

Winds and Waves

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Hits and misses in Maharashtra

By Dharmalingam Vinasithamby

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When Chikhale residents laid out their vision in 1979, they wanted a railway station. I tagged it then as a pipe-dream. But when I visited in January, there it was – a station linking it to Mumbai, 33 kilometres away.

Chikhale was a “model village” set up by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA). Our target was 232 such pilot projects across Maharashtra state, one in every *talukh* or sub-district.

The first was the Maliwada Human Development Project, near Aurangabad, in 1976. To “replicate” this in other villages, we set up a Human Development Training School. The eight-week course was to motivate villagers and train them in leadership methods. Many of them joined the ICA and were sent out in batches with a few ICA veterans to villages in the scheme. Their mission: live there for two years and help residents organise themselves and develop the village.

After almost 40 years, I wanted to see what these places were like. Our *Nava Gram Prayas* (“New Village Movement”) was a life-changing experience for me. But what was its impact on rural development in Maharashtra? I also wanted to meet people I had worked with and hear their stories. I visited some of these villages with Hiranman Gavai and his wife Mangala who live in Pune. The following are some impressions and reflections.

Republic Day at Chikhale

We drove to Chikhale on January 26th, India’s Republic Day. The main landmark, a large moss-covered pond, was still there. Next to it was a

residential school that we had built. About 700 children from tribal communities in the vicinity live and study there for 12 years. Many were taking part in a flag-hoisting ceremony, belting out patriotic songs and slogans, as we arrived. The tribal communities are among the poorest in India. The tribal school, one of several run by the government, helps some to make the leap from subsistence labour to more remunerative employment.



Other parts of the village had changed. The mud hovels of the poor and large houses of the well-to-do had been replaced by multi-storied buildings. Much of the farmland had gone as well. The village is now a dormitory for workers in Panvel, 6 km away.

When we began the project, access was a key problem. The road into Chikhale (the name literally means mud) was a sticky, slippery mess in the rainy season. The bridge across the stream was too narrow for trucks to enter the village to support any industries.

The railway station and other improvements solved these problems. But, ironically, they also led to the village being swallowed by Panvel.

Meeting Maliwada's elders

The situation was similar in Maliwada. Previously, you could see the village from the road. A bus stop with a tea vendor marked the road junction. But when we drove up, commercial buildings lining both sides of the road blocked our view.

Several villagers we had worked with recognised us, including Lakshmi Bai. She and her late husband Pandit Udawant, the village goldsmith, had been pillars of the project. His son, then a child then, now runs the business. He invited us to his goldsmith shop. Another elder was Pundlik Dangare. He spoke a smattering of English and took us on a tour.



The central square or chowk looked the same. The area around it was now packed with more houses. A water tower obscured the famous view of the ancient Daulatabad fort in the distance, showing that the village now has piped water.

The grounds were strewn with shreds of white Styrofoam plates and cartons. The village used to look cleaner - rubbish was more organic without the everlasting quality of plastic and quickly disintegrated. The large building where we lived had returned to its state of rubble. When we started the project, we rebuilt the *haveli* for staff quarters and village meetings. Stripped

of its timber and roofing, it now reeked of human waste. Previously, villagers would nip over to the nearby fields to take a dump. Now that those had been built over, the abandoned haveli with the privacy its walls afforded had made it a convenient open-air toilet.

The Human Development Training School, another large building next door, was a recycling factory. It was packed with mountains of used plastic bags to be turned into plastic pellets.

Pundlik and the others recalled the changes. The population had grown with many villagers working in Aurangabad, 20 km away. Outsiders also lived in Maliwada. The village, once politically part of another village called Abdi Mandi, now had its own *gram panchayat* or village council. The younger generation was now in charge with better access to government resources for development.

Jawale's progress

We also visited Jawale, a former project in the Khandala sub-district of Satara. Here the village identity was intact, perhaps because of its remoteness. The village is about 60km from Pune and 9km from Shirval, a small town.

Mangala, who had worked here, and village elders who greeted us described the changes. Also with us were Jeroen Geradts and Rokus Harder, both of the Netherlands. They had worked here as volunteers for six months in 1983 (*see their report, Journey back to Jawale*).

The access road, originally gravel, was tarred. What was once a bare plot on the right of the road was now a grove of trees. Small bunds built during the project years had elevated the ground water table. After the village got electricity, pumps and an irrigation system linked to a nearby dam had made farms more productive. Piped water was also available.

Among other changes: village paths which used to get muddy in the rainy season had been surfaced. Open drains beside them had been covered as well, with grill-covered inlets here and there for runoff water. Several brick-built homes stood next to ones of mud and rocks. Some were double and triple-storied. Several motor-cycles, once a rarity, were parked outside.

Another change – a woman was village chief. Poonam, who gets a meagre salary as *sarpanch*, spends most of her time dealing with infrastructure glitches like a breakdown in the irrigation system. Husband Ravindra Patil does some of the running around for her.

The improved political status of women is due to the Panchayat Raj policy changes in 1993 by the late prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. These require state governments to enact laws empowering panchayats in various ways such as reserving a third of the seats for women, proportional reservation of seats for

disadvantaged minorities, direct elections and gram sabhas (village assemblies).

