

In Touch *with The Grail*

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DIGGING YOUR OWN WELLS

ICA have been working in Chikhale village for two or three years now. I think their achievements there have been considerable, although there have been many setbacks and difficulties. Of course, if you think of development as meaning big buildings and a city-type lifestyle, there is none of that. What they are out to encourage is a self-sufficient community, with the emphasis on 'community' as much as on 'self-sufficient'.

Basically a village like Chikhale, with a population of 1000 can achieve quite a lot if they organise themselves and work together, but otherwise it's very difficult for them to get out of the existing situation. They suffer greatly from water problems and need to work out effective irrigation and drinking water systems, because the water is contaminated with a ghastly worm that gets into the bloodstream and is not easily cured by antibiotics. They have been told so many times that if they boil their water it will be OK, but they can't be bothered. So something needs to be done about the water supply.

EASILY MADE THINGS

In order to stem the continual drift to the already overcrowded cities, the villages need to be places with prospects for young people, setting up their own industries. 'Industries' here just means organised cottage

industries such as weaving, or something that can be made easily on village ground, for instance, bricks. The two examples I have given are what has, in fact, been done in Chikhale where a brickmaking industry has been set up, and also a women's weaving industry. The latter has taken two years to get going. The equipment was not much of a problem. The villagers saved up to buy it and an expert helped them set it up, but independent thinking was the problem. Once they had started weaving they wanted ICA to give them wages. ICA tried to explain, 'No, this is your industry. You run it. You make the profits. You organise wages from them.' It took them a long time to grasp that they are actually the owners, but, in the last few months, it's clicked. Now it's running well with two women in charge.

ICA have decided that now is the time to extend their work to the circle of villages around Chikhale. The villages concerned have all agreed that they want ICA to work there for two

DOING THE WORK

Everything started last March with teams of four people going off into each village to talk to the villagers, to hold village meetings and find out what the village needed and would like to do about it. I was put on a team with Monu Battyanarya, the Indian head of our house. He is very wise and what is more speaks perfect English. He, two other Indians and I set off to a village called Ajivili, about two miles away from Chikhale, and walked there over the fields. Ajivili is one of the most 'difficult' villages in the circle, because the people there are very passive and expect everything to be given to them, rather than doing things themselves. The community is split into two parties which makes any sort of village scheme difficult. Monu was explaining all this to me as we walked there. I was rather nervous because I'd never spent a whole day in a village other than Chikhale.

We were planning to hold a meeting



A pause in the work on the village well

years, and work is starting now. So I have come at rather an exciting time. They are getting the support of Indian business and voluntary people, who have all sorts of useful ideas and schemes for helping the villages, and ICA is a vehicle for putting these into practice.

with the villagers, or rather the men of the most important families. Not because we invited particularly these people, but because these were the people who turned up. This is ICA's method for village work and, being the first time that I'd seen it, I was very interested to discover what ac-

you like to see here? Monu went round asking each person in turn. The answers were things like: a drinking water system, more bullocks, better roofs on the houses, that is tiles instead of mud and straw, some electric lighting, more places for water storage, an irrigation system. These were all written down, and that evening people from all the ten villages came to Chikhale to meet together to see what needs they had in common. This continued throughout the week, with further meetings deciding why they weren't getting these things, and most tricky of all, how they could set about getting them.

At first all the villagers sat around saying, 'Oh, the Government should do this and that for us', but Monu told them that the Government couldn't do everything. It was their village and they were responsible for doing it themselves. Eventually it was worked out that for issues like an irrigation system, if the villages made a survey and plan of where water pipelines were necessary they could a) get an irrigation officer to give them a cost estimate and b) get a loan from a bank if they collected 10% between them, to pay for the system to be installed. This was a new idea to them and some were very excited about it. I felt pretty excited too.

