
AREA NETWORKING AND DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES (ANANDI), GUJARAT

In a room at Devgad Baria in Gujarat's Panchmahals-Dahod district, adivasi women of the Devgad Mahila Sangathan rehearse a street play that will be part of a national rally on the proposed Employment Guarantee Act. Scripted by them, it articulates their experiences of having to migrate for a livelihood and exploitation by landlords and middlemen. A day later, women and men of Shihor taluka in Saurashtra, gather in Vadodara to debate the strategy on enhancing the capacities of mahila sarpanches. In the lively, informal exchange of ideas, a gamut of subjects are discussed – how can a woman sarpanch resist pressures from her husband and community leaders, female infanticide and rape.

From issues of livelihood to violence against women, ANANDI (Area Networking and Development Initiatives) straddles two diverse

geographical regions addressing the complex needs of women using different strategies – sometimes through direct interventions and in others by providing linkages and working with various partners. ANANDI has helped in capacity building for people to access and implement government schemes but is clear it will not let the state abrogate its responsibilities. All this is to translate the nebulous term of 'women's empowerment' into a tangible reality.

In a microcosm, this reality is exemplified by Dholiben of Gajapura village who is a dedicated health worker and dai; and Shantaben who does not let men with vested interests interfere with her measurement of land as an eco worker participating in the CAPART (Council for Advancement of Peoples Action and Rural Technology) watershed program; and the



Women at masonry work



The ANANDI team

collective strength of the mahila mandals who organized an Arogya Jagriti rally covering various primary health centres and raising issues of women's health.

The health program, which was funded by Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, has literally breathed new life in many of the villages. Says Dholiben, "Earlier even a simple case of diarrhea meant certain death. Now with awareness and multi-purpose health workers the situation is much better."

More recently, ANANDI's courageous intervention during the Gujarat riots has enabled Sharifa, Latifa and Firoza feel a little more secure within their own Muslim community as well as society at large.

If, in the process, there is the feeling that ANANDI is 'too much into everything', it is because as Sejal Dand, one of the four founding members of the organization explains, "There is respect for the complexity of development where there can be no linear process. We are constantly engaged

in the macro picture of where a woman's position is located whenever something happens. The quake in Saurashtra will also affect the tribal woman in Baria. A pregnant tribal woman was forced to walk 400 kms across the state for 12 days because, in the chaos of the quake, her daily wages had not been paid."

The ability to see the larger picture and interstices at every point is also the key to the way in which ANANDI was formed in 1995 and how it functions today. Dand and the other three founding members – Nita Hardikar, Sumitra Thacker and Jahnvi Andharia – all development professionals came together in the late 1980s in an Indo-Dutch bilateral education project that stressed on the need to initiate dialogue with people in the most vulnerable areas. The experience left the young women with another great asset – tremendous grounding on how to build capacity in a team.

After quitting the program, the four women felt

the need to see different models and take the learning process forward. They worked in different spheres but would meet every few months and exchange notes. As middle-class, young, single women who wanted to carry this experience forward, the four were aware of the challenges – committing at least five or six years of their time and functioning collectively while giving each other space. The strength to do so and thereby form ANANDI came from the common goal – belief in the process of dialogue.

They were clear they did not want to set up an institution or specific projects. “The paradigms had shifted in the late 1980s,” notes Andharia. “Self-help groups were limited in approach. We wanted to initiate a change in values and have women in the bastion of decision-making. In Panchmahals we aimed to work directly with the tribals and form local women’s organizations – the sangathans – which would then become the primary mobilizing agency. ANANDI’s role would then transmute to capacity building. In Saurashtra, which was economically better off but conservative and patriarchal, we chose the harder path of partnering with male-headed organizations.”

“We believed it was an idea that could work.



Training camp in progress

And it was the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust that put its trust in this idea. Working with so many partners was a learning experience. Even when we walked down separate ways it was without any souring of ties,” says Andharia. The Trust sanctioned a grant of Rs. 23.30 million to ANANDI in 2004-2005 for a period of four years.

Team development and ability of second rung leadership to take over and carry the programs forward in Saurashtra was demonstrated when Andharia had to shift base from Bhavnagar to Vadodara after the riots to anchor the new intervention – addressing Muslim women’s concerns and managing diversity. One of ANANDI’s perceived challenges post-riots is to engage with the middle class, a constituency that needs dialogue in an increasingly polarized society.

ANANDI’s members worked in the relief camps even though the Baria office was attacked and the workers threatened. Under the Citizens’ Initiative, they helped some residents to resettle in Boru.

For their principled stand and efforts to enhance tolerance levels ANANDI received the *Asian Heroes of 2003* award given by *Time* magazine. The ANANDI women say, “Our motivation came from the tribal women’s organization. When people were scared of taking a stand these women, who have food insecurity for six to nine months, kept the possessions of Muslim families in their safe custody. They gave some of the children shelter and all because they believe, ‘if it is right and true and just, we must go ahead.’” It’s a credo that is in resonance with ANANDI’s own thinking.