

In search of relevance

My journey towards action and reflection at the grassroots

CHLP Report 2008-09
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Those who made it possible - acknowledgements

Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one. ~Jane Howard

Embarking on the journey to a more socially relevant life is supposed to be challenging, full of risks and likely to bring on opposition from family and disconnect with one's peer group. So far, my journey has been challenging but I haven't encountered any risks. And I have been immensely fortunate in the support, advice and encouragement received from my network of family, friends, mentors and peers.

I would like to thank CHC for conceptualizing and setting up the unique Community Health Learning Program and Sir Ratan Tata Trust for funding it. Every member in the CHC team has taken time out of their busy schedules to advise, encourage and support us. Special thanks are due to Sukanya and Eddie Premdas, who have managed the CHLP and provided valuable mentorship to me. The openness with which staff members, past fellows and associates have shared their positive and negative experiences, their mistakes and corrective measures and their approaches in dealing with their frustrations and disappointments along the way was eye-opening. I have learnt to look for the silver lining in every dark cloud, and for this I thank the CHC family.

My fellow travelers – Varsha, Adithya, Lakshmee, Savitri, Ria, Karibasappa and Jeyapaul - and those with whom I have shared part of the journey – Sabyasachi, Vashti and Sapna – have provided friendship, entertainment and inspiration. Some of their stories have brought me to tears, yet others have made me laugh, wince, reflect and provide feedback. We have had fun on our collective journey and I will always treasure the time we have spent together.

My journey towards an alternate paradigm began with my involvement with the Association for India's Development (AID) in the US. Through this involvement, I have been exposed to movements, campaigns and grassroots organizations throughout India. Fellow volunteers in our local chapter in Minnesota and throughout the world have provided valuable insights that helped build my perspective. In recent months, the friends made through AID have provided hospitality during our travels, served as sounding boards for thrashing out issues and provided guidance and direction where necessary. I am very thankful to be part of the AID family.

All the activists, academicians, journalists etc. that I met through AID have provided valuable mentorship. But I owe a special thanks to Richa Singh, Richa Nagar, Surbala, Reena, Mukesh and all the friends of Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan (SKMS) in Sitapur, UP. The lessons they are teaching me cannot be captured in books or lectures and I look forward to further learning and sharing with them.

Coming from an engineering/technical background, it has been a pleasant surprise to find childhood and college friends exploring alternate paths in life – civil service, wildlife protection

and waste management, to name a few. Even those firmly ensconced in the corporate world and with different political views have helped me develop – if I can convince them of something, I know I have done a good job! I am glad to have them as friends.

And last, but definitely not the least, I owe an immense debt of gratitude to my biological and marital families. The support and encouragement my parents and in-laws have given me is as rare as it is valuable. Growing up with my brother, who is mildly autistic, has helped me appreciate and embrace difference. My life-partner, Dwiji, provides challenge and comfort in equal measure. I am grateful to have found him and treasure his companionship. We have traveled together to all the groups mentioned in this report and our discussions are central to the observations and analyses I have presented here.

With the wealth of human support that I have, I hope to be able to weather the challenges ahead of me and contribute towards building a more equitable, just and healthy world.

Sudha



A brief overview

My education has been in the areas of engineering and biomedicine. What I knew about community work, community health etc. was picked up from a random selection of books, field trips and discussions. My main objective in joining CHLP was to develop some foundation and rigour in these concepts. The orientation session was an invaluable help in that direction. It gave me insight into the community approach, some background into community health in India and across the world and detailed understanding in topics such as health systems, disparities due to caste, class and patriarchy etc.

Following the orientation, my learning objectives were two-fold: to develop my understanding in agriculture (particularly sustainable agriculture), appropriate technology, sanitation etc. and to build a better perspective about my field area in Sitapur dt., UP. My future work would be in collaboration with Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan (SKMS), a grassroots organization working on rights and livelihoods in Sitapur, therefore my field trips and learnings were largely geared towards ideas that could be implemented there. We also visited a number of individuals working in different capacities with communities or on rights-based campaigns to get an insight into their role within these groups, the politics of their engagement as outsiders or members of the community itself and their personal approach and motivation.

I have learnt a lot about myself in these months of discovery. These learnings have been laid out in detail in Chapter 1. My understanding in specific issues are described in Chapters 2-5. Plans for future work are elaborated in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 provides an overview of my field experience. Chapter 8 describes the CHLP orientation and my learnings from it in detail, while Chapter 9 provides an exhaustive list of all the organizations and individuals I have visited during my fellowship. The annexure contains a writeup about the Kunwarapur dairy in Sitapur dt., materials used for workshops and miscellaneous articles written in this period.

Figure 1 is a diagrammatic representation of all the issues that I've discussed, reflected on and read about in the past few months. While I will not be able to do justice to each of these topics in this report, I hope to touch on as many points as possible.

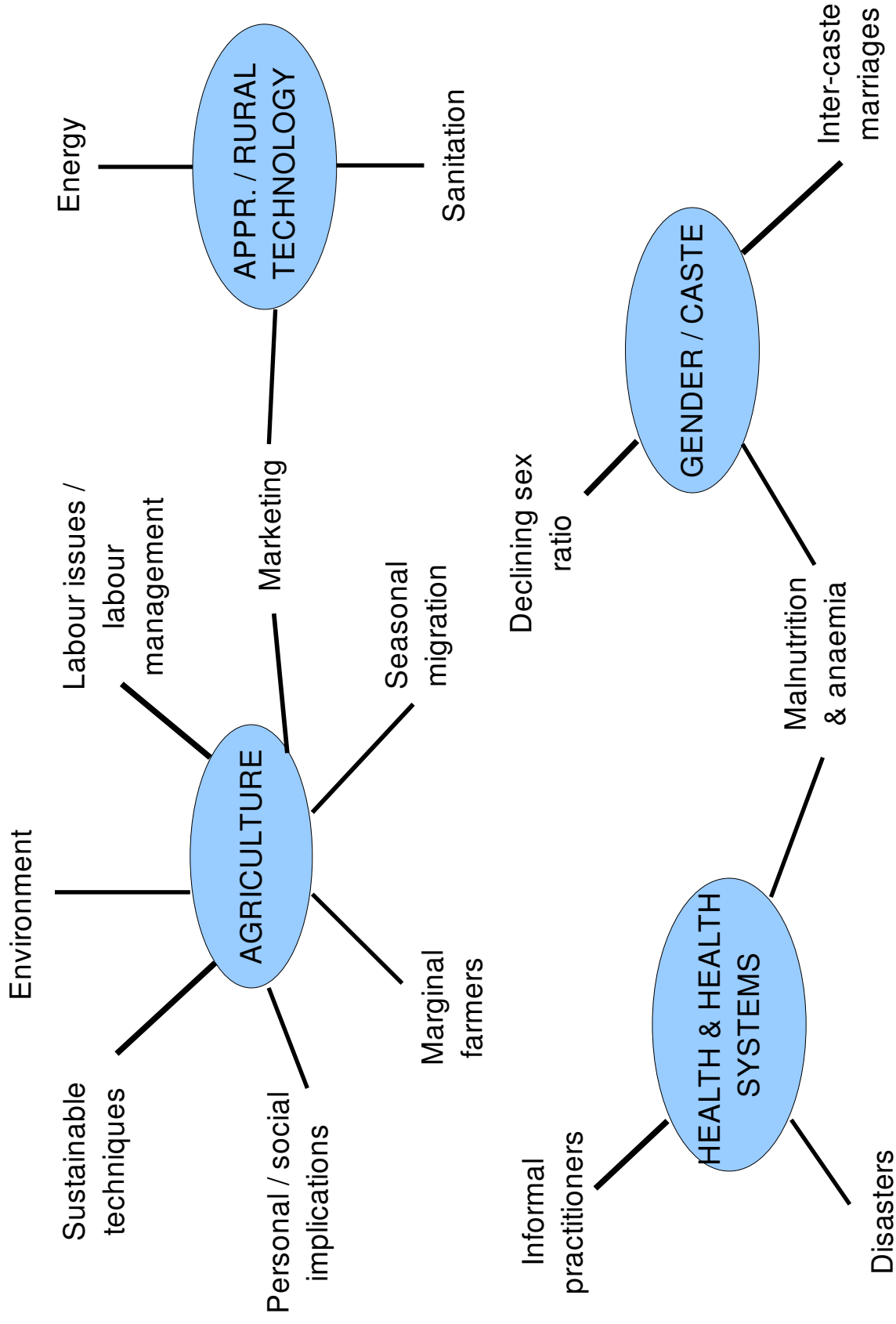


Figure 1: Issues of interest

My personal journey

Fertile ground – where I started...

When my husband, Dwiji, and I returned to India from the US in March 2008, we had reached a critical point in our journey towards a more socially relevant life. Since 2001-02, we had been volunteers of the Association for India's Development (AID), a volunteer-run nonprofit in the US that supports developmental activities in India. Through this organization, my understanding of the issues of displacement, corruption, gender-biased violence and the concerns of marginalized groups in India had crystallized into meaningful engagement and support for grassroots organizations.

Our chapter in Minnesota was committed as much to building perspectives as to supporting projects in India. So we convened discussion groups on the history of communalism (after the 2002 Gujarat riots), globalization etc., organized workshops on gender, peace, theater and more and performed plays on social themes. In later years, we initiated local volunteering efforts individually and as a group. We engaged actively with grassroots organizations and activists in India, learning from them about their work and philosophy and were even exposed to critical analysis of their and their peers' work.

The impact this volunteerism and learning had on my life was immense – I left my job in the corporate sector, realizing that even a company whose mission is to save lives was not improving the lives of the poor. I worked with an environmental advocacy group, Clean Water Action, as a canvasser. This work involved going door-to-door signing on members, collecting donations and educating people about current environmental concerns and legislation. This work helped me develop my communication skills and persuasive abilities. I eventually learnt to be true to myself – to not overstate the criticality of the issue and yet convince people about its importance. Simultaneously, I interned with a State Representative, Karen Clark, during the brief 2006 session of the Minnesota House and Senate. During that experience, I gained a little perspective on the complexities of passing legislation without it getting subverted or distorted.

I have always been keenly interested in agriculture. Almost all of us can trace our families back to the land – in my case, my mother's family is still involved in farming. Further, it is central to human existence. During my stay in the US, I was connected to local food movements and worked part-time on a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farm for two seasons. I read extensively about the global agricultural situation and met activists working on issues as diverse as sustainable techniques, rural credit, farmer suicides and GM seeds.

We planned to return to India after my husband's graduation to work at the grassroots level and finally managed to do that in 2008. Why return? It was an emotional as well as a logical decision. There were enough issues to work on in the US, but we felt a visceral connection to the land where we spent our formative years. Also, we felt that we had more to offer to

communities in India in terms of our understandings and access to resources. Finally, it seemed an easier way of reducing our ecological footprint!

The questions in our mind were the following:

- Could we live together in small-town or rural India?
- Could we contribute meaningfully to grassroots work?
- How would we earn our livelihood?

We first spent some time with Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan (SKMS), a group based in Sitapur, UP, whom I had been associated with since 2005. This group works on mobilizing rural communities to fight for good governance in NREGA, BPL programs and other government projects. They have also been working to develop viable livelihood options. Six weeks with SKMS helped answer some of our questions, but threw up a lot more. What would our role be within the Sangathan? How could our skills be utilized in the best manner? And how could one contribute to improve SKMS's strength in agriculture, livelihood projects, health etc.?

The Community Health Learning Program came along at an opportune time in my exploratory phase. I knew about CHC and had attended PHA-II in Cuenca, Ecuador in 2005. I did not know what the fellowship program would entail, but felt the need for some structure and conceptual understanding. And thus my journey merged with countless others on the path to community health...

Learning objectives

When joining CHLP, I was quite clear that my field organization would be Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan (SKMS), UP. Dwiji and I plan to live in Sitapur for a few years and work with various communities that are part of SKMS. I would like to help build capacities in the areas they are already working in and with some they have expressed interest in. These include a co-operative dairy, appropriate technology for power generation and sanitation, sustainable agriculture techniques and improving livelihood generation activities. With this in mind, my learning objectives were as follows:

- To develop a better understanding of agricultural issues, particularly different approaches towards sustainable farming, and to build enough confidence and knowledge to start an initiative in this area.
- To visit some cooperative dairies and learn about their strategies for increasing members and revenue. Simultaneously, to get a better picture of the problem in Sitapur and brainstorm on some strategies
- To explore various alternative energy options such as gohar gas, pedal power and solar for use in Sitapur

- To develop better perspectives on the issues of sanitation – why it has been so hard to implement in India, what are the different approaches institutions have developed to work on this issue etc.
- To begin discussions on health in Sitapur to gauge the issues on which a campaign could be initiated in the future
- To organize a trip with SKMS members to some people's movements and organizations in Badwani MP and engage in collective learning

Many of the areas in which I plan to improve my knowledge may not be eventually tried out in Sitapur, but I hope to make a good-faith effort in each of them in the coming months and years.

Introspection and self-discovery

Being part of the CHLP challenged me to examine myself thoroughly. While I have been introspective in the past, the orientation brought such musings to a new level of intensity. I had to ask myself what my core motivations were and to assess my strengths and weaknesses. This exercise would help me overcome or compensate for my shortcomings, build on my strength and develop new skills.

The orientation made me realize that my lack of patience could hinder working with the community. A community is made up of disparate individuals, each with their own point of view, each thinking and working at their own pace. To respect their individuality and yet weave them together to achieve their goals is a challenge that requires patience, humility, commitment and humour. Hearing various CHC staff and associates talk about their experiences that spanned decades, the importance of incorporating these attributes within myself was underscored.

Given my socioeconomic and educational background, I will always be privileged compared to the rural poor with whom I want to work. How can I bridge this gap and make it irrelevant? There is still a part of me that hesitates when stepping into the poorest of hovels or when interacting with children in dusty rags. That hesitation can develop into a divide. I hope to overcome it through sustained engagement and by challenging myself to take the extra effort at every step.

While in the field this July-August, I realized the importance of observation and analysis in understanding the basic problem. The case in point was the cooperative dairy and its future plans. Earlier, in April, I had gained a superficial understanding of the problem and the way forward as suggested by the dairy committee. But in the second round of discussions, I realized that I had failed to understand some important aspects of the problem, which radically altered the scenario. In the face of these discoveries, the suggestions Dwiji and I

made were quite different from our earlier suggestions. This incident has further emphasized the importance of sustained discussions and thorough observation of the situation before proposing solutions.

I have also gained confidence to speak up in large gatherings and to facilitate workshops and discussions among my peers. During July-August, I seeded discussions about health in SKMS regional meetings that were attended by 60-100 villagers. In September-October, Dwiji & I facilitated discussions among AID volunteers in chapters across the US. There are a lot of things I still need to learn, but have taken the important step of trying out my ideas and learning from my missteps.

In the journey to community health, one's own community of friends, family and peers should not be forgotten. In the past few months, I have found it easier to communicate ideas and philosophies to those in the mainstream. It is essential to present these views in a non-threatening manner to people who have grown up thinking of development as roads and cities, community work as charity and so on. But, interestingly enough, I have learnt a lot in recent months from people I would have earlier labeled as ignorant about grassroots issues. A doctor spoke to me about his rural service in the 60s with nostalgia, a friend discussed her fledgeling initiatives for waste management in cities and my mother shared her memories of her father and his work to conscientize privileged families in his village. Communication with my peers who are beginning their work with grassroots organizations has improved – we are having more in-depth discussions about the politics of community work, our role etc. Finally, I have met a number of people who are beginning their explorations. I have been trying to provide guidance, support and friendship to these travelers on their journey.

