

Movement and Action Network for Transformation in Rural Areas (MANTRA) - 2016



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Movement and Action Network for Transformation in Rural Areas (MANTRA)

An alternative paradigm of Community-led Habitat Development in rural Odisha, India

*“Our village is better than the town. We have 24*7 piped water supplies to all families, without exception. Every family has its own toilet and bathing room as well. When we seek marriage alliances, our daughters ask us – ‘would there be similar facilities there as well?’”* says Lalita Malik of Tamana village in Ganjam district of Odisha excitedly when asked what changes they see in their lives in the recent years.

More than 69,000 families across 1206¹ villages in Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Andhra Pradesh, today echo similar sentiments. These are people, who have participated in and, subsequently taken ownership of the water and sanitation programme promoted by Gram Vikas.

Gram Vikas is a rural development organization working with poor and marginalized communities of Odisha since 1979. Presently, it is operational in 25 districts of the State. The programme has also been piloted in 9 villages in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh in collaboration with other NGOs. Since 1992, Gram Vikas has been implementing its community-based sanitation and water supply programme, in which each family in the village builds its own toilet and bathing room, with piped water supply from a common overhead water tank, ensuring 24*7 access to protected piped water supply to all families throughout the year. MANTRA (Movement and Action Network for Transformation in Rural Areas) is the overarching framework of Gram Vikas’ habitat development initiatives.

¹ 69,219 households across 1206 villages were covered under the water and sanitation programme as on 31st March 2016.

The context

The issue of water and sanitation has been recognized at international levels for many years now. There is also no dearth of statistical data at the global and national level, which point out the poor state of affairs in the area of water and sanitation.

Odisha, one of the poorest states in India, has a population of close to 42 million of which 83% live in rural areas (Census 2011); over 57% of the population is below the poverty line, defined as Rs.12,000 (\$240) per family per annum. Although government figures show 55% coverage of sanitation, the Census 2011 data reveals 85% households in rural areas practice open defecation. Only 25% households are connected with piped water.

Impact on health & women: In the early 1990s, Gram Vikas conducted studies and found that over 80% of the cases of morbidity and mortality in rural Orissa could be traced to poor quality of drinking water. This was to a great extent, a consequence of the callous attitude towards human waste disposal. Human waste, in its raw form, found its way to the same water bodies, people are dependant upon.

In the absence of proper mechanisms for sanitation, women have to bear the terrible indignity of defecating in the open. In order to achieve some level of privacy, women rise before dawn and have to endure the humiliation of searching for discrete locations to defecate.

Women spend a better part of their day fetching water for household needs. This drudgery is more acute during summers, when women have to spend hours together, traversing nearly four to five kilometers to fetch water. In most villages, the women would also take along with them, their girl children to fetch that extra little water they could carry. This meant that sending girls to school was given lower priority and as a result, attendance figures for girl children were abysmal.

In the absence of a protected enclosure, women are forced to bathe in the common village pond. Due to presence of men on the other side of the pond, women are mostly forced to resort to insufficient and hurried cleaning of their bodies. Moreover, in summers, communal bathing in turbid waters of a shallow pond is a major cause for the spread of skin diseases.

Social exclusion: The experience in Odisha showed that exclusion – of *dalits*², *adivasis*³, backward castes, widows, and women in general – is the bane of rural society. This has grown into a deep-rooted hegemonic system, where the excluded now believe that it is their fate to be excluded and those excluding them believe that it is their right to do so. To achieve an improvement in the health status and a better quality of life in rural areas, Gram Vikas felt strongly that, a process where communities go through an experiential learning of social inclusion is absolutely necessary.

The realization

Gram Vikas realized that water and sanitation might be the only way where an entire community could come together to have their first experiential learning of inclusion. What was important was to come up with a win-win solution for all the stakeholders in the village. In the community-based sanitation and water supply programme implemented by Gram Vikas, water and sanitation forms an entry point activity, aiming to improve the quality of lives of rural areas, demonstrating as to how a socially inclusive, gender equitable, people-friendly and financially viable model of sustainable and holistic development can be constructed, where everybody is benefitted. Those who had been previously excluded from most development activities, now become a part of the progress that the entire community is making. Even those who have been excluding others from different spheres of society benefit since from the point of view of environmental sanitation, it is in their interest that every single individual in the village has access to a means of safe disposal of human waste.

