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Samagam 2018

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Tom, the longest serving PRADAN-ite gave his farewell speech on the last day of Retreat 2018

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Newsreach, a bimonthly journal, is a forum for sharing the thoughts and experiences of PRADAN professionals working in remote and far-flung areas. *Newsreach* helps them reach out and connect with each other, the development fraternity and the outside world.

SOUPARNO CHATTERJEE

SAMAGAM 2018

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"If India had mainstreamed what PRADAN had thought of 30 years ago, we would have achieved a lot more as a nation."

April 18, 2018, marked the 35th year of inception of PRADAN. We chose to commemorate the achievements of the organization as well as the civil society sector by hosting an event called 'Samagam 2018' at Siri Fort Auditorium in Delhi. Samagam was conceived as a platform to discuss issues and challenges faced by the sector. It was part of a larger initiative to create greater visibility and support for the work being done by the development sector. Given the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and complexity of the development issues in India, creating 'a just and equitable society' demands persistent work, and is a long haul, touching more than one facet of the lives of marginalized communities. It also requires all relevant stakeholders, including the community, to come together and forge a systemic collaboration and add to each other's efforts.

Through decades of dedicated effort, in addressing the pressing issues of inequality, deprivation and injustice, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have endeavoured to bring about change and usher in innovations in their domains of expertise. Be it bringing in technological solutions for growing problems in the rural areas or setting up community institutions and health-care systems that later were adopted by the government for its flagship programmes, development sector organizations have accomplished the most challenging tasks in some of the toughest geographies. However, very little is known and/or acknowledged about these contributions. And, above all, it is becoming increasingly difficult for these organizations, especially when it comes to the question of sustaining themselves with stricter financial regulation norms in terms of Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) being inflicted by the government that are drying up several of the

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existing foreign funds due to the mammoth (false?) projection of economic growth in the sub-continent.

Perhaps, it was the right time to convene an event, in which the stakeholders of development work speak out and share with each other, their work, their ideas and the challenges they face. At times, all it takes to bring the desired change is to speak up. Samagam 2018 was organized with this purpose in mind.

The day began with Ms Anshu Vaish briefing the audience on the journey of the past 35 years of PRADAN and introducing Dr Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Vice Chancellor, Ashoka University, to deliver the keynote address.

In his speech, Dr Mehta expressed his joy at being the keynote speaker on the occasion of the 35th Foundation Day of PRADAN. Congratulating PRADAN on this achievement, he articulated that PRADAN was not just an organization but an idea which exceeds itself. How would India's developmental trajectory look like if the ideas PRADAN stood for, and implemented, were to become central to the developmental imagination at the level of the state and society.

Whereas there has been appreciation of PRADAN's work on the ground, there has seldom been any effort to take it to the mainstream. PRADAN introduced and took up the revolutionary idea of the role of gender in development. Contextualizing the role that gender-based gaps have played in deterring India's growth, Dr Mehta referred to, and compared, the idea with the work being done in China.

The very fact that the participation of women in the workforce in China outnumbers India by miles and that women's sense of agency has been the driver of growth in that country is the fundamental difference between the two countries. This is never pointed out by analysts.

"Despite organizations such as PRADAN, SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) and many more that have understood the importance of gender equality and worked on it, since their inception, it is still treated as a sectarian fact—*gender is another social sector thing we will get to*—in the mainstream. If India had mainstreamed what PRADAN had thought of 25–30 years ago, our priorities would have been different and we probably would have had much more success in achieving what we are trying to achieve as a nation," Dr. Mehta stated.

He pointed out that the importance of human capability in making a state successful or

There has been too much focus on the list of deliverable services as key to bringing in change. Instead, if the nation had asked what would be the human prerequisites on the ground to drive the change, the outputs today would have been very different

markets vibrant, completely escapes the Indian intelligentsia. There has been too much focus on the list of deliverable services as key to bringing in change. Instead, if the nation had asked what would be the human prerequisites on the ground to drive the change, the outputs today would have been very different.

There has been extraordinary growth in civil society in the last two decades; yet CSOs are always under the scanner and fingers are pointed at them. A sneering view reigns—do we at all need so many Non-Government Organizations (NGOs)? Albeit today CSOs are doing extraordinary work in their own sphere and making a difference to the lives of many, the paradigm of development remains relatively unchanged. Civil society is in a precarious situation because of regulations, the democratic clamour for accountability or Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) rules and the public perception that civil society is even more untrustworthy than political parties or corporations. It will not be wrong to assume that this clamour for accountability will grow independent of the government and the presumption that civil society is suspect rather than innocent will persist. CSOs will have to be resilient and continue to work on imaginatively in order to prove that there are diverse forms of accountability and that the democratic system already exists. SEWA and PRADAN are good examples of this.

However, the state comes with a dual conceit: the conceit that it can formalize everything and, on the other hand, not even be aware about its actual capacity to do so. This project of formalization for civil society will be challenging in terms of easier participation in the sector. One advantage of informality is that there were low entry barriers; anyone can enter the market.

While speaking about the spectre of social failures in India, he called them the most profound failures. He pointed out what it means to interact with a citizen on some minimal basis of reciprocity, what it means to overcome a society, which has the vilest form of discrimination any human society has invented. Almost all weaknesses and pathologies of the nation are deeply rooted in social failure, which obviously cannot be cured by laws or administration. It requires deep transformation of our sense of self and its relationship with others.

He ended the keynote address with some prognostication, which again highlighted the relevance for motivated CSOs to work for social good. India, as a society, is going through rapid transformation and every form of social conflict is going to get exacerbated. The conflict between the Dalits and the others is going to increase, which is a good sign in the context that there has been political empowerment. If one looks at conflicts in India, it can take an inward form. There is a risk in that. When people sense that they are not moving forward as a collective or a nation, they can then move in a direction that will exacerbate social failures and social pathologies. Few organizations are capable of taking that conversation forward. The sensibilities of the people in PRADAN are suited to initiate the dialogue between social failure and how to address it. PRADAN has ensured that there is hope but the nature of the challenge is such that it will require many more PRADANs. Referring to Antonio Gramsci, he iterated that in dark times one should have the pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the will. “We can take heart from the fact that optimism of the will is so alive in this room and will demonstrate, ‘yes we can’.”

One key learning from PRADAN's work has also been to see how grass-roots accountability can work and how organizing and mobilizing the poorest, the disadvantaged and the forgotten empowers them

A discussion round followed the keynote address, taking up tenets from Dr Mehta's speech with Anurag Behar (Azim Premji Foundation—APF) and Mirai Chatterjee (SEWA) as participants. The session was chaired by Ved Mitra Arya (Srijan).

Ved initiated the discussion referring to Pratap Bhanu Mehta's speech as a reminder of the old days that highlight the culture of PRADAN, that is, combining intellectual debate with action. These debates are not only valuable for the people who join PRADAN or the development sector, but also the Indian elite and the middle class, which does not value civil society. Ved pointed out that whereas the techno-managerial solutions suggested in the 60s and 70s seemed to provide a new mechanism to address things, they were no longer sufficient in current times. The process of formalization, as suggested by Dr. Mehta, may be beneficial for big players but will pose serious challenges for small businesses and the state, which is largely controlled by these big players.

With a scenario such as this, women show a very high potential, which goes untapped. Mirai Chatterjee, referring to Dr. Mehta's speech, stated that the development sector, practitioners and thinkers have come a long way and have influenced the development framework in the country. Whereas women's work was earlier considered a mere hobby and a time-pass activity, today it was valued as an economic contribution to the country's GDP.

Pointing out issues with the government up-scaling contextually significant programmes, Mirai Chatterjee mentioned that when the state replicates models, it creates entities that are a far cry from the original. The state-created SHGs and Federations are often very different from what, for example, PRADAN has created.

One key learning from PRADAN's work has also been to see how grass-roots accountability can work and how organizing and mobilizing the poorest, the disadvantaged and the forgotten empowers them. PRADAN has decisively shown the power of women's leadership and has shown how women can be elected to local *panchayats* and demonstrate women's leadership. Finally, what PRADAN does is *anubandh* (linking all aspects of society) that promotes an economy of nurturance. Mirai Chatterjee stressed the need for numerous, small, formal entities to make the larger informal, instead of having huge vertical formals. This creates a scope for flexibility, a sense of ownership for the locals, local control and decision-making, and a scope for organic growth. On the other hand, mainstream formal institutions have failed these entities. Whereas these mainstream doors were shutting out the women, PRADAN has created bodies of women, who know how to open these doors.

Ved Arya stressed that a major learning that CSOs have learnt from PRADAN is the culture of promoting a sisterhood or brotherhood, which grows to be a formidable bond, and of working with so many families with one common purpose. This has led to many PRADAN-ites going ahead to form many organizations with the same vision and motif. At this juncture, it would be interesting to focus on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17: Partnership and how CSOs can organize and work together to create greater impact.

Anurag Behar, taking a lead from Dr Mehta's analysis of the state of CSOs, posed the question,

Being political, being organized and being on the ground has become very rare and the opportunities have vanished. PRADAN stands for all of this and still stands to be an organization with all these capacities. Behar urged PRADAN to be more political

"Ab karen kya (What do we do now)?" He spoke of the initial work experience of Azim Premji foundation (APF) in the field of elementary education, enshrining the belief that school education is one way to human development, justice, equity and humaneness. However, Behar went on to say that most of the CSOs are skirting away from political issues. There is a lot of energy being invested in creating livelihood options, the physics of it, and awareness of land rights, but the deep political issues behind these are not completely addressed. And there is a need for that.

The second necessary requirement, according to Behar, is to be organized. Being organized is different from organizing a community. PRADAN has been an extraordinary example to this effort of an organizing organization, which creates the ground for being political.

Behar next focussed on the scarce opportunities available for people, who are willing to work for society. Thinking of it from a political perspective leaves even fewer options. With the decline of Unions, the Seva Dal, and the Communist leftist forces, hardly any spaces remain for people to contribute to society. Being political, being organized and being on the ground has become very rare and the opportunities have vanished. PRADAN stands for all of this and still stands to be an organization with all these capacities. Behar urged PRADAN to be more political.

Ved summarized the discussion by saying that if one is on the ground and is taking charge of the change process, one can find some answers to what the way forward could look like.

Three panel discussions foregrounding the challenges and achievements of CSOs, expectations from CSRs and expectations from the government followed the keynote address.

The first panel on 'Civil Society: Role and Challenges in Contemporary Times' was chaired by Gagan Sethi (Janvikas). The panellists were Rajesh Tandon (Participatory Research in Asia—PRIA), Aruna Roy (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan—MKSS), Apoorva Oza (The Aga Khan Rural Support Programme— AKRSP) and Amitabh Behar (Oxfam India).

Gagan Sethi started the session with three questions: A). What is ailing our society? Is there any disease? B). What is the course of action needed to rectify the problems? C). Where should we invest in the future?

One of the most crucial roles of civil society in a democracy was completely about speaking truth to power and holding power accountable for everything that happens under its aegis

In response to what ails the country, Aruna Roy pointed to the ambience of utmost fear and violence that has engulfed the country, jeopardising the rule of law to a considerable extent at many places. However, she said, as CSOs it is essential that we create a counter-culture of protest, of speaking out and raising hard questions—all these without being the least apprehensive of the dire consequences the act of protest may imply. It is thus crucial to assert some of the basic values without which there is no India.