The cycle of reflection and action that has been emphasized at CHC has struck a chord with me. A number of people involved in campaigns, activism and with community groups do not take the time to reflect on their actions and are caught up in day-to-day demands of their work. I hope to avoid this in my future work. In that, I have found support and guidance not only at CHC, but among my Saathis at SKMS. For that, I am thankful!

A balloonist's view of agriculture

Since 2004, I have been building my understanding and perspective on agricultural issues in India and throughout the world. In the last few months, I have met a number of groups and individuals working on this issue and have had extensive discussions with them. Following is a brief description of each of these visits:

I. LEISA project – connecting the dots

In December 2005, Dwiji and I had visited Motaganahalli, a village in Bangalore rural dt., where Prasanna Saligram and others were working through AID India with locals on a LEISA (Low External Inputs Sustainable Agriculture) intervention. Back then, their focus was more technical – they were looking at how much biomass was required, what crops to grow together etc. Now, with the implementation of NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) in all districts of the country, the social aspect of this program has increased to getting Panchayats involved and using NREGA funds to pay for some of the off-farm activities such as composting and preparing biosolutions. A new field area: Dhanametapalli in Kolar dt. has been added.

The basic model is as follows: a group of 4-6 landless women are selected to work on leased land to improve its fertility and organic content. In the process, they receive a share of the produce and valuable training that can allow them to become resource-persons or workers on organic farms. The philosophy of work is inspired by Mr. Dabholkar's ideas and practitioners like Mr. Renke. The current conceptualization with the social components was done by Mr. Datye, an eco-construction, agriculture and energy expert who passed away recently.

The challenges in this work are immense, the extremely low levels of the water table, shortage of biomass and good quality seeds, dependence on the goodwill of the leasing farmer and now cooperation of the Panchayat and so on. But there has been progress – local leaders have been created at the village level and the project has continued due to their commitment. The women of Dhanametapalli, in particular, were enthusiastic and enterprising. At one point when work was delayed due to non-availability of seeds, they took the initiative to find out who farmed organically in the area. They visited these farms, learnt some farming approaches and procured seeds themselves! Because of the proximity to Bangalore, selling their produce has been relatively easy as well.

In conclusion, this initiative is worth supporting and learning from. It has pitfalls and inconsistencies, but it has also provided valuable capacity-building. Also, from the beginning, importance has been given to replicability and the larger picture, something that is lacking in many agricultural interventions.

II. Revathi and TOFARM - where there is no alternative

I first met Revathi in early 2005 in Tamilnadu, while helping her draft a proposal for rejuvenating agricultural land damaged by the tsunami. At that time, agricultural university professors were saying that it would take 3-7 years for the land to return to full productivity. Revathi, along with Nammalvar and other people involved in organic farming, wanted to prove them wrong and they did.

Since then, Revathi has continued to work on training farmers and trainers and on setting up a model farm near Thiruvarur. More recently, her group has worked with Oxfam in Ampara province in Sri Lanka. The entire province has turned organic, in large part due to the difficulties of supplying fertilizers, pesticides and seeds in this conflict-torn region. A huge challenge from an organic farming standpoint was the lack of domestic animals, again due to conflict. But by using techniques such as green manuring with 15-20 seed varieties, they have been able to make the land productive again.

The model farm that Revathi is setting up near Thiruvarur is only a year old, therefore it was



an excellent point in time to observe her planning. The land she and her husband purchased is low-lying and often gets waterlogged, so it was sold at a low rate. Revathi and her team are trying out many innovative techniques to compensate for this. A number of ponds have been dug and the mud from them has been used to elevate certain fields. In another place, a zigzag system of trenches has been created with the dug-out soil elevating the space in between them and creepers planted to reduce evaporation in summer. Fish have been introduced into the trenches and ponds – their sale provides

income as well.

Revathi's mentor is Nammalvar, one of the pioneers in the Tamilnadu organic movement. He once very beautifully explained to us how it is essential to tailor farming practices to the local conditions. Seeing Revathi's work underscores those principles and provides inspiration for coming up with such approaches wherever we are.

III. Farming in Auroville

Around the time we were to visit Auroville, we found that some friends from ReStore, a Chennai collective that fosters consumer-producer links, were attending a 10-day workshop at Solitude Farm. We decided to attend part of the workshop while visiting other groups at Auroville. The parts we attended included discussions on Fukuoka's methods, digging a soak pit with banana saplings and other seeds and processing of traditional grains. I also briefly

participated in making seeds pellets – encasing them in clay to prevent being eaten by birds and insects when broadcasting (no-tilling sowing).

Solitude farm fits seamlessly into the Auroville ethos of living in harmony with the earth. Also, since Auroville markets and consumes a huge amount of organic produce, the market does not seem to be a problem. The farm, like everything in Auroville, seems quite disconnected from the surrounding population. The cook, who comes in from a nearby village, told us: 'What is the point of going through all this trouble to pound, clean and then cook these grains?' Perhaps, because the farming and food practices are so rooted in spirituality, the residents of Solitude Farm and Auroville are willing to work harder, and pay more, for this lifestyle.

IV. BAIF Karnataka – tree-based dryland cultivation

BAIF is one of the oldest NGOs in the country, set up during Gandhiji's lifetime by Manibhai Desai. It works in many states across the country. BAIF Karnataka works on a number of issues, but we were primarily interested in the agricultural aspects of their work. They have been promoting tree-based farming as the best solution for dryland areas. We saw two types of interventions. One was with individual farmers, where, over a 3 year period, BAIF staff trained the farmer and helped him with organic practices such as trenches filled with organic matter, biosolutions etc. A lot of their work has been with mulberry growing in this silk-producing area. Through use of biomass, they have cut down on water consumption significantly.

Another effort has been to rejuvenate huge tracts of land, such as a 100 acre barren area that was distributed among landless families. BAIF provided training, support and funding for 3 years, at the end of which the land is productive and covered with trees. This is quite an achievement, given that many such projects are not successfully implemented. The BAIF staff told us that they paid people to water saplings in the summer and extensively monitored to ensure that they were doing so. In the words of their director, 'such work requires commitment over long periods of time'.

The work that BAIF does requires a lot of funding. They have even signed MoUs with the government in order to implement some of this work, and advocate similar styles of functioning for other NGOs. They do not have faith in local government functioning in an honest manner without inspection by NGOs, but NGOs can be as susceptible to corruption as a local official, in my opinion.

V. Bhaskar Save – the voice of natural farming

In 2007, Bhaskar Save, a farmer who has grown using natural methods for decades, wrote an open letter to M.S.



Swaminathan about the agricultural crisis in the nation. That letter was an inspiration and we were keen on meeting Bhaskarbhai. We met him a couple of days after Diwali at his farm near Umargaon. A number of pilgrims seem to have found their way here and he has now developed a 2 hour session for visitors! He talked about realizing that he was losing money rather than making a profit through chemical farming by spending so much on seeds, fertilizers etc. The understanding that he needed to bring down costs led him to Fukuoka and natural farming. Since then, he has not looked back. His son, Nareshbhai, is also farming organically – the premium these products fetch in the market is also attractive.

Sadly, the area around Umargaon is rapidly getting industrialized. Land prices are shooting up so has pollution. It will be sad if the land that was nurtured carefully for all these decades will be impacted by these new developments.

VI. Becoming the change – individual experiments in farming

A significant path for people aiming to lead more meaningful lives has been agriculture. I have heard of and met people both in India and the US who have given up professional careers, bought land and begun growing their own food. It is an option we have considered too. In early November, we met Smitaben and Dhirendrabhai, a couple who were professors in Baroda. Through a process of reading, discussions and reflection, they decided to live a more sustainable life and moved to Sakvi, a village near Rajpipla. They learnt traditional farming methods from their Adivasi neighbours, who have now ironically moved to chemical farming.

The couple educated their children at home, allowing them to learn what they were interested in. They grow all they need on one acre of their land. The other acre is devoted to trees and is almost like a forest. They provide mentorship and guidance to others interested in taking up farming. If there is regret, it is that they have not been able to do more work with the villagers. But they feel that such efforts would lead them to neglect the land for which they came here in the first place. It was really nice meeting them and their older son. However, I think I would need a lot more patience and humility than I have to live life as simply and steadily as they have!

VII. The farmer-labourer connection

In more than one place, we have heard farmers talking about how hard it is to find farm labourers. 'People don't want to work hard', 'Men are addicted to drink' etc. are some of the comments I have heard. On the other hand, we know that many in rural areas are poor and underemployed. So why does this situation persist? Visiting Subhash Sharma's farm near Yavatmal might provide some of the answers.



The first thing he has done, which is simple yet

profound, is provide employment for his labourers all year round. Conventionally, agricultural work has been seasonal, with a lot of demand during the sowing and harvesting times, but little in between. Subhashji has planned his farm so that there is something or the other to do throughout the year. He provides food and accomodation to his employees and even takes them on yearly vacations! These systems have allowed him to not only farm successfully on his own land, but also lease others' and make them productive and profitable.

Subhashji mainly grows greens, vegetables and pulses. He sells almost all his produce in Yavatmal, with only a few items sold to dealers in Nagpur. He firmly believes in selling in the open market as close to the farm as possible. I agree with him on this – food that is labeled organic and sold in the export market defeats the goal of sustainability. Subhashji has been able to make good profits by timing the arrival of his produce in the market - for example, the first methi in the market always fetches a good price, so he plants an early crop even though the yield is low. By incorporating natural farming techniques, Subhashji has been able to reduce his costs and his water usage. The tree cover on his land provides a haven for birds, which naturally control pests. He leaves some land fallow every year to let it 'rest'.

After touring Subhashji's farm, I was stuck with the uncomfortable thought that this kind of planning and practices would be possible only on a large landholding. One would need atleast a few acres to allow some of it to remain fallow, to plant trees etc. Would the labourers on this farm follow these practices if they owned the land? I talked to some of them who have land back in their native village – one said that his son, who farms the family land, grows cotton using chemical methods. I was left wondering how to incorporate some of Subhashji's approaches in a collective of marginal farmers.

VIII. 10-gunta farming, rooftop gardening – a model for Indian farmers and cities?

I have recently read 'Plenty for all', a book on how everyone can enjoy a good quality of life with just half an acre of land. The author, Dabholkar's describes Prayog Parivar, a network of people who learn from and teach each other and collaboratively build on existing knowledge. Dabholkar passed away recently, but many people inspired by him continue to work on and refine the techniques he propounded. Even the aforementioned LEISA project draws on some



of these techniques, though one problem that the group faced was the huge biomass requirements in the first year or two.

Anyway, we heard of a rooftop garden experiment by the manager of a Bombay Port Trust canteen, Preeti Patil. The approach taken by her is inspired by the Prayog Parivar. She has been able to convert all the organic waste produced by her canteen into compost and her team grows a number of vegetables using them. While nowhere near producing the

vegetables needed daily in the canteen, this effort effectively manages waste and is a green oasis in the dreary Port area.

We also visited Deepak Suchade in Bajwada, MP. Deepakji is Dabholkar's protege – he is documenting many of these approaches and providing training and workshops. His farm is on the banks of the Narmada and is a beautiful place. Over the past two years, he has transformed his land and laid out a model of a 10-gunta (quarter acre) farm that will provide for all the food a family needs. Another model that is called the Gangamaa mandala uses all the household wastewater and provides enough fruits and vegetables for a family.

While these techniques are worth learning, the earlier mentioned drawback of huge amounts of required biomass still exists. Further, the principles that Dabholkarji laid out and which Deepakji advocates seem a bit unrealistic. For example, they say that the Gangamaa mandala would yield atleast 2 kg of vegetables every day. One kg. can be used for domestic purposes and another kg. can be sold. In my opinion, selling 1 kg. of vegetables every day does not make business sense unless one belongs to a cooperative that sells produce from a large number of people collectively. To set up such a cooperative is not a trivial task and many such efforts have failed in the past, but the Dabholkar school of thought does not seem to give much importance to this problem. From a personal nutrition point of view, this approach is very useful, but I am not convinced that this can provide a livelihood for a marginal farmer, let alone a middle class lifestyle. But, all said and done, these techniques and approaches provide valuable insight and inspiration for anyone interested in organic/natural farming.

All these visits, combined with my learnings in the past have now given me the confidence to begin some work on agriculture in Sitapur dt. The farmer-members of SKMS hold small tracts of land, many under an acre. Some have access to irrigation and therefore grow 3 crops a year. The rabi crop is usually wheat, followed by lentils, corn or vegetables (if there is water available). In the monsoon, some grow paddy, others groundnuts etc. A lot of sugarcane is grown, though receiving prompt payment from the sugar mill has been a challenge in the past. Monocropping is prevalent and soil erosion is extensive. On the nutrition front, there are high levels of malnutrition and anaemia.

During January-March 2009, we made some preliminary visits to get a better understanding of the circumstances of the Sangathan farmers. One active Sangathan Saathi had started composting and vermicomposting on his land just this year and we had a few discussions with him. He had received training and a subsidy through the Krishi Vigyan Kendra for this initiative. We visited older farmers in the area to find out what was being grown in the past in this region. Also, we have been keeping informed about the agricultural work that is being taken up through NREGA. External support is essential for marginal farmers to change to more sustainable practices and getting some work done through NREGA seems only logical. So far, in Sitapur, NREGA has been used to level fields belonging to Dalit farmers (necessary to improve water retention and yields) and for tree plantation. In one meeting, we discussed

how tree plantation is often done – haphazardly and without any follow-up watering to ensure that trees survive.

An initiative that we are exploring is to work in one Gram Sabha to improve the quality of the work that is being done under NREGA and push for further involvement in land-related activities along the lines of what is being tried out in the LEISA project in Karnataka. Another possibility is to work with the Sangathan to get more people growing vegetables and planting fruit trees for domestic consumption. We will explore these and other ideas that come up in the following months and years.

Our health in our hands – learning about community health in Sitapur dt.

The orientation at CHC had given us a thorough introduction to community health. I realized that health was not just doctors and medicines, but all the factors that can impact health positively or negatively.

But health systems are important, as I realized in Sitapur during my first long visit in April 2008. A young villager had had an accident that damaged his spine. It was possible that he would not walk again. Since he was working for a prominent landowner at the time, SKMS tried their best to get the young man some support. The plan was to send him to Lucknow, which is the closest place where facilities for rehabilitation are available. A private vehicle would be needed to transport him, plus some living expenses, and the man's family were extremely poor. But the SKMS team were unsuccessful and the man was taken back home.

I. Initial forays and dealing with a disaster

When we returned in July-August, I planned to discuss what I had learnt at CHC with a few core members and brainstorm on some activities that could be taken up. However Mukesh, who serves in an advisory role with SKMS, suggested that I speak about health at the regional meetings using one or two talking points, thus starting the thought process in a wider circle on this important topic. Other SKMS members concurred, so I raised the issue at the Aug 10th and 11th meetings in Aant and Qutubnagar respectively. We discussed why it is easier, or rather more natural, to work on livelihoods, BPL etc. than on health – we only think about the health system when we are sick, knowledge and power are concentrated in the hands of medical professionals etc.

I asked the assembled people, about 100-150 in each meeting, to think about health-related issues and come up with one or two that they would want to work on. While everyone was mulling over this, Reena and Surbala who are founding SKMS members, raised the issue of malaria. At this, a lot of people began speaking up about their own and their village's situation. From there, matters progressed very quickly, and before I knew it, plans were being made to prepare lists of people affected by malaria and to demand action at the block level.

I was not sure what to do with the information being collected, so contacted CHC. Sukanya advised me to talk to the doctors in the area, both government and private, nurses and lab technicians to get a sense of the impact of malaria in the region. She also suggested that I do a survey in a few villages to get some preliminary data. Swami promised to send me Hindi pamphlets on malaria that cover prevention, diagnosis and treatment.

