
PAN HIMALAYAN GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION, UTTARANCHAL

Kalyan Paul, the legatee of an affluent business family from Kolkata, decided to shun the good life very early on in life. Even as a student at BITS, Pilani, in the late 1970s, welfare economics dominated his interests and thought leaders of a different league – Amartya Sen, Gunnar Myrdal and Schumacher – helped crystallize his politics and world-view.

A stint at the Administrative Staff College of India (ASCI) immediately on graduation exposed him to development policy making, mostly its dark underbelly. Quick, frequent forays into villages for directing surveys and collating data for a bevy of clients was his first brush with the myriad problems and dynamics of the Indian hinterland.

His parents, though unhappy at his reluctance to pursue the wealth creation agenda, like other

industrial scions, didn't chastise him for they believed he had set course on a respectable career path as high-brow consultant. The ASCI engagement was however ephemeral.

It was rural India that lured Kalyan. He was, however, constantly troubled by an inexplicable fear. "I was afraid whether I would be able to break ice and work with communities," recalls Kalyan.

An article authored by Dr V Kurien of the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) in an anthology called *Growing out of Poverty* lent him the resolve to abandon ASCI for the dank classrooms of the Delhi School of Social Work. Kalyan eventually exorcized the ghosts in his mind at the school. The course mandated at least two days of field work in urban or rural communities every week.



Anita Paul at a village meeting

In Anita, a classmate, Kalyan found someone who shared the same passion and together they set out on paths untrod.

A series of bitter field experiences very early on and good counsel from faculty soon expelled all romanticized notions of spearheading grand societal changes from the minds of the duo. Kalyan, inspired by the former naxalite Sujoy Srimol, who had formed co-operatives of Kolkata's rickshaw pullers, had tried to do the same in Delhi, little knowing he would be pitted against a powerful, politically connected mafia. The duo had to pull back, badly bruised.

This and several other face-offs with mafia-like forces in their formative years, in a way, made the duo gravitate towards rural India. The choice was between urban reconstruction, slum development et al, to addressing the phalanx of problems that confront the rural poor.

"Many times in urban settings, things are beyond your control. There are too many forces at play. In rural areas, you can see immediate changes resulting from your work, even if it is in a small way," explains Anita.

The couple, for starters, experimented with a number of assignments including a failed attempt at creating an association of mithila craftsmen in Jitwarpur, Bihar. Very soon, the duo subsisting on a small loan extended by Kalyan's brother, reached out to Dr V Kurien and Dr Amrita Patel of NDDDB, who quickly took the couple under their wings.

With the Kurien-Patel mentoring, Kalyan and Anita quickly acquired the clarity of vision and the expertise that now manifest in the numerous initiatives of the Pan Himalayan Grassroots Development Foundation in the Kumaon and Garhwal Himalayas.

The development philosophy of the duo crystallized at NDDDB as they worked through a number of projects including that of setting up milk

co-operatives in strife-torn Punjab, battling the salt mafia in Gujarat and also rolling out a wasteland rejuvenation program.

"Dr Kurien and the Anand experience gave us the cardinal principle – that to do good to the poor you don't have to be poor. As professionals one ought to be sharply focused only on the ways and means of improving the quality of life of the poor," says Kalyan.

The dictum governed the Pauls as they tried out innumerable innovations through the 1980s when they kick-started and steered the Central Himalayan Rural Action Group (CHIRAG) and also later on, from 1991, when they floated Grassroots, following differences with group members. The tiff with CHIRAG colleagues was on the growth mechanisms to be adopted following a funding carte blanche from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC.) The agency had promised to support CHIRAG in all its activities for 15 years.

The parting with CHIRAG was painful and also fraught with risks for they were almost penurious, just as they were when they left the confines of the NDDDB with just about Rs. 90,000, their combined provident fund, to fall back on.

The Pauls however persevered. In fact, they tend to seek challenges and get into trying situations. They had decided to leave NDDDB because life was turning too comfortable and predictable! "We also feared worldly pleasures might get the better of us, leading us away from our goals," recalls Anita.

If challenges were what they were looking for, they got it in leviathan measures when they decided to work with mountain communities. Kalyan always wanted to live and work with hill folks. Anita, a Himachali who grew up in the plains, egged him on.

Hill ecosystems posed problems they had never confronted before and the Pauls had to ride

a learning curve all over again. There were no recorded NGO experiences or best practices to go by.