² *Dalits* were considered 'Untouchables' in the Hindu Caste system. During the struggle for Independence, Gandhi referred to them as '*Harijan*' or the Children of God. They are designated as Scheduled Castes under the Constitution of India.

³ *Adivasis* means indigenous people, designated as Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution of India

The notion that rural masses basically need only low-cost (almost always taken to mean low-quality) solutions to their problems is by now a part of the psyche of policy makers. There is abject neglect of the rural people's needs and their aspirations. Plans rolled out from the top and histories of short-term low-quality fixes to problems in rural areas have contributed to their low self-esteem and dignity.

What is required basically is addressing the feeling of helplessness that has enveloped the minds of rural poor due to their inability to even attain a 'threshold level of quality of life.' The 'threshold level of quality of life' refers to a situation where communities have satisfied the most crucial basic needs of life and are in a position to dream of further improvements. We believe that this 'threshold level' is a pre-requisite for the rural poor to begin to feel a sense of dignity and self-worth – of being second to none.

We also realized that institutional mechanisms could be developed around this programme, which would be the first experience for a community managing its own village institution and financial resources. The marginalised sections of the community need to be given opportunities to sit together with the more powerful sections and negotiate issues regarding the village on equitable terms. This builds the capacities of the community and instills in people a high level of confidence. Villagers learn how to deal with conflicts and act as pressure groups against vested interests within their village and outside. They learn to question and hold accountable the Village Committee that is elected by them. Villagers learn the ropes of maintaining public accounts, organizing general body meetings and elections.

The Mechanism

Under MANTRA, every household in the village constructs for itself, a toilet and bathing room, with 24-hour piped water supply to both the toilet and bathing room as well as to the kitchen of the house. The water is supplied from an overhead water tank constructed on the basis of estimates of per capita consumption of water (of 70 liters per day), projected for the population twenty years hence. This is done so that every household can have 24-hour

running water supply from their taps. The water is pumped up using electric pumps where available, and in the hilly areas the water is sourced from perennial springs using the gravity flow system.

People contribute at least 50% of the cost of toilets and bathing rooms (costing a total of Rs. 26,000) and up to 10% of the cost of establishing water supply system. The idea is to make people contribute substantially, since, that is critical in bringing a strong sense of ownership for the assets created. People construct their own toilets and bathing rooms with technical and organizational assistance from Gram Vikas. Gram Vikas facilitates families to access Rs. 12,000 under the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (the national programme on Sanitation) towards construction of an individual toilet and bathing room. People generate the rest through local materials (sand, stones, boulders, aggregates etc), physical labour as well as cash contributions. In case of piped water supply system, Gram Vikas also facilitates access to resources under the National Rural Drinking Water Project (NRDWP), wherein the government contribution is to the tune of 90%. Again, people bear the remainder of the costs.

The initiation of the programme is subject to the generation of a 'corpus fund' by the village, to which every single household contributes Rs.1,000 on an average (the poor give less and the better off more, but the poorest widow also contributes at least Rs.100). Completing the collection of this upfront payment is considered to be an 'acid test' of commitment for the communities where people collectively confirm that they are willing to be a part of this programme. The corpus fund ensures that 100% coverage is maintained at all times in villages and when new households are added to the village, the interest accruals from the corpus is used to extend the same subsidy to them so that they may be able to construct their own toilets and bathing rooms. Thus, the responsibility of meeting the cost of construction material purchased from market (which Gram Vikas today provides in the form of an advance) for the future is taken over by the Village Committee to provide for new families in the village.