Armed with their advice, I went to meet Richa Singh, the SKMS representative in Sitapur. She was quite concerned about the various illnesses prevalent in SKMS villages this monsoon – the rains had been particularly severe this year. She felt that camps should be organized in a few central villages so that all the sick could easily access health services. We decided that I

would meet the chief doctor in Mishrikh where a CHC (Community Health Centre) is based.

A brief description of the area: Mishrikh block is served by the Mishrikh CHC and 2 PHCs (one of which is in Naimisharanya, a pilgrimage site). The SKMS villages are all served by the Mishrikh CHC, with some villages as far as 20 km away. The average cost of travel one-way to Mishrikh is Rs. 10. If the patient needs to be escorted, travel costs for the day could be as high as Rs. 60. Further, patients need to reach the CHC before noon to get a 'parcha' or token that would allow them to see the doctor, get medicines etc. Transportation in the form of tempos is not very reliable and if one is late, the entire day is wasted. In contrast, Qutubnagar, one of the big villages, is more accessible for the people in that area and has one MBBS doctor who charges ~Rs. 40 per diagnosis and a couple of 'jhola chhaap' doctors who charge even less. There is an ANM that serves the villages around Qutubnagar, but I could not contact her the 2 days I tried. It did not help that the rains and resulting emergencies occupied everyone's time.

I visited the Mishrikh CHC on August 19th. The chief doctor was not available – he was on leave till the 28th, the day after we were scheduled to leave Sitapur. On further enquiry, I found the junior-most doctor on service. He was swamped with patients. I managed to speak briefly to him and asked him what planning the Health department did for diarrhoea, malaria and other diseases in the monsoon. He looked at me like I was delirious – 'We are here treating patients – that's what we do!' I then asked what would warrant a personal visit by a team of doctors to a village. 'A serious outbreak of diarrhea or something equally contagious and life-threatening' was his reply before he was engulfed by patients again. I talked to the staff nurse as well, but she did not have much to share.

Given the lack of progress at Mishrikh, I went to the District Hospital in Sitapur the next day hoping to get more answers. Here, I was luckier – the additional CMO (Chief Medical Officer) and the Deputy CMO were both in the office and the latter was in a chatty mood. He talked about the staffing problems in the district – there was a shortage of at least 30 doctors. Currently, even C-sections had to be performed in the District Hospital as there was no anesthesiologist at the CHC. They were under-equipped for normal times, let alone catastrophic situations. He then went off on a slight rant about how ignorant and lazy villagers were and how hard it was to treat them.

When pushed on health camps, the Deputy CMO said that a team would visit a village only in exceptional circumstances. Usually, there was a good reporting structure in place and news of outbreaks almost always reached them. In fact, in some situations, they had gone to villages and found that the situation there was not as dire as expected. Such visits were detrimental since the team could have spent their time better in the hospital treating the patients who arrived there.

After this discussion, I came to the conclusion that it would be very hard to get a medical team to visit any of the SKMS villages. Nevertheless, I communicated this information to the SKMS team and they tried to get a team to visit Kunwarapur. The entire Dalit 'basti' in Kunwarapur

was inundated with both lake and canal water, the latter escaping through a breach. Many houses had collapsed and people had come onto the village road with their cattle. Drinking water was very likely contaminated – the handpumps in the area access water that is about 20 ft. deep. The deputy CMO told me that boiling or chlorination of water was essential in these circumstances. Boiling was almost impossible, so I decided to strongly advocate chlorination.



Two days later, we went to visit the dairy group at Kunwarapur. No medical team had come to the villages. But we learnt that, in a nearby village, 7 children had died from diarrhoeal-related causes the previous day. So much for a good reporting structure... But, to be fair, the situation was quite dire throughout Sitapur. The district is very close to the Nepal border and is crisscrossed by rivers, all of which were in spate. In some blocks such as Rewsa, the villages were completely inundated and villagers were camped on the highways. Almost

100 people had died in Sitapur city itself, bracing against a swelling Sarayan.

During this little exercise I undertook, I met 2 doctors in Qutubnagar, one MBBS and the other more 'jhola chhaap'. I asked them about the incidence of malaria, government services, lab testing etc. Both said that they were swamped with patients and that, when they suspected malaria, they rarely advised their patients to get tested. 'They are poor and cannot afford it', was the consensus. Another statement that came out was the inconsistencies between the government and private lab in Mishrikh – apparently, the government lab records an abnormally high number of negative results. 'Every sample that I then sent to the private lab came back positive' was what they said. Whether this reflects underreporting by the government lab or overreporting by the private is to be studied. In the district hospital, I had seen some data on monthly malarial cases detected. The numbers varied from ~800 in summer to ~3000 in monsoon. How that connects to the actual cases in the district is hard to tell, given the low levels of testing.

II. Becoming a jhola-chhaap doctor

The ease at which one can become a medical authority here was brought home to me during the regional meetings. Most people said they did not go to the CHC for 'jaada bukhaar' (cold and fever, the colloquial term for malaria), so I asked them what they did instead. One or two replied that they go to a 'doctor' in Qutubnagar who injects them with some medicine that makes them better.

Many situations have come up in Sitapur where people have taken decisions or acted in ways that I am sure are wrong for them. But I have often kept quiet due to the lack of alternative

options for them and because I did not want to get into an indefinite 'lecturing' mode. Even with friends and family in one's socioeconomic strata, we choose to keep quiet during difficult discussions to keep the peace. But here, I decided to speak up and told the group that that was not the right way to treat malaria.

'Then what is the right way, didi?' asked someone. I mentioned chloroquine, the most commonly used drug for treatment or prevention of malaria. The group talked among themselves and more people joined the conversation. A little while later, another SKMS member came up to me and confirmed the name of the drug. By that evening, a number of people had bought chloroquine tablets to stock at home and had told their fellow villagers to come to them if they had 'jaada bukhaar'!

This worried me – did I do the right thing? But talking to Sukanya helped – as she put it, 'You gave them the right information,' she added. 'The need for good health services in these communities is so acute that any good information they get can only be beneficial. So don't hesitate to share complete and accurate information – we all have a role to play.'

III. An outbreak and an intervention (or lack thereof)

On March 6th, 2009, when we heard that a young boy, Sanjeet, from Allipur village had died suddenly while giving his 10th examinations, we weren't shocked. Perhaps he had consumed something, perhaps he had built up too much stress... His younger brother, who was also appearing for his 10th exams, returned home from his examination centre. He fell sick too, but it was assumed that he was just suffering from the loss.

On the morning of March 9th, we heard that the sick brother, Manjeet, had died the previous night. More people in the village were sick and were undergoing treatment with a private doctor in Pisawa, the block headquarters. Richa and others immediately contacted the CMO and demanded that a medical team be sent to Allipur. Dwiji and I decided to go and make sense of the situation for ourselves. Before that, I called up Sukanya to get some ideas on how to proceed in a possible epidemiological investigation.

When we reached Allipur, we found a medical team already there – we later found out that it was just from the CHC in Pisawa. The team collected blood samples in the form of slides and distributed medicines to family members. When asked what they suspected, they replied that it could be dengue fever. The ANM was also in attendance – she told me later that she only visits Allipur once a month, given that she has 12 other villages on her roster as well as polio work.

Manjeet's corpse was still in the village and people took me to see it. There were black marks on the face and chest – it seems they developed in the 24 hours before his death. The mother of the two boys was there and in a state of uncontrollable grief. A pall seemed to have descended over the entire village.

We found out that the cousin of the boys, Suraj, had also gone with them to Majhiya, a village

in neighbouring Hardoi dt., to give his exams. Dwiji began talking to him to get more details of the boys' deaths. We also talked to other family members and villagers to piece the story together. Apparently 7 boys who were studying in a private high school in a nearby village had rented a room together in Majhiya for the duration of their exams. They had reached there on March 1st or 2nd and had given one exam. On the evening of March 5th, while studying for an exam the next day, Sanjeet began complaining of a headache and pain. Soon after, he threw up and was in a lot of distress. The other boys decided to take him back to Allipur, about 20 km away, and got a jeep to transport him. Halfway to Allipur, he passed away. They still took him to the Pisawa CHC, where he was pronounced dead on arrival.

Manjeet and Suraj returned to Allipur that night. Manjeet seemed fine, but fell sick with a slight fever and pain a few days later. On the night of the 8th, he was in bad shape, with poor consciousness, convulsions, vomiting etc. His family rushed to the Pisawa CHC with him and went to rouse the doctor there, Dr. P. K. Singh. But it seems the doctor refused to open his door, even after the group nearly broke it down. The villagers then went to the police station to file a complaint, after which the Inspector contacted the doctor, who finally came out and examined the patient. The doctor said that the case was beyond his ability to handle. He claims that he asked the family to take Manjeet to Sitapur, 40 km away. The villagers say that he told them to go to the Maholi CHC, 12 km away. There is no ambulance available at Pisawa, so the family had to transport Manjeet on their own.

Manjeet was taken to Maholi where, instead of the CHC, he was taken to a private clinic. The doctors there told the family that he was in critical condition and needed to be taken to Sitapur. On the road to Sitapur, Manjeet passed away.

What about the other 5 boys? Suraj, the cousin, seemed fine, but his father was being taken to Sitapur – he was semi-conscious, possibly due to shock, but nevertheless... We suggested that they take Suraj along to be examined and thankfully, they had thought of the same thing. Another boy in the village had dropped off some food for the boys in Majhiya. He had been complaining of neck pain and had been taken to a private doctor the previous night. The treatment consisted of some injections and a saline drip and had cost Rs. 1200! The father of the boy said that this doctor had saved his child's life and urged us not to investigate him. We asked him to be alert to his son's condition and to immediately take him to Pisawa or even Sitapur if he developed a fever, had vomiting or convulsions etc.

Another boy out of the 7 lived in Allipur – Dwiji went to meet with him while I provided updates on the situation by phone. By then word was out that a boy from a nearby village Basi, who was among the group of 7 and had been hospitalized in Maholi, had died. Apparently, he was being taken to Lucknow but died on the way. His brother had also been among the group giving their exams.

We decided to visit the last boy among the group, who lived in a nearby village, and to also meet the doctor of the private clinic in Maholi where the boy from Basi had been admitted. Finding this boy, Anoop, turned into a slightly amusing situation. We asked around in his

village and one boy told us that Anoop's house was on the main road a km away. We reached that house only to find out that the boy who directed us was himself Anoop! Apparently, he had become scared with our enquiries. His mother was not willing to talk to us at all – she seemed more angry than afraid. I didn't quite understand what she had to say – between referring to how boys were not giving exams that they had paid for because of this fright to referring to Dwiji as a 'messenger of death', she worked herself to quite a state! After a little while, we were able to talk to Anoop's father and tried to convey what we had learnt in as reassuring a manner as possible. He assured us that he would take his son to Pisawa for treatment if necessary.

In Maholi, we were in for a surprise. The doctor there, a Dr. Gupta, told us that Saurabh, the boy from Basi, was still in his hospital. He had advised the family to take him to Lucknow, 110 km away, but that was a big step, financially and otherwise, for them. He had sent blood samples to Lucknow for testing and would get results by the next day – he suspected something viral.

We went to meet Saurabh and his family – his mother and brother Deshdeepak were with him. Saurabh was in bad shape – he had to be escorted to the bathroom and back and was not fully conscious. There were black spots all over his body which had apparently developed in the last 24 hours. Then followed the most difficult part of the day for me as Desdeepak and his mother asked us what they should do. We knew that this disease was dangerous, but could they afford to take Saurabh to Lucknow? I talked to Richa and found that the district administration would send an ambulance to bring Saurabh to the District Hospital, but would that be enough? We tried to lay out the options before the two. Since Dr. Gupta had already advised them to take him to Lucknow, we didn't have to override his orders, at least. While talking to Deshdeepak and his cousin, Dwiji found out that the former's father had gone to mortgage some of his small landholding in order to raise the money for the expenses so far.

Incidentally, a recent UP Planning Commission Report has revealed that 34% of Below Poverty Line (BPL) families, such as this one, have had to sell their assets or take on crippling debts for medical expenses. Also, Lucknow Medical College is supposed to provide free treatment for BPL patients, but rarely does. In such a scenario, a family's choice of medical treatment is far from trivial. An operation can save a life, but bankrupt a family.

We tried to be honest, yet reassuring, with Saurabh's family. Deshdeepak, when seeing us off, broke down talking about how he had to pick up the corpses of two of his friends and didn't want to have to do the same with his brother. What could we say to him beyond the platitudes?

The next few days passed by with Saurabh admitted to Lucknow Medical College and the district administration agreeing to bear the costs for his treatment. The diagnosis of the disease also came out – it was meningococcal meningitis, a particularly dangerous form of meningitis that is bacterial and droplet-transmitted. Family and neighbours from Allipur were admitted to the district hospital and some were treated as a preventive measure. Two children

had died in Majhiya and the Hardoi CMO was apparently monitoring that situation.

Talking to the CMO, additional CMO and deputy CMO (who is also the District Surveillance Officer) was an interesting and frustrating exercise. Our small efforts in tracking down all the boys who had stayed with Sanjeet and Manjeet and interviewing them was more than the CMO or his deputies had done. The CMO claimed to be paying for Saurabh's medical expenses in Lucknow due to 'humanitarian reasons', but these are costs the administration should cover and apparently a budget had been submitted to the District Magistrate for them. The Health Officers had prepared a convincing report for the state Disease Surveillance Unit. They conveniently attributed the delay in intervention to villagers seeking private instead of government treatment for their children.

There were no more cases in the following days, thankfully. But I could easily imagine how different the story would have been with a more dangerous disease. Just a few years ago, in 2005, Japanese encephalitis had claimed more than 300 lives in UP. The list of dangerous diseases affecting communities only seems to be growing...

IV. Future steps

Following the outbreak in Allipur, we organized a meeting there to share our findings and discuss them and other health-related issues. An important point that we wanted to stress on was the impact of mobilization on the district health services. The persistence of the villagers in Allipur and that of other Saathis in Sitapur resulted in a medical team sent to the village, a number of people admitted to the district hospital and support for the boy admitted to Lucknow General Hospital. This would not have been possible in a less vocal community.

But where do we go from here? The meeting brought out the glaring faults in the Pisawa CHC and the government health services available in the block. Children were not being immunized. There was only one doctor in the CHC and he spent very little time treating patients. Medicines were in short supply and there was no refrigerator in the hospital or ambulance to transport patients to Sitapur. In effect, very little was available at the CHC and the population of Pisawa was almost fully dependent on expensive private doctors with varying levels of competence.

There was a strong desire among the people gathered in the meeting to take up the issue of improving the Pisawa CHC. I mentioned that there were risks in such a campaign – they could lose the few facilities that they had if no health professionals were willing to come to Pisawa in the future. Already Pisawa suffers from neglect by the district administration – it does not have its own BDO and is served by the BDO of neighbouring Maholi who comes once a week. To which some people responded 'So be it'. The CHC would be shut down and there would not be the pretense of a functioning hospital! As it is, they did not depend on it now – if a campaign could improve the facilities to some extent, it would be worth it.

We also discussed what communities themselves could be doing to improve their health, specifically nutrition. What foods promote good health? Where could food for domestic

consumption be grown? And what foodgrains, vegetables etc. were grown in these parts earlier? There was talk about how elders were much tougher because they ate more oats etc., processed their food at home and grew things that required less water.

As this writeup indicates, there is scope to work on health issues in Allipur and neighbouring villages in the coming months and years. I would like to work with the Sangathan to develop a campaign to improve government health facilities in Pisawa. Further, like in many parts of India, anaemia and malnutrition levels are high here. Whether through discussions, setting up kitchen gardens or other means, I would like to support the Sangathan in their efforts to improve these indicators of their overall health.

