

Water-cum-Sanitation Projects in Koderma: Learning through Exposure Visits

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Cutting across caste barriers, the sanitation and drinking water project brings together entire villages and helps the villagers realize their strength and potential when they work as one towards a common goal.

Pradan has been working in Koderma district of Jharkhand since 1992–93, promoting Self Help Groups (SHGs) in three blocks, covering 83 villages. The SHGs comprise members from the poor and marginalized sections of society. By February 2009 there were 400 SHGs in the area, with no less than 6,000 women members. The SHGs in the area have been further organized into a federating body, namely, the Damodar Mahila Mandal Sangh. After close to two decades, today the women leaders of the SHGs have become very confident about interacting with the outside world.

The SHGs, along with their federating bodies, are important vehicles of socio-economic change. The SHGs are engaged in regular savings and credit mobilization. The credit is usually utilized for investments in a variety of activities such as agriculture, animal husbandry, petty business, repayment of other debt, meeting day-to-day expenses such as ration, school fees, health and house repair. Loans are also taken for meeting working capital requirements in Pradan promoted activities such as poultry rearing and tasar reeling.

Of late, in addition to SHGs, a new approach has been adopted for promoting Gram Vikas Samitis (GVSs) with the mandate of spearheading the overall development of villages. A GVS is a 20 member body, comprising 10 male members and 10 female members selected by the gram sabha. The main task of a GVS is to implement, monitor and manage all development and welfare programmes promoted in the village. Pradan has implemented land and water-based interventions such as water conservation, land levelling, plantation, micro lift irrigation in five villages under the supervision of the GVSs. A demonstration plot for agriculture was also established as part of the efforts. In 2009, Dharaidih and Belkhara villages were chosen for implementing the drinking water supply project, to be funded by the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC), a public sector undertaking, as part of their CSR initiatives. The project aimed at supplying potable water would be supplied to all the households through a network of pipes. The

availability of clean water would make it possible to construct toilet-cum-bathroom facilities in each household. It would also reduce the drudgery of women who have to otherwise fetch water from far away locations.

Before implementing the drinking water projects in Dharaidih and Belkhara, Pradan thought it worthwhile to take the local GVS members to a location where similar projects have already been implemented through community based institutions. The objective of the exposure visit was to enable the villagers of Dharaidih and Belkhara to visualize the sanitation-cum-drinking water project better, and get acquainted with the planning, implementation, monitoring and day-to-day management processes of the scheme. Moreover, as we had envisaged, the operating costs were to be borne by the villagers; therefore, Pradan thought it worthwhile to take the villagers to a project where the community totally owns the project and pays regularly towards its maintenance.

VISITING GRAM VIKAS

Gram Vikas in Orissa is one such organization that has been working since 1979 to bring about sustainable improvement in the quality of life of the poor and marginalized rural communities, mainly in Orissa. The core group of Gram Vikas had come to Orissa as student volunteers of the Young Students' Movement for Development (YSMD) to work for the victims of a devastating cyclone in 1971. Registered as a society on 22 January 1979, Gram Vikas today serves more than 2,52,000 people in 704 habitations of 21 districts of Orissa, in eastern India. Through the intervention by Gram Vikas, around 35,000 toilets and bathrooms, and provision

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for piped drinking water have been constructed in 522 habitations in 11 blocks and 22 districts across two states in India.

When the prospect of visiting Gram Vikas was discussed in the gram sabhas of both the

villages, the participants expressed great enthusiasm. Seven persons from Dharaidih and four from Belkhara were selected by gram sabha for the visit. The participants were active members of the GVSs in their respective villages. They were primarily farmers, who would volunteer for developmental activities in the village. Two of us from the Pradan team accompanied the participants for the five-day exposure visit to the Gram Vikas office in Mahuda, Ganjam district, Orissa.

On the first day, we set out from the Gram Vikas campus in Mahuda to visit the sanitation and drinking water projects of nearby villages such as Bettapalli, Sindurpur and Tamna. Two Gram Vikas officials, Gobardhan Pradhan and Sambit Dora, were our guides. Our group got to see, for the first time, a gravity flow-based water supply system that supported a toilet-cum-bathroom in each and every household. Water was being collected upstream on the hills and piped into water tanks situated at the foothills, where there were settlements. There was no operating cost involved and gravity was used to bring the water down to the villages. The tanks were covered with cement slabs. The tanks were constructed on an elevated platform about 20 ft above the ground so that gravity would again come into play when water is supplied to households. The tank size varied, according to the spread and the

population of each of the villages. The system was designed to provide 100 litres of water per family per day.