In tune with this, Rajesh Tandon pointed out that civic spaces are decreasing steadily. Civic space is our right as citizens of this country. It is not a state-determined right. It is simply a right to be a citizen of a society. Thus, as part of the civil society, it is a must for us to occupy and reclaim that civic space where people can speak, talk, connect, disagree and even fight…but to do all this in a larger constitutional framework and keeping mutual respect unharmed. He also highlighted that the conceptualization of citizenship has also become increasingly vertical vis-a-vis the state as opposed to horizontal vis-à-vis fellow citizens, which is the desired equation. This has led to an increase in discrimination and broadened the gap in the horizontal relationships with fellow citizens.

Apoorva Oza claimed that NGOs have become players in multiple projects and grants. The ratio of transactional work to transformational work that is being done is changing substantially. However, sometimes just organizing ourselves in a pluralistic way and getting people together, making them respect each other as human beings and overcoming the identities of religion and caste are significant achievements. NGOs are seldom in a position to bring this shift in their approach to development. In fact, they barely stand in solidarity and support each other in times of crisis. Amitabh Behar, agreeing with Aruna Roy, mentioned that one of the most crucial roles of civil society in a democracy was completely about speaking truth to power and holding power accountable for everything that happens under its aegis. And in this respect the Indian civil society has been very shy. With the changing architecture of democracy, it is essential to change the existing stance that adheres to the structures of the 1980s. It calls for a paradigm shift in the approach and mindset of civil society by adopting something that corresponds to the new, evolved face of Indian political structure and democracy.

Panellists expressed a felt need to increase the number of actors in the civil society domain. The usually ignored ones, for example, teachers, anganwadi and Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers and several other people, who have never been considered part civil society should be included to strengthen the united case. It was also emphasized that NGOs are operational in more or less every block of the country and doing many things beyond their projects. One of the duties of organizations, beyond that of fulfilling project demands, is to start a conversation with the youth in small towns and raise various questions in their minds regarding employment, education, development, etc., so that they are not misguided by external powerful forces.

The post-lunch session began with a focus on the relationship between CSOs and donor agencies, mainly corporate organizations and the state. A book, *A Development Partnership*

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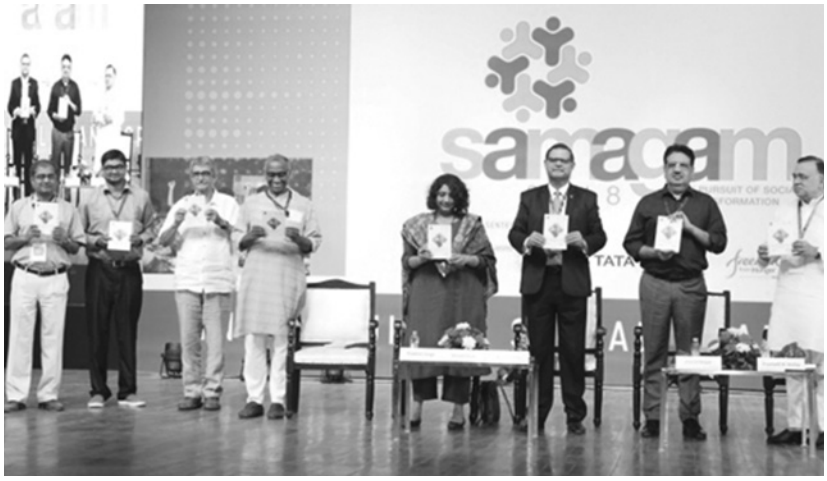

to Emulate: PRADAN and ICCO (Inter Church Organisation for Development Cooperation), co-authored by Dr Prabhu Ghate and Pratyaya Jagannath Panda, was released, documenting the nearly 30-year partnership between PRADAN and one of its donors—ICCO, The Netherlands.

The book highlights the necessity of donor partners supporting NGOs with an aim of building robust institutions and invigorating the development sector. This trend is dwindling. "ICCO does not, as a rule, look for short-term, project-oriented partnerships, but rather for long-term cooperation in which an agreed strategy underpins the common goal of working towards ending injustice against the poor and excluded groups of society. ICCO is required to take a look at the longer-term prospects of structural change and not just at the projected short-term results." It "understands that Southern partners are autonomous organisations within their own societies and does not see them as channels for aid-delivery or project sub-contractors." In other words, it adopts "a partner rather than a project focus."

The abiding trust and patient capital that ICCO invested in PRADAN for about three decades paved way for the sustained growth of PRADAN as an institution of significance in the civil society sector. If PRADAN has considerably influenced many aspects of rural development thinking and practice today, through human resources groomed by PRADAN, development ideas or management systems, it has been the result of the long-term unfettered support provided by donors such as ICCO.

The second panel of the day focussed on 'Civil Society and the Expectations from the World of CSR'. The panellists included Dhruvi Shah (Axis Bank Foundation); Vineet Nayar (Sampark Foundation); Rajiv Williams (Jindal Stainless Limited); the session was chaired by Pramath Raj Sinha (Founder, Ashoka University).

Setting the tone of the discussion, Pramath Sinha mentioned the various expectations and buzz that exist around the volume of money available from various CSR initiatives. However, a perpetual lack of clarity reigns about who to approach and how to access this two per cent commitment. He called the session "an opportunity to hear from the other side and get their perspective on disbursing of CSR funds and how CSOs could access CSR funds—the challenges and opportunities that one sees." He invited the panellists to deliberate on the mindsets that govern CSR investment decisions.

Dhruvi Shah, pointed to the significance of the two per cent mandate Bill and said that many

'To bring the desired change, one needs to live the future in the present tense'

corporate entities were now compelled to start funding and many new funders have entered the scenario. Therefore, the quantum of money under this two per cent pool is destined to increase. She highlighted the fact that the Axis Bank Foundation, like several others, has been allocating funds much before the Bill was legislated. However, when CSRs are associated with business ventures, the numbers (data) become more important, although at the end of the day, CSRs and NGOs both look at the same thing, that is, sustainably impacting people's lives and livelihoods. Dhruvi mentioned that there are silos between corporate funding and the intent of the development sector, and this demands a collaborative approach. Working in partnership with NGOs, the sector experts, will help corporates and other funders make more educated investments.

Rajiv Williams focussed on the requirement for CSR initiatives to concentrate on their industrial plant areas rather than accommodating the funding needs of any other part of the country. This is mainly because the operations of industries, especially in the manufacturing sector, directly impact the population residing in those areas. At the same time, he highlighted a major bottleneck that corporates face when it comes to choosing the implementing partner because many of these corporates had not invested in CSR before this Bill was passed. Also, there are many NGOs that have weaker delivery models, leaving the corporate organizations in a dilemma about the outcome of their investment. Some of these organizations have decided to directly implement their projects whereas a few have chosen to implement through hired teams that then become part of the company. In many cases, the company outsources it to partners, that have an equal stake in developing and implementing a given project. There are no defined metrics to evaluate a partner NGO. Sharing the experience of Jindal Stainless Foundation, Rajiv mentioned that their partner selection process happens on the basis of word-of-mouth and personal experience.

The third panellist of the session, Vineet Nayar began with an anecdote of his visit to one of the remote villages in Chhattisgarh during his stint as a member of PRADAN's Governing Board. He mentioned that the visioning exercise with the village women, which PRADAN professionals facilitated, was an eye-opener for him. He had had the experience and the wisdom of running IT companies for 25 years and had done numerous visioning exercises himself. However, this one taught him a big lesson: 'To bring the desired change, one

Global funding for change initiatives is dwindling as India emerges and will continue to emerge in the world economic sphere. The contribution of Indian foundations, therefore, is crucial because global foundations will find it difficult, if not completely irrelevant, to fund development projects in India

needs to live the future in the present tense.' As a corporate person, his notions, thus, underwent a sea change after this experience in an NGO.

Sharing his view on the two per cent mandate, Vineet expressed his apprehension about IT companies spending the entire two per cent of their profit on CSR initiatives. He pointed out that these typically happen on an ad-hoc basis and the choice of partners happens by word-of-mouth. Thus, decision-making is often found to lack the desired maturity. Second, commercial activities are fewer in poor rural areas spreading mainly across Central India whereas corporate organizations are usually based in the urban/peri-urban areas. This results in the lack of CSR funding opportunities in these areas, where a substantial number of poor people reside. The overarching focus is on their plant areas, catering to their own communities affected by their commercial activities. The daunting task of reaching out to the actual poverty-stricken population remains unfulfilled forever. Resonating with Dhruvi's concern about the importance of data for more effective CSR partnerships, Vineet mentioned that CSOs are organizing themselves better; in some time, CSOs will come up with more streamlined systems and as per the standards expected by corporate organizations.

The promise of CSR should be seen as a ten-on-ten opportunity. Global funding for change initiatives is dwindling as India emerges and will continue to emerge in the world economic sphere. The contribution of Indian foundations, therefore, is crucial because global foundations will find it difficult, if not completely irrelevant, to fund development projects in India. In this light, the mandated two per cent must be seen as guidance set forth by the government for the corporate sector to follow. However, many of the corporate houses have not considered it as a mandatory aspect and certainly they have not allocated straight two per cent of their profits towards the CSR cause.

The third panel of the day comprised J.R.K. Rao (Secretary, Minorities Commission), Ritu Sain (Additional Resident Commissioner, Chhattisgarh Bhawan, New Delhi), Sandeep Dikshit (former-Parliamentarian), Guru Charan Naik (Afghanistan Resilience Consortium at Afghanaid), and was chaired by Sushil Ramola (B-ABLE). It focussed on 'Civil Society and the Expectations from the State'.

Sushil Ramola set the ball rolling by creating the backdrop of the current situation, in which civil society has played a complementary, supportive role to the state in its development programmes and their implementation. Yet, the state and the civil society seem to be getting polarized in their approach to solving development issues. There seem an apparent lack of trust between the two key stakeholders and it is important to find a way for them to work together for the cause of social development in the country.

Ritu Sain asserted that the ultimate goal of both the state and the civil society was the same—the welfare of the people and good governance. She shared some of the key roles played by civil society, as perceived by the state; these include ensuring mobilization, capacity building and participation of the communities (including in very remote and backward regions) for effective dissemination of information and translation of policy into action. She thinks that the state and the civil society help bring different perspectives,

The panel agreed that the state and the civil society could work towards having a symbiotic relationship. Civil society may need to drive a 'Common Minimum Programme' with the state, which defines roles and responsibilities for both stakeholders

points-of-view and thinking on the table, and this certainly need not happen in a confrontationist mode. However, Ritu Sain shared that the agenda of some NGOs may be too focussed, narrow or restrictive in the context of the overall development agenda of the state, and may need the state to keep the larger agenda in mind when engaging with such NGOs.

Sandeep Dikshit opined that the state tended to look at the NGO sector with limited respect and a level of suspicion of professionals wanting to 'interfere' in government policies. It was okay with civil society working within the parameters set by the state; discomfort sets in when civil society raises the stature of communities from consumers of state policy to that of responsible, questioning citizens, demanding their rights and not just fulfilling their duties. NGOs need to be ready to bear the pain and sacrifice, if required, to stand up to the state and get the citizens and the society their due.