The nitty-gritty and politics of technology

During our travels in November, Dwiji and I spent a few days in Rajpipla, Gujarat and visited the nearby Sardar Sarovar dam. Looking at the huge structure that has devastated so many lives, I was struck once again by the thought that our urban, high consumption lifestyles have made more such mega-projects inevitable. Appropriate technological solutions for power, water management etc. are not just beneficial for underserved communities, they should be promoted as a solution for all communities – urban or rural, rich or poor.

Following is a brief description of some innovations we learnt about, classified according to topic:

I. Biogas, gobar gas etc.

Renewable energy is a major area of focus worldwide and many of the centres we visited had various models of using biomass (leaves, twigs etc.) or cowdung to generate gas that is used for cooking or to generate power. Gobar gas units are quite prevalent in villages and families that install these units receive a subsidy from the government. However, we have seen that most stop working after a year or two due to poor maintenance or some breakdown. Due to low availability of service and repair, they are often abandoned. Apparently, some groups have combined installation with training of a local mechanic – that seems a model worth exploring.



At Centre for Science in Villages near Wardha, we saw a gobar gas plant that generated enough gas to power a bank of lights using an old Fiat engine coupled to an alternator. As was explained to us, the old motor was used because it is easily available, cheap and can be repaired by a small-town mechanic! The amount of cowdung required was a small fraction of what is usually available in a village with cattle. As with any gobar gas installation, the cowdung slurry can be used in a vermicompost bed or directly on farmland.

II. Solar power

Solar photovoltaic panels as well as concentrators are being used in a number of places to cut

down on electricity or fuel consumption. Solar panels are now part of the mainstream and used widely for water heaters, to charge lanterns etc. However, they are expensive and their repair and service seems to be a challenge, especially in rural areas. Solar concentrators are convex mirrors that concentrate solar energy to produce steam or to heat food directly. They are widely being used in solar cookers. We saw various forms of solar cookers, huge such as the one in Auroville, as well as small portable ones. In the portable models, there are newer versions that have tracking technology – they tilt the mirror according to the time of day to maximize solar input. This process is a little more vulnerable to breakdown. Overall, those who have been using simple models (and who have the space to set it up) seem happy with their performance.

One must not forget, however, that all forms of energy on this planet are a direct or indirect result of solar energy!

III. Pedal power

I had heard of pedal power in the past due to some projects in the Narmada valley that were funded by AID. During our visit to Centre for Sustainable Technologies in Auroville, we found an engineer designing a setup that uses pedal power to charge a battery and power a refrigerator. During discussions with him, we realized that we could use pedal power to directly compress a refrigerant, a more efficient process. Such a setup could be used to make ice, which is a requirement for the SKMS dairy. We had planned to work on a prototype in Sitapur in July-August, but were hampered by rains and logistical problems. It is on our list of activities for the future.

IV. Construction technology

Across India and throughout the world, today's landscape is cluttered with houses that are badly designed, energy-inefficient and inappropriate for their environment. On the other hand, there are a number of individuals and groups working on building structures that use local materials and are naturally designed to be cool during summer and/or warm during winter. I have seen or stayed in such buildings in the past at Timbuktu collective, Navadarshanam etc. During this trip, we learnt about alternative building techniques at IISc, Auroville, CSV (near Wardha) and THI (Tribal Health Initiative), Sittilingi. We witnessed some simple innovations in a number of private homes that increase light, conserve water and power and reduce the use of harmful materials such as paint. While I have no immediate plans to use any of these approaches, I hope to share these ideas with as many people as possible and eventually implement them in my own surroundings.

V. Waste management

Solid- and liquid-waste management is missing in most parts of India. Getting rid of garbage means dumping it in the nearest empty site and wastewater treatment is cursory at best. There are so many ways of reducing, reusing and recycling within the home itself as we discovered in the past few months. By recycling grey water to flush toilets, one can reduce

domestic water consumption. With soak pits and other forms of using water to irrigate plants, domestic water is used to the fullest. And by composting or growing plants in organic waste, one can cut down household waste significantly.

VI. Sanitation

On the sanitation front, India has ambitious goals. It seeks to provide access to toilets for 50% of its population by 2012 and 100% by 2015 (Total Sanitation Campaign). The reality is bleak – only 28% of the population has access to improved toilets. And throughout the country, one can find toilets being used as cowsheds, for grain storage or as an extra room. The question in my mind when I started looking at this issue was: what are the crucial components that make for success or failure in a sanitation project?

My conversations with women in Sitapur, plus the experiences of the monsoon where it was hard to find a dry place to defecate and water-borne diseases were rampant, convinced me of the importance of the issue. The few women I talked to were not interested in a dry pit toilet – they felt that cleaning of such a toilet would fall on their shoulders and if so, they would rather deal with a wet model. We visited two centres working on Sanitation – Safai Vidyalaya near Ahmedabad and CSV near Wardha. The staff there agreed that wet toilets were more acceptable. Both have been working on toilets that require very little water and that have leach pits rather than septic tanks. Leach pits allow the human waste to compost into rich manure. Each organization has also come up with unique designs geared for particular needs, including a joint human and animal waste composting unit, a compact bathroom cum toilet design etc.



What about the implementation and usage at the village level? We had a chance to visit one village near Sewagram where Dr. Ulhas Jajoo, in partnership with CSV and a funding agency, had helped the villagers all build personal toilets. From the villagers' explanations, it seemed that the subsidy they received from an external funding group, plus their confidence in Dr. Jajoo, helped seal the deal. Once the toilets were in place, their good design went a long way towards building acceptance. A few people still defecate in public, but that is now increasingly frowned upon.

With the understanding I have developed on this issue, and with the aid of some reference material, I hope to start some conversations and perhaps organize a site visit to a group working on sanitation in the near future.

We have also had a few interesting conversations on technology with friends and acquaintances that have helped strengthen our perspective. An important aspect of the work of appropriate technology groups that they have either ignored or choose not to project is the inherent decentralization possible with these alternate approaches. When generating one's own power, one is not dependent on the government to put up transmission lines and supply electricity and thus one is more self-sufficient. Unfortunately, with the Nehruvian mindset of our government, top-down approaches have been favoured and promoted. If our government and thinkers had instead truly promoted 'Grameen Swaraj', what would our nation look like today?!

Another crucial area of work which very few people are engaged in is promoting appropriate technology in urban and affluent centres. As one of the experts in this field commented – a surefire way of dooming any innovation is to project it as an innovation for the poor! Further, power and water conservation, waste management etc. are as important, if not more, in dense urban areas. We came across some innovations and efforts in Mumbai, Bangalore and other cities and hope that these efforts gain in volume and popularity. For better or for worse, urban centres are trendsetters in today's India. And it is necessary to have them on board if a different lifestyle is to be adopted.

How to work with a community – lessons and challenges

Over the past few years, I have been exposed to the world of activism, people's movements and the sociodevelopmental sector in great detail. I have always wondered about the process by which a movement/ campaign/ organization succeeds or fails. The external factors were a little easier to understand – macroeconomic policies, corruption, market forces, vested interests etc. But what are the internal factors on which its success depends? And how does one quantify success or failure?

As a volunteer with a funding organization, I soon realized that our cycles of fund approval and release were so drawn out that, by the time a grassroots NGO received funds for a project, the work would have been completed some months earlier! So it would often use this money for some other purpose. Even if funds were released in a timely manner, a project plan would often be abandoned mid-course because of lack of local participation, absence of some key resource, change in the government schemes available etc. I learnt to make decisions of fund approval based on the organization itself – on its past history, the composition of the group and their ideology, recommendations from other activists in the field and some independent research. There were gaps in my understanding of local dynamics that I hoped to improve after returning to India.

Parallely, we were also concerned about our role within or as partners of a grassroots organization. Given our background, it would be very easy for us to create a hierarchy of resource and knowledge and thereby a power imbalance. The sociodevelopmental sphere is littered with groups that have a controlling centre of power, that lose their relevance once their founders have left and so on. We were keen on developing skills that would help us avoid such pitfalls.

During our travels, we met individuals who have found a place within large institutions or who are part of radical unions or loose collectives that would not become institutionalized. Yet others work independently, either in collaboration with grassroots organizations or as consultants with them. Each of these individuals had perspectives to share about the relevance of institutions, hierarchies and democratic functioning within organizations and the approaches we should take while engaging with communities.

I. Listening to the community

While seemingly trivial, listening to the community involves a lot of skills and orientation as I have experienced. When in the US, I used to advise newer volunteers on how to communicate with partners in India, on how to get information without taking an inquisitorial tone etc. We used to talk in terms of respecting our partners and building a relationship of equals. But now, I am beginning to realize that the gap in communication is more profound because both sides speak a different language.

In Sitapur, especially in the dairy initiative, I have learnt the importance of listening, asking the right questions and having sustained discussions. The understanding of the situation that I developed in the first round of discussions was transformed in the second round when we began putting numbers into the picture. We had to come up with different ways of getting the information we needed. Now, we find that communicating our analysis of the situation is equally challenging.

We have met friends and acquaintances who have found themselves out of organizations or at a distance from communities primarily because, I think, the communication was not established or maintained.

II. Democratic functioning within organizations

Closely associated with the issue of communication is democratic functioning within an organization. We have heard of many a movement or campaign that starts off in a very participatory manner, marshalling local support and fighting for the issues that matter for the local population. But as time goes by, the movement sometimes turns more radical than the population it represents. Often, a leader receives the spotlight of media and opponents and she/he becomes more autocratic. How does one recognize such pitfalls and steer clear of them?

Two perspectives were very valuable in building our understanding: one, of a grassroots activist and the other of a couple who consult with a number of grassroots organizations. The first one said that the outside world looks for a 'leader' or representative in an organization, because mainstream society and media have become individual-oriented. This individual then receives immense focus and attention, is deified and villified in equal measure, and becomes susceptible to bribes, threats, undue fame and other forms of pressure. Thus, an organization should resist the pressure of naming a single spokesperson. It is a hard task for an organization to develop a wide leadership, but it is worth it in the end.

The other perspective about democratic functioning within an organization was with regard to the tough battles many movements are facing. When there is an approaching 'disaster' such as an eviction notice, some emergency steps have to be taken, which do not allow for participatory planning. Such decisions then need to be shared within the community and enough time and energy expended in reaching common ground. If not, the core group or leadership will continue to make such decisions and the distance between them and the community will increase. In some situations, the community is ready to compromise while the leadership is determined to fight on. Such situations are inevitable with this gap in understanding and compromise within the organization.

These insights have found fertile ground with me, given my 'middle path' attitude. I have always found it hard to agree wholeheartedly with any one view and believe in the process of arriving at a solution with fair and commensurate representation of many views. The

conversations of the last few months have underscored the importance of sustained and full engagement, even if progress seems slow and external market and mainstream forces seem to have so much more of an impact.

III. Institutional hubris

Many organizations started out within a radical framework. But as they became bigger and got caught up with salaries, yearly targets and the like, they became more institutionalized and out of touch with their original mandate. During our in-class discussions, we talked about how a number of mission and charitable hospitals have fallen into this trap. And during our field trips, we witnessed this quite starkly with Gandhian institutions in Gujarat and Maharashtra. While many of the older generation of Gandhians continue to live simply and abide by Gandhiji's edicts, their beliefs and approaches seem disconnected with today's realities. And most of the younger generation, from what we could learn, is either professionalized, running a mainstream NGO, or disillusioned with Gandhian thought. And yet, Grameen Swaraj and other Gandhian beliefs still seem relevant in our time.

Of course, these institutions are serving a valuable role, providing education, health care and development to rural populations. But because there is so little political and ideological content to their work today, their role can and has been taken up by mainstream and right-wing organizations. Further, many big organizations have been antagonistic to rights-based groups, considering them as troublemakers who are opposing development.

On a positive note, some big organizations are becoming supportive of rights-based work. At a national and international level, the need for empowerment of local communities has been recognized. Work such as training of women Panchayat members and health activists, RTI workshops etc. has become mainstream and is receiving plenty of funding and support.

As an activist who is now managing the branch of a large NGO said, "I have recognized the need to support some inefficient or bad work in order to fund the groups that matter!" Perhaps, if big institutions can gear themselves to include some radical work in their mandate, they will prove to be beneficial to marginalized communities in the long run. After all, today's radical is tomorrow's social worker!

IV. Sources of personal income

The question of our income has been an important one that we hoped to find some answers for in our first year back in India. We knew that we could not expect a salary with SKMS, given their lean budget and their goal of providing livelihoods for the local community first. While there were some options of funding available to us, we did not like the baggage that came with it. The CHC fellowship was a welcome opportunity because it combined rigour and

expectations with flexibility in the right balance. But what happens after the fellowship is complete?

The individuals that we talked to about their livelihood choices fit broadly into three categories – those who are directly funded by institutions or run their own, those who are indirectly funded with fellowships etc. and those who choose to support themselves by other means.

The first category is what the majority of people in the sociodevelopment sector seem to be opting for. It offers security and possibly more ability to influence policy. The second category seems designed for people who are still exploring or for those who do not want to be associated with any organization and its politics. I found the second reason, which was cited by many of the individuals we met, to be a little problematic. Even the fellowship programs that they were availing of sprung from organizations that have the same politics and shortcomings. So all they were doing was creating degrees of separation from problematic situations and saying, 'That is not my problem.'

In the third category, we found people who are supported by their spouses or family members working in mainstream jobs, those who worked part-time or on a consulting basis (which is a challenging task) and those who have found a livelihood based on their principles, such as owning an organic/sustainable farm. Among those involved in agriculture, we found generally high levels of satisfaction, but also an acknowledgement that they were not able to engage with local communities as much as they had planned initially. This was due to the timelines of farming that cannot be postponed.

To sum up, the different approaches of earning livelihoods all have their benefits and shortcomings. But the bright side of this kind of work seems to be that we can craft our very own model of individual income generation!

While I was involved in all these discussions and brainstorming at an individual level, I re-connected with a group of friends, mostly AID volunteers, embarking on similar journeys. We are trying to build an informal network where we can share ideas, provide feedback and support each other on this journey. Similarly, among our current CHC fellows batch, we have been sharing information and brainstorming on approaches to finding livelihoods that resonate with our beliefs and goals. From all the people we talked to, we realized further the importance of a peer group and a support network and will continue to work to keep such networks vibrant and useful.

Future steps

Over the last few months, I have learnt a lot about communities, the social, political, economic, cultural and environmental aspects of community work and the manner in which we, as activists, can engage with communities and the system. With these understandings, I hope to work with SKMS (Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan) in Sitapur, UP on a variety of issues and initiatives as listed below.

I. Agriculture

My plan is to initiate discussions on agriculture in the SKMS villages. Among some SKMS members, especially those in the core committee, there is an understanding of the ill-effects of pesticides, the limited diet of people and resulting undernourishment, the need to manage village waste etc. Depending on the interest and available resources, one or more of the following can be attempted in the future:

- Composting / vermicomposting
- An exposure trip to get a detailed understanding of some aspect of sustainable farming, marketing etc.
- A model plot in a borrowed or leased piece of land to experiment with some alternative agricultural techniques
- Revival of traditional foodgrains that are more nutritious than rice or wheat
- Wastewater management techniques, kitchen gardens etc.

To implement any new initiative, it is essential to have a team of committed people who will work on the issue. I will work to identify such people. Further, SKMS has always tried to develop a larger understanding of the issues that affect the rural poor. I will attempt to do that by conducting discussions on GM seeds, food security, agricultural policy etc. Finally, SKMS has supported developing new livelihoods among its members. With interested people, I will explore if any avenues for developing agricultural products are possible in Sitapur dt.

II. Community Health

Some areas in which I foresee future work on health with SKMS are:

- A campaign to improve government health services in Pisawa block and the Pisawa CHC
- Discussions and initiatives to improve nutrition in the Sangathan villages
- Exposure trips to develop an understanding of community monitoring of health services, training of community health workers etc.

Engaging with the health system is unavoidable in community work. I expect that as I get involved in the work of SKMS, more challenges and approaches to tackling them will become

evident.

