

Lessons from ICA's Human Development Projects in Maharashtra

by V. Dharmalingam, October 2025

The following are reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of our work in Maharashtra four decades ago and learnings that can be drawn from them for future development attempts.

The Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) initiated the Nava Gram Prayas ("New Village Movement"), targeting 232 pilot human development projects across Maharashtra, one in every sub-district. This extensive reach was part of its strategy to replicate successful models like the Maliwada Human Development Project. A key component was the establishment of a Human Development Training School (HDTs), offering an eight-week course designed to motivate villagers and train them in leadership methods. Its graduates often joined the ICA, forming teams sent with veterans to live in various villages for two years, assisting their residents to organise themselves and develop their communities. The original idea was to raise a "servant force" of youth equipped with methods to play a catalytic role and use locally available resources, rather than relying on overseas funding for infrastructure.

Strengths of the Strategies:

- **Facilitating Infrastructure Development:** The projects contributed to significant infrastructure improvements on the village level. In Chikhale, a railway station was established, linking it to Mumbai. This, along with other improvements, resolved earlier access problems where the road was a "sticky, slippery mess" and the bridge too narrow for trucks. In Jawale, the access road was tarred, village paths were surfaced and drains covered. Piped water became available in both Maliwada and Jawale. The development of pumps and an irrigation system in Jawale, linked to a nearby dam, increased farm productivity.
- **Community Mobilisation and Local Leadership:** The initial phase focused on helping residents organise themselves and develop village leadership. In Maliwada, for example, residents Lakshmi Bai and Pandit Udawant, who had undergone training in the HDTs, were pillars of the project.
- **Bridging the Gap with Government Structures:** A particularly effective strategy was coaching and encouraging villagers to visit government offices and banks to utilise available schemes. Closing the gap between the village and the government left more lasting changes than any direct funds that the ICA had invested. This approach empowered villagers to access resources already available to them.
- **Inspiring Commitment:** The presence and commitment of some volunteers seemed to inspire villagers and others, and this commitment continues to have a role today.
- **Specific, Targeted Projects:** Ongoing work by former ICA staff demonstrates the potential for specific, focused projects. The learning centre for school dropouts provides a "second chance". The Potali Project, based on the Learning Basket program, is a targeted educational outreach aiming to boost infant brain development by training young village women as teachers and engaging parents/grandparents.
- **Increased Awareness and Connectivity:** People in project villages seem more aware of and interact more with the larger metropolitan community, the nation, and the world.
- **Empowering Local Governance:** The political status of women has improved. This is partly due to the government's introduction of the Panchayat Raj policy of reserving seats for women. We saw this in Jawale where a woman served as the village chief. The urban influence, such as taxes from local factories, empowers the

gram panchayat financially, enabling infrastructure maintenance and improvements. Panchayats also seem to have greater access to government development funds, and credit has become more readily available.

Weaknesses of the Strategies:

- **Lack of Long-Term Sustainability of Infrastructure:** Some physical infrastructure built during the project years did not last. The haveli in Maliwada, rebuilt for staff quarters and meetings, returned to a state of rubble and became an open-air toilet. The Human Development Training School building in Maliwada was repurposed as a recycling factory.
- **Unforeseen Consequences of Success:** The very improvements that solved access problems in places like Chikhale (e.g., the railway station) ironically led to the village being "swallowed" by urban growth, becoming a dormitory for a nearby town and losing much of its farmland. This highlights a lack of foresight regarding the impact of urbanisation.
- **Failure to Adapt to Changing Realities:** The initial strategy was based on a rural development model. However, some project villages were in areas prone to urban growth, and the strategy did not help villagers plan their future within this emerging urban reality.
- **Decline in Community Engagement:** Despite increased formal political power at the panchayat level, local involvement in decision-making is less keen than before in Maliwada and Jawale. Village elders attributed this decline to people staying indoors to watch TV facilitated by satellite dishes, increased individualism linked to mobile phones, and growing materialism replacing the spirit of voluntary work sessions (shramadans). This suggests the strategies did not fully inoculate the communities against the social impacts of modernisation and external influences.
- **Environmental Changes:** The increase in non-organic waste like plastic (Styrofoam plates, cartons, plastic bags being recycled) represents a negative environmental change compared to the previous, more organic rubbish.
- **Hygiene Issues:** The lack of easily accessible alternatives led to abandoned project buildings being used for defecation as nearby fields were built over.
- **Limited Direct Impact of Funding:** Direct funds poured into the village by the ICA has been less impactful than its work of coaching villagers to access existing government structures.

Learnings for Future Development Attempts:

- **Crucial Importance of Location Selection and Foresight:** Future projects must consider the potential impact of external factors, such as urban growth, on the chosen location. Selecting sites where urbanisation might obliterate the work or fundamentally change the village's character should be avoided if the goal is traditional rural development.
- **Adaptability and Planning for Changing Realities:** Development strategies need to be adaptable and help communities plan for their future within evolving contexts, such as urbanisation, rather than being anchored to a single model (e.g., purely rural).
- **Focus on Enabling Access to Existing Resources:** A highly effective role for external organisations is to act as a bridge between communities and government/institutional structures. Teaching and supporting villagers to access and

utilise existing government schemes, banks, and resources appears to create more lasting change than providing direct funding.

- **Sustaining Community Engagement:** Efforts are needed to counter the decline in community participation caused by factors like media saturation, individualism, and materialism. Future strategies must find ways to sustain the "spirit" of collective action and involvement in decision-making.
- **Sustainability of Infrastructure:** Plans for physical infrastructure must include provisions for long-term maintenance and adaptability to ensure they do not fall into disrepair or become misused.
- **The Enduring Role of Human Catalyst:** The commitment and presence of dedicated volunteers or staff remain important for inspiring local action and connecting communities to opportunities. The original idea of raising a local "servant force" using locally available resources rather than external funding for infrastructure can potentially have a more lasting effect.
- **Targeted, Specific Initiatives Can Be Effective:** Projects focused on particular needs, like early childhood development (Potali Project) or education for dropouts, can have a tangible positive impact and empower local individuals (e.g., training young women as teachers).