There was common agreement that state's approach to development and its attitude to civil society tended to be individual-driven rather than constant across the tenure of officials. Mr J.R.K. Rao highlighted that state officials had not made the shift yet from being 'regulators' to 'facilitators', in the context of developing and implementing community policies and programmes. The difference in motivation of pursuing the development agenda results in conflict between the state and the civil society. He, however, was extremely positive of the state's growing appreciation of the role of civil society as the new breed of better-educated, more sensitive, new-generation administrators, who had grown up in the era of liberalization, took centre stage. He also mentioned that developments on the IT and Internet front, which made raising of issues and crowd sourcing of ideas simpler and faster, augurs well for the future of civil society and makes for a more sensitive, responsive state, willing to work more closely with civil society on development issues and things that matter to the citizens of the country.

The panel agreed that the state and the civil society could work towards having a symbiotic relationship. Civil society may need to drive a 'Common Minimum Programme' with the state, which defines roles and responsibilities for both stakeholders. Reinforcing the need for such collaboration between the state and the civil society, the panellists pointed out that the state's approach to development and attitude to civil society tended to be individual-driven rather than a constant across the tenure of officials.

The event was perceived as a one-of-its-kind initiative by PRADAN professionals. Apart from creating a cherished feeling about the organization itself, Samagam was a platform promoting cross-learning opportunities involving actors beyond similar NGOs

Summarizing the day's proceedings and hinting at the exigencies that the sector should focus upon, PRADAN co-founder, Vijay Mahajan, pointed to the relevance of rewriting the Constitution of India by the youth. "We have to sit down like our founding fathers did in 1949 and remove some of the distortions that have come into our building of that great vision which was laid down in the 1949 Constitution." A body called 'CIVIC' (Citizens' Initiative for Visioning India's New Constitution) has been formed to translate the thought into action. Vijay also highlighted the need to allocate a bigger budget to CSOs that are doing a majority of the development work in India. "The 15th Finance Commission must take into account that if, indeed, civil society is a legitimate instrument of development and agent of change in this country, then just as we found it okay to tell the corporate sector to put two per cent of their net profits for CSR, one per cent of all government budget spent on development needs to be earmarked for the civil society sector. That is 30 billion US dollars, which is roughly about Rs 2 lakh crores."

The event was perceived as a one-of-its-kind initiative by PRADAN professionals. Apart from creating a cherished feeling about the organization itself, Samagam was a platform promoting cross-learning opportunities involving actors beyond similar NGOs. It helped in generating ideas and practical solutions for pertinent problems from representatives of the state and CSRs. The relevance of organizing this event was a much-talked-about topic among colleagues. Taking a futuristic stance, Samagam, if seen as a platform where ideas and actions are to be celebrated, cannot be a one-time event. There is, thus, a felt need to organize Samagam every year. In making it an annual event, we aspire to bring all CSOs on this platform, hear them, help them acquire more knowledge and forge new partnerships and/or networks leading to more effective community engagement. It is being conceived as the single largest platform for the creation of a knowledge pool about development and the cradle of new-born ideas and constructs that will design the future development trajectory for India, if not for other countries of the South, worldwide.

However, making it a recurrent annual event does involve certain challenges some of which we faced this year. One of the daunting tasks is to make such an event a self-financed one. Funding this event from PRADAN's corpus fund and from ad-hoc donations is not going to serve the purpose. We will have to come up with solutions and raise funds to make it a sustainable venture. The content and format of an event such as Samagam needs to be so planned that its relevance and importance compel people to attend it every year. The success of any event is determined by the people's interest and keenness to come back to the congregation every successive year.

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Souparno Chatterjee *is based in Delhi.*

DEEP JOSHI

Combining Head and Heart to Transform the Lives of Poor People: My Experience in PRADAN

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Remembering the influences on him during his formative years in a village in the Himalayas, his education that took him across continents, his drive to return to India and work with the poor and the marginalized, the genesis of PRADAN and his over three-decade journey, this acceptance speech brings alive the quiet determination and clarity and humaneness of the speaker, who co-founded PRADAN

I am grateful to the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation for the opportunity to be here to speak with you. Ramon Magsaysay was a humanist first of all and it is an honour to be here in his land during his anniversary week.

I am not much of a public speaker and as an essentially intuitive person, am most comfortable in interactive dialogue. What I say here is, therefore, to bring you on board with me, with my journey as a professional and my work so that we can have a dialogue, in which I hope you will participate. I will quickly share with you my early years before I share with you my experience of PRADAN, the organisation I have had some role in fashioning.

My Ignorance of NGOS and Development

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India has always had a highly evolved civil society. Formally incorporated non-profits, or NGOs as we call them, perhaps constitute its largest and most visible segment and may now number a million or more; no one has a reliable count. We have had laws enabling incorporation of non-profits or charities for

The buzz and glow of Independence was still around when I was growing up as a child in a tiny village, up in the Himalayas. Yet, I had not a clue about what all this meant for my own life or career. Did I have a role in 'development' or in 'nation building'

150 years. With that background, it may sound ironic, perhaps even untrue, that I had not heard the term, much less encountered an NGO until I went to review one at the age of 31 in 1977. It is doubly ironic that this single encounter should have changed my life and given it a purpose I never imagined existed. But that is how it is. Of course, as a child, I knew of the independence movement of Gandhi and other stalwarts of our freedom struggle. There were freedom fighters among relatives, one of who would tell us stories of how they would walk night and day to participate in a rally—often dozing away and subconsciously keeping track of the ditches on the road. My father himself was a fee-paying member of the Congress during the freedom struggle; he had the portrait of Gandhi engraved along with those of gods and goddesses on a wooden beam over the entrance to our house in the village. The buzz and glow of Independence was still around when I was growing up as a child in a tiny village, up in the Himalayas. Yet, I had not a clue about what all this meant for my own life or career. Did I have a role in 'development' or in 'nation building', a phrase I learnt much later, I did not know. I have seen dire poverty from close quarters as a child. Though my own family never had to worry about food, clothing or shelter, and all seven of us siblings were sent to school and got college education, those who came to work in our fields were very poor and some lived sad lives. I remember a couple who had 11 children, not one of whom survived even a year. Yet, I never imagined then that I would spend a good part of my life nurturing an organization that would work to improve the lives of such people.

I had my first encounter with what I later learnt to be 'development' when I was about eight. The government had recently begun the Community Development Programme. A development office called the Community Development Block had been created for a cluster of around 100 villages; in all there were about 5,000 such offices across the country. Headed by a block development officer, it had a team of technical specialists and village-level workers. One such village-level worker came to our village to teach us the technique of growing paddy nurseries on raised dry beds. While helping him lay out the nursery, I remember being amused to see an 'officer' in neatly pressed clothes and shining shoes working with a shovel. While nothing much came of the nursery, my father would periodically talk of this or that 'scheme' through which he would get new seeds, saplings of fruit trees, money for paving the walkway and building a bathing place in the village, etc. So, this to me was 'development' and was done by some government office, just as schools were run and roads built. And I never thought of working in such an office.

Stumbling into a Profession

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Students good at math were expected to study engineering in those days. Things, sadly, have not changed much! So, I did, upon securing admission in an engineering college through a competitive examination. In a way, it was a prize earned for having done well in school rather than a choice made consciously. All I knew of engineers then was that they went around in jeeps, inspecting road construction, were regarded in high esteem and seemed to have much authority. As I learnt more about what engineers did and became more conscious of my proclivities, I decided against choosing the normal occupations for engineers in government and factories. I had to get a job to support my

The contrast between the US and my own country was simply unbelievable, overwhelming. A small group of us from my country would often discuss this and I became increasingly drawn towards issues of poverty and development back home

siblings in college, I, therefore, chose to teach engineering in my alma mater. Although I knew I would need a doctorate to get anywhere as a teacher, that would have to wait till my siblings finished college.

A few years later, I won a national scholarship to study abroad and landed up at MIT in the US, to get a doctorate in engineering. The contrast between the US and my own country was simply unbelievable, overwhelming. A small group of us from my country would often discuss this and I became increasingly drawn towards issues of poverty and development back home. I gave up the idea of an engineering doctorate, winding up with a masters, and would have liked to study economics but did not have enough time left in my scholarship. So, I did an MBA from Sloan instead, to get some understanding of economics. Making full use of the flexibility at Sloan, I took some courses in development economics and returned home.

First Encounter with an NGO—Discovering Professionalism

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Back in India, I got a job in an organization that specialized in introducing management techniques and systems thinking in government, public sector companies, cooperatives and other development organizations. That was closest to my newfound interest in development though I still did not know what someone with my kind of education could do to change things in villages and how assisting the government would help. My first assignment was to conduct a review of a community health project run by an NGO in western Maharashtra and to design an organization to upscale it. This was my first experience of seeing highly qualified professionals—a couple, Mabel and Raj Arole—with MDs from Johns Hopkins, working in villages. In fact, this was my first experience of any professional working in a village, directly engaging with poor people. Professionals and other people of authority always supervised the work of less-educated subordinates, who worked in the field. The Aroles had set up a small referral hospital in a small town that served as the market for surrounding villages where they worked, focusing on preventive and community health. They had developed a new approach of using village women as community health volunteers. These women, trained by the Aroles, were mostly illiterate but well-regarded in their respective villages and were chosen by the villagers themselves. The Aroles, who received the Magsaysay Award in 1979, had clearly transformed the public health scene in about 100 villages that constituted the sub-district of Jamkhed, where all parameters of public health were distinctly better than in neighbouring villages and the rest of the country. Nationally, we still have not reached the infant mortality rates Jamkhed achieved in 1977, and the overall nutrition status of children across the country is far worse even today than it was in Jamkhed in 1977!

What I saw in Jamkhed struck a chord, perhaps because I spent the first 17 years of my life in a village among poor people as part of my community. Perhaps that socialization, that sense of affinity with poor village people had not been overtaken by my education. It also gave an answer to the question doing rounds in my subconscious about the role of professionals like me in development, in transforming villages. What was different about the Aroles? After all, there were doctors working in other sub-districts in government-run primary health centres. The

They had developed a new approach of using village women as community health volunteers. These women, trained by the Aroles, were mostly illiterate but well-regarded in their respective villages and were chosen by the villagers themselves

difference lay in the way they engaged with the people they served, with an obvious sense of oneness, of empathy. Yet, they steadfastly kept challenging what was irrational in existing health practices and behaviour in villages, having earned the right to do so through demonstrated interest and caring. It was this combination of knowledge and empathy—what I call 'head' and 'heart'—that I believe led to their success. Professions are about using knowledge to serve a social purpose; that comes from the definition of the word itself. Societies are human formations, not mechanical assemblies. One obviously cannot engage with human formations except by being expressly human, by showing empathy.

A couple of years later, I had an opportunity to work in a watershed project in a cluster of villages. Headed by an unusual government scientist, P.R. Mishra, the project was trying to induce inhabitants to conserve their watershed, promising in return higher productivity through more availability of water. The project had a strong technical component concerning little dams, soil, plants, irrigation, etc. But it also required bringing together people with conflicting interests, changing established practices and norms, introducing the notions of equity and organizing people to take responsibility for management; it required human transformation. We were able to achieve these because Mishra displayed the same qualities as the Aroles, of oneness with village people we were working with, despite our clearly different situations. The successful experience here further reinforced what I had learnt from the Aroles, that knowledge is needed but it does not go far in dealing with human contexts, especially the contexts of the excluded and marginalized, without bonding, without empathy. The question for me no longer was what professionals could do to change villages but how to get more of them to villages and create mechanisms by which they would be effective.