III. Technology and Sanitation

With the dairy cooperative, we plan to explore various modes of power generation for the purpose of heating/pasteurization and refrigeration of milk. These include go-bar gas and pedal power. We plan to have discussions on technology and work with children on some simple projects that demonstrate some simple concepts.

On the sanitation front, there is already interest among a number of Sangathan Saathis in building toilets. I hope to work with them to get the most optimum toilets built for their needs. If these individual efforts are successful, more wide-scale initiatives can be planned.

IV. Other activities

- Organization of exposure trips for SKMS members to learn about new issues, to build networks contacts and to inspire and be inspired
 - Planned: NBA, JADS, CEHAT Saathi in Badwani, MP
 - Possibilities: Groups working on herbal medicines, agricultural techniques etc.
- Continuation of work with cooperative dairy to expand its membership and revenue
 - Working with dairy members to develop a comprehensive understanding of planning, accounts, marketing of new products etc. before launching new initiatives
 - Purchase/design of equipment for making cream and ghee, refrigeration etc.
- Drafting proposals and following up on funding for SKMS activities

From long-distance to on-the-ground: my field experience

I first heard about Sangtin in 2004 when Richa Nagar, a Professor of Women's studies at the University of Minnesota, contacted our chapter for support for this group. She had worked with seven field-level activists and Richa Singh, a district-level coordinator for Mahila Samakhya, on a journalling project. The project culminated in a book chronicling the lives of these rural women and critiquing the politics of NGOs working on the empowerment of marginalized communities. The resulting backlash from NGOs within UP led to Richa Singh resigning from Mahila Samakhya and devoting her time to Sangtin, a group that had been set up by local women to campaign for their rights.

I read the book written by this group *Sangtin Yatra: Saath zindagiyon mein lipti naari vimarsh* and was struck by the connections they had made between their experiences and the politics of developmental work. Many of the points they raised struck a chord with me, engaged as I was in understanding the confusing tableau of movements, NGOs, institutions and the like. While the struggles each of these women had faced in grappling with patriarchy, caste and class was inspiring, their vision for their future work was intriguing.

My chapter began supporting their work financially and I visited Sitapur in March 2005 to meet the women of Sangtin. At that time, their cumulative experience was in the area of women's empowerment and they wanted to move beyond that. As they put it – 'Jab ghar mein roti nahin hai, to aadhi roti ki ladai mein koyi mathlab nahin' (when there is no food at home, there is no value in fighting for half a share) Some women had already left Mahila Samakhya and were engaged in charting their future course. Meeting these women at the start of their journey and discussing their vision and plans was an invaluable experience for me.

Over the next few months, Richa, Surbala, Reena and others conducted village-level meetings and had extensive discussions on the problems faced by the poor in these villages. While education, health and a campaign against brick kilns were suggested for future work, the organization eventually decided to work on reviving a canal that had been dry for decades. In the process, they mobilized in a number of villages, grappled with the district administration and the Irrigation department and campaigned against the use of machinery in the cleanup work. The coalition formed with farmers and labourers transformed the organization into Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan (SKMS), a people's movement of the rural poor.

When the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was implemented in 2006, SKMS had already built experience on the issue of minimum wages. It took on the administration to ensure proper implementation of the Act, from the issuance of job cards to receiving applications for work and inclusion of women in the workforce. The Sangathan launched a campaign for unemployment benefits for those who had applied for work and not received any to test the administration's sincerity in implementing the letter and spirit of NREGA.

I had been following all these events long-distance through correspondence, phone calls and occasional meetings. When back in India in 2008, Dwiji and I agreed that Sitapur was the first place on our itinerary after family visits! The six weeks in April and May that we spent in Sitapur were wonderful and provided us with a lot of insights. I got to see the Sangathan at work and the various forces that affected it, from the district administration and local power structures to natural disasters such as fires during the sweltering summer. In earlier field visits, I had felt crippled seeing the stark poverty and wretchedness of the rural poor, especially in Uttar Pradesh. During this stay, I began understanding agency – the manner in which people and organizations can challenge themselves and engage with the system to improve their circumstances.



Dwiji and I began making plans to work with the Sangathan for a few years. I wanted to learn from Richa, Mukesh, Surbala, Reena and the other Sangathan Saathis and develop the skills to work with grassroots communities. I also wanted to help build the Sangathan's capacity in new areas. I joined CHLP designating SKMS as my field organization. My goal during the fellowship was to build my understanding of agriculture, appropriate technology etc. with SKMS in mind. During the course of my fellowship, I developed many insights and also got contacts and leads for people who could be approached for assistance. Now how could these be connected to the day-to-day events in the Sangathan?

I saw January – March 2009 as the period when I would stop being an observer and actively participate in the Sangathan's activities. Richa Singh, who serves as the Sangathan's voice in Sitapur city, provided me valuable mentorship during this time. She encouraged me to lead meetings, discuss issues and take initiative. She advised me to not worry about making mistakes, but to learn from them.

When we arrived in Sitapur in January, the campaign for unemployment benefits had reached a critical point. The committee set up to investigate the matter had submitted its final report establishing the eligibility of over 800 families for over Rs. 15 lakhs of benefits. But there was no progress on the administration's front. The Sangathan planned an indefinite dharna from January 16th onwards at the Sitapur collectorate.



Planning for the dharna (in village meetings) and organizing during the 5 days it lasted provided

me valuable experience. More importantly, I formed friendships with the farmer-labourers from the Sangathan villages and gained an appreciation for the hardships they face. One Saathi, Kusuma, was running a fever but refused to leave the dharna site. "We haven't been paid for our work for months and are tired of fighting with our Pradhan and BDO. We won't leave Sitapur till our demands have been met." The dharna site became a place of learning, sharing experiences and making our presence felt through songs and slogans.

The dharna ended in a victory, with the administration coming up with concrete plans on each of the demands of the Sangathan. Unemployment benefits to eligible families in Sitapur district were announced by the Commissioner of Rural Affairs for Uttar Pradesh. Though the order was challenged in court, it was upheld and the money eventually began reaching the eligible families. (As of April 2009, the money is still arriving in families' bank accounts)

Concurrently, the Sangathan decided to hold a sammelan, the first such event it had organized in Sitapur. The goals were as follows: to share news about their victories and the possibilities of NREGA with farmer-labourers from other blocks in the district, to make their presence felt in Sitapur and to discuss and reflect on the wider scenario of problems faced by the rural poor. The sammelan was to be held on February 24th and 25th and most of February was taken up in organizing for this. I helped with planning for the event, training people to sing, chant slogans and give speeches and with discussions on the larger issues such as the dependence of rural communities on the government and market, the spirit of NREGA etc. I also helped with making posters and a photoexhibit for display at the event.



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The sammelan itself was a mix of high points of emotional speeches and songs, chaotic times with food distribution and other engaging moments. Many people did not sleep for the entire duration of the sammelan – the night was filled with music in the local 'aalha' tradition and other songs on demand. On the morning of the 25th, the CDO (Chief Development Officer) and the PD (Program Director) of Sitapur visited and addressed the crowd. Their comments were not taken at face value – they were questioned on the assurances they gave and challenged on their confidence in the district administration. One issue that had been frustrating the Sangathan Saathis was the delay in payment for wages – while work had started in a number of villages after the dharna, many villagers had outstanding wages for work completed months ago. The CDO promised that payments would be done by Holi, a big festival in these parts.

After the sammelan, some analysis and soul searching was done. What were the goals of the

sammelan and were they achieved? One goal, that of attracting farmer-labourers from other blocks in Sitapur district, was not achieved – there were barely 100 such people who attended the sammelan. The need for local meetings, preferably at the village level, was underscored. The goal of making one's presence felt had only been partly achieved – with a turnout of 1500-2000, the district administration and the city did pay attention, but was not shaken.

There was also frustration with how little progress there had been on the issues for which the dharna had been organized. It took so much effort to get work started in a village and then it would be stopped after just a few days. With the introduction of direct payment of wages into labourers' bank accounts, increased complexity was introduced into the process. Now villagers had to pressure the Pradhan to submit a request for payment, the Block administration to make that payment and then the bank and Pradhan both to transfer money from the Gram Sabha account into individual accounts. And if the Gram Sabha account and labourers' accounts were in different banks, atleast a month was required to realize the payments! Most Sangathan Saathis see the value of having bank accounts, but when the supporting institutions are weak, disinterested and uncoordinated, their problems had increased multifold. So where in 2008, wages had been distributed in cash on the eve of Holi, in 2009 this was not possible and many people did not receive payments and found themselves short of money for Holi.

During my field experience, I encountered many such situations that reveal the challenges and paradoxes of community work. In a Gram Sabha where one village was well mobilized, the Pradhan had chosen to provide work for them but not for the other villages which were under his control. Should one devote more energy to work with the mobilized village where challenges still exist or should one work in the other villages where people were not even getting applications for work received? Caste politics triumph all else and very few village Sangathans have been able to mobilize across caste lines. How much should one try to work on this issue? The benefits of work being provided was felt throughout the village, but in some places Sangathan members were being labeled as troublemakers and not provided work for which they had fought. How can we counter such situations?



In the area of livelihoods through the dairy and chikan cooperatives, similar questions came up. Embroidery work does not pay a minimum wage, but yet it has been providing valuable income for young girls. The Sangathan, like other organizations working in this area, has been insisting that the girls go to school and do this work in their spare time, but is that sufficient? On the issue of milk, if a good price is provided for it, would families keep some for their own use? And in the absence of common pasture lands, would landless families or those with marginal landholdings (a majority of the Sangathan) be able to afford the upkeep of cattle? I had earlier

realized that providing viable livelihoods for the very poor is extremely difficult – now I saw the challenges at the ground level.

Inspite of all these problems and challenges, I found the months I spent in Sitapur enjoyable and meaningful. After a while, I did not need to make a conscious decision to be involved actively – the opportunities began presenting themselves. We were also able to make progress in some of the areas we had deliberately planned to get involved in. We had a few meetings to plan the future direction of the dairy, met farmers in different Sangathan villages to get an understanding of the agricultural situation and got involved in a few health issues that have opened up the path for future work in this area. There is ample work to be done – the challenge of the next few years will be to make progress on issues which often end up on the back burner while continuing to work on the immediate needs. Thankfully, our Sangathan Saathis are committed and constantly challenging themselves and others. Hopefully, we can build on past successes and travel in new directions in the coming years...

CHC Orientation

Having only a vague idea about CHC, I started CHLP with very few expectations beyond getting a grounding in community health. Ravi (Narayan) mentioned in one of his sessions that he thought of CHC as a 'sarai' that provided some space and time to fellow travellers. That is perhaps the best way to explain my viewpoint when I started the program. However, the orientation turned out to be much more than that.

Starting off, the CHLP fellows of 2008-09 couldn't have been better chosen. The diversity in ages, backgrounds and interests of the fellows was impressive, to say the least. The 'group lab' session and the group assignments helped build connections and the time spent together during the field trips also allowed us to interact to a greater extent. We have learnt much more as a group than we would have individually, I believe, and that has underlined the importance of 'community' in community health.

The sessions that made up the orientation program could be broadly divided into the following categories:

Overviews of concepts

We had introductory sessions on some core issues of Community Health: the concepts of Primary Health Care, history of community health in India, the public health approaches to disease, the impact of globalization etc. Since most of us do not have a public/community health background, some of these sessions were revelatory. For example, when working with marginalized communities, it is easy to dwell on the failings of government. But at independence, the life expectancy of Indians was 42! Obviously, basic health services were improved dramatically. Also, studying the structural aspects of health once again underscored for me how it is necessary to analyze the impact of systems beyond individuals – an organization may be run by sincere, committed people, but often their collective impact can be more detrimental than beneficial.

Specific health topics of interest

A number of CHC staff and associates are working on specific health matters, for example tobacco, non-communicable diseases and immunization. From them, we got the micro-perspective as well as the impacts of these issues on the larger health situation. One session that I particularly enjoyed was Chander's talk on tobacco and its impacts on society. I had primarily thought about the issue from the point of view of smokers and secondhand smoke. The lecture opened my eyes to the problems of tobacco cultivators, beedi makers (primarily poor women in the unorganized sector), the impact of tobacco curing on the environment etc. I have learnt to connect specific issues to comprehensive health and to appreciate the importance of forming broad coalitions of affected peoples for a cause.

Personal journeys

We were privileged to listen to people talk about their work in the field. Some examples - Sunil Kaul shared his experiences with the ant in Assam and Lalitha talked about her work with the Tribal Health Initiative in Sittilingi, Tamilnadu. These talks gave us an insight into how the concepts we were learning about found practical applications. One hour into Lalitha's discussion, someone thought of asking her which area she had specialized in. She said she is a gynaecologist, to our immense surprise! We had been discussing organic agriculture, marketing, weaving and power looms etc. and somehow hadn't thought of her as a medical practitioner. But this is how a responsive community health program should be – responding to the needs of the community.

Field trips

Two field trips were arranged during our orientation – a 3-day trip to Hannur and surrounding areas in Chamarajanagara dt. and a 6-day trip to Bellary and Raichur dts.

In Hannur, our hosts were the sisters of the Holy Cross Comprehensive Rural Health Program. They shared the trajectory of the program since its early days of follow-up for TB patients to its current comprehensive health focus. Community health workers in villages have been trained in herbal medicines, safe deliveries and basic follow-up. Further, child labour is very prevalent and the sisters have been proactively involved in combating it. They have formed alliances with schools for health education and with a local NGO, MyRADA, for watershed and other developmental activities. We visited the Hannur PHC to get exposure into some of the process of community monitoring - assessing facilities and interviewing staff and patients. We also visited MyRADA and its field area, met with local communities and visited a government school as well as a residential school for former child labourers operated by Holy Cross.

In Hospet, Bellary dt., we visited SAKHI, a group working to improve access to education for Dalit girls and women. We got a primer on the mining situation in the area - mining has transformed the economy, making some very rich and impoverishing others because of its negative impact on agriculture. The area has seen an influx of seasonal labourers from nearby areas – we met some of them at an open-cast mine, typical of mines in the area. The situation of women, men and children working in these mines was horrific in our eyes – the tragedy was that they felt the wages and work were an improvement over what was available in their native villages! We got an inkling into the difficulties in intervening in a situation where economic and political forces are so strongly lined up in opposition. We also visited a group, Punyakoti foundation, working on mental health, addiction and with mentally retarded children. There is a vacuum of mental health professionals and services in the northern Karnataka districts – therefore Dr. Ravi, its psychiatrist founder, is working to train the community to detect and counsel people affected by mental illness. He is also running a school for mentally retarded children with community support.

We then went to the JMS (Jagruta Mahila Sangathana) headquarters in Potnal, Raichur dt. for

an intense 3 days of learning, sharing and living together. The centre houses the Chilipili residential school, the terracota jewellery group, the clinic and herbal medicine unit as well as some staff members, so it was always bubbling with activity. We learnt about the evolution of this group that was set up to empower Dalit women and their struggles for infrastructure, fair wages, government services and against violence and abuse. We spent time discussing the greater historical and sociopolitical situation in Hyderabad Karnataka, which was a revelation to me in terms of the inequities within Karnataka, a relatively better-off state in India. The best part of the field trip was the day we were split up into 3 smaller groups and sent to meet different village communities. The pairing of experienced activists and newbies like me helped us get multiple perspectives when visiting a PHC or talking to a Self Help Group. Sharing between different groups at the end of the day brought out in clarity what we had discussed in theory earlier – the stark inequities between castes, the cycle of oppression built between groups at the bottom of the ladder such as the Valmikis dominating the Madigas and the modes of intervention with these marginalized groups.