Each and every household had a toilet-cum-bathroom, made by using locally available stones, bricks, sand and mud. Cement, paint, door fittings and other fixtures were purchased from the market. Two soak pits for every toilet were constructed so that when one soak pit got full, the faecal matter would be diverted to the other pit. It normally takes 2–3 years for the faecal matter to get converted to soil, which could then be removed and used as farmyard manure. We could not imagine that such facilities could be provided in remote tribal villages.

A DIGNIFIED LIFE

In the afternoon, we were shown a very inspirational film, *Dignified Life*, based on the experience of Gram Vikas in Samantarapur. The Gram Vikas staff had to hold more than 100 meetings at the village of Samantarapur to convince the villagers of the benefits of community-based sanitation and safe drinking water supply. The process adopted was explained in the movie. Gram Vikas facilitated the training and capacity building of the local youth, mobilizing resources and encouraging community participation. Many young men were trained as masons, plumbers and fitters. Both men and women actively participated in the implementation of the project, helping in activities such as trenching, digging, pipe laying and tank construction. Similarly, the village committee was oriented about the role it would play in the maintenance of the project.

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The movie conveyed the thoughts, reflections and feelings of the villagers of Samantarapur. It captured the day-to-day lives of the villagers before and after the implementation of the project.

We learned that open defecation has completely stopped in Samantarapur. Men and women bathe in the bathrooms only. Safe drinking water has reduced the occurrence of water-borne diseases. Women have been greatly benefited by the conveniences brought to them by the project. So much so, parents now want their daughters to be married into villages where similar facilities are available! More than anything, the movie highlighted how the project had elevated the morale and confidence of the villagers.

The screening was followed by a discussion session, in which our group voiced their responses to the movie. The members of our group asked the Gram Vikas members how they had mobilized the villagers and convinced them of the benefits of the project. They also asked about the grants mobilized, the sources of funding, the processes involved and the role of the village-level committee in other developmental activities in the village. Ensuring total sanitation and safe drinking water through community-based systems had really helped the villagers of Samantarapur to lead lives of dignity.

VISITING SAMIAPALLI AND BAHALPUR

The next day, we started for Samiapalli and Bahalpur—two villages in Ganjam block. In Samiapalli, we saw a functional water supply system, and individual bathrooms-cum-toilets in every household. Our group then sat with

the villagers, eager to know more about community organization, structure and functions of the gram sabha, and its Executive Committee. Gram Vikas has constituted village-level gram sabhas, in which every household is a member. The gram sabha assembles once a month. It selects an Executive Committee, usually of 10–20 men and women, depending on the population of the village.

In Samiapalli, the Executive Committee comprises eight men and three women. The Executive Committee has three office bearers—President, Secretary and Treasurer. The three office bearers are signatories to the Committee's bank account. The Committee appoints one supervisor for the operation of motor and maintenance supply lines—in other words, the basic infrastructure of the project. In Samiapalli, the supervisor is paid Rs 1,500 for his services.

The Executive Committee looks after the day-to-day management of the sanitation and drinking water works, in addition to the other village-level developmental works such as the management of the village library, common plantation, NREGA activities, etc. It gives details of the work done and the financial transactions in the monthly village-level gram sabha meetings. Details of the new initiatives to be taken, if any, and any issue raised or problem faced during implementation of the on-going projects are also taken up and discussed. Any household that absents itself from a meeting, without adequate reason, will incur a fine of Rs 21. Major decisions such as fixing monthly water charges are taken at the meeting. There is mutual trust between the committee and the villagers.

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The village library in Samiapalli was set up with the support of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. Schoolchildren and other villagers read in the library in the afternoon and in evening. The villagers have contributed substantially for each of the projects they have implemented in their village. The amount for the supervisor's salary, electricity bill and other maintenance costs are being contributed by the villagers. This amounts to Rs 30 per month per household.

In Samiapalli, the people are poor but their organization is so strong that they have overcome all the obstacles they have faced in developing their village as a model village. They have developed a strong sense of fellowship amongst themselves. They took a bank loan of Rs 50,000 by mortgaging their only piece of land to arrange the corpus money of Rs 1,000 for each household. There were 50 households in the village.

Later, our group visited a multi-caste village, Bahalpur, which has 123 households. There are several castes in the village—Brahmin, Sundhi (OBC), Sahu (OBC), Dandashi (SC), Macchuar (SC) and Nai (OBC). There is very little social interaction between the higher castes and the scheduled castes.

Our group saw the successful demonstration of the sanitation and drinking water project. The supervisor of Gram Vikas, who was responsible for the area, told our group that the very first condition that was put to the villagers was that members from every household had to sit together in the gram sabha for the project to be initiated. Because access to sanitation and safe drinking water was important to each and every

villager, all of them consented to sit alongside one another, despite the caste restrictions, for the meeting.