Unraveling the close relationship between human settlements, population growth, expanding hill-slope subsistence farming with the increasing demand on forests for fodder, fuel-wood and land for farming was quite an experience for the duo.

As they grappled with the intricacies of mountain ecosystems, the duo also began to appreciate the theory that one to four hectares of forest is an absolute necessity for supporting or sustaining one hectare of farmland in the mountains (varies with altitude and annual agricultural cycle).

The Grassroots endeavour hinges on attempting to set right this fine balance between the water, fodder, fuel-wood and livelihood needs of mountain communities with the need for protecting tree cover and river systems. Chronic

water and biomass shortage faced by the hill people was the entry point.

“We therefore told communities we worked with about the need to experiment. No tall promises were made but we insisted on community participation in every activity we undertook,” says Kalyan.

In fact, unlike other NGO systems, extension workers or program officers do not oversee Grassroots’ activities but villagers themselves, trained and oriented, chart their destinies. “We have also done away with the project area concept,” says Anita. This lends Grassroots a certain degree of flexibility to work across large swathes of the hill states.

Appropriate technologies were identified and adapted. Grassroots eventually promoted the concept of infiltration wells, built around a community’s primary water source. Kalyan had to push the idea through rabid opposition from



Kalyan Paul at an international conference



A biogas unit under construction

the establishment keen on hauling water over distances through pipelines. Despite dire prognostications, infiltration wells have been a runaway success.

The infiltration well of Rawalsera in Almora, for instance, is so flush that it also caters to water requirements beyond the village boundaries. Over 195 communities in far-flung micro watersheds have now gained access to safe drinking water through the use of this technology.

The Paul's have been pushing a holistic version of mountain development, which embraces water, sanitation, renewable energy, rainwater harvesting, catchment area treatment, land use and micro-enterprises. Over the past decade, Grassroots has invested around Rs.10 million a year in hill development programs.

The biogas initiative, for instance, has caught the imagination of the government, the development sector and scores of hill communities. It has greatly reduced the burden of women who have had to lug fuel-wood from long distance and has also helped conserve forests. Over the past decade, 482 families from 252 villages of seven districts across Uttaranchal and Himachal have opted for biogas units.

The idea now is to ensure that at least 50 per cent of households in the hills use biogas. This is considered the threshold for any tangible impact on the biotic pressure in the immediate catchment area. The task of taking the biogas agenda ahead has now been passed on to the Kumaon Artisans Guild, an association of local experts and biogas plant masons, trained and mentored by Grassroots. The Guild is on firm foundations from the support of Rs. 21.75 million extended by Sir Dorabji Tata Trust (SDTT). "It was imperative to create new forms of organizations to help gain critical mass with this initiative. The Trust support was crucial but more importantly it was the freedom they gave us to tinker with organizational

structures that got us going," says Kalyan.

The Guild, just as the Mahila Umang Samiti, a women producers group engaged in value adding and marketing of hill products, are independent organizations, though they function under the tutelage of Grassroots. "This is in keeping with our philosophy of building the capacities of communities, vital for the sustainability of any intervention," explains Kalyan.

Micro-enterprises have been supplementing the incomes of over 1,000 households through production and sale of a bevy of products – microlite concrete roofing tiles, wood furniture, hand-knitted woolens, fruit preserves and natural honey. The Samiti's turnover for 2003-2004 was over Rs. 1.30 million.

Grassroots, with an SDTT outlay of Rs. 17.02 million lasting till March 2008, is now expanding its canvas for bigger, long-term interventions, aligned with the millennium development goals. Restoration of the Gagas river basin in Uttaranchal, which requires considerable marshalling of resources, is just one of them.

The Gagas is a fragile spring-fed river, which has seen an unnerving reduction in water flow in recent years. Over 130 of the 200 small streams that run into the river have already dried up. "The task is monumental. A multi-stakeholder participation forms the bedrock for implementation," explains Kalyan.

The roll out of the integrated water resources management plan, therefore, involves capacity building of all of the basin's 250 gram panchayats and scores of self-help groups. The focus will be on identifying potential community leaders, especially women, and building their skills, to take on the massive job at hand.

"The biggest challenge for us now is scaling up," admits Anita as they walk the tightrope of bringing together disparate groups of all hues for a grand mountain coalition.