

# MY JOURNEY WITH PRADAN CONTINUES!

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Once a PRADAN-ite always a PRADAN-ite...seemingly, one can take a PRADAN-ite out of PRADAN but not PRADAN out of a PRADAN-ite...the ethos, philosophy, mission and values remain forever embedded in the psyche

**I** often say that PRADAN made me the person I am today. My journey with PRADAN has been of enduring value. Although I was born and raised in a small town, my familiarity with rural India was very limited. Let alone knowing about rural development, I was not even aware of the basic essence of a village and the challenges that poor communities face in rural India. My journey with PRADAN has shaped my world view, both personally and professionally. Besides the commitment and approach PRADAN has to rural development, the kind of grooming PRADAN professionals receive is incomparable. PRADAN guides us to develop the noesis and skill-set to work with the community, not for the community. Although there are many challenges and roadblocks in development, my experience with PRADAN has been extremely valuable to me, and my journey with PRADAN still continues as an educator and researcher.

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My academic training, though, had offered me some theoretical information of community development that nurtured my inclination for rural development. In due course, I was fortunate enough to be selected for PRADAN's Development Apprentice (DA) program. This is when my journey with PRADAN began. I have a vivid memory of my first day in PRADAN in the remote village of Ramgarh, Alwar, Rajasthan, where I attended, for the first time, a microfinance SHG (self-help group) meeting with a senior professional. The SHG members were disbursing money the bank had loaned among themselves in that meeting. When I found them taking a little longer (than presumably I would have taken) to count the rupees, I almost offered my help; my colleague stopped me from doing so. I could not comprehend why I had been stopped. Later on, I was told that our role was to encourage the group to be self-dependent. In retrospect, I realize how big that lesson was. I could not have identified the real distinction between being a facilitator and being a helper without the field training that PRADAN offered.

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communities can relate to, drinking tea or water they may offer in their cups, etc., may seem to be trivial; however, such practices help disseminate signals that can potentially alter the structural status quo of social hierarchy. Hierarchy (based on gender, caste, age or economic status) is often inculcated in our mindsets (through social conditioning) and is usually reflected in our social interactions. Although change in such norm-based behavior does not come easy, modest gestures can help bring change while challenging the status quo. In terms of the approach to rural development, these gestures not only challenge the hierarchical structure but also help professionals come closer to the community. It speaks loudly to the fact that we are there to work with the community on their terms, not do the work for them.

In my early days in PRADAN, I remember addressing my senior colleagues as 'Sir', in alignment with my earlier social training and conditioning. My colleague repeatedly told me to call him by his first name. It was difficult to give up on diehard practices. However, eventually I addressed him by his first name without understanding the real

significance of it. Later, I attended a PRADAN's monthly meeting. Because my seniors had helped me develop nonhierarchical professional relationships with them, my DA colleagues and I were able to participate openly in the meeting. We often even confront and critique our seniors in the meeting on various issues. Although, we (DAs) were aware of the fact that the senior professionals would be evaluating us, and our continued employment in PRADAN was, in some measure, contingent upon the grading of our senior professionals, we never felt intimidated. I realized then the real meaning of the non-hierarchical and democratic approach in professional development and how a small practice of calling people by their first name has huge implications in professional growth.

In the DA-ship program, the apprentices are expected to undergo a 'Village Stay' training in which a DA spends a few weeks in a remote village. I packed my bag and was dropped at a village in district Alwar. Although the village had scenic beauty and greenery, I was hardly appreciative about these facts. I was clueless, somewhat nervous and apprehensive, too. To me, it was a strange place,

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with strange people, who had a strange lifestyle. In due course, I acknowledged that an outsider is more welcomed by villagers than a villager is welcomed in any urban setting. The warmth and love of the villagers took away all my fears and apprehensions and I started enjoying my stay. I attended SHG meetings, and experienced agriculture and livestock-based livelihoods and lifestyles. My most important learning during my village stay was 'learning to unlearn'. Some of what I learned through the process of unlearning include: 1) Strangers are not always a threat 2) People who wear dirty clothes are not poor people that we should pity and 3) People who do not possess any formal degree are not uneducated people.

The meaning of 'education' for me was challenged and proved to be very superficial. I recognized that education is not only the degree that we get through schools and universities, it is much more than that. I realized that the people in the village were more educated than I, not only in terms of their knowledge of agriculture, livestock, etc., but also in terms of their attitude to life and their environment. I witnessed them enjoying life in adversity and scarcity. I found them leading a more organic life without

overexploiting their environment and natural resources than us, so-called 'educated' people.

I often used to take the availability of water for granted until an incident taught me the value of water. It was a hot summer day and I badly needed to take shower. I was reluctant to take a bath in a local pond where all the women from the community used to go. So, one *behenji* (the lady I was staying with) was kind enough to give me half a pail of water to shower inside her household. Although it was very little water as compared to what I was used to, I appreciated the shower I took more than ever before. I felt guilty because I knew that the women walked miles and it took hours to fetch water every day; I learned to be mindful of the water I get to use every day.