After a series of meetings, the gram sabha agreed to contribute Rs 1,000 per family towards the corpus. The required fund was mobilized by Gram Vikas. The work was completed in less than a year in 2004, and clean water was made available through pipes to all the 123 households of the village without any discrimination. The village got recognized as a totally sanitized village by the government of Orissa.

The Committee here is very similar to the one in Samiapalli. Its account-keeping is transparent. An office bearer has to perform efficiently to the ultimate satisfaction of the villagers. Youth and middle-aged people with a lot of energy for community work are selected to leadership positions. In addition to this project, the Committee has played an important role in establishing a cashew plantation and a village library, and in undertaking works under NREGA as well.

The farmers also visited a bamboo plywood unit and the vertical brick kiln unit, in which innovative techniques are used to make bamboo plates and bricks. The plywood and bricks are used in the construction of the sanitation and drinking water projects. Next was the question-and-answer session. Queries were raised on the design of the water tank, the intake well, the submersible water pump, the process to avail of electrification, water treatment procedures and sources of funding for drinking water and sanitation work.

REFLECTIONS AT THE END OF THE EXPOSURE VISIT

Towards the end of the visit, our group sat and consolidated its learning. The villagers

from Dharaidih and Belkhara were optimistic that similar work could be undertaken in their villages. They knew that a strong community organization was central to the activity. They drew up action plans to share their experiences with their villagers on return. They went over the chief points that they would like to highlight. They realized that the effort could help resolve caste differences in their own villages as well. The visitors made a promise to inform their fellow villagers of the dignified lives that the sanitation project, such as the one they had recently observed, could ensure.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AFTER EXPOSURE VISIT

On their return, the villagers organized meetings both in Dharaidih and Belkhara and shared their experiences. We facilitated these meetings. Both the villages were similar to Bahalpur in Ganjam, in terms of their caste composition. In the villages in Koderma, caste affiliation is much stronger. Instances in which people have worked as a collective to achieve some common goal are rare. There are more inter-caste conflicts. In Dharaidih, there are OBCs such as Sao, Yadav, Giri and Nai, and SCs such as Ravidas, Razak and Paswan. Muslims belonging to the Ansari caste fall under the OBC category. In Belkhara, the Yadavs belong to the OBC category and Bhuiyan belong to the SC category.

The political system broadens this caste barrier day by day. Sanitation and drinking water are common problems in these villages. Defecation next to and bathing in outside water sources as well as lifting drinking water from such resources are common. Drinking water sources get contaminated because of these practices and this causes many health-related problems. Water-borne diseases are rampant. Even though most of the villagers

realize that this should not happen, some people argue that such a practice does not cause any serious problem. Most of them agree that if the government provides piped drinking water, it would be very beneficial.

Nonetheless, the villagers who had gone on the exposure visit shared their experiences and learning. They highlighted instances in which all the villagers had worked together to achieve some common goals such as starting a school for the first time in the village, and observing Ram Navami, among other activities. They said that to lead dignified lives, the villagers have to join hands. Sanitation and safe drinking water are as important as education, electricity, livelihoods, etc. Toilet-cum-bathrooms are very essential, particularly for women. Without these facilities, they face a lot of difficulties. Moreover, a woman has to spend a lot of time and energy to draw water from the dug well for the whole family. A woman can't take a bath freely outside near the well. There was a series of meeting around all such common issues. Most of the people agreed to contribute to the project.

Committed people from the GVSs took a leading role in mobilizing the other villagers. Finally, it was decided to start the sanitation and drinking water projects in both the villages. In Belkhara and Dharaidih, the SHGs are more than eight years old. SHG members

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took a leading role to mobilize villagers, particularly the women, to work together for drinking water. In Dharaidih, there are 125 households and, in Belkhara, there are 80 households; all are involved in the project.

With great enthusiasm, work started by the first week of March 2009. As of today the implementation of the drinking water component is just about complete. When completed Dharaidih and Belkhara will be the first villages in Koderma district to have community managed drinking water projects.

The first phase of the programme had funds for the drinking water supply component of the project. For Belkhara, the cost of the project was Rs 15,04,800—of which Rs 14,84,800 was given by DVC as a grant and Rs 20,000 was raised by contributions. For Dharaidih, the project was pitched at Rs 16,12,600—of which Rs. 15,84,800 was provided by DVC and Rs 20,000 raised through individual contributions.

The work progress in the drinking water scheme has been highly satisfactory. But it will be a while longer before the sanitation work is completed. Fresh proposals have been submitted for the sanitation work. The villagers and Pradan are hopeful that their dream will come true just like in Samiapalli and Bahalpur.