetings got neglected. I could see my clusters disintegrating and was worried, but I didn't have the liberty to overlook other responsibilities. I began feeling that my SHGs are there only in name. However, this belief was not entirely true; there were good groups too.

Being straddled with too many tasks, I began to lose my human touch in work. With a semi-autocratic approach, I scheduled meetings, according to my convenience.

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Three colleagues left Pradan between February and March 2006 from my team, and two more left in the following months. I was losing focus on account of the added pressure. The DPIP programme was very demanding, and so were the growing expectations of the communities we were working with; but there were simply not enough of us to partake and share in the aspirations of the people. Once, I met with a serious road accident and, on another occasion, contracted jaundice. Owing to such reasons, I finally resigned.

Although it has been quite a few years since I resigned and I have worked with different types of organizations, my years with Pradan were the most formative. Starting off as a young lad, who was looking for a comfortable lifestyle, a cosy corner in an NGO working on health issues, I landed in Pradan. That rude wake-up call from a senior team member reminding me that college is over, and that too on the very first day of work is well remembered. Today, if I exercise caution before taking decisions, it is on account of that very reminder. I know too well that I am responsible for every decision that I make. More than anything, the Pradan years brought me to look beyond my dithering and my personal comfort. Pradan demanded a lifestyle change and though it did take a toll on my health in the long run, it left me with a great deal of empathy for the village folk. In addition, Pradan opened up an entirely whole new world, very different from the one that I knew of earlier. It helped me observe society, with all of its caste-based dynamics, class rivalries, poverty and yet its shimmering hope for a better future. While

we were all eager to address issues of poverty at the village level, Pradan ensured that we questioned many of our own beliefs—sessions on gender during our orientation workshop readily come to my mind.

I had to adapt urgently and the whole process of adapting was very enriching. Besides requiring me to leverage programmes such as DPIP and facilitate the formation of a dairy enterprise at the village level, my work required that I remain astute and diplomatic in dealing with conflicts or with trouble makers. And as I learnt of the outside world and how to work with it, I even learnt of how one must prioritize work and coordinate activities with one's peers. There were challenges at every step and every success brought many great lessons with it. Fortunately for the work culture that prevails in Pradan, I am glad that my juniors rarely hesitated to correct me where and when required. Likewise, the inputs of my seniors and their invaluable guidance are treasured till date. From their example, I learnt the delicate art of facilitating SHGs, the formidable skill of anchoring larger projects and ensuring the participation of

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communities all along. More than anything, it was the genuine concern and utter simplicity of many of my seniors that inspired me. Even today, after having risen to senior posts, be it in Pradan or elsewhere, they feel no shame about sleeping on the floor or sharing the home and hearth of a poor farmer. Similarly, it was never in their nature to advertise any of their achievements. This is the ethos

I learnt in Pradan, and not through text books but through sheer experience and example.

Interaction with researchers and development professionals from other organizations has convinced me further of the credibility of Pradan's work. Pradan has never compromised its belief in working with the poor. Instead of grappling with theories alone, Pradan has been able to effect significant changes at the grass-roots level. The appreciation that I received from community members and my colleagues is cherished to this day. It is for this reason that another ex-colleague and I strongly believe that, "Once a Pradanite always a Pradanite." I am proud that the Pradan experience has not left my soul.