

SAMAJ PRAGATI SAHYOG (SPS), MADHYA PRADESH



The SPS core team at Bagli

The road to Sitapuri is long and difficult, and not just because it is un-tarred, bumpy and riddled with broken debris. Here, civilization seems a million miles away. The village itself (though it is more of a hamlet) is pristine and as untouched by 21st-century India as it possibly can be. A few mud huts with thatched roofs lie huddled together interspersed by lush, green fields. The Barela tribal inhabitants greet us warmly and as is often the case with the poor, share all that is theirs with us.

But despite its utter remoteness and dismal economic condition, Sitapuri is prospering... though perhaps not in the way that we usually measure prosperity and success, but in a way that is important to the people that live there. For what was once a forgotten and neglected area, one in

which no electoral or administration official has visited in years, is now home to a successful watershed experiment. Which is why despite the scorching heat, the fields in this drought-prone area are flourishing. It may not translate into big bucks for the villagers, but it does mean that a few square meals are assured with perhaps a little extra to earn a living.

So how did Sitapuri change from one of the most ragged places on earth to a gathering of hope? Largely, due to the forward thinking and far-reaching interventions of Samaj Pragati Sahyog (SPS) and their unstinting efforts at watershed development, agricultural renewal and community dialogue and participation.

SPS was formed in 1990 by a group of professionals who wanted to “step out of the ivory

towers of academia”. They came from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Attending seminars and academic workshops on poverty and the environment only increased their sense of frustration. It reinforced their belief that without the central involvement of the people in whose name this talk took place, there could be no movement forward.

Says Mihir Shah one of the founders of SPS, “We felt strongly that a new paradigm of development needed to be forged in India, one that was based on the principles of sustainability, equity and people’s empowerment. We had learnt from our education that large parts of India had been deprived of the benefits of development. On

the other hand, millions of people, especially the Adivasis, had suffered at the hands of so-called ‘development’ interventions.”

The group¹ decided to live and work together in an area that typified the most difficult problems faced by the most deprived and neglected people of India. After a year of extensive travel across many regions in India, they decided to settle in the Adivasi pocket of the Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh, known as the Bagli tehsil in the Narmada valley. Since then, their work has focused on around 50 villages in the area and has centred on the issue of water, which is widely seen as the most basic need of people in this country. Building on this focal point of intervention, the core team carried out programs on drinking water, updating land records, watershed development, lift irrigation, drip irrigation, bio-farming, livestock improvement, women’s empowerment, micro-finance, renewable energy, right to food, low-cost shelter and sanitation in this area.

The initial period was extremely difficult with obstacles at every corner. Powerful land holders opposed their equitable water sharing programs. They moved the courts against SPS. Its campaign to update land records was opposed by the local patwaris and sarpanches, who also waged a battle against SPS’s efforts to procure minimum wages, equally for men and women. The most violent opposition was faced by the women’s empowerment program, when the community hall in which the women learnt to stitch was burned down.

Armed with dogged perseverance and the belief that the hand of friendship should be extended to everyone including those who had quite literally dug their graves, the SPS group stood their ground. Resistance was offered in the form of satyagrahas, constantly working with the community and the administration and standing by their principles of equity and transparency.



Sitapuri check dam



Water wheat fields



Women at a training session

In the end, the hard work paid off. As the SPS programs started to bear fruit, the results when translated into actual terms brought about change in many ways. Over the years, the SPS programs have resulted in drinking water security to 20,000 people, a rise in the percentage of irrigated areas by 150 per cent, a 90 per cent reduction in indebtedness, 80 per cent decrease in distress migration and 100 per cent increase in income.

While numbers and statistics are important, what is equally important is the level of acceptance that the SPS group has within the villages and surrounding areas of Bagli and Neemkheda, and particularly with the Adivasis. At every turning and narrow lane, the villagers come out to greet Rangu Rao, who spearheads the work in the field. And it is not a formal greeting of distrust and suspicion. Rather it is one of mutual trust and respect, built on a relationship that both SPS and the villagers have worked hard to cultivate.

The entire situation in the area has reversed. While earlier the local leadership wanted them out, now they are actively sought after and try their best to work with panchayats that adhere to the principles of the SPS work ideal. This acts as

positive pressure on leaders to adopt these principles. Demonstration pressure is also felt by the local administration which is forced to perform in an accountable manner by the people.

Part of the SPS vision has been to create the Support Voluntary Organization (SVO) model. The idea of the SVO was formed when the group felt that the success at Bagli could be replicated in other parts of India. Thus, the Baba Amte Centre for People's Empowerment at Neemkheda was set up.² Here various community-based organizations receive training and field experience in several facets of development. This unique model has touched the lives of over a million people and has spread the work and word of SPS to over half a million acres of land in 50 districts in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar and Rajasthan.

As for the future, as Mihir Shah points out, "The main requirements for the work to carry on beyond the core group are: to build leadership at every level within the organization and to build durable systems within the organization so that the work becomes relatively 'core group independent' and so that the emerging leadership

has a firm context within which to carry the work forward.”

This is the main focus of the work of the core team. After the initial years of handling opposition and strife, now is the time to plan for the future. And part of the planning has been possible because of the timely support of the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust. Over the past eight years, the Trust has supported SPS projects worth more than Rs. 50 million. SPS describes the Trust as “our lifeline”. Says the group, “The Trust has shared our perspective, has been flexible and has provided the much-needed gap-filling support that other agencies tend not to provide.”

The thrust to development based on the principles of participation and transparency – as spearheaded by the vision of SPS for more than

10 years – has transformed villages such as Sitapuri from an area of conflict and contention, to an atmosphere of relative peace. And this along with a hope for a better future.

¹ Mihir Shah, is an ecological economist and provides overall guidance and direction to SPS. He is joined in SPS by Rangu Rao, Jyotsna Jain, Nivedita Banerji, P S Vijay Shankar, Pramathesh Ambasta, Pinky Brahmachaudhury and Shobhit Jain. The group is mentored by Drs Debashis and Mridula Banerji. Debashis Banerji is an eminent scientist while Mridula Banerji is the president of SPS and provides guidance on the administration at the headquarters.

The core team takes overall responsibility for running SPS. The structure and decision-making is flat and consultational. Most decisions are made in monthly meetings along with 50 full-time activists of SPS, half of whom are tribals.

² Baba Amte is the Pramukh Sahayogi of SPS and the group takes their inspiration from him and the community at Anandwan, which is the largest community of variously challenged people in the world and is largely self-sufficient.