On the final day of our field trip, we visited briefly with Navjiva Mahila Okkuta, a group that has mobilized vulnerable women – Devdasis, widowed and single women etc. - to campaign for their rights. They have built strong alliances with groups throughout the dt., including JMS, and this coalition has campaigned effectively for employment under NREGA.

The field trips were a crash course and practical observations of the issues we had discussed throughout the orientation. I have been on self-organized field trips before, but these were an order of magnitude richer in exposure to issues, discussions and stirring of thought processes. During the trips, there were times when I felt mentally and emotionally exhausted, but it always seemed worth it. Interestingly, I also gained some insights into how, even in the information-gathering phase of an intervention, one can and should contribute to the local community through insights, suggestions and other small forms of assistance. These communities are so deprived that it would be remiss of us to go and just 'study' them without some interaction and sharing.

At the end of the orientation, I gained a much better understanding of community health as a concept, a philosophy and a uniting issue for mobilization. The ideas that I had about livelihoods, education etc. being connected to health have been solidified with data and examples.

Finally, the positive and can-do attitude of almost everyone we interacted with is heartening. The road to good community health is littered with failures, unavoidable detours and roadblocks. Yet those who are working on these issues have not lost their enthusiasm for it and are motivating entrants into the field. The orientation session left me brimming with ideas and enthusiasm. My thanks to the CHC team for their untiring efforts!

Itinerary of visits and field work

During my fellowship, I visited a number of groups working on agriculture, rural technology and sanitation. Interspersed with these were meetings with groups and individuals that would shed light on the structure and work style of grassroots organizations and the modes of engagement of 'outsiders' with a local community. I also spent a few weeks in Sitapur to work with SKMS in July-August and later a few months for my field work. Finally, CHLP inspired me to share my learnings with my peers in AID-US. Dwiji and I conducted a series of discussions with AID chapters in the US in September-October during a family visit to that part of the world.

The following table lists the organizations I visited, dates visited and issues that were discussed.

Table 1: List of organizations/individuals visited

Date(s)	Organization/Person	Issue/Topic	Place
Karnataka & Tamilnadu			
7 th July	IISc	Appropriate technology	Bangalore, KA
10 th July	NAPM, local groups	Land rights, livelihoods	Nandagudi, KA
11 th -12 th July	AID India, local groups	Sustainable agriculture, NREGA	Bangalore rural & Kolar districts, KA
18 th July	Revathi	Sustainable agriculture	Thiruvarur, TN
19 th -22 nd July	Centre for Sustainable Technologies, Village Action Group, Solitude Farm	Sustainable agriculture, sanitation, appropriate technology, mobilization	Auroville, Pondicherry
23 rd - 24 th July	AID India, Corporate Accountability desk, Kalpana (ex-TNSF), Chandrika (Construction workers union)	Education, livelihoods, environment, mobilization	Chennai, TN
Sitapur & miscellaneous			
25 th July	Sambhavna clinic, Eklavya	Health, Education	Bhopal, MP
26 th July-22 nd Aug	SKMS	Field work	Sitapur, UP
12 th Sept	BAIF	Agriculture, marketing	Tiptur, KA
AID Chapters in the US			
25 th Sept	AID-Buffalo	Rural livelihoods	Buffalo, NY, USA
27 th Sept	AID- Penn State	Rural livelihoods with focus on JMS & Raichur dt.	State College PA, USA
28 th - 29 th September	AID Pittsburgh	Agriculture, Community Health	Pittsburgh PA, USA
30 th Sept	AID Chicago	Informal discussions	Chicago IL, USA

Date(s)	Organization/Person	Issue/Topic	Place
4 th Oct	AID Minnesota	Scale and scope of work	Minneapolis MN, USA
7 th Oct	AID Duke	Group dynamics	Durham NC, USA
10 th Oct	AID Clemson	Group dynamics	Clemson SC, USA
11 th Oct	AID Atlanta	Rural Livelihoods	Atlanta GA, USA
Gujarat & Maharashtra			
31 st Oct	Bhaskar Save, Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti (PSS)	Agriculture, Industrial pollution	Umargaon, Gujarat
1 st - 2 nd Nov	Sarvodaya Parivar Trust	Gandhian philosophy, community work	Khadki, Gujarat
4 th Nov	Dhirendrabha & Smitaben, Ashokbhai, Ekal Mahila Manch, Sardar Sarovar	Agriculture, nutrition & community health, mobilization, big dams	Narmada dt., Gujarat
5 th Nov	Lakhanbhai & friends, Virji & Sushilaben	Watershed development, Agriculture	Narmada dt., Gujarat
7 th Nov	Janpath, Prasad Chacko, Safai Vidyalaya	Community work, mobilization & awareness, sanitation	Ahmedabad, Gujarat
8 th Nov	MARAG, Behavioral Science Centre	Community work, pastoral communities	Ahmedabad, Gujarat
10 th - 12 th Nov	Madhulika & Ashis, Ekal Nari Sangathan	Community work, rural marketing, mobilization	Dungarpur, Rajasthan
13 th Nov	Vinay & Charul, Trupthi (Sahiyar) & Rohit (PSS)	Politics of working with communities, gender issues, radical unions, communalism	Ahmedabad & Baroda, Gujarat
15 th Nov	Preeti Patil	Rooftop gardening	Mumbai
18 th - 22 nd Nov	Ulhas Jajoo, Sevagram Ashram Trust, CSV (Centre for Science in Villages), Pavnar Ashram, Magan Sangrahalaya, Goras Bhandar, individual farmers	Community health, Gandhi & Vinobha Bhave's philosophy & work, Rural economy, Agriculture, Dairy	Sevagram, Wardha & neighbouring areas, Maharashtra
23 rd - 24 th Nov	Subhash Sharma	Agriculture	Yavatmal, Maharashtra
25 th Nov	NBA, Khandwa	Mobilization, big dams	Khandwa, MP
26 th Nov	Deepak Suchade	Agriculture	Bajwada, MP
Miscellaneous			
18 th - 20 th Dec	Tribal Health Initiative, TULIR	Health, agriculture, alternative education	Sittilingi, TN
28 th Dec	Madhya Pradesh Vigyan Sabha	Appropriate technology, livelihoods	Bhopal, MP
14 th - 15 th Feb	Activists / people involved in community work	Informal discussions on politics of community work	Delhi

Date(s)	Organization/Person	Issue/Topic	Place
Sitapur			
31 st Dec - 27 th March	SKMS	Field work	Sitapur, UP

ANNEXURES

WRITEUP ON KUNWARAPUR DAIRY (IN HINDI)

महिला डेरी – आगे का रास्ता

ग्राम कुंवरापुर (ग्राम सभा डिघिया) में संगतिन से जुड़ी कुछ महिलाओं ने 2004 में एक सहकारी डेरी की स्थापना की जो पराग डेरी (उत्तर प्रदेश की सहकारी डेरी) से जुड़ी है । एक कमेटी का गठन हुआ और रीना डेरी की सचिव बनी । डेरी की शुरुआत 1/2 लीटर से की गयी। डेरी में आज लगभग हर दिन 40 सदस्य दूध लाते हैं और दूध वहाँ से सीतापुर भेजा जाता है। सदस्य रोज – रोज दूध बेचने के झंझट या खोया बनाने के काम से मुक्ति पायें हैं। लेकिन डेरी कई दिक्कतें भी है। पराग डेरी कभी भी भुगतान समय पर नहीं करती है – 2 से 6 हफ्तों के बाद ही पैसा पहुँचता है और फैट रीडिंग डेरी के माप से कम बताती है । महीने में कम से कम एक बार दूध फटने की शिकायत मिलता है और सिर्फ 1 यो 2 रूपया प्रति लीटर मिलता है ।

प्राइवेट में दुध बेचने में भी कई दिक्कतें हैं – कभी दुध का भाव ज्यादा तो कभी कम हो जाता है और डेरी के सामग्री एवं सुविधाएं जैसे टीकाकरण, प्राइवेट से कहाँ मिलती है? फिर भी एक साल (2007 – 2008) में डेरी का दूध एक प्राइवेट फैक्टरी में भेजा गया था। उस साल डेरी में बहुत दुध पहुँचा कुछ दिन 1000 लीटर से ज्यादा और आस पास के गाँवों से भी लोग दुध बेचने आये थे । उस साल 15 लाख से ज्यादा पैसा डेरी के माध्यम से लोगों के हाथ में पहुँचा। लेकिन इस काम के मेहनत से और फैक्टरी के मसलों के कारण लोग पीछे हटने लगे । एक महत्वपूर्ण बात यह है कि इतनी मात्रा में दूध बेचने पर भी डेरी ज्यादा मुनाफा नहीं बना पाई। डेरी में काम करने वाले साथियों की मजदूरी भी नहीं निकल पाती है, जो कि संगठन के द्वारा उसका वहन किया जाता है। पराग से भी बहुत दबाव आ रहा था। इन सब कारणों के वजह से फैक्टरी को दूध बेचना बन्द कर दिया।

तो आगे का रास्ता क्या है? दूध बेचने वालों की ख्वाइशें क्या हैं? दूध के लिए नकद पैसे तो मिलने चाहिए और ज्यादा सुविधाएँ भी प्राप्त होनी चाहिए जैसे पिछले बरसात में जानवरों और इंसानों को कई नुकसान हुए, बीमारी और घर खराब होने के कारण सब के पास इस वक्त चारा बहुत कम है। अगर डेरी और मजबूत हो तो ऐसे मसलों का हल ढूँढ़ा जा सकता है।

डेरी चलाने वालों के अपने कई सपने होत है – पशु पालन, जो गाँव में कम होता जा रहा है फिर से बढे और लोगो को, खास कर महिलाओं को भी घर में आमदनी मिल सकती है। जो साथी डेरी की जिम्मेदारियां उठा रहे है उनकी मजदूरी डेरी के ही खाते से निकले। डेरी का कोष हो जिस से भुगतान व आपातकालीन खर्चे निकले । सिर्फ दुध नही क्रीम, घी, मट्ठा आदि बनाया जाय और गोबर खाद आदि भी बनाया जाय तथा बेचा जाय। सदस्यता बढे और आस पास के गाँव के लोगो को जोडने का प्रयास करना चाहिए। कुंवरापुर डेरी के अपने नियम बने, सिर्फ पराग के नियमो पर न चले जो लोग और संगठन से निर्धारण हो। यह नियम लिखित रूप में होना चाहिए और डेरी के सदस्यों और संगठन को इसे अपनाना चाहिए। डेरी सिर्फ मुनाफे के लिये नहीं बना है और सिर्फ 1 – 2 लोग ही इसकी पूरी जिम्मेदारी नही उठाना चाहिए। तभी ही यी डेरी सचमुच की सामूहिक डेरी बनेगी। हमारे सामने कुछ रास्ते है जिन पर बातचीत और काम शुरू हुआ है। जिन लोगो को जानवर लेना है उन को लोन दिलाना, यह ऐसे लोग है जिन को व्यक्तिगत जानवर के लिए कर्जा सरकार से मिलना मुश्किल होता है संगठन और डेरी के बलबूते यह लोग इकट्ठा लोन ले पायेंगे। यह सब कुँवरापुर के आस पास के है। अगर डेरी के सदस्य बने तो दूध की मात्रा बढाना आसान हो जायेगा।

दुध पराग या फ़ैक्टरी में बेचने से मुनाफा नही है लेकिन अगर व्यक्तिगत खरीदार मिल गयें तो बात अलग होती है। मिश्रिख जहाँ ब्लाक और तहसील के मुख्य कार्यालय है कुँवरापुर से 7 किलोमीटर दूरी पर है। वहाँ कोई दफ़तर या स्कूल से सर्म्पक करके दूध बेचे तो हमारे पास साल भर का बाजार रहेगा। तब हमारी चुनौती रहेगी दूध की मात्रा कायम रखने में और हर दिन दूध सही सलामत ग्राहक तक पहुँचाने में।

एक रास्ता और है कि सिर्फ दूध बेचने पर सीमित न रहें। क्रीम और घी के अच्छे भाव मिलते रहे और वह जल्दी खराब भी नही होते है। उन के बिकने से हाथ में नकद पैसे मिलेंगे। ऐसे काम के लिए डेरी मे और साथियों की जरूरत होगी लेकिन यह अच्छी बात होगी कि कुछ लोगो को रोजगार मिलेगा।

यह सब कदम उठाने से पहले पक्की योजना बनाना बहुत जरूरी है। इतनी ही जरूरत है कमेटी, गाँव के लोग और नए सदस्यो की डेरी में भागीदारी बढे और समझ बने। जब और साथी डेरी के वर्तमान का समझ ले तो साथ साथ आगे बढने की प्रक्रिया हो सकती है।

कुंवरापुर डेरी में संगतिन किसान मजदूर संगठन की अहम भूमिका रही है पर साथियों में

इसके बारे क्या समझ बनी है ? संगठन और डेरी का क्या रिश्ता है और आने वाले दिनों में डेरी में संगठन की भूमिका क्या रहेगी ? इन सब विषयों पर बातचीत एवं चर्चा की जरूरत है। आज क्षेत्र में सिर्फ कुंवरापुर में महिला डेरी चल रही है लेकिन संगठन के कई गाँवों में पशु पालन एवं दूध का कारोबार हो रहा है। क्या कुंवरापुर डेरी की सफलता से संगठन के और गाँवों में फायदे हो सकते हैं? यह सवाल डेरी से जुड़े लोग और संगठन को पुछना चाहिए और आज नहीं तो भविष्य में इस के जवाब ढूढने चाहिए।

US CHAPTERS TOUR, SEPT - OCT 2008

Introductory email to chapters

Dear Friends,

For the past 5 months, we have been traveling in India visiting and working with grassroots organizations. We have discovered a lot about these groups and about ourselves. During our trip to Canada and the US in September-October (for personal reasons), we would like to visit AID chapters and reconnect with volunteers.

Our motivation is to discuss issues we have reflected on over the past few months. Some of them have come up during the course of Sudha's fellowship (Community Health Learning Program) at Community Health Cell, Bangalore. Others have become apparent during visits.

Rather than a brief overview of all these topics, we would prefer to have an in-depth discussion on one or two of them.

- i. **Scale and scope of work:** What do we mean when we talk about an intervention at the district level? At the block level? At the state level? What is the magnitude of the task being undertaken and how can we gain a realistic understanding of the scale of the interventions we support?
- ii. **Appropriate technology:** While there are many technological solutions that are not just appropriate at the margins but also in the mainstream, why have they not been adopted? Instead, why do we still see resource-hungry solutions such as diesel generators? Societal acceptance is an important component in the 'appropriate' aspects of technological solutions – has this not been sufficiently addressed? Are there other parts of the picture that we are missing?
- iii. **Rural livelihoods:** There seem to be very few self-sufficient models of income generation. A lot of schemes seem to be dependent on distant, urban markets. Is it possible to come up with sustainable, local producer-consumer links? How do livelihoods connect to NREGA and other government schemes?
- iv. **Sustainable agriculture & food security:** There are many roads leading to sustainable agriculture – environmental, livelihood-related, spiritual, etc. What are the potentials for scalability for each of these approaches? Is food security for the producers a natural outcome of such programs? What is the role of the consumer? Fair wages for laborers is one of the central tenets of progressive thought, what is the equivalent for the marginal farmer?
- v. **Caste and gender dynamics:** A lot of the interventions we support are with marginalized communities - women and/or Dalits or Adivasis. When we talk about the

discrimination that these groups face, we usually externalize it. But how do the disadvantages these groups face relate to our lives and the visible and invisible privileges we have received? And what, if anything, can we do about it?

- vi. 'Insiders' and 'outsiders' and group dynamics: How does the presence of privileged 'outsiders' impact the functioning and direction of a grassroots organization? What are the challenges faced when working to create and maintain a non-hierarchical organization? And why is this important?