The Birth of Pradan

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The opportunity came when I began working with a foundation in the early 1980s and had the responsibility to develop a programme to strengthen grass-roots NGOs. I visited a large number of NGOs across the country. Whereas most tended to be initiatives by individuals or small groups deeply concerned about poverty, rarely did any have professionals on board. And they had marginal impact on the lives of the people they wanted to serve and who were always welcoming of them. Interestingly, every one among the NGOs was keen to have professionals working with them and all were willing to pay them reasonable remuneration; they simply were unable to attract them. That is when I conceived the idea of PRADAN, the organisation I have spent nurturing the past 25 years of my life. The idea was to create an organisation to systematically induct and groom professionals to work in villages and provide them platforms to work from. Many of the NGOs I had already met would, I thought, be effective platforms for professionals to work from.

As a donor, my employer would only make grants and not provide services or set up organizations. I needed someone to set up an organization and a constellation of people, who would govern and guide it. I could then make a grant to get it off the ground. Heads of several NGOs I met had agreed to be in the governance constellation. My explorations to find someone to set up the organization led me to Vijay

It was this combination of knowledge and empathy—what I call 'head' and 'heart'—that I believe led to their success. Professions are about using knowledge to serve a social purpose; that comes from the definition of the word itself. Societies are human formations, not mechanical assemblies

Mahajan. Vijay, 28 years then, had recently graduated from the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. Prior to that, he had studied engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, and worked for four years with a well-known multinational. He had always had interest in grass-roots development, had on his own visited a few well-known NGOs and had been involved in an interesting rural action-research project led by the founder director of his management school, Ravi Matthai.

Vijay readily took to the idea and agreed to explore it further while simultaneously working with one of the NGOs I introduced him to. That is how PRADAN was set up in 1983, as an Indian non-profit. I stayed back to finish a few other programme ideas I was working on but was closely involved as an informal advisor and mentor to Vijay, in helping with linkages and knowledge inputs. For the first three years, PRADAN would only loan its professionals to work with other NGOs. Vijay himself worked in a large NGO that helped poor farmers develop land given to them under the *bhoodan* movement led by Vinoba Bhave, one of the earliest recipients of the Magsaysay Award. Recruiting professionals turned out to be far more difficult than Vijay and I had imagined; it continues to be so even now, in the context of the larger numbers needed. The main reason, in my view, was that working at the grass roots is not the 'normal' identity of professionals and that, unfortunately, persists even now; the lower-than-market salaries and the difficult working conditions contributed only marginally. The normative role for professionals is to give advice, supervise others and, generally, be in positions in which they exercise normative authority with their supposedly superior knowledge and presumed sense of responsibility. A few who want to work at the grass roots with poor people branch out on their own as the Aroles and many others like them have done and continue to do. Others engaged in development join governments where they play the 'normal' roles expected of professionals.

Four of Vijay's classmates and a few others with a bit of grass-roots experience joined PRADAN, during the first two years. PRADAN instituted internships for students to provide them exposure to grass-roots work. A couple of people came through this route. Efforts to recruit from professional colleges by courting faculty sympathetic to the idea were not very successful, nor were efforts to recruit through advertisements. A small breakthrough was made in 1985 when IRMA, the rural management institute set up by the National Dairy Development Board to train managers for milk cooperatives, entertained requests from NGOs to let them also recruit their graduates. This provided a steady trickle and, at one point, PRADAN was the largest employer of IRMA graduates, outside the Dairy Board. PRADAN chose to work on enhancing livelihoods of poor people, in part because of the dire poverty among the people we were working with and also because of the proclivities of the pioneers, who joined in the initial years. I formally joined PRADAN in 1986. That is also when we began our own village projects, working with poor communities directly rather than only via other NGOs. The latter approach was discontinued in 1992.

Training to Work with Head and Heart

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We learnt a few things from the experience of the early years. First, that getting professionals on board in large numbers would

> The question for me no longer was what professionals could do to change villages but how to get more of them to villages and create mechanisms by which they would be effective

require a far more vigorous effort than we had been able to mount so far. We realized that we would need to cast our net wider than to a few elite colleges as in the initial years. Second, our education system, especially higher education system, simply does not train people to be effective as grass-roots development professionals, even in disciplines that are supposed to have a rural orientation, such as agriculture and social work. Educated people, including professionals far too readily jump to offering solutions rather than trying to understand the context in which poor people are. There is little reflection and no attempt to learn from the people. That is the classical extension paradigm and is ineffective with the historically excluded, isolated and marginalized communities; it works well only with those already in the mainstream of society and economy.

We realized that we would need to systematically groom campus graduates as grass-roots workers rather than putting them to work straightaway. This, in effect, meant that human resource development would become as important for us as the organizational mission of promoting livelihoods.

The goodwill we had earned, principally because we were putting professionals to work in villages, gave us the courage take on this challenge. We even began informally calling ourselves a 'rural university' with villages as classrooms and the rural people and all our experienced professionals as faculty! And I believe we have to an extent become a rural university even though we do not and cannot grant a degree (that is a future project). We created a separate human resource development unit and I myself took responsibility for it. A behavioural consultant, who continues to work with us to this day to refine systems, helped us design a year-long apprenticeship programme in 1994. PRADAN would now only recruit individuals with an MA level of education (16 to 17 years' education in India) in any field of study as Apprentices; they become employees, designated as Executives, and begin working independently in projects only upon completing the year-long apprenticeship. To expand recruitment, we trained everyone with four or more years' experience in PRADAN as a recruiter and more keep getting trained as they gain the threshold of work experience. There are now 80 professionals in PRADAN, trained as recruiters. In teams of two, they go to one or two campuses each, every year, taking time off from their regular work in projects. They administer a culture-neutral (non-numeric, non-verbal) test to judge mental ability, hold two group discussions, and conduct an interview, besides scrutinizing academic performance, which must be consistently above average. We now recruit from 70 to 80 campuses every year. Beginning with 10 Apprentices in 1994, we now get 150 apprentices every year. Apprentices receive stipends more than adequate to meet their living expenses.

The apprenticeship itself comprises mentored learning-by-doing, reflection and limited interactive classroom inputs. Each Apprentice is placed in one of PRADAN's 30 projects, in which there are 8 to 12 professionals, working in a cluster of 100 to 130 villages to help poor people enhance their livelihoods. An experienced PRADAN professional, who has received four-weeks training, including an intense behavioural lab, is assigned as the Field Guide, or mentor, to each apprentice. There are about 50 trained Field Guides and more keep getting trained as they gain the threshold of field

Beginning with 10 Apprentices in 1994, we now get 150 apprentices every year. Apprentices receive stipends more than adequate to meet their living expenses

experience. Engagement in the field is structured and includes a 15-day stay in the home of a poor family in a village, a participative village study, small assignments to understand the impact of PRADAN's work and tasks designed to learn various skills of working with poor people in villages. Apprentices periodically write reflective reports about their experience and discuss those with their Field Guides, who give them feedback. Three reviews are conducted through sociometry, and those below a threshold of motivation to work with poor people are advised to leave. An apprentice is also free to leave any time; there is no obligation to repay the stipend and expenses PRADAN may have incurred. Since working in villages is still not a preferred career for educated people with urban career options, we pay for all Apprentices to go home for a week at the end of the first three months so that they can share with their family and friends their experiences and buy some goodwill and support.

PRADAN has professional development programmes that continue beyond apprenticeship, including programmes that groom people for their organizational responsibilities, such as recruiting, mentoring and managing programmes. The core, however, is the apprenticeship, in which the insights and empathy gained through personal encounters and the attitudes necessary for bonding with poor people are developed and practical skills needed to play a catalytic role in poor people's lives are learnt.

A PRADAN Executive imparts training to the farmers on disease and pest control in Jharkhand.

Therefore, if people are to be trustees outside, they must be so treated inside. Several key features of PRADAN, such as a collegial climate, flat structure, rotational leadership, democratic governance, etc., derive from this basic tenet

Nurturing Trusteeship

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A tenet that has guided PRADAN since inception is that, as a helping endeavour that seeks to bring about transformation in individuals and communities, development work is a bond between two individuals; this is what I learnt from the Aroles. Each one of us engaged in building such a transformative relationship, such as building the self-confidence of poor people. Educating, or counselling, is a trustee of that relationship.

That relationship, or transaction, when it occurs, is not amenable to 'third-party' monitoring. Now, an organization as a human formation cannot be very different outside from what it is inside. Therefore, if people are to be trustees outside, they must be so treated inside. Several key features of PRADAN, such as a collegial climate, flat structure, rotational leadership, democratic governance, etc., derive from this basic tenet. In a way, the head and heart combination is as important internally as it is in our work in the communities. Internal governance in PRADAN has evolved over time. Vijay stepped down as the first chief executive when he completed five years but stayed on for another four years. Succeeding him, I did the same, and so on. A constellation of senior people, initially three and then seven, deliberated on policies and strategies during initial years. Currently, all professionals in PRADAN automatically become members of a general council upon completing four years. They now choose a steering committee for a three-year term (through sociometry rather than election) to function as the internal board, and the chief executive is chosen every five years again through sociometry. PRADAN has had a retreat of all professionals since the very second year of its existence. A five-day event, it is an occasion for reflection, sharing experiences and critiquing its own work.

Outputs and Outcomes

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Over the years, more than 1,000 PRADAN professionals have worked in villages for varying lengths of time. It now works with over a million people from nearly 200,000 families in seven Indian provinces. About 60 per cent of them are from various ethnic tribes, many of which, until a few generations ago, depended on hunting-gathering. Another 15 per cent are from among the erstwhile untouchables or outcastes among Hindus. These two groups together constitute over a quarter of our population and are easily among the poorest. Both have historically been outside the pale of the mainstream economy and society. First and foremost, they need to be helped to discover their potential or agency to change their own lives so that they can claim what is their due and join the mainstream with dignity and pride. To stimulate such changes, people need to go through positive experiences. One needs to engage with them in a non-threatening relationship in a sustained way. This is where and how PRADAN professionals begin and this is where empathy comes into play first of all. PRADAN begins by organizing women from these families into small self-help groups around small savings and credit. As groups gain in strength and members gain confidence, they are facilitated to carry out a diagnosis of their resources and potential opportunities to enhance their livelihoods. Men also participate at this stage. PRADAN then helps families get the necessary skills, finances and know-how to take up new livelihood activities or enhance existing ones. The groups are federated into secondary and

The experience of working together also helps women to work as cooperatives when they need to deal with the markets. There are now more than 11,000 such primary groups and several hundred cluster associations, federations, cooperatives and companies

tertiary formations to strengthen a sense of solidarity. Over time, the groups also begin to take up issues that affect them as communities, such as access to services, etc. The experience of working together also helps women to work as cooperatives when they need to deal with the markets. There are now more than 11,000 such primary groups and several hundred cluster associations, federations, cooperatives and companies.

The poor people PRADAN works with also have limited assets, mainly poor quality of land without irrigation; many have no assets. This is where the professionals' knowledge is primarily challenged, in creating robust livelihood opportunities from limited and inferior assets, owned by people with no skills and no education. PRADAN pilots new livelihood ideas, demystifies technologies, downscales technologies and production systems, to suit the contexts of poor people of limited resources and low-risk thresholds. It extensively collaborates with the state, market and knowledge institutions, and has made several landmark innovations.