The changes give panchayats political clout in the district level. But village elders in both Maliwada and Jawale said local involvement in decision-making is not as keen as before.

One factor – the satellite dishes sprouting on the roof tops of even humble homes. People are reluctant to attend meetings and prefer to watch TV, said a Jawale elder, Vinayaka Dhondeba Patila, 72. “Jawale population has grown, programmes continue but they do not have the spirit of those days,” he said. Another elder, Mahadev Baburao Patil, blamed the growing individualism on mobile phones that everyone seems to carry. “Before, everyone would show up for *shramadans* (voluntary work sessions). Now people are more materialistic,” he said.

On the positive side, people seem more aware of the larger metropolitan community, the nation and the world, and interact more with these realities.

The urban influence also empowers the panchayat. Small factories and industries on the outskirts of Jawale, for example, pay taxes to the gram panchayat, enabling it to carry out various infrastructure maintenance and improvements. It also seems to have more access to development funds from the government. Credit is more readily available. Previously, villagers had to go after bankers. Now they come offering loans.

A village servant force

I did not get all my questions answered during my brief tour in Maharashtra. But I realised that some came from a dated perspective. Things I found jarring such as rubbish and haphazard urbanisation were present in non-project villages as well. There was a new generation of leaders in charge with different priorities. The world had moved on.

But other issues gained focus. One was the absurdity of having picked places where urban growth would obliterate our work, something an economist could have foreseen from the map. In Chikhale, for example, we should have helped villagers plan their future as part of an urban rather than a rural reality.

It was also clear that the main driver of development is the government. Its various schemes for individuals and backing for infrastructure development have made a big difference in both project and non-project villages.

Where we played a useful role was in closing the gap between the village and the government structures. We did this by having a residential team that coached and encouraged villagers to visit government offices and banks to make use of the available schemes. This, rather than any funds we poured into the village, left lasting changes.

In addition, it was the presence and commitment of some of the volunteers that seemed to inspire villagers and others; and it still has a role today.



I saw this dynamic at a project run by former ICA staff Mary and Cyprian D'Souza in Mawal sub-district, near Pune. The main activity is a learning centre for school. But what stood out for me was a secondary project – an educational outreach program run by young village women. The Potali Project, based on the Learning Basket program developed by

Keith Packard and other ICA workers, aims to boost brain development among infants which is at its peak in the first three years. The team of young teachers, equipped with books, cards and other materials, tour villages in the area. They hold meetings once a week for parents and grandparents in a village and show them how to interact with their infants and thereby release their full potential.

When we began our work in Maharashtra, a part of the vision was to raise a servant force for development. Instead of ICAs focusing on infrastructure projects preferred by donors, equipping youth with methods to play a catalytic role in India's villages would have a more lasting effect. That would also have a broader effect on society by providing youth a channel for plugging in their creativity.

Cutting through corruption

By Dharmalingam Vinasithamby

Pratibha is 25 years old and sharp as a knife. Slim, bright-eyed and fast of speech, she works as a thalathi (land tax collector) in a sub-district of India's Maharashtra state. Pratibha (not her real name) is part of a team that fans out across the sub-district, assessing how much each farmer should pay based on the size of their land holdings and crop yield.



Her father, a former ICA human development project staff member, held the same post before his recent retirement. Most of the thalathis I had encountered when I worked in villages years ago were middle-aged men like him.

But Pratibha projected a completely different image when I met her in his house in February this year. She has three villages to handle. Her tools of trade are modern. Unlike her father, who had to refer to sheaves of dog-eared land records, she carries a laptop packed with the required data and

forms. A few taps on the keyboard and her assessment is registered and later transferred to a server at her office.

Although she evidently enjoys her work, her forthright manner and frank speech gets her into trouble. In one incident, she complained about flaws in the way software training was provided. “We were tested on our mastery of the software even before we had begun our training,” she says. Her superior complained to his higher-ups about her insubordination. They decreed that her annual increment would be forfeited this year.

“I did not tell my father about this till he had retired,” she told me. “I was afraid he would have spoken to my superiors and tried to seek their forgiveness on my behalf.” She considers the punishment meted out to her as unjustified and has filed an appeal against the action to the authorities at the district level. What if the appeal fails? “I will ask the revenue department to conduct an investigation and give its ruling,” she says. “I don’t see why I should be penalised for doing the right thing.”

Pratibha is irked by the slipshod standards around her and says graft is rife in the system. She says when the thalathi and the gram sewak (a village development officer appointed by the district) conspire, they can siphon off funds meant for the development of a village. “I too have been asked by people to look the other way in return for cash gifts,” she says. “But I refuse. The 25,000 rupees (US\$400) I receive each month as salary is enough for me.” India must deal with corruption, she says. “But we have to start from the top, not from the bottom.”

If Pratibha remains true to her ideals and does not get kicked out, she could rise up the ladder and perhaps help reform the way things are done. For now, she represents the energy and potential of India’s youth to change their nation and the world.

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