We are also open to discuss issues either of us have talked about on our blogs at <http://slip-n-slide.blogspot.com> and <http://dwiddly.wordpress.com>

Notes for Community Health

- Individual-oriented vs. community-oriented approaches to health
 - The medical approach
 - Cure vs. prevention
 - Seed and soil
 - Where does the skill development happen – doctors, nurses, technicians or the community itself?
 - Funding, knowledge production
- Techno-solutions to health problems
 - My experiences with Medtronic
 - ORS packets for diarrhoea
- Social aspects of health
 - Mobile clinics (Arvind eye hospital) and sanitation programs
 - HIV detection and impact on women
- Meeting community health workers

Notes on Caste and gender dynamics

- Visible differences
 - Caste – Wealth, Education, Trade (commerce), knowledge and land ownership
 - Gender – Wealth, Education
- Invisible differences
 - Caste - Written and documented traditions and culture, Lesser trades and service livelihoods, 'Ghetto'ization in the urban scene

- Gender - Ownership of wealth (Cattle, Seeds, Jewelery)

Caste

- Institutional development
 - Enhanced existing disparities
- Gandhi / Babasaheb / Periyar approaches to the caste question
 - Gandhi
 - Service of the 'harijan' and Seva towards 'upliftment'
 - Babasaheb Ambedkar
 - Rejection of the Hindu religion and practices whole and soul, move towards Buddhism
 - Rejection of the village hierarchies and move towards the cities
 - Periyar
 - Staking a claim to land and state resources
 - Fleeing of the brahmanical classes to safer urban centers outside Tamil Nadu
- Land redistribution and the caste inequities
 - How does land redistribution affect us personally?
 - Who received the redistributed land?
- The creamy layer
 - Less untouchable than the others
 - Results of economic opportunities and resource access
- Partners and saathis of AID
 - Most of them are upper caste though working mostly with dalit and adivasis
 - The language of the rights based struggles is something that we have not yet learnt
 - At the core, rights-based work not funding centric
 - Engaging and assessing outcomes of these low on monetary and high on interaction interventions has not yet been taken up on a systemic basis

Gender

- Sex Ratio
 - More skewed in urban areas and developed states
Best in poor & remote areas
- Dowry rates
 - Higher amongst NRI communities across regions and languages

Notes on Group dynamics: 'Insiders' and 'outsiders'

- Typical binding agents in a group
 - Language, Education, History, Money, Access to resources, Caste, Gender
- Game
 - Public instructions:
 - A big NGO is in its last stage of evaluating a proposal for a high school. The community wants the school.
 - Each person gets a chit with a talking point
 - Some chits are blank
 - You are all villagers (except for the change agents) and each of you can improvise on the talking points you receive in the chits
 - There will be two minutes of discussion within the community to strategize
 - One does not have to reveal the contents of her/his chit
 - Agents of change have an idea that there is something the community is not sharing which could impact the success of the project
 - Individual instructions:
 - Agents of Change
 - Agent One: Identify the number of kids that would go to the school in the first and second years
 - Agent Two: Identify one person to prepare the mid day meal, and another to maintain the school accounts.
 - Community chits
 - Chit One: Population that would be served by the school: 500 families. You are illiterate.
 - Chit Two: Number of kids that would go to this school: 150 kids. You are literate.
 - Chit Three: Most girls drop out of school by third standard. but remember, your community wants this school. You are illiterate.
 - Chit Four: If this school is opened, your daughter can go to school and you want her to be well educated. You are illiterate.
 - Chit Five: Many girls from your village work as agricultural labourers. If the NGO comes to know about it, the school will not open and your community really wants to get this school. You are literate.

- Chit Six: The quality of primary and middle school education is very bad. But a girl from your village is now an IAS officer. You are illiterate.
- Chit Seven: You are illiterate.
- Chit Eight: You are illiterate.
- Chit Nine: You are illiterate.
- Chit Ten: You are illiterate.
- Post game discussion
 - What people chose to reveal (and not) in pre-game discussion
 - Access to information as an inequity
 - What kind of hierarchy emerges?
- Forms in which an 'outsider' engages with a community
 - Live with the community
 - Building a shared history
 - Developing trust and confidence in one another
 - Eg. Michael & Swati and Juna Mozda
 - Takes a lot of time
 - Scaling challenged
 - All-round development
 - Non symptomatic approach
 - Coalition / Alliance
 - Retains its 'outsider' identity – allowing the space for the community to maintain / develop its own identity
 - An equal partner, typically a complementary partnership
 - Negotiated common space requires effort from both sides
 - Tendency to drift towards a hierarchical relationship
 - Protected in their own comfort zones
 - Harness 'outside' resources to the benefit of the community
 - Eg. ICJB
 - Hierarchical
 - We tell, you do
 - Blinkered
 - Eg. Govt., Big NGOs

- Resource person
 - Improvement in certain standards
 - Typically a short term / visitor relationship
 - Eg. AID Chennai (Education), Theater trainings
 - Provides recognized skills/resources for the community
 - Channelizes passion / energy
 - Can slip into the 'find a problem to use the solution' model
- Funding Organizations
 - Financial support
 - Remains external
 - Could give a lot more (or very little) space for the group on the ground
 - Changes financial resources within the organization and the community
 - Eg. AID US
- About hierarchies
 - Greater improvements in a particular developmental parameter
 - One-way flow of information
 - Low to absent feedback mechanisms
- Hierarchy flags
 - One point contact
 - Pay disparity
 - Travel and training patterns
 - Parrots – extreme coherence or uniform ideology in communication
 - No course corrections or reviews since project inception
 - Planning meeting composition

Notes on Rural Livelihoods

- Rural Livelihoods / sources of income
 - Traditional, Farm labour, Farmer, Village store, Moneylending
 - Government / Contracts
 - Commuter

- Agents / Financial
- Seasonal migration / bonded labour
- Remittances from family members
- NGOs
- Why do we need interventions in rural livelihoods?
 - Lack of livelihood options
 - Didn't exist earlier, don't exist now
 - Caste and class hierarchies
 - Lack of investment in rural sector
 - Infrastructure development
 - Differential incentives
 - What free power?
 - Eroding of traditional livelihoods
 - Cobblers, 'lohars', foodgrain processing etc.
 - Artisans and craftspeople
 - Shortcomings of commercial sector jobs
 - Do not break hierarchies because they look for 'qualified' and connected people
 - Very little capacity building
 - Only scope for growth is migration
- Types of income-generation projects
 - Traditional
 - the ant, Dastkar
 - Livestock
 - Newer, market driven
 - Products - papads, furniture, jewelery
 - Contracting – running a bus, construction etc.
 - Skilled trades – radio and TV repair, handpump mechanics, battery maintenance, drivers etc.
 - Improving community + personal income
 - Community health worker
 - Resource-persons for sustainable agriculture

- Degrees of sustainability of interventions
 - Where is the market and how accessible is it?
 - Training – frequency and duration, distance, cost
 - Can they run the program themselves after a certain amount of time?
 - Skill development beyond the intervention
- What is the potential of NREGA?
 - Comparison with an income-generation scheme such as NABARD

Notes on Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security

Warm up

- Quick fire
 - Seasons and fruits
- Geography
 - Soil type
 - Rainfall
 - Crops

Main points of discussion

- Livelihoods of landless labor
 - Moving towards landed labor
 - Livelihood through land development
 - Community or leased land
 - Minimum wages
 - Finding alternate employment during lean periods
- Livelihood of marginal farmers
 - Where will the money come from?
 - increased production
 - reduced expenses
 - market regulation
 - producer – consumer networks
 - Training and capacity building
 - Rain-fed dry land
 - 'Internalizing' farm inputs
- Is it just a money problem?
 - What is the source of the marginalization?

- Inherited and seeking to break from the mould
- Lack of credit
- Focus on cash crops and decreased food security
- Govt. policies
- Agri institutions focus on 'fair weather' crops
- US farming sector example

- Glossary of terms
- Motivations & Approaches to alternative agriculture

	Individual	Group / NGO	Village	Govt.
Market driven	various	various		
Cost of farming		ToFARM, Nagai		Karnataka govt.
Food security / Nutrition		LEISA		
Spiritual		Auroville, AoL etc.		
Environmental			CSA, Hyd.	
Traditional	across the land			antagonistic

- GMOs
 - messages that you have heard from the anti GMO campaign
 - how do you contrast GMO vis-a-vis hybrids
 - traditional seeds are hybrids with longer history & following
 - terminator gene and its spread / diffusion
 - Further externalizing farm inputs – seeds, fertilizers, tools, etc.

Trip report

As communicated earlier, we had planned less of a speech and more of an interactive session during each chapter visit. So, for each topic, we planned some games, exercises and some discussion starters to get the ball rolling. Here's a brief description of how the visits went:

1. Buffalo Topic(s): Rural Livelihoods & general discussions

Buffalo was our first pit-stop, so before going into the topic straightaway, we decided to start with some 'icebreakers' (inspired by a discussion at Basic Needs, a group in Bangalore that works on the rights of People with Disabilities). We asked volunteers to say if they agreed or disagreed with the statements we displayed and why. Some examples:

- Residents of a village have been campaigning hard for NREGA work for more than a year without any success. A contractor offers to intercede and provide work, but will only pay half the minimum wage. The villagers accept the deal.
 - An activist (in India) you know and respect, who happens to be gay, has been arrested on Anti-Sodomy laws. Would you join the protests against his arrest?
 - A Dalit woman is raped in her village. Her family and the rest of the village negotiate a settlement with the assailant. The woman withdraws her complaint.
- The discussion was quite lively. Almost every statement drew responses from both sides of the issue and in some cases, there was a vigorous debate.

We next moved into the discussion on rural livelihoods. Here, we went through an overview of rural livelihoods – from the more traditional agriculture-based ones to the newer government and private opportunities. People did mention that NGOs are now providing livelihoods in many parts of rural India! We discussed the need for intervention in rural livelihoods – what are the reasons rural economies are not able to sustain themselves?

A discussion on the need for land distribution and of breaking caste hierarchies that impact livelihoods led to the question – do you have a Marxist ideology? Is AID red?! It was really good that the question was asked because we could get to the meat of the problem - unless structural inequities within the community are acknowledged and addressed, interventions can only be incremental and often are limited in scope.

At the end of the session, the feedback made me realize that we had not set the scene properly. Folks were expecting photos and personal anecdotes, and while many enjoyed our non-prescriptive approach, it was hard to get concrete take-home points. However, everyone seemed to enjoy the session, and that folks were sitting around chatting till 11:30 pm on a weekday night gave us hope (though it might just have been the pizza!). Our take-home was that we needed to introduce our format better and be a little less ambitious with the material to be covered, especially given the interactive nature of the session.

1.Penn State Topic(s): Rural livelihoods with focus on Raichur dt., Karnataka

We decided to exercise Penn State volunteers' drawing skills by asking them to sketch their image of rural livelihoods. Since some of us are less adept at this (!), we made sure to explain what our drawing represented.

I had visited Jagruta Mahila Sangathana, a group in Raichur dt., Karnataka that AID-Penn State has been supporting for ~8 years and was interested in fostering better communication between the two. I had sent the chapter my 10-page visit report in advance and decided not to focus on it unless there were specific questions. Instead, we started a discussion on the factors that would lead to disparities in development, such as education, caste, gender, geography (urban vs. rural, state) etc. To get a better picture of these variations, we did a little exercise. We split up into smaller groups of 2-3 people and each group looked through a

chapter in Karnataka's Human Development Report of 2003. This report compiles statistics from the Census, various NSSO surveys etc. to draw a picture of Karnataka's position and progress in Education, Health, Gender Rights etc. During our exercise, we also kept a focus on Raichur dt., women and Dalits (that being the target population of JMS). When compiling the data, we could clearly see that Raichur and the rest of the districts in Hyderabad Karnataka lagged behind the rest of the state.

The issue of migration and its impact on local communities came up in discussion, as did the increasing violence and insurgency in many parts of the country. When put thus, the need for intervention in rural India did not have to be explained further.

The feedback here also included requests for more personal anecdotes. Also, the 'numbers' exercise had become too long and drawn-out. But the game and exercise were appreciated. The comment of the day (and perhaps the entire trip) was from a long-time supporter of the chapter: 'You have the same problem as the groups you work with. You train a set of folks and they graduate, move to a different place. Its migration!'

2.Pittsburgh Topic(s): Sustainable agriculture & Community Health

We had 2 evenings with AID Pittsburgh volunteers and spent the first talking about sustainable, or rather alternative models of, agriculture. We talked about the distress in agricultural communities and the shortcomings of conventional 'one-size-fits-all' approach to farming. To get a better idea of alternative farming techniques, we discussed the motivations – environmental, food security, market-drive etc. and the scale – individual, village, district etc. We also played a clip from recordings we had made while talking to Nammalvar-ji, one of the leading figures promoting organic farming in Tamilnadu. We discussed self-sufficiency in food and the need to promote sustainable dry-land farming techniques in India. The LEISA (Low External Input Sustainable Agriculture) project that AID Pittsburgh supports in Karnataka was analyzed, especially its incorporating sustainable agriculture in NREGA and village development plans.

The next evening was devoted to Community Health. Individual and community based approaches to health were contrasted and examined. Examples of community health interventions such as nets and cleaning up of water bodies to prevent spread of malaria were shared. We also addressed the politics of health and health funding – how certain diseases, age groups etc. get a disproportionate share of research money. Finally, I shared my experiences meeting community health workers and their direct (improvement in health) as well as secondary (bridging caste barriers) impacts on communities.

Here too the feedback was that more personal anecdotes would be preferred (!) and that our attempted classification of alternative agricultural approaches was not helpful. But the discussions were found to be thought provoking and our general inputs into chapter functioning, funding etc. were found helpful.

3.Chicago Topic(s): General discussions

We arrived in Chicago on a weekday and therefore a chapter meeting was not possible. Instead, we had general discussions with 4 volunteers. The talk was freewheeling around the topics of our experiences over the years, the work of the groups we are associated with and the functioning of AID-Chicago. It was a thought-provoking evening with interested volunteers who, though their activity levels have gone up and down in the past, continue to be interested in the issues.

4.Minnesota Topic(s): Scope and scale of interventions, NREGA

AID-MN is our 'alma mater' and there were a few familiar faces. But the chapter has gone into a dormant stage in the past year. Yet, 7 people turned up and we had a good discussion with Sangtin Kisaan Mazdoor Sangathan (SKMS), the group that our Saathi Richa Singh works with, as the example. We used the map of Sitapur dt., UP where SKMS is based to get an idea of the distances SKMS organizers travel on a daily, weekly or monthly basis and the time and money spent for traveling. This led to a discussion of the reach of an organization and its level of involvement in the local community.

We also discussed land holdings and the impact of NREGA on rural communities. There was some concern expressed about the increased scope for corruption and we responded with stressing the need for community mobilization and with examples from the field. The funds supplied to rural communities were contrasted with the perks given to urban and industrial projects, SEZs etc. to provide more perspective.

With AID-MN being dormant, we hadn't expected much of a turnout or discussion so were pleasantly surprised! Hopefully, this is a sign of better things to come for the chapter...

5.Duke Topic(s): Insider/outsider and group dynamics

The plan at AID-Duke was to start our discussion at 8 pm after their CSH. We did wonder how much energy volunteers would have so late on a weekday evening, but folks were ready to go on. Earlier that afternoon, we had been brainstorming on a game/role-play that would highlight group dynamics. Once Naga, our host, realized that we were going to do more than talk, he began calling up people to come to the discussion and that surely helped as well!

The role-play was quite simple – the setting was a village where a new high school is being planned. Most people in the room would be villagers, while two would be the change agents – representatives of an NGO that would manage the school. Each person was given a chit with individual instructions which they could choose to share or not share. The background to the game was that the change agents are at the final stage of selecting the village as the site for the new school, but they feel there is something the village is not sharing with them that could

impact the success of the project. Their goal is to find out what this 'secret' is. On the other hand, the villagers are vested in seeing the school set up in their village. At the start, both the change agents and the villagers were allowed time by themselves to strategize – then came the interaction between the two groups.

