

We will Dig Our Well

Swati & Michael, Juna Mozda, September 1998

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Dear Friends,

A year flew like wind. The past year has been so full of activities that we are again four months late in producing our eighth annual letter. Still, here we are with experiences and reflections of last year. Some friends have suggested that we should write twice instead of once a year. Perhaps we will try.

We have also gradually begun getting more involved in Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti work, which often takes us away from Mozda. This does affect our work in Mozda, but looking at the way natural resources being captured by a few from the masses, the way farming and rural life styles are facing onslaught from an urban/semi-urban culture(our friend calls it the attack of oil based society on soil based society), we can not stand on the borders being passive onlookers! So we try to do whatever we can, best to our capabilities and capacities. This work has also begun helping our horizons widen and help take stock of the situation a bit better.

Hoping the best for everyone,



Watershed Management

In our last years' letter we have written some of the dilemmas we face in this work. Despite them, with greater extension work and detailed planning meetings with people, we have managed to work in three villages, with a total of 60 farmers for soil and water conservation last year. Two of the villages were totally new to us. The new villages were Pansar(Pandhai in the local dialect) and Bogaj. In Pansar we've formed a village committee for soil and water conservation and the secretary of the committee is very sincere and active and spends considerable time for the village.

Last year around 700 cubic metres of stone and 2000 cubic metres of mud work was carried out. Around Rs. 53,000 was spent and 7,500 kg of wheat was distributed. Most of the work was carried out in village Pansar.

Last year's watershed work in Pansar encouraged them very much. Since it was the first year, not all farmers had joined. But this year we were told by the volunteers right from the start that most of the farmers would be joining.

We had planned to organise training of volunteers to increase their participation and for exposure to other areas and ways of doing the same work. This was organised in cooperation with Development Support Centre, Ahmedabad. The training was held in Saurashtra, about 500 km from Mozda. Most of the volunteers (six from Pansar and three from Mozda) travelled that far for the first time.

The exposure and lessons about measuring bunds did have a very positive effect. It increased the confidence of all volunteers and made them share their knowledge as well. In the end, they were very motivated for this year's work and this motivation rubbed off on all the farmers as well it seems.

After the training we had asked them to have a meeting in the village with all interested farmers and collect preliminary information about them. Then we had a meeting with them to finalise the details.

Our meeting was a surprise to us. The people had most of the answers to our questions ready and had some very specific questions to ask. About 150

farmers had gathered and the meeting was over in 20 minutes!! The decision - making process was very much facilitated by the volunteers.

This year nearly all the farmers of Pandhai village, 180 of them, joined the watershed programme, making bunds. Around 1,643 cubic metres of stone work was done and 3,384 cubic metres of earth work was carried out. This has provided direct protection to around 280 acres of farmland and indirect protection to over 200 acres. The total expense was Rs. 1,25,000 and 17,000 kg of wheat was distributed. Farmers contributed over Rs. 12,000 in cash and the rest was in kind. The rest of the money was contributed by two trusts.

More bunding was needed and we could not support all of it due to limited resources. Sixty five farmers extended their bunds without any support from us. Around 223 cubic metres of stone work and 224 cubic metres of mud work was carried out without any support from us. Repairing of old bunds is also carried out by the farmers themselves without any support from us.

We have written before that there were three volunteers from Mozda. One of them was a farmer and a so called 'illiterate'. We selected him because we have found him very interested, keen, hardworking, adaptive, and open to new ideas and techniques. He has always been around to help us when we've needed help. When he was informed that he too is to join this training he just could not believe it and could not contain the joy as he heard this.

He was most active during the field visits in the training. Apart from the training of soil and water conservation structures, he very keenly observed every farm activity going around. He was impressed by various techniques of farming he saw and as we found out later, by the fact that people had worked so hard to build irrigation wells.

Upon his return to Mozda after the training, he had meetings with this extended family and revived the idea of digging a well on their farm for irriga-

tion. They are some of the most diligent farmers of Mozda and have fairly well managed farms. They had a well which was used for irrigation of vegetable plots in winter but was too small to irrigate a field and they wanted to make this well bigger to double their farm production. After two or three meetings amongst the family, the contributing members were convinced enough and gave a nod. The farmer came one day to us and said, "if you provide the needed help, we will dig our well and construct it to increase our productivity."

We had a long discussion with him and it was decided that most of the labour would be contributed by them and they would also fetch sand for masonry work and we shall raise funds for everything else.

They agreed and started digging the well. They are very hard-working and digging was properly finished in time. Sand could not be fetched in time before the rains began so the well could not be finished before monsoon but will be finished this year.

Health Work

We have written last year that a doctor from SEWA-Rural, a health NGO, came once a month to Mozda to run a dispensary (an OPD). This arrangement went on well for a year, first Friday of every month. Every month we used to organise informing people in all the surrounding villages about this OPD. All patients with chronic illnesses coming to us during the month were also informed about the next date.

The idea behind having a doctor once a month was to be able to treat chronic illnesses and try and detect other diseases which we couldn't. Also, it was in part an experience for people that good health care is available at a reasonable cost.

At the end of a year, we found that very few patients were coming to the OPD. The reasons, as we've understood are:

1. It is a habit of the people here not to follow up or even finish the medicine when the

health improved a bit.

2. People search for a doctor only when the health worsens substantially. at that time, a doctor may not be available here.
3. A gap of one month was too long for the people to remember. also first Friday of every month was not very easy to remember.
4. After all these years of surviving without a public health service, people have come to adjust to the quacks in Dediapada. Changing this relationship is not all that easy.

Along with the OPD, health education of the patients was also carried out by community health project workers of SEWA-Rural with posters and leaflets.