Epilogue

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There was much debate about the approach to be followed for India's development in the run-up to Independence, during the 1940s. Gandhi famously argued for self-reliant, village republics. He thought that priority must be given to develop villages into self-governed republics without want, illiteracy, ill-health and superstition. He wanted to modernize the village and create a new construct of good life that the world would emulate. Modernization was, indeed, the theme adopted for India's development but without the village. We are the world's largest democracy. We have elected bodies for governance down to the village, yet villagers do not have an effective voice in how their local school runs… if it runs at all. As education and educated people focus on abstractions and 'things' like technology, capital, goods and services, they keep getting more and more alienated from poor people. That is clearly visible in my country, now a powerhouse of educated human resources and technology, and it is beginning to particularly matter because we now have the money to invest in village development and human well-being. I believe PRADAN has demonstrated one way of changing things. In a small way, it has rediscovered professionalism as it was meant to be—a synthesis of head and heart, of knowing, feeling and purpose. It has demonstrated possibilities. I hope others will listen and join.

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Deep Joshi *is the founder of PRADAN. He delivered this speech at the Magsaysay Awards Presentation Ceremony on 31 August 2009, at the Cultural Center of The Philippines.*

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ACHINTYA GHOSH

REMEMBERING BYGONE DAYS

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Looking back, memories bring alive the passion, drive, excitement, joy, total involvement and conviction about development work that each member of PRADAN shared... "We did it anyway!"

Institution Building

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The first time I met Vijay Mahajan, I was in for a rude shock. This was 30 years ago and Vijay was probably 27 years old. I thought he would be a big man with a big belly, probably between 50 and 60 years of age—hence, I was a little wary of meeting him. Nevertheless, when I did meet him, I thought, "*Arre, yeh to ekdum hamare jaisa hai—bindaas and ekdum laid back* (Hey, he's exactly like one of us—carefree and completely laid back)." I was relieved.

After our initial contact, he invited me to one of the project locations of ASEEFA, to explore the possibility of my joining there. The purpose of this in Vijay's mind, I think, was to understand this 'development *wallah*' and to gauge the level of his/her excitement to be in the field. In those days, there was a lot of lift irrigation work that was being

It was very different from how I thought 'NGO work' would be done. The kind of looseness that is assumed would be there in a voluntary organization was not there

implemented around Gaya and he wanted me to see that. Therefore, we started from Gaya in an old pick-up van kind of thing, which carried many other things besides us, including PVC pipes and other material. Through the journey, I realized that Vijay was not only a manager but also a hands-on worker. He was teaching things, telling people what to do, what not to do, training people on the job and guiding people all at the same time. He performed many roles at the same time, not content with being a mere manager.

As we travelled in this pick-up van, we stopped at many places, picking up people and dropping them, creating a lot of hustle bustle. As the van crossed a bridge, he asked me, "Look, Achintya, look at that stream. How can we measure the flow of the stream?" It seemed a very technical question. I looked at him and wondered how I should answer this question. I did not know his background. "Tell me your background, so that I can answer your question accordingly," I said. I thought that if he were a technical person, I would give him a technical answer; and if he were not, I would use a simpler explanation to help him understand. He answered, "Well, I am a technically trained person." I said, "I do not understand." I thought, "*Arre yaar, yeh aadmi to bara gol gol jawaab de raha hai. Samajh mein nahee aaya* (This man gives such convoluted answers. I can't understand him)." I tried again, "So, what have you been trained in? Where and what have you studied? And what is the degree that you have?" He replied, "I am an engineer." I presumed he must be diploma holder or some such. "Are you a diploma holder or a degree holder?" my questioning continued. He said, "I am a degree holder." I said "*Achcha*? From which institute did you get your degree?" He said in a very nonchalant way, "I am from IIT." 'Oh my God!' I thought. He had never mentioned it before this conversation, through our whole ride together or through the entire day. I thought he could have very easily in the very first instance mentioned this and said, "Look, I am just like you, an engineer from IIT." But he did not. I was pleasantly surprised. I thought here was a person who saw no need to brag about the fact he is from a premier institution. I persevered, "So right after IIT, did you join this NGO?" He said, 'Well, no. After IIT, I worked for Philips for a bit and then I went to a management institute.' My next question was: "Which management institute?" He replied, "IIM-A." I again went, 'Oh my God!' in my head. 'Not only was he from IIT but he also went to IIM-A.' And much later—much much later—I learned that not only is he from IIM-A, but he also was a gold medallist from that institute. I really got a glimpse of what made this person spectacular when we were travelling in the field. We travelled from one irrigation field to another, at noon, under the scorching sun in the month of May. He had no food the entire day; he talked to everyone, providing inputs, and was on his feet the whole time. It was very different from how I thought 'NGO work' would be done. The kind of looseness that is assumed would be there in a voluntary organization was not there. In the morning, we had four *puris* and two *jalebis*; in the evening, we had a cup of a tea. When we returned to where we were staying, he treated me to a scrumptious dinner of fish curry and rice. Vijay asked me to join the organization. I do not know what he liked about me but I think that after having spent the day in the field, we both started respecting and liking each other.

Many months, probably years, later, I truly understood what institution building was. I understood that we, as PRADAN-ites, need to engage differently with our colleagues, stakeholders and, of course, with our work to attain something meaningful, purposive and large

On a later date, he mentioned, "Achintya, we have started an organization called PRADAN. It is an organization of professionals. We need to work with poor people; we need to help them move forward, to build livelihoods so that they can better their lives. However, in order to do this, we need to bring in professionalism, the same kind of professionalism that is there in large corporate companies. We need to bring in an understanding of better management systems in such organizations."

I felt inspired and motivated. I wanted to do something to help the plight of the people. He added, "What we need is to look into institution building in a serious way." Of course, institution building! I have knowledge of low-cost construction and building. I would definitely be able to help with that. My mind was flooded immediately with thoughts of construction material, sand and pipes, mortar, etc. I shared this with Vijay. I said smugly, "Boss, I know a lot about low-cost construction." He laughed aloud and said, "No! No! Not that kind of institution, not a building but an institution of people." At that moment, it struck me that I really do not understand Vijay.

That moment was amazing when I look back at it after so many years. Many months, probably years, later, I truly understood what institution building was. I understood that we, as PRADAN-ites, need to engage differently with our colleagues, stakeholders and, of course, with our work to attain something meaningful, purposive and large, which will change lives of the disadvantaged in a sustainable way and will continue to draw many more caring and capable souls to work towards this with a missionary zeal.

We continue to draw bright minds in doing this pathbreaking work. PRADAN today has the largest number of professionals outside the government set-up, working for development. What Vijay dreamt, practised and inculcated in PRADAN's early days—we were able to work towards that and make it happen. The same ethos and processes have become the strongest pillars of foundation of PRADAN.

The Selection Process

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In those days, and I am talking about 30 years ago, telecommunication was non-existent. We used to write letters, primarily postcards, to each other. One day, Vijay Mahajan wrote to me about a person called Vinod Jain, who went to IRMA. During the IRMA selection process, the selection committee told him that he need not join IRMA; instead, he should work in the grass roots and join an organization like PRADAN. Vinod Jain met Vijay Mahajan. Vijay described Vinod later. He said, "*Yaar*, this boy looks like a *lallu* (fool). I have my doubts whether he can work in the field." Vinod came to Vijay, who took a liking to him after a few discussions; he sent Vinod to where I was to help him see the field.

One morning, Vinod came to Gaya. It was the rainy season then. Vinod asked me for directions on how to reach the village from the main road. I told him that he needed to get off the jeep on the main road and then walk in. I asked him to walk a 7 km dirt track. It was slushy, slippery and extremely arduous. His clothes got soaked in the slush, he lost his footwear and slipped and fell several times before finally making it to the village. He looked like a ghost covered in filth from head to toe. I made him traverse this 7 km path on his return journey too to the office. When he finally

What PRADAN looks for in a person is not only good academic grades but the zeal, enthusiasm and ability to take on the hardship that this profession offers. Head, heart and hands—all three move in symphony. We used to say, "The head touches the sky and the feet touch the ground"

reached office, he looked like some unrecognizable muddy monster. "How was it?" we asked him. Vinod replied, "Oh, great! It was great fun. Of course, it was difficult but I got an opportunity to explore and see so much. I have to admit it was a real learning experience." Vinod was serious. We could see from his face that he did, in fact, have fun, and the challenge and hardship of the visit to the village had not deterred him in any way. We were pleasantly surprised.

This is how our professionals were selected then. Post that episode, Vijay asked Vinod to go to Delhi, to complete the formalities of joining. If not, Vijay informed Vinod that he would be passing through Kanpur and that Vinod should come to the railway station in Kanpur and meet him to complete the formalities. The train would pass through the station at midnight. The train chugged into the station at two in the morning. Vijay got ready to get down at the station. A colleague from the development fraternity, Loganathan, who was travelling with him, asked him where he was going. Vijay told him that he had to meet someone at the railway station. Surprised, Dinabandhu, another colleague, said, "What? At this time? Who do you have to meet at this time at the Kanpur railway station?" Vijay replied, "There is an engineer who wants to join PRADAN. I have to meet him. I asked him to come to the railway station so that I could confirm his joining the organization!" Loganathan said, "You must be mad! No one and that too an engineer in his or her right mind will come at this time to the station. You said that he does not even know which compartment or bogey you are travelling in. That means he will have to search the entire train for you. I really do not think he is going to come."

This is how offers were made to professionals then. Total madness. However, that madness had to be matched with a passion and excitement to do something. And have fun while doing something; most importantly, do something with a vision. There was a method in the madness. Vinod, of course, did come; he passed the litmus test with excellence twice. There is really no need to add that post the 'selection process' he continued in PRADAN for 20 odd years or so and carried the responsibility of building PRADAN as a member of the top leadership group over a decade.

What PRADAN looks for in a person is not only good academic grades but the zeal, enthusiasm and ability to take on the hardship that this profession offers. Head, heart and hands—all three move in symphony. We used to say, "The head touches the sky and the feet touch the ground." This philosophy guides us in the selection and grooming of our co-travellers and makes us a unique organization of development practitioners.

Mainstreaming and Collaboration with the Government

—

I went to meet the Block Development Officer (BDO) of Guruwa block in Gaya for some work. As was typical, I spent the entire day waiting outside but did not get a chance to meet the official. Every time I would remind the peon that I was waiting outside, I was told, "*Sahab ke paas time nahi hai* (Sir is busy)." I was adamant. I decided that I was not going to leave without meeting him. After all, I had spent the entire day waiting and if I now felt frustrated and left, it would not only be a waste of my day, it would make me appear to lack perseverance. I kept hounding the peon until I saw the *bada sahab* emerge from his room.

PRADAN has maintained the ideology that puts mainstreaming and collaboration with the government at the heart of its efforts and work. Today, PRADAN is the largest and biggest NGO in every aspect to collaborate with the government and other mainstream organisations

I had noticed that he was not busy the entire day because he was gossiping and whiling away his time inside the room.

I finally offered a cup of tea to the people to get an entry to the BDO's office. He obliged and we started chatting; in this way, I made headway with my work in that office. When we used to go to government offices initially, we used to crib. I would say, "Why do we need the government? The officers are so corrupt; they are not going to do anything. Why waste our time?" To this, Vijay would reply, "The government is the largest development body in the country. If we don't collaborate with them, how will we mainstream our efforts? We need to sit across the same table and negotiate with them. After all, they handle the taxpayers' money. Why should we not engage? We must engage with them if we want our efforts to be sustainable." It made sense.