TEA AND TALKING

Just being there was an intriguing experience for me. I wasn't particularly anxious to start doing anything on my own. However, on Tuesday, Monu told me to go off with one of the young men called Sitar, and to talk to the women. 'They won't talk to me', he said, 'because I'm older, and they will be too shy, and it's not acceptable for Sitar to go and talk to them alone, unless he's acting as your translator.' I felt very nervous. However, Sitar and I went and we sat outside one of the houses. Immediately six women came up. The woman of the house gave us tea, and a blanket to sit on.

So much for me talking to them. They just surrounded me and fired questions at me, poor Sitar having to translate. Occasionally I could understand without translation but not very often. There was one particularly bright-looking woman whom I liked on sight, called Sitaram. She was asking the most searching questions. First they asked 'How old are you?' When I said I was only nineteen, they

your brother and sister? England too? You came alone, in an aeroplane? There was a bemused silence then Sitaram said 'How is it that you are only nineteen and you come alone to India without your parents or husband?' This was rather difficult to answer in words of one syllable that Sitar could translate, but I said something about English girls getting married later and wanting to see another country before I got married, and that my parents were worried, but knew I was safe because I wrote letters. Sitar persisted, 'But you are so young and alone - are you not often frightened?' I felt myself shrinking. 'Yes', I said in Marathi. Why this answer pleased everyone so much I'm not quite sure. Perhaps it lessened the distance or something. Anyway then it was time to leave. To my joy, they all said, 'Come back tomorrow.'

RAISING MANY QUESTIONS

Talking to Monu later, I felt rather despondent because I'd just talked about me all the time. However he squashed my doubts. 'No, Ann, it is just as important for them to see you, and what you are. Don't you realise what an impact you will have made. These women never even go into the nearest town alone, and now they have met this young girl who has come from the other side of the world. Already they are all talking about you. You have raised many fundamental questions in their minds. They see that there are other things that a young girl can do that they had not thought of.' This made me feel better. Then Monu went on to talk about the women in Maharashtra and I learnt more from him in half an hour than I could have done from six books. Basically what he told me was that the women in Maharashtra are in many ways stronger than anywhere else in India. They are very powerful inside the home, they do most of the work in the fields, they take their crops to market and sell them, they do all the cooking. What the men do I'm not quite sure. Sit around smoking, it seems.

Given all this, it seems amazing to me that the women aren't more assertive, but they still honour tradition and when their husband is there they don't speak unless spoken to, they don't go to the village meetings because it's not their place to discuss politics with the men. And when the men are sitting together, it's as if

would have to work hard to get them to take notice of me. The first day, although they always gave me tea first and all that sort of thing, they completely ignored me. I think this was because they weren't sure whether it was suitable to speak to me, or how to treat me. So the second day I decided to be brave and introduce myself to several of the men, who, once spoken to, were quite friendly and amenable. It had just never occurred to them to speak to me.

The third day the village leader noticed me taking notes and for some reason was very impressed with my handwriting and motioned all the others to come and look. He bowed and said something to Sitar, who translated it as, 'He says you are a very good scholar.' From then on I had fewer problems with the men, and even on one occasion led a meeting with a translator, though I felt very nervous. Sitar told me that I must put all my effort into getting the women to feel that their participation was just as important as the men's. They must feel that their ideas carried weight in the village decisions. So the women must somehow be persuaded to come along to the meetings, and this is difficult - they're just not used to doing that sort of thing.

At first I didn't realise what I was up against. As instructed, I went round to several houses and spoke to the women, explaining about the meetings, and asking them if they'd like to come. 'Oh, yes,' they all said, but no-one turned up. The next day I asked them why they hadn't come. 'We had the dinner to cook'. Sigh! That day I spoke to the men. I said how important it was for their wives to come and participate, that it was a project for the whole village, not just for the men. Surprisingly, several men agreed to encourage their wives to come along. I talked a bit more to some of the women about what was needed in the village, and they were extremely concise and quick-witted about it. The most important thing, they said, was a drink-int water system. They also talked about how the community was divided and wanted ICA to help them start a women's society to bring it together. Anyway the next day eight women turned up at the meeting. I was so happy.

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