The energy, efforts and money spent to organise this dispensary was not properly utilised as there were too few patients. Hence we decided to discontinue the dispensary.

As before, now also people from surrounding 8-10 villages come to us for medicines. We are considering whether we can organise health training for the youth of these villages.

When we moved to Mozda, one of our first concerns was health problems here. Like all remote regions, there is very little by way of infrastructure here. There is practically no public health service.

In the last seven years we've spent here, we've spent some time and energy to understand people's needs and attitude and have tried various programmes as per our capacities and understanding. After the experiences gained, we feel that perhaps the right system for this area would be village level health workers in this village and a good referral centre in Dediapada.

Samaj Women's Group

The women's group active since four years has been named Samaj women's group and this, in a way, has instilled new enthusiasm in the members. Monthly meetings are regularly held and savings activity also goes on. Women have shown interest in night classes, but we have not been able to start them this

year.

Women becoming active, saving money, going on educational trips etc. was not received well by some men it seems. We had sensed this and had tried to talk to them and discuss various programmes with them as well. However they were not interested and they tried to instigate the women and we did have to deal with some difficult situations. We found that the only way out was to stay firm and go on.

This year we could also do better planning for dal making. We distributed information sheets about dal and also made some advertisement. Three friends took responsibility of distributing dal in Vadodara, Ahmedabad and Bombay. However, we had to make special effort to buy pigeon peas this year as the crop was not very good. Some of our friends in Mozda helped get peas.

The people who consume dal are saying that the quality of dal has improved. But still there are some people who do not like the looks of this dal as it is not polished, while there are others who prefer this dal to any other dal.

There were other difficulties in dal making as well this year. While dal-making was going on, there were three deaths in our hamlet. One of them was death of the husband of one of the most enthusiastic member of the group. The whole atmosphere was quite gloomy and dal making stopped for many days.

The other difficulty was there were some government employment available this year. Like all other govt. employment, this road making activity paid a lot (compared to other wages in the local economy), no responsibilities and little work had to be done. So going for this work became an attractive proposition and some women took it. So dal making kept on getting delayed. The process of dal making is a long and tedious one. The peas pass through the mill thrice before becoming dal. Seasoning in the sun, applying oil and hand-picking are needed. Timing of all these activities vis a vis temperature is also important. On the other hand women in

urban areas are always in a hurry to buy dal, as soon as the new one comes to the market. We get a continuous stream of letters asking us the date of delivery and some orders are cancelled as we are late! Explaining this to the women is not very easy. In addition to all this there are those men who try to incite the women by saying that this is a little paying job, you are getting conned etc. Mani, a young woman who was coordinating production played a very good role in educating women. We explained that our credibility was at stake if we could not supply dal in time. Still, we were a bit late in supplying dal this time.

After all this, the activity has become self sustaining and pays the women fairly well. We have used some money from the reserve to buy a new machine.

We aim to train the women to slowly take over all the responsibilities and production be controlled by them fully. But this will take a long time. A young man from Mozda took charge of maintaining accounts and Mani coordinated buying peas, production, quality control, weighing, packing etc. We consider it a challenge to train all of them enough to do all these activities by themselves.

Environmental Work

We have been working to help make life in villages self sufficient and full of prosperous. Along with that we've kept our eyes (and ears) open to policy changes and the effects due to their implementation.

Liberlisation, globalisation of economic policies and industries are having very serious long-term effect on our society. Some development is definitely visible but capturing the fundamental common property resources like land, forest and water is going on at a much rapid pace. Economic disparity is increasing social tension and general discontent.

The visible effects of this industrial development immediately visible are:

- * capturing of natural common property resources by private companies
- * This directly deprives the common people from their only productive assets, leading

to destitution

- * widespread pollution
- * slums, gambling, prostitution and freely available liquor even in villages

In such a situation, like minded friends in Bharuch district with other people have formed Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti (Environmental Protection Group). The group would try to solve problems through study, awareness generation, research, communication and consultation and mobilisation.

Currently the group works on:

1. Gujarat Mineral Development Corporation (GMDC) mines lignite (brown coal) for the last 15 years near Rajpardi in Bharuch district. Due to this mining activity, drinking and irrigation water of surrounding villages has been lost. Rivers are silted, acidic effluents flow in the river, land is submerged, displacement has taken place and the corporation is still trying to displace again.

After communicating with GMDC, we have reached an agreement with them to mitigate these problems. The people are ready for protests and organising against these excesses by the company if the agreement is not properly implemented.

2. The Gujarat Industrial Development Corporation is planning to make the Jhagadia industrial estate a mega chemical industrial estate. The people of these villages have no clue about what this entails and they are not being informed. We are trying to build awareness in these villages and are trying to explain what a mega chemical industrial estate might entail. We have been able to establish contact in 25-30 villages. A voice is rising from many villages "no hazardous chemicals in our vicinity".

3. Most of the two thousand odd industries in Ankleshwar are chemical industries. Due to lax monitoring and controls by government agencies, pollution is widespread here. A preliminary survey in settlements around the industrial estate showed most of the 65 deep wells (bored for domestic use) to be contaminated. Most of the water is col-

oured, foul smelling. Experts have said that it would probably be contaminated with heavy metals as well. We are trying to carry forward this study and also to make people aware of what exactly is happening.

Similar situation either exists or is in the making for almost all industrial areas of Gujarat. We feel that a voice has to come up against this indiscriminate destruction of natural resources.

While working on these issues we

experience people's expectations and understanding closely on one hand, while on the other hand we also get a first hand experience of the callousness and unpreparedness of various government agencies. In the process of what the politicians and industrialists call 'development' the common people often are totally forgotten and ignored.