Gram Vikas firmly believes that the poor can and will pay for their development. It strongly contends the attitude of political patronage and bureaucratic concessions that normally accompany the provision of any service for the rural poor and marginalized. However, it also feels that the rural poor must have access to services fulfilling their basic needs as a matter of right, and not due to any form of patronage dispensation. To put the issue in perspective, it is pertinent to bear in mind that in urban areas, one is witness to enormous subsidies granted to people in facilities ranging from electricity connections, drainage and sewerage, education etc. For example, urban consumers are charged anything ranging from 3%-12% of total costs incurred on maintaining water supply system in cities. Compare this with villages that have implemented their own systems, where people would be paying for the complete maintenance of such facilities after the initial installation. Even within rural landscape, ironic though it might sound, perceptive people notice that it costs less to irrigate crops than to provide drinking water for people!

There are social costs involved in making basic services available to the disadvantaged, which governments and society, at large, must bear. It is towards bearing this social cost that Gram Vikas attracts government and donor funds. The subsidy, that meets the cost of external materials used for construction, is raised as seed capital and is accessed from a variety of sources including government schemes, development donor agencies and private financial institutions.

Before construction of the toilets and bathing rooms, young men and women, working as unskilled labourers, are trained in masonry. On completion of the training, they construct the toilets, bathing rooms, overhead water tanks and later on, houses, under the supervision of master masons and technical personnel. These newly trained masons are assured of work for at least one year if they so desire. Some of them go on to become master masons, leading trainings in other project areas, or successfully securing contracts for work in nearby urban centers. These people who, earlier, could not earn even Rs.100 per day in non-agricultural

season begin to get Rs.200-350 after the training and between Rs.350-500 after a year or two. None of these masons sit idle due to lack of work opportunities/offers.

Sustainability of the water source

Gram Vikas is of the view that an open sanitary well is the best for water supply primarily because an open well can be recharged. It believes that one has a right to extract water from the earth only to the extent that one can recharge the aquifer. Sourcing water through deep bore wells from below the impervious level is nearly impossible to recharge through water recharging techniques and should be the last recourse. There are other dangers as well. Quite often, one hears of the presence of water pollutants like arsenic, nitrates and fluorides in drinking water. All these pollutants are present mostly in water drawn from bore wells (tube wells). Sanitary dug wells are tested for water quality at regular intervals and villagers organize themselves to clean these wells whenever required.

To ensure that the dug wells do not run dry, appropriate water recharge and water harvesting mechanisms are undertaken. These follow best practices of watershed management based on the 'ridge to valley' approach. Specific activities include pond excavation, gully plugging, continuous contour trenches and water absorption trenches to reduce the velocity of runoff water and to further harvest rainwater.

In addition to pumping ground water, Gram Vikas has also been able to bring about technological innovations to beat the obstacles that certain villages face in remote hilly areas. In the past, it has had great success with sourcing water from springs/streams on higher hill slopes. This water, once tapped at a higher altitude, easily fills up an overhead water tank located at a lower altitude using the gravity flow principle. More recently, it has also been successful in innovative experiments like sourcing water for a village from the bottom of a sanitary dug well located at a much higher altitude, thus, reducing the dependence on perennial springs/streams.

Programme sustainability

The most prominent determinant of the success of the behaviour change process initiated by Gram Vikas is whether 100% people in the village are regularly using toilets and bathing rooms and also keeping them clean. Once the toilets and bathing rooms are constructed and water supply systems established, the village committee lays down several codes of behaviour for every one. Any deviation from these is met with rather heavy fines. The village becomes free from open defecation and any one defecating anywhere near the village within one km radius has to pay a fine ranging from Rs 50-500. A dirty toilet attracts a fine of Rs 10-25. Because of these social pressure tactics, people get used to toilets and the villages have 100% toilet usage and most importantly, the toilets are kept clean. In addition, every week/fortnight, school children move from house to house, inspecting toilets and bathing rooms. Children clean any dirty toilet spotted, a penalty is paid by the household and the money collected goes towards the school fund.