Although my academic training taught me to be non-judgmental, it was hard to practice this in real life. The psychological trainings that PRADAN offered during the DA program has been immensely valuable. These provided me the ability to be aware of my personality, my strengths, my weaknesses, and identify my goals in life. Those training programs have been tremendously helpful in my interpersonal relationships

with my friends, families and colleagues, without being judgmental and offensive. I feel more aware and informed about people's behaviour and began to comprehend and appreciate an individual's strength.

On a personal note, I think that my interpersonal skills have evolved through the DA training program, and my overall experience with PRADAN. I began to appreciate and value my relationships and my resources more than ever before. On a professional level, PRADAN provided me with the platform for in-depth empirical knowledge of rural development, and opportunity for professional growth in a democratic and non-hierarchical environment. Although I realize the challenges and roadblocks in the development sector, I believe as a development professional and researcher, there is always opportunity for improvement.

My employment as a project executive in PRADAN had not been for very long, yet it has been very substantial. Like other PRADAN professionals, I was able to facilitate various SHG groups in the process of forming, grooming and linking them to banks and other available projects, such as DPIIP

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(District Poverty Initiative Project) available for SHG groups at that time. My work as a development professional was fulfilling because I could see some measurable and tangible growth (at the economic and personal levels) for SHG members. In addition, some intangible (often hard to measure) changes in the community were also very satisfying.

Nonetheless, I do believe that my approach (and including my colleagues' approaches) in livelihood (dairy, goat, agriculture) promotion was often guided by grant requirements and was often quantity focused. This is the challenge we, as development professionals, often face. When working in the field, I often faced moral dilemmas in terms of individual need over group priority. For example, I used to come across families struggling with immediate medical needs and I had nothing to offer in that regard. If I get a chance to change the way I worked, I would work in collaboration with other agencies, which could provide health and other services to the community.

When it comes to my research program, I often think that I do not fit into any specific box because of my focus on field

research in the development sector. I am trained as a political scientist, but I care for marginalized communities because of my training in PRADAN. I often try to find a common ground, therefore, for my research. When I was working on my PhD dissertation, my obvious choice was to select a topic that can speak for PRADAN. However, I was as a political science student, I had to choose a topic that was relevant for the field of political science. Although I was aware of the fact that PRADAN's approach towards politics is neutral, I believe that PRADAN's work does have various indirect and spillover effects on the rural communities it works with. Such effects do have political relevance, in terms of political participation and human rights norm diffusion, etc. Accordingly, after some deep thinking and consulting with my professors as well as PRADAN professionals, I chose a topic for my research to explore PRADAN's spillover effect that had political relevance.

Although it is hard to be an objective researcher while being sensitive to the issue, I believe that my research has only focused on the supply side of the market in livelihoods promotion, be it production, training for the

activity, etc. We often overlook the demand side of the market such as who will be the buyer, what is the market competition, and what are the challenges or threats to livelihood activities. In future research, I would like to include the demand side of the market in terms of its impact on livelihoods promotion.

When teaching, I always draw insights from my field experiences in PRADAN. It not only provides me insights to explain theories of development but also helps me illustrate the relevance and implications of those theories in the real world. Based on my personal experience, I realize the importance of field exposure for my students. I, therefore, included field exposure in one of my courses. Recently, my students from the State University of New York (SUNY) got exposure to PRADAN/Manjari Foundation location in Dholpur district, Rajasthan. The group of students were from the MPA (Masters in Public Administration and Nonprofit Management) program. With the great support of Manjari Foundation, the students had the opportunity to learn theoretical and empirical aspects of community development, microfinance, livelihood activities and collaboration with government

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They were amazed to learn how rural women were independently holding and running their own microfinance institutions and livelihood activities. Besides their entrepreneurial skills, their exhibition of intangible soft skills convinced my students that the women were empowered in many ways

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agencies in various activities. The students were overwhelmed with all the information, especially interacting with the vibrant rural women was inspiring for them. They were amazed to learn how rural women were independently holding and running their own microfinance institutions and livelihood activities. Besides their entrepreneurial skills, their exhibition of intangible soft skills convinced my students that the women were empowered in many ways. The students witnessed empowerment in a real sense; some of them even got permanent tattoos of the Hindi word *sashakt* meaning empowered. I believe this action arose out of the students'

respect for the community they interacted with and learned from in various ways. I was also happily surprised to see the achievements of the women's groups I had worked with. Some of the SHG groups that were formed a few years ago, now own their businesses. I strongly believe that the small and microenterprises (SMEs) will have a very positive impact for the betterment of the community. The groups, however, have a long way to go to graduate out of poverty.

In summary, my journey with PRADAN has been tremendously valuable, both personally and professionally. Although there are always opportunities for

advancement, the kind of work it does is incomparable. Moreover, the organizational approach towards development is enduring not only for the community but also for development professionals, and fits into the larger schema of development, development research and developmental education. Therefore, like many other professionals, my journey with PRADAN continues and I live PRADAN's mission in my various roles.

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**Students from the State University of New York (SUNY) with the women in Dholpur, Rajasthan**

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