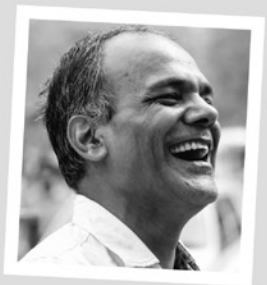
From a very early stage, PRADAN has maintained the ideology that puts mainstreaming and collaboration with the government at the heart of its efforts and work. Today, PRADAN is the largest and biggest NGO in every aspect to collaborate with the government and other mainstream organisations, often bringing in changes in programmes and policies, making these more appropriate for whom the programmes were intended. We are, perhaps, the largest in terms of numbers of collaborations, number of stakeholders (departments), places (districts and state), financial volume and the coverage of families, in the field of rural livelihood programmes. Those were the days…lots of excitement about changing the world, doing some unconventional yet purposeful and meaningful work for the country and the people. We did it because we enjoyed doing our work. Our work was intended to bring joy and happiness to the poor in the villages. It was and still is all fun, joy, excitement, passion and madness. We did it our own way. Who cares for acknowledgement or a legacy…we did it anyway!

—

Achintya Ghosh *joined PRADAN in 1983. He served as Executive Director of PRADAN from 1997-2002. He is also the founder of Kabil - a not-for-profit society.*





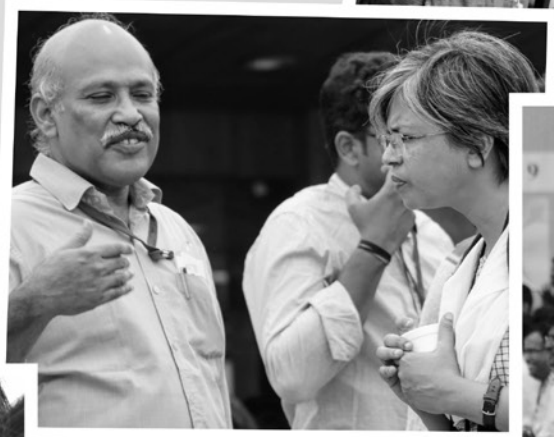








RETREAT 2018
SOME MEMORIES




ENTRY


21

AMITA V. JOSEPH

WHEN THE SEARCH BECOMES ONE'S LIFE...

...

For me, working for over a decade now in the field of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), has raised more questions than answers. Where does one start? Where do journeys begin? Where do journeys end? Do they?

Where do I begin to tell my story? Do I start with the salubrious summer vacations of my childhood in the village of Veliyanad in Kerala's Kuttanad backwaters, with memories of fruit-laden mango trees, glistening paddy fields, waiting for the small *vanjis* (canoes) to bring our daily needs, or the visit of the lone postman? Or do I begin by recounting the social and political events that took place... the unionization of agricultural workers (a first in the country), land reforms that meant all families (including ours) gave away ten cents to each worker? Or with the reminiscences of a peaceful time when the followers of Buddhism and Christianity co-existed and all went to the lone Sanskrit school in the village?

It was a time when my identity was that of my family's, my respect came from being my grandfather's granddaughter, a man who had taught in the local school and had become the headmaster. Veliyanad was a place where there was no electricity and no roads until just a few years ago. We lived life amidst the lazy lagoons, drinking water from lotus covered ponds, and weddings and funerals were community-led, not just family events.

My stint with PRADAN in 1986 was brief, but important, primarily because it was my first exposure to 'development issues'

I was a fairly good student, for whom the library was a more exciting place than the beach across Presidency College in Chennai…I went on to do a Post Graduate Management course in Finance and International Marketing, then law from Delhi University, a Post Graduate in Human Rights Law and followed it with a PhD from Deakin University in Australia, a school which valued work experience and offered a scholarship. Academics always held a fascination for me and I loved to teach. This love for academics found expression in a number of courses I later started and ran with the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT), the Indian Institute of Corporate Affairs (IICA), etc.

My stint as a lawyer mainly focussed on matters of public interest. I had many cases but little income as I worked with the poor and took on issues that concerned the economically weaker sections. So, some consulting assignments helped, especially evaluating the work of Financial Management Service Foundation (FMSF) partners in South Asia, Church's Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), Save the Children Fund (SCF) partners, etc. Development work was for me a choice and though frustrating, at times, it always alternated between hope and despair. I continued to be involved with the work of the PUCL and Civil Liberties/Human Rights, working with Justice V.M. Tarkunde, who I admire, and later with Prashant Bhushan, who remains a valued friend.

My stint with PRADAN in 1986 was brief, but important, primarily because it was my first exposure to 'development issues'. It was early days for PRADAN too, which operated from a two-room office in Rajouri Garden shared with Deepalaya. I was recruited as Executive—Corporate Affairs, to register Sec 25 Companies and was sent to Kesla for 'immersion' in a village.

Meeting with Eklvaya in Hoshangabad, Shankar, Kusum Aunty, Silvy, Subbu and others, driving to the Tawa Dam, a bike accident en route…are all vivid memories, as much as sitting on the banks of the Narmada, discussing Jonathan Livingston Seagull! In retrospect, I think that maybe PRADAN and I were together at the wrong time in our lives. We were young, idealistic and wanting to change the world overnight!

I did take away many lessons from my association with PRADAN. One important lesson I learned was the importance of sensitivity and empathy with fellow travellers; this stood me well later in life as a team leader. Deadlines were less important than fellow human beings; listening and taking every team member along became a conviction for life. I recall sending my resignation letter to Vijay with a poem of Tagore on 'Farewell', on the need for partings to be sweet…

Life's happy accidents took me to work with organizations such as Deepalaya, Women's Action for Development (WAFD) and longer stints with OXFAM (Trade, not Aid) where I met my life partner Mathew Cherian. Thereafter, came a five-year role as Social Development and Gender Adviser with the Department for International Development (DFID) on urban poverty programmes; later I became Country Head with Global Alliance. Another role that followed was as the Anti Trafficking Head for South Asia, overseeing work in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, etc.

My stint with the funding sector made me realize that financial resources alone were not the solution. In fact, too many financial resources created avenues for corruption and

If I had the right to migrate from Kerala to Tamil Nadu to Delhi for better opportunities, so did my fellow citizens across India. I also learned that economic deprivation did not mean the absence of cultural or spiritual values and labelling people 'poor' had to be qualified with the financial deprivation aspect usually

wastage. Change was a long-term agenda and one could at best be a facilitator in that process and it required the deep wisdom, commitment and involvement of communities. Consultants who flew in were resisted fiercely because the cost of poor advice was very high and would ultimately be borne by the poorest.

I realized that slums were the hubs of enterprise; that it was the shortage of low-income housing and infrastructure that forced people into the margins. I realized that, if I had the right to migrate from Kerala to Tamil Nadu to Delhi for better opportunities, so did my fellow citizens across India. I also learned that economic deprivation did not mean the absence of cultural or spiritual values and labelling people 'poor' had to be qualified with the financial deprivation aspect usually.

Having two daughters meant juggling various priorities at home and at work, with all the causes that one cared about…and bringing those lessons home.

I do not know what it is that drives me? Is it anger? I recall a movie of our times '*Albert Pinto ko gussa kyon aata hain*?' People used to ask me the same question. Or is it empathy? Or is it a sense of identification with the cause? However, it is often my voluntary work that gives me a deep sense of being able to contribute, be it the involvement since 1995 with Palluruthy Relief Settlement (PRS), a home for the mentally-ill destitute people in Kochi, Kerala, or the struggle for entitlements for the urban homeless since 1999. Delhi itself has 1,50,000 persons on the streets and their daily struggle is heartbreaking although their spirit of entrepreneurship always inspires me.

They subsidise our cities with their cheap labour as head-load workers, rag pickers, rickshaw pullers, etc., and yet they get nothing in return. How can one tolerate and coexist with such endemic poverty? How are they so peaceful? Will any of us even survive a day or two on the streets? We just need to tap their strengths and great resilience rather than preach to them! Is it all then just an accident of birth? Answers elude me.

Another question I ask myself is—are we as Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) holding out hope rather than facilitating people to be able to demand their rights and entitlements? Would 1000 mutinies have happened but for NGO interventions as the paper by Prakash Karat (Marxist 1984) outlined? And yet, ironically, the government is hell-bent on crushing dissent and maligning civil society/NGO initiatives! Why are non-profits not valued in India for their contribution to nation-building as much as the corporate sector is?

We employ people in steady jobs, raise our own funds; we extract no minerals nor do we pollute or exploit. In fact, every important initiative…be it the right to information, leprosy eradication, water sheds, work on TB, preventive health-care by the Aroles, Amtes, Bangs, work on environment, the Jaipur foot, etc., began with pilots by visionaries from the Non-Profit Organization (NPO) sector, which later the government took to scale. Yet, there is no formal recognition or acknowledgement of the tremendous contribution by the non-profit sector.

Tragically, NPOs are often treated only as sub-contractors by the government and the Corporate sector and it is time to remedy this. Is it the lack of unity, then, and the inability to stand together and for each other as a Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) or The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce

It is this unsustainable growth pattern that needs to be challenged and questioned. The prevailing economic conditions and policies that allowed this to happen are unjust and unsustainable

and Industry (FICCI) that is the bane of the non-profit sector? Are there any efforts to remedy this? Should organizations like PRADAN attempt this? Should they align with other networks and organizations for collective action? Many heads and hearts are better than a few; and rather than mediating, our role, in my opinion, is one of 'creative subversion' and to work for the 'last and least' in our society.

For me, working for over a decade now in the field of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has raised more questions than answers. Can companies that have caused a problem be part of the solution? Should they not first be law abiding? Should they first not do harm with their products and services before they can even attempt to do any good?

What are the resources that the corporate sector wrests from the governments and the banks (budget foregone, tax holidays, subsidized land, non-performing assets—NPAs, etc.) and from the communities (water, forests, clean air, commons, etc.) and is that proportionate to what they give back? Is two per cent adequate when jobs are outsourced, supply chains abound with human rights violations? And will 'the polluter pays principle' recharge ground water in Plachimada or in Kala Dera when it takes years to be replenished or to mitigate environmental pollution? Can we allow CSR to be a 'temple hundi' of sorts, which allows for charity to be a plea bargained for various acts of wilful commission and omission?

Baba Adhav, who led the unionization of railway porters in Pune, said publicly at the TOI Awards function, attended by the then Prime Minister of India, that the GDP stands for 'Garib, Dalit, Peedit' in the Indian context and we need to find better solutions than accept western models of growth or philanthropy/CSR that leave a huge footprint on the planet!

Ramesh Agrawal of Chhattisgarh, who won the Green Nobel award, said of CSR, "You take away my hoe, you give me a needle." At the end of the day, it is the tribals of Niyamgiri, the villagers in Odisha among others, who have understood and withstood the onslaught against their impoverisation against the corporate Goliaths of this world.

The Oxfam Annual Report on Inequality points out that a tiny elite group of individuals control about 83 per cent of the world's resources and in India a mere one per cent own 73 per cent of the wealth! It is this unsustainable growth pattern that needs to be challenged and questioned. The prevailing economic conditions and policies that allowed this to happen are unjust and unsustainable.

Piketty's epic research throws light on some of the trends and reasons across the world. It is said that "Nothing can succeed in a social environment that fails." We cannot work on economic parameters or livelihoods alone without addressing the marginalization of Muslims, tribals, Dalits, women and the general violence in our society—in the hearts and minds of our fellow brethren. As Harsh Mander poignantly puts it, "We cannot look away."

We do so at our own risk because when they come for us, there will be no one to protest unless we do so ourselves…

Where do journeys end? Do they?