Another critical indicator of the success of this programme is whether there are sustainable mechanisms in place for people themselves to take care of costs related to operations and maintenance. In MANTRA villages, once all toilets and bathing rooms are constructed and the piped water supply is in place, all families are expected to pay a monthly fee (less for the poorer people) as fixed by respective village committees which is sufficient to cover the salary of the pump operator and maintenance costs of water supply systems. The monthly collections contribute to a maintenance fund established in every village. In quite a few villages, 0.25%-0.50% of the gross product at the time of harvest is contributed towards the maintenance fund. Again, this is socially just as the landless do not have to pay. The village pond is used for community pisciculture, once pressures of other uses are lifted off it. Common wastelands are developed and used for community-managed income generating activities. The returns from such activities also go to the maintenance fund. One or two village youth receive training in plumbing and in handling electrical equipment and are able to service the infrastructure, reducing the village's dependence on external support.

Emphasis on personal hygiene

Gram Vikas staffs engage with women self-help groups to impress upon them the importance of personal hygiene. Small, but instructive messages about using soap for hand washing after toilet use, bathing regularly and wearing clean clothes are passed on during the regular meetings. Due to the availability of a bathing room, women would find it easier to take care of their personal cleanliness and hygiene. In addition, children are repeatedly guided in schools about the importance of hand washing, keeping their hair clean, keeping nails short and clean etc. Between the mothers and the children, there is often a mutually reinforcing cycle at work, making the need for personal hygiene an ingrained one.

Strengthening local governance structures

The programme involves each and every family in the village without exception. 100% consensus ensures that even the poorest and most marginalized benefit from the same level of service and have an equal say in deciding how the project should be implemented. This minimizes the chances of the systems established falling into disrepair or disuse. In villages where the programme is established, the village institutions represent interests of all sections, and attempts are made to develop necessary capacities so that they are able to manage conflicts. The village committees have proportionate representation of all caste and class groups in the community. Gram Vikas continues to remain three to five years to build capacities of women and the excluded so that they can participate on an equal level. For the first time the poorest woman, the widow, or the *dalit* (untouchable) feels that s/he has a voice, which will be heard and which matters.

The initial effort to get the participation of women by bringing them into the general bodies or executive committees of these villages did not have the desired results. So, a separate general body exclusively of women - where an adult woman from every household is a member - was attempted. Here, women opened up and began to participate in the discussions pertaining to various issues of general concern. People elect an equal number of women and men to the Executive Committees. This was a learning process for Gram Vikas and a lot of

efforts went into the inclusion of women general body members and executive committee members, before they could sit as equals with men at the same meetings and express their opinions without any fear or inhibition.

Over time, both men and women begin to accept the enriching role that women can successfully play outside of their families. This is reflected in the respect given to them and in the loosening up of traditional roles, codes of conduct and, gradually, in power relations. Women have taken over the responsibilities of maintenance and monitoring of water supply and toilets, in resolving conflicts, organising mass protests, enforcing programme codes in the village and in advocacy beyond the village. They are also confident and firm in their interaction with government officials, banks and other outsiders.

Each village forms a village society with the elected representatives to the Executive Committee as members, which is registered as a legal body. The legally recognised status enables villages to leverage development resources in a more effective manner. It takes a lot of time and energy to build the capacities of erstwhile un-represented, excluded sections of a village community, and for them to demand accountability from other committee members and also for themselves, to be accountable when in positions of responsibility. During the 3-5 years that Gram Vikas remains in these villages, communities learn how to deal with conflicts and act as pressure groups against vested interests within their village and outside. Villagers learn the ropes of maintaining public accounts, organizing the general body meetings and elections.

Relationship with Panchayats⁴: Once people begin to experience managing their village water supply and sanitation systems, they begin to take interest in the *Ward Sabha (Palli Sabha)*⁵. Most Executive Committees have ward members or other *Panchayat* representatives. The general body, which is the *Palli Sabha*, is strengthened and supported to

⁴ The 73rd amendment of the Indian constitution instructs the state on significant devolution of powers to Panchayats (a three tier structure of governance - at the village, block and district levels). In Orissa, a Panchayat typically comprises five or more habitations.