The role play worked better than we expected. Both parties took the discussion in unexpected directions, and the game brought out group dynamics, hierarchies, how negotiations occur etc. The post-game discussion was quite insightful as well. Parallels were drawn between what played out and what they experience in the chapter.

From the game, we segued into a discussion of the ways in which outsiders could engage with a community – from living in it and eventually becoming a part of it to being an external remote funder. There was a lively discussion on whether AID-US works purely in a funding mode or provides resources to the community. This led to a brief discussion on how we could improve our contribution to our project partners.

The chapter found the game a valuable team exercise and I must say I learnt a good deal about interactions from watching them. The discussion and the analysis of various modes of engagement were found useful. Again, there was not much time for our personal anecdotes. But it was felt that the traditional mould of speaker/visitor was broken, which made us very happy!

6.Clemson Topic(s): Insider/outsider and group dynamics

AID-Clemson was not on our initial itinerary, but since we were traveling by road from Durham to Charlotte and then to Atlanta (courtesy Gautam), we contacted the Clemson folks. Their response was positive and enthusiastic – with a single day's notice, 12 volunteers came to meet us! The topic they chose was group dynamics, which made our work easy.

Here too, we started with a brief introduction and then got into the game. In Duke, Dwiji had brainstormed with the village while I worked with the change agents – this time we changed positions. As at Duke, the interaction between the two groups was lively. The change agents here took a confrontational approach and asked all kinds of questions that we hadn't prepped for, like the land available for the school, what parents expected for their kids (the answer was that they'd move to cities and send money home!) etc. The villagers responded with equal vigor – without lying, they sent the change agents off on the wrong track altogether!

We took another break for strategizing and reconvened. At this point, the village group started chanting 'We want the school!' Eventually, the change agents decided to recommend against opening the school in the village, frustrating the village group.

I personally was amazed to find so many parallels between this interaction and those we have experienced or heard of in the field. But on reflection, why shouldn't it be so? There are basic

human traits that will surface in any interaction, irrespective of culture, world-view, hierarchies etc.

We continued the discussion about modes of engagement, hierarchies within and between organizations and how we can enhance our contributions to the groups that we support. Finally, we moved into a discussion of AID Clemson. Because they do not have much funds, they consider themselves a small chapter but we disagreed – their volunteer strength and enthusiasm tells a different story! We strategized on ways they could be effective – links with 'richer' chapters, accessing common-pool funds, cross-chapter responsibilities etc.

7. Atlanta Topic(s): Introduction to AID & rural livelihoods

The group we met in Atlanta was truly a new chapter – many had come for the first or second time. The presence of seasoned volunteers like Gautam and Alka as well as Sachin's experiences with AID-New Mexico allowed us to have a good discussion on what AID is, the forum it provides and how volunteers can get connected to campaigns and interventions in a much deeper fashion. We discussed how the chapter can build visibility in the local community with tabling, talks, local volunteering etc.

In our discussion on rural livelihoods, we talked about traditional and new forms of rural livelihoods, the increased rates of seasonal migration and the impact of the failure of conventional farming techniques. We discussed the importance of food security and briefly debated the reasons for the current state of agriculture in India. There wasn't any time to discuss NREGA, so I suggested that the group do it at a later time.

The feedback was that context had been provided to what was discussed in meetings. One volunteer commented that our anecdotes about SKMS and Sitapur dt. made North India less terrorizing in his mind! A need to have more discussion on agriculture and health education was felt.

General comments

We had a great time with all the chapters we visited – thanks for hosting us! Since this was our first 'tour', we weren't sure how it would go. But from the first evening in Buffalo, the structured and unstructured sessions went smoothly. Almost everywhere, there was a little confusion because volunteers expected a talk and more personal anecdotes. But most seemed to enjoy the discussions, games and the focus on interaction.

Though all the games and exercises were fun, I'd like to specifically mention how much I enjoyed the role-play on group dynamics at Duke and Clemson. The volunteers took on their roles with zest and displayed their interpersonal skills as well as their guile and ingenuity. To me, this game illustrated the challenges faced in situations where information is withheld and the skill required in conducting successful negotiations.

We have a lot to learn and hope that you will continue to provide us feedback. About the almost universal desire for more personal anecdotes and stories, we consciously chose to underplay the personal in our talks because our experience is not that extensive – other speakers/visitors have a lot more to share. Further, we are trying to develop an analytical framework for each topic we presented. It seems to me that we do a lot of storytelling (which is important) in AID, but not as much analysis of the issue before jumping into the funding mode. But given the feedback, we might incorporate more of the personal in future sessions.

Lastly, I keenly felt the lack of time. Maybe it was bad planning on our part or just the breadth of the subject matter, but we never managed to wrap up the sessions satisfactorily. We plan to coordinate more such sessions in the future and will have to improve our time-management skills. Also, we'll call them 'workshops' so that people are inclined to budget more time :)

MISCELLANEOUS ARTICLES AND POSTS

Contributions to an online Forum discussion on inter-caste marriages

Hi folks,

It is great to see this issue discussed here. From what I have understood, inter-caste marriages were actively promoted by radical organizations, movements, Gandhian institutions etc. a generation or more ago. They do not seem to have the same kind of support or visibility today. But, in my opinion, caste divides are deepening, not narrowing. Some examples:

1. The recent reports that came out about the treatment of Dalit students in AIIMS – from not being allowed to play with other students to being forced to live on a separate floor – show that caste discrimination is strong in the 'educated' elite. The earlier anti-quota protests by students, which took the form of sweeping streets, were equally horrific in their implications of students' mindsets.
2. Ghettoization is increasing, not decreasing, in Indian cities. The difficulty of buying/renting an apartment when one has a Muslim or Dalit name is well known. Previously integrated localities have gradually become segregated throughout the country.
3. When mapping a locality, particularly in a rural area, the correlation between caste and economic status is so high that one does not need to ask where the poor people live – just ask where the Dalit basti is and you will find the low-lying (therefore vulnerable to flooding), unsanitary and cramped part of town. This is not a new phenomenon – it is just depressing to note that this hasn't changed much over the years.

Why are the above points important in the context of marriage? Whether arranged through parents/family or self-chosen, one's spouse tends to be from one's socio-economic background. And as the spheres of interaction between communities are reducing, so are the possibilities of finding common ground and possible life partners. As distrust between castes/religions are increasing, tolerance for relationships across these divides is going down. And given how intricately caste is interwoven with class, the challenges of an inter-caste marriage are not just societal and cultural, they are economic and class-related as well.

When such divides exist in our society, can one take refuge behind the language of choice? By the same token, dowry should be considered a personal choice – why oppose it, especially when both parties are willing? The sex ratio is most skewed in rich, educated communities. If educated, independent women are choosing to abort their female fetuses, shouldn't one respect their choice? I oppose this, because I see it as a forced choice and am concerned about its effects on society. Similarly, I oppose the practice of choosing one's spouse within one's caste, because I see the impacts of such a practice as solidifying caste identities and deepening divides.

Speaking to the point Shailabh raised about homogenization, I agree that there is a beauty in the diversity of food, language, practices and beliefs that exist in various parts of India. But these differences were not and are not solely due to caste. Geography plays a much larger role – for example, the Kannada spoken in Raichur dt. is almost unintelligible for a Mangalorean. Therefore, a marriage between members of the same caste from these two regions would result in significant loss of idiomatic expression and other aspects that enrich a language in the next generation. Thus homogenization almost always occurs when marrying outside one's immediate geographical community.

But more importantly, differences between equals can and should be celebrated as diversity. However, differences that perpetuate inequities and power balances are hierarchies and should be opposed.

As should be evident by now (!), I am a fervent promoter of not marrying within one's own caste. Given how privileged, independent and well-off most of us are, we should be able to weather the challenges of parental pressure, societal expectations and inertia (it is easier to search within my community or let my parents find me a spouse!). So many of us are trying to live an eco-friendly existence, to not pay bribes even though it makes our life more difficult and to make other personal changes that take extra effort but will ultimately be beneficial to our planet and society. Should we not make and promote personal changes to combat the biggest social ill that plagues India?

Regards,
Sudha

Friends,

Two stories about caste and marriage that I'd like to share (sorry, it's a little bit off-topic):

1. During our travels through India, we've been meeting a lot of people and discussing personal as well as philosophical, organizational etc. issues with them. We met a member of the Sewagram Ashram Board in Sewagram who is in an inter-religious marriage. She left her home in answer to JP's call in the 70s and joined a youth group. There, she met her future husband. When I asked her about inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, she said that she felt it could not be forced - because she and others were in a forum where people met across caste, religion and class, such associations happened automatically. There was opposition from family to her marriage, but time healed all rifts.

2. An activist from Tamilnadu shared an incident from a village where he works: they have 2 temples there, one for the 'upper' castes and one for the Dalits. During the temple festival, in the past, the Dalit temple idol would be paraded throughout the village, while the other idol would not be taken through the Dalit basti but just be left outside it for a few hours so that the

Dalits could pay their respects. As the Dalits in the village became politicized, they began wanting the non-Dalit deity's idol to be paraded through their streets. Last year, when the idol had been left outside their basti, they paraded it themselves through their streets. This led to tension in the village - threats between the communities etc. - and a peace committee was set up to calm the situation. The peace committee deliberated and made the decision to henceforth limit the parade of the Dalit deity to the Dalit streets and the non-Dalit deity to the non-Dalit streets!

My goal of sharing these stories is to highlight the fact that divides between communities are increasing. Where are today's equivalent of radical movements, where youth came together and formed new communities? Even on a website like <http://idontwantdowry.com>, caste is a filter.

Madhu made a valid point earlier about class - that marrying in our own class does not diminish inequity. But I am afraid that caste as a barrier often pervades even within the same class. The tensions in the Tamilnadu village rose with the upward mobility of Dalit families. I remember visiting a village in Bundelkhand where a Pandit-led mob went on a rampage in the Dalit basti, killing a few people and burning down homes. The trigger, according to the people there and the local organization, was that the Dalit community was becoming richer due to remittances from cities.

So while middle class inter-caste marriages are not very radical, they are a step in the right direction. As Nishank points out, deadlines and parental thought processes still push youth towards marriages within one's own caste. Interestingly, the sub-castes that Madhu pointed out among Rajput-Bhil etc. intermarriages seem to be emerging in middle classes too. My in-laws have a Brahmin-Lingayat marriage and apparently marriages are being promoted within this sub-caste!

Further, for good or for bad, urban middle and upper classes are trendsetters for the rest of the country. With media and popular thought being driven by these classes, any move away from caste can only be good, in my opinion.

Regards,
Sudha

Not just an unemployment allowance (co-authored with Dwiji)

A milestone was achieved recently in the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in Uttar Pradesh. The UP govt. approved payment of unemployment benefits of almost Rs. 15 Lakhs to 826 families in 20 villages of Mishrikh and Pisawa blocks of Sitapur district.

A person living in a rural district can apply for work under NREGA with either the Pradhan, Panchayat secretary, or the Block Development office. If s/he is not given work within 15 days of filing the application, s/he can apply for an unemployment allowance. If 100 days of work is not provided to the applicant's family in that year, they are entitled to an unemployment allowance.

Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan is a movement that came together in 2005 in the Mishrikh block of Sitapur dt. The farmer-labour movement was mobilized on the issue of bringing irrigation waters in the Islamnagar Rajbaha (canal). The rajbaha was dry and had been written off as unusable, even though the UP Irrigation Dept. continued to issue contracts for its cleanup every year. After a few months of mobilizing in the affected villages and sustained non-violent campaigning at the block and district offices of the Irrigation Dept., water was released into the rajbaha for the first time in decades. The success of the campaign is underscored by the fact that water continues to flow through the canal three years after the campaign. During this campaign, the Sangathan first took on the issue of payment of minimum wages and the inclusion of women in the work force.

Sitapur district was one of the 200 pilot districts in which NREGA was launched in 2005. Realizing the potential of the Act, the Sangathan decided to take up its proper implementation in the villages they were active in. The non-issuance of job cards, illegal charges taken for photographs, refusal to receive work applications, refusal to provide work, denial of work to women, illegalities in measurement of work done, payment of less than minimum wages and various other shortcomings in the implementation of NREGA were taken up. Farmer-labourers from nearby Pisawa block joined the campaign and became an integral part of the Sangathan in this period. While tackling these issues at the day-to-day level, the Sangathan decided to pursue unemployment benefits for those who had applied for work but had not received any. The campaign for unemployment benefits was launched in Nov. 2007 as a test of the administration's sincerity in implementing NREGA. It was also part of a strategy to pursue a targeted campaign while engaged in tackling the various local issues relating to the implementation of the Act.

The district officials initially refused to acknowledge that the applicants were entitled to unemployment benefits. In December 2007, after a 10-day dharna at the district collectorate, the District Magistrate intervened and set up a six member committee, with equal representation from the govt. and the Sangathan, to investigate the claims. This committee submitted its report in March 2008. This was opposed by the Pradhan association. In response, the CDO asked the committee to give them a hearing. He also asked the committee to calculate the individual payments that were due to the eligible farmer-labourer families. The committee submitted its final report in October 2008 establishing the eligibility of 826 families to receive Rs. 14,99,340 in unemployment wages. As and when the district administration used stalling tactics due to vested interests or a lack of initiative, the Sangathan used non-violent protests involving larger and larger numbers of farmer-labourers to move the administrative machinery.

Finally on January 15th 2009, a govt. order was issued by the office of the Commissioner of Rural Development authorising the disbursal of unemployment benefits. The order also called for disciplinary actions to be taken against the responsible officials during the time period in which employment was denied, as confirmed by the committee. The then B.D.O.s of Mishrikh and Pisawa subsequently filed a writ petition in the Lucknow High court challenging the constitution and composition of the committee. In a quick decision, the two judge bench noted that the Commissioner of Rural Development is the responsible and empowered authority under NREGA and that the appellants should file a representation before the commissioner within three days of the court's order. It went further and noted that the Commissioner has the responsibility to ensure that deserving families are not denied their rights in the process of reviewing the work of the committee.

During the Sangathan's latest dharna in Sitapur between 16th and 20th January, a representative of the district administration confirmed receiving the order for disbursal of unemployment benefits from the state offices in Lucknow and read it out aloud to much cheering and jubilation. The dharna was ended after five days when the district administration acceded to eight other points on the local aspects of the implementation of the Act and laid out action plans. Camps at the block offices every second and fourth Thursday for issuance of new job cards and display of the revised measurement of work standards on the walls of the panchayat and block buildings are a few of the steps to be taken up by the administration.



Returning to their villages in a Vijay Jaloos (Victory Rally) on Jan 20th, 2008

It is the first time that the UP govt. will be disbursing unemployment benefits for those denied work under NREGA. Beyond this, the setting up of a committee with equal representation from the Sangathan and the govt. is a big step in participation of civil society in the implementation of a govt. programme. Different govt. programmes have incorporated people's participation in planning, monitoring and oversight as part of their definition. The committee set up by the District Magistrate of Sitapur to look into the demand of unemployment allowance is in keeping with this spirit. This decision came about only after sustained campaigning by the Sangathan and stands testimony to the strength of people's power.

It is also reassuring to see that once again a people's movement has been able to amend the designs of govt. officials (more than once) and enforce a fairer implementation of a govt. programme. Each of the voices in the Sangathan has grown stronger as the campaign has progressed. Questions have been raised and action plans are being charted to tackle not just the challenges in the implementation of NREGA but also other govt. programmes and schemes. The coming days will reveal how the strength of mobilization can change the rural landscape of Sitapur within the existing framework of laws, programmes and schemes.