—

Amita V. Joseph *has a Management, LLB, PG (Human Rights) and PhD as qualifications. She is a lawyer, teacher and development worker. She has a three-decade long work experience across legal, corporate and development sectors. She is associated with a number of non-profit organizations as a Board Member.She is one of the founding members of Corporate Responsibility Watch India, a collective of 16 non-profit organizations.*

NARENDRANATH DAMODARAN

THE BEING AND DOING OF CSR

Emphasising the distinction between the being and the doing capabilities of a person and a community, the article stresses how corporate support in nurturing civil society, through collectives, will lead to holistic development of the poor, knowing they have the potential to bring about change in themselves and the world around them

"You don't have to make headlines to be a hero. The ladies from Jaridih, Jharkhand, are addressing issues of domestic violence, family feuds and unemployment through strong rural collectives, or Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Indigo Reach (a CSR-initiative of Indigo Airlines) has partnered with PRADAN to empower these SHGs. Village organizations and gender leadership camps (were) initiated to create a knowledge-sharing pool and to build understanding on gender, sex and patriarchy."

It is, indeed, inspiring to see a corporate celebrating the rural poor women as they valiantly take on patriarchy and make an irreverent foray into taboo issues such as sex, gender and violence. The blurb on the pages of the Hello 6E, in Indigo Airlines, cheerfully announces where the Company has

Poverty in India is a complex phenomenon. The scale and expanse of poverty and inequality is immense. There are no clear definitions on who is poor; suffice it to say that more than one-third of the world's most desperately poor people live in India

invested its CSR funds. Not for Indigo the beaten-track investments such as school buildings or sanitation units; or looking for brand-positioning opportunities. Instead, they have drawn on the lessons they have learned from working in the villages and have decided to strengthen 'girl-power' within their Company. This may be one specific instance of how some of the progressive corporate organizations are reconceptualising their investment in CSR. Being from a large NGO that is ever-short on funds, it is in the order of things for me to state that CSR funds are not usually forthcoming for projects that do not offer an opportunity to showcase a brand or when there is no immediate visibility of the Company.

Section 135 of the Companies Act 2013 does allow for an assortment of avenues for investment of CSR funds. However, the suggested avenues are only guidelines; so it should be possible for companies to plan and evolve their own ways to identify the investment areas that suit them best, as long as they stick to the broader objectives such as eradicating extreme hunger and poverty, the promotion of education and so on. The Act does conceive CSR funds as supplementary to the funds being spent by the government; and, therefore, allows companies to liberally contribute to the PM's Relief Fund or to Clean India Fund, Clean Ganga Fund, etc.

As per the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, the available data for the Financial Year (FY) 2015–16, show that 5097 companies spent a total of Rs 9,822 crores as CSR. As per estimates, the amount would not be less than Rs 13,000 crores in the FY 2018–19. Compared to the more than three lakh crore rupees that the government puts out for development, every year, this amount may be miniscule, but it has the potential to substantially improve the effectiveness of those funds, if invested imaginatively. It is an important call for CSR Heads to decide on whether they want to supplement the already massive resources of the government or strategically complement state resources, creating a multiplier effect.

Poverty in India is a complex phenomenon. The scale and expanse of poverty and inequality is immense. There are no clear definitions on who is poor; suffice it to say that more than one-third of the world's most desperately poor people live in India. There is no one silver bullet that will solve the problem of poverty and inequality in India and, therefore, any effort at alleviation will have to, as much as possible, address the root causes of poverty rather than just address the symptoms.

Even if we do not agree on who is poor, there is an increasing realization among everyone that adding a few more rupees to the income of a poor household, albeit being a formidable task, is in itself not a solution to the myriad problems faced by the people. Amartya Sen, through the articulation of his Capability Approach to understanding human well-being has provided a strong theoretical backing to this notion. Sen has postulated poverty as a lack of capabilities, both being and doing, to lead a good life. As a corollary, development is defined as capability expansion. The 'being' capabilities are about whether the person thinks she has the agency to change the status-quo (of poverty and misery) and the 'doing' capabilities are actually the capabilities required to bring about the change.

This is where the bulk of CSR investments must primarily go—towards nurturing civil society, leading to more holistic development. We need to build institutions in civil society that are inspiring and so that the youth is drawn to dedicate themselves in the long term and pursue their calling

The basic tenet is that the poor people have the potential to bring about change (both in themselves and the world around them). But, how does one stimulate change in a community of people with a deeply limited sense of being and doing? This is where the role of groups comes in. Persons in similar circumstances will mutually support and reinforce each other's quest for a dignified life. NGOs like PRADAN have chosen to mobilize women from the Dalit, Adivasi and other deprived communities into SHGs and Federations, which have now emerged as a very powerful pathway to a dignified life.

Collectives are important because poverty in India is not just an economic issue but a social and political one. Poverty and inequality are perpetrated through the age-old forces of gender, religion, caste and class, which have built their own fault-lines in the social fabric, unceasingly mediating any change in status quo. Collectives have the confidence to take on these forces. They also have the opportunity to build linkages with external agencies such as the government departments, the *panchayats*, markets and other knowledge institutions, to mobilize the resources they need.

Thus, the enormous quantum of resources available with the government, banks and other technical institutions have a much better chance of being invested more effectively.

The space for mobilizing communities through a process of knowledge and capability building has been the forte of civil society organizations, or NGOs. Civil society has been a trail-blazer in the domain of strengthening communities and facilitating sustainable and inclusive development, with the community in focus, offering innovative solutions to the

Village Benduakona is now electrified through Solar Grid under the Clean and Renewable Energy Project funded by Bank of America CSR in Gumla district, Jharkhand

The CSO sector in India is vibrant. It is ready today to envision audacious change; it is ready individually and as networks, to build fair partnerships with the large companies and with the state to build the nation together

deeply entrenched problems of poverty, livelihood, health and education, environment and so on. Moreover, it has nurtured the spirit of voluntarism in society and has become a space for those interested in a vocation of doing something for the others. This has been done by facilitating the entry of educated men and women into the voluntary sector and by encouraging local leadership, mostly women, in the villages and *mohallas*, to extend themselves in a spirit of citizenship. Whereas many individual Samaritans, most of those who enter and remain in the voluntary sector, do it because of the existence of the vibrant civil society institutions, which provide them guidance, mentoring and the space for learning, thereby helping them evolve into effective development workers. The CSO space provides the opportunity to pursue their passion and strive for social change, in partnership with the communities with which they work.

This is where the bulk of CSR investments must primarily go—towards nurturing civil society, leading to more holistic development. We need to build institutions in civil society that are inspiring and so that the youth is drawn to dedicate themselves in the long term and pursue their calling. The CSO space has to evolve as an overarching eco-system for social change, which orchestrates partnerships with different stakeholders, including the state and the market, and catalyses change in scale.

NGOs are already recipients of CSR resources in a limited manner; these resources are more toward the delivery of specific outputs, in the short-term, and many-a-time only as service contracts. There is limited money for institution building. The costs of putting in place modern systems, advancing innovation, nurturing talent, ensuring a competitive compensation package, building and disseminating knowledge, and so on fall in the purview of institution building. The longer term patient funding and contribution to the Corpus is crucial in creating robust institutions. Most of these are not how CSR funds flow to NGOs today, and there is need for this to change. We need to build enduring partnerships between corporate organizations and CSOs to bring about the transformational change that we envisage in society.

The CSO sector in India is vibrant. It is ready today to envision audacious change; it is ready individually and as networks, to build fair partnerships with the large companies and the state, to build the nation together. With many conventional funding routes shutting down, it is an important need for CSR funds to indeed step in and support CSOs, not from a vantage of donors, but as co-travellers, in mutually rewarding alliances, to build the just and equal society of our dreams.

—

Narendranth Damodaran *is the Executive Director of PRADAN.*

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TEJINDER SINGH BHOGAL

LIFE AND TIMES AFTER PRADAN

•••

Reminiscences of a former PRADAN-ite bring back, the varied experiences, training opportunities, and personal growth that being an agent of change heralded....today someone who began his journey in PRADAN stands shoulder to shoulder with the best in the field

Inventing a new life

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The day I left PRADAN (20 years back almost to the day!), I got a job offer—and a good one at that (as Deputy Head of a UNDP-funded program, with the implicit promise that I would be the head in a year's time)! This was the 'market value' that a PRADAN-ite carried even at that time!

I was clear I did not want to be in a formal organization; I wanted to work on my own. Consequently, I negotiated with UNDP to let me do an Organization Development (OD) analysis of the very program they wanted me to join. I would, subsequently, decide whether I wanted to join that program. UNDP accepted my proposal, and I was off with my very first assignment as an OD consultant—something I have remained for the past 20 years of my life!

Despite the brisk start to my career (other assignments too followed fairly rapidly thanks to the

To a rural development professional like me, a consultant was a mere clever talker, somebody who was good at presentations and theory, somebody who, importantly, did not know the field and was quite useless for society and organizations. And here I was going to become one such consultant!

many who trusted an experienced PRADAN-ite), there were two big challenges that I faced: the first, psychological, and, the second, intellectual.

The psychological challenge was that for the previous 13 years, I had viewed myself as a rural development professional, someone who worked directly with villagers and helped transform their lives. To a rural development professional like me, a consultant was a mere clever talker, somebody who was good at presentations and theory, somebody who, importantly, did not know the field and was quite useless for society and organizations. And here I was going to become one such consultant!

In order to come to terms with my new reality, it was important for me to re-frame my profession. This re-framing became: "I am a consultant because I know a lot about the realities of the field, of the village, of the government and banks. I have been working for 16 years, and I know from the inside how different organizations concerned with social transformation actually work. My consulting or advice, therefore, is based on this extensive intuitive understanding, and not just some theory that I have picked up. In short, I am not a typical airy-fairy consultant, but a more solid, grounded and, consequently, a genuinely useful consultant for the sector."

All of the above was undoubtedly true, and helpful. Organizations were willing to hire me because they could see in their first interaction with me that I knew how the world worked.

Yet, I realized that this was not enough. Intuition and field understanding were not enough; I also needed to understand theory. And I needed to understand the practices of the world of Human Resources (HR) and OD.

Learning on Steroids

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PRADAN had provided opportunities to build multiple skills and understanding. I had attended a three-phase Training of Trainers with PRIA, a Basic Lab on Human Processes with ISABS, a training on OD with Somnath Chattopadhyaya, Listening skills with Deepankar Roy, Recruitment and Selection with N.R. Jain, Case Writing with Ranjit Gupta and Personal Counseling with Fr. Fustere. Starting off as a consultant, I could evaluate my skills. Recruitment: Good (having used it extensively in PRADAN); Training: Potentially good but, at present, rusty; Listening and Counseling: Usable.

The very first workshops I conducted were hugely stressful. I remember sitting up late in the night before the workshops, visualizing all kinds of questions that might be thrown back at me, and imagining all kinds of scenarios in various sessions.

Thinking about the questions, naturally got me to want to read up on theory. Reading theory, however, required books… and books on OD and HR were expensive. Nonetheless, I decided to invest in appropriate books; in the first year of my consultancy, I spent Rs 24,000 on books, which in 1999 was a princely sum!