⁵ Palli Sabha is the lowest tier of the Panchayats – it is approximately the equivalent of a village that Gram Vikas works with.

formulate micro-plans for presentation in the *Gram Sabha*⁶. As the programme is being implemented in a cluster approach, there would usually be quite a few habitations of a *Panchayat* implementing the programme. When united communities come together, they form a ‘critical mass’ that can demand a change in their respective *Panchayats*. These villages together mount great pressure for the proper functioning of the *Gram Sabha* and hold to account the elected representatives of the *Panchayat*. They are also able to access funds for the programme and also for any further development activities that need to be carried out in the interest of their village. Establishing linkages with the Panchayats is a step towards evolving strong people-centric local governments.

Replication

The first 6 years of the programme (1992-1998) were characterized by the ‘push’ factor. From 1999, the ‘pull’ factor has been gradually emerging. The demonstration effect is clear as neighbouring villages are tempted to undertake the programme. Old villages often play a key role in motivating new villages. People perceive the enhanced social capital in villages, which are a part of the programme. The visible reduction in the incidence of water-borne diseases, reduction in the drudgery of women and the comfort of privacy they now enjoy are also powerful motivating factors for adjoining villages. An interesting development has been that girls from MANTRA villages are now reluctant and often refuse to be married in villages where there are no toilets, bathing room and piped water.

Impact

Studies have shown an 85% reduction in the incidence of water-borne diseases in these villages. Over 90% eligible children in all these villages are in school and regular immunization camps are conducted covering all eligible children. The programme has had a positive impact on the quality of life of all participating villages through reduction of water-borne diseases and hence, a marked improvement in the health situation. Due to the

⁶ Gram Sabha is the general body of the Panchayat, where five or more villages are represented.

importance given to personal and environmental hygiene, people have cleaner habits and are more aware of their responsibility in keeping not only themselves but also their village clean.

As on 31st March 2016, Gram Vikas has covered 69,219 households in 1,206 villages across 25 districts of Odisha. In all villages where water supply has been established, it is heartening to observe that communities have ensured that the systems are functional. Communities have put together corpus funds worth over Indian Rupees (INR) 90.05 million. It is a validation of the principle behind the corpus fund that 475 ‘new’ families have constructed toilets and bathing rooms with assistance from the respective Village Water & Sanitation Committees, without any assistance from Gram Vikas. There have been occasional technical failures, but people have organised themselves every time to successfully address the problems.

In seven villages until now, however, the social processes have not been realised in full measure. This is to say that in areas of women’s empowerment, participation in Panchayats or even in some cases of inter-caste relations, the achievements till date leave a lot to be desired. The communities in these villages have taken care of the functioning of the systems, but are resistant to any significant social change in their villages. In these cases, the most common reason has been that the men felt threatened by the possibility of active participation by women. In these villages, the social change will possibly take some more time to materialise.

It is planned that 100,000 families (500,000 people) bound in clusters will be covered by this intervention by 2019, spearheaded by community-based organisations, like-minded NGOs and Gram Vikas’ direct outreach programmes. There are some key points that have guided Gram Vikas in this journey. Gram Vikas has always believed that any malady in rural areas can be cured if the community is treated first. In treating the community, total inclusion should be a non-negotiable principle. In spite of all the perceived difficulties in achieving 100% inclusion, it has remained the basic tenet of Gram Vikas’ MANTRA programme. That this could be achieved with 1206 communities is a vindication of this belief.

Secondly, treating rural people as second-class citizens and being callous towards their needs of a life of dignity and access to basic facilities is an injustice that has been perpetuated for far too long. MANTRA is a statement in dignity. Villages where MANTRA has worked have shown how the feeling of “*being inferior to none*” fires the imagination of communities and rouses their confidence to tackle other problems in their villages.

Finally, MANTRA is also about sustainable systems. Unless institutional mechanisms are established and social capital is created, no programme can have a lasting impact.