Simultaneously, I started investing in developing skills related to OD and HR. I attended a certification course on administering MBTI and FIRO-B; attended over a dozen human process labs in the course of becoming a professional ISABS member, underwent training in using Systems Thinking, etc. I got selected to be a fellow of an international program called LEAD (Leadership and Development), and in the course of exposure to environmental

The mid-70s saw a different sort of organization emerging: those which began to look at society and societal issues more deeply. These respected and trusted the agency and wisdom of the community to a far greater extent

and development issues in China, Canada, Moldovia, Italy and Indonesia, I learned about Systems Thinking and Stakeholder Analysis.

A World of Social Transformation beyond PRADAN

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Over the past 20 years, I worked extensively with donors, NGOs, CBOs, networks and government programs concerned with social issues. As a consequence, I have had occasion to work with organizations and programs on health, mental health, education, gender, children, environment, rights, rural and appropriate housing, and with those working on livelihoods and natural resources.

As I worked, I began to realize both the multiplicity of approaches that exist, and in the widening of approaches to social transformation in the sector.

Till the 70s, most NGOs working in India were either of a religious or Gandhian persuasion. The emphasis was on delivering good quality services (health, education, animal care), and/or on living an ethical life. In education, lest it cause any confusion, the focus was on delivering education where there were no schools: there were no particular concerns about innovations in curriculum or ways of teaching.

The mid-70s saw a different sort of organization emerging: those which began to look at society and societal issues more deeply. These respected and trusted the agency and wisdom of the community to a far greater extent. Among the first such interventions were those by Bunker Roy in Tilonia (see Barefoot College) and Dunu Roy in Shahdol (Vidushak Karkhana).

Others followed: Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program (which segued into EKLAVYA, one of the first to use experiential learning approaches for school children); Jagori (bringing feminist agenda centre stage), SPARC in Mumbai (the rights of pavement dwellers), PRIA (Participatory Training and Research), SEARCH in Bangalore (organizing and sensitizing farm workers), Behavioral Science Centre (use of behavioral science technology to work with Dalits); and, of course, PRADAN with its focus on livelihoods and natural resources.

When compared to the Gandhian and Missionary organizations, these organizations featured a new set of people: young, energetic, highly educated and willing to explore new paradigms and approaches. It was thanks to the alternatives generated by these organizations that the Government of India started reconsidering the way it tried to deal with social issues. Over the next decade or so, inspired and learning from (many times, unacknowledged) the sector, the government set up Mahila Samakhya (Women's empowerment), Watershed Development, Wasteland Development, Poverty Alleviation Programs, Rural Health Missions, National Literacy Missions and so on and so forth.

By 2000, even as the NGO sector fell into some disrepute (organizations working only as sub-contractors; some clearly in only for money and not for any social transformation, etc.), and the traditional multi-sectoral NGOs (Sewa Mandir, ASSEFA, Chirag, BCT, MYRADA) seemed to be losing their mojo, a slew of newer organizations, with radically different and exciting approaches entered the fray. Thus, you had organizations as diverse as Video Volunteers (community using modern technology to deal with human rights issues), CREA (Feminist human rights), Azad (training women cab drivers), Magic

Getting to work, or know about many of these organizations, movements, CBOs, and even some of the newer government programs (such as the Kerala program Kudumbashree) was exciting because it highlighted the need for social change and transformation, and what all was possible for that change

Bus (sports for slum children), Vinyas (Building as Learning Aid, creating an intersection between architecture and education) FAT (feminist technology), Arvind Eye Care (low-cost, high-quality, large-scale eye care for the poor), Equations (Environmentally friendly and socially sustainable tourism), Nidaan (organizing street vendors), Aajeevika Bureau (ID cards and multi-level support for migrant tribals), Prayas (reforming the criminal justice system), and Banyan (mental health).

In short, the NGO sector had now become an interesting mixture of dinosaurs (old-style organizations), older organizations that continued to remain vital through re-invention (such as PRADAN and AKRSPI), the un-savoury or superficial ones, and exciting, innovative and new organizations that dealt with hitherto unrecognized issues in very different ways.

But this was not all, the energy for social change was also emerging from different movements and campaigns, as well as community-based organizations (CBOs) and cooperatives. Some of these campaigns such as Right to Information (RTI) and Right to Food (RTF) had a huge impact on national policy (leading to the framing of the RTI Act, and legislation around food security); others, around women's rights movement (Nirbhaya campaign, OBR, We Can campaign) had a slow fuse impact on a range of issues such as domestic violence, representation of women in Panchayati Raj, dowry deaths, etc.

Other campaigns (Narmada Bachao, anti POSCO -Pohang Iron and Steel Company) have had an impact on policies related to displacement and resettlement of tribals (in particular).

Working directly with many of the above as well as by listening to others I was not otherwise directly involved with, my education about the social sector has been a continuous, ongoing process. And this education, has, in turn, led to a deepening concern about social change.

A Deepening Concern about Social Change

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Getting to work, or know about many of these organizations, movements, CBOs, and even some of the newer government programs (such as the Kerala program Kudumbashree) was exciting because it highlighted the need for social change and transformation, and what all was possible for that change.

In the course of these 20 years, my understanding of the nature of this social change (required and possibilities) has grown, not in a very defined step-by-step fashion but more through a process of diffusion and osmosis.

This growing understanding has been aided and moulded by a series of questions that either I have asked or have become aware of. Some of these questions have been as follows.

- How is it that whereas India has become a hub for medical tourism, thanks to the high-quality corporate hospitals in metropolitan India, the public health centres (PHCs) around the country are becoming increasingly dysfunctional? How is it that whereas a middle-class person in Delhi has access to the latest in medical technology (MRIs, laser surgery and high-end medicine), a woman living in an MP village cannot even be assured of a safe childbirth?
- How is it that whereas we now have air-conditioned schools in Delhi, where children use the latest computer technology to learn about the world, tribal children in Odisha are

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being denied education as the government shuts down schools one by one in villages, ostensibly because they are 'unviable'?

- How is it that Reliance has been able to build up its giant commercial empire on cotton, even as over 1000 farmers growing cotton commit suicide every year?
- Why is that the various state governments hush up farmer suicide deaths? A recent example is in Punjab, where every week farmers' bodies are fished out of the Bhakra canal.
- Why is it that every month 3000 children land up at the New Delhi railway station, having run away from their homes? Why do we as a society remain blind to children employed in restaurants and tea-stalls, about child rapes, and child sexual tourism (the highest in India being in the temple towns of Puri and Tirupati).
- Why do state governments hush up or ignore reports on bonded labour (another term for slave labour)?
- In 2014, almost 2.6 lakh people were killed in traffic accidents and another 25 lakh were injured. A disproportionately high number of those killed and injured were pedestrians and cyclists. Why is it that our countries (and cities) keep on investing in super-highways and fancy flyovers without investing in pedestrian bridges and subways or bicycle tracks? Why is it that there are no campaigns for safe driving, or stringent checks by the police for wrong driving? See the number of trucks driving back on the wrong side on highways; cars jumping red lights in the city; or fancy cars weaving from one lane to another as if they are in a James Bond movie.
- Why do middle-class colonies ban the movement of people living in poorer areas through their colonies? (Clearly, there is no counter ban!)
- Why don't people carry cloth bags for shopping? Why do they insist on getting their grocery in polythene bags? Used polythene bags litter our cities and roadsides: quite apart from looking ugly, these end up by choking our drains, and killing cattle which consume these bags.
- Why do people insist on buying bottled water, rather than depending on our municipality water for drinking? That water in plastic bottles is somehow purer and cleaner than municipality water is one of the biggest marketing scams, and all of us have seemingly fallen into the trap of buying water, which should be, otherwise, available to us for free?
- Why are slum people evicted from the Yamuna plains (in the name of protecting the flood plains), whereas, at the same time, the construction of the Akshardham temple and other such massive concrete structures at the same place has been allowed?
- Why is it that we allow the construction of huge energy guzzlers such as gigantic airport terminals, malls, flood-lit massive stadiums, diesel guzzling SUVs, even as we struggle with the climate change impact of high carbon emission? Some of the biggest culprits of high carbon emission are the coal-powered thermal power plants. Encouraging high energy guzzlers (is IPL more essential than irrigation?) ensures that we cannot do without coal-based plants. So much so that we are rapidly setting up mines in prime forest areas, both destroying forest cover essential to absorb the carbon in our atmosphere and displacing the tribals living there. I am amazed that the Government is unable to

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see the obvious process by which we are destroying the environment at both ends (increasing use of energy while decreasing forest cover) and unable to bring in any coherent policy to deal with these.

A bigger question is why are so few of us concerned about questions such as the above? Why is the majority of the middle class more concerned about IPL bidding, and the marriage of film stars, the building of bigger and flashier airports (huge energy guzzlers) and not with communal amity, inclusiveness and a sustainable environment?

Against Stupidity the Gods Themselves Contend in Vain

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As time has gone on, I realize that two concerns have grown within me. The first concern is with the culture of thoughtlessness, short-term thinking and immediate gratification that seems to have pervaded society. The second concern is with the heartlessness and extreme self-centredness of those who are well off. The second is even more troubling because the upper middle class never had it so good in terms of material comfort: ACs, SUVs, regular air travel, foreign vacations, and the best of health care.

These concerns make me angry, sad and upset.

What makes me upbeat is when I come across organizations that are thinking about these issues and trying to resolve them. There is profound satisfaction for me in working with these very organizations and helping them improve their internal processes, the way they structure themselves, the way they solve conflicts, the way they build a culture of greater inclusiveness.

The way I look at it, organizations that are concerned with social change need to deepen a culture of reflection about what they are doing, both inside and outside the organization. In many cases, organizations that are thinking of, say, education or livelihoods, are not aware of other processes in society, which can lead to destroying those societies in the long run. They may set up School Management Committees (SMCs) or Water User Associations but not recognize the caste conflict in the village that prevents parents and others in these committees from working effectively with each other.

In a similar fashion, organizations may be sensitive in dealing with the community but not realize that a culture of authoritarianism inside the organization de-motivates the community workers and others. The mismatch of stated and practised values ultimately harms the effectiveness of these organizations as social transformation agents.

To summarize: there is a huge need to reflect on what development professionals and workers are doing as individuals, as colleagues and bosses; as teams and departments; and, finally, as organizations. They need to reflect and be able to recognize processes that strengthen working together as well as those that destroy trust, and those that end up by destroying our future.

My role is to help organizations to learn to reflect and get society at large to reflect; and to become wise, in the course of such reflections. Only when enough of them actually do become wise will I be convinced that my two-decade journey, post-PRADAN, has been worthwhile.

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SUPARNA SONI

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.

Sitting on the floor or on a mat with the group members, wearing clothes that the rural 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

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.

Sitting on the floor or on a mat with the group members, wearing clothes that the rural 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,

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

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 DPIP

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

(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

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

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

Panel discussion by the alumni of PRADAN
on "The changes triggered by PRADAN-ites
in the society and the way forward"

PRADAN is a non-governmental organization registered in Delhi under the Societies Registration Act. Working with small teams of professionals in several poverty clusters in seven states across central and eastern India, PRADAN builds and strengthens collectives of rural women, in order to stimulate their sense of agency and help them occupy space as equals in society. PRADAN professionals work through these collectives, to enhance the livelihoods and overall well-being of women, thereby striving for a just and equitable society.

Newsreach is an endeavour by PRADAN to reach out to the world by sharing stories of the struggles and the hopes of the rural poor, and inspiring friends and well-wishers to get involved and participate in bettering the lives of marginalized and vulnerable village women.

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PRADAN-ites sharing lighter moments during Retreat 2018 in New Delhi

PRADAN

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