

Support for self-reliance

by Veena Gokhale

The lights have gone off in Samarpada, a small village in the Bharuch district of Gujarat. But this has not dampened the enthusiasm of the villagers gathered outside the sarpanch's (village leader) house for a purposeful meeting. The first issue on the agenda is to discuss why the land earmarked for fodder cultivation and management, which the village Mahila Vikas Mandal (MVM – Women's Development Group) was supposed to nurture, is lying unattended.

Plans to put this plot of land on the outskirts of the village to good use have gone awry two years in a row. First it was decided that the land would be used to grow high quality fodder. But the villagers, who are poor tribals, do not possess the quantity or quality of cattle that can use such fodder. In the second year, the land was used as a vegetable patch, and a mixed lot of trees – papaya, eucalyptus, and mango – were also planted there. Unfortunately, the vegetables were stolen before they could make their way to the *haat* (rural market).

It was then decided that the village women would clear the ground and do something with the troublesome plot. But no action took place. Why? The villagers and the workers of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP), India, try to find the answer.

The women have done nothing with the land because they are wondering if their efforts will lead to failure a third time around. Some more discussion, and the reasons for the failures are pinned down. "Is it possible to overcome these problems?" "Yes, it is." "Is it worthwhile to do something about the land?" "Yes, it is." "How many women are going to volunteer?" Only half-a-dozen hands go up at first. More join them. Finally, 20-25 names are put down. Then two of the women are selected as coordinators.

After this triumph, the meeting moves on to the next topic on the agenda: whether to buy a rice thresher with the help of a government subsidy, some help from the AKRSP, and individual contributions. The women leave, and the men discuss the repayment of a government loan taken the year before, for buying agricultural inputs. It has been a bad year, the groundnut crop has failed, and money is tight. Yet the villagers, supported by the AKRSP staff, decide on partial repayment so as not to lose their credibility at the bank.

Working together

The three-hour meeting puts into practice at least some of AKRSP's theories about how rural development should be approached, and how it should take place. The basic objective of this non-communal (i.e. not partisan) and non-profit organization, set up in 1985, is the alleviation of rural poverty. The focus of AKRSP's programmes is the

weaker sections of rural Gujarat, such as Samarpada, a tribal village. Special effort is made to involve the village women in the schemes.

AKRSP believes that organizing rural people into viable and self-sustaining institutions such as Gram Vikas Mandals, or GMVs can alleviate rural poverty. As the first step, the field staff of AKRSP initiates a dialogue with the villagers of select villages to understand the causes and possible solutions to their problems.

The Villagers form a Gram Vikas Mandal (Village Development Group) whose membership is open to all. Some of the GVM members visit neighbouring villages to see the ongoing AKRSP projects. They adopt certain schemes for their own village. The AKRSP takes on a supporting role in preparing plans and estimates, mobilizing finances from government and non-government sources, and undertakes training of village volunteers. The organization staff oversees the GVM's activities for a gestation period that roughly ranges from five to seven years.

“We strive for quality, for people's participation, for technical excellence, for cost-effectiveness, for equity, for sustainability and self-reliance, and we try and link the income generation activities to other spheres of a villager's existence so that there is an improvement in the quality of life,” says Ail Shah, Chief Executive of AKRSP.

AKRSP stresses local involvement, and not the usual authoritarian top-down approach. One example is that of afforestation and the preservation of existing forestland. Simplistically stated, the government's approach was to cordon off large tracts of barren land, spend a lot of money replanting these and then take on the near-impossible task of “guarding” these thousands of acres. The fuel and forest produce needs of the villagers were sidelined or met erratically, through official handouts, which comprised of a fixed quota of wood or bamboo every year.

This inevitably led to illegal felling, resentment and defiance of the law on the part of the villagers, and occasionally violent confrontations. The corruption and commercial exploitation of forests continued unchecked. Against this backdrop, in 1985, the AKRSP decided to adopt a participatory wasteland management programme in the once thickly forested tribal tracts of Bharuch district.

The villagers earmarked barren land in their vicinity, and were paid to plant species, which had been decided upon in village meetings. They took turns to guard the growing trees and penalised villagers who broke the rules and let their cattle graze within the protected area. The 17 hectares covered by AKRSP's Wasteland Programme in 1985 now covers 1,100 hectares and involves 20 villages.

Making things work

The success of the AKRSP forest programme rests on the fact that the people are voluntarily participating in conservation efforts. Planners and executors have come together with the masses on a common platform - a feature that is singularly absent in the government programmes.

“The challenges before the AKRSP,” says Shah, “is to cancel the failure of many of the country's development projects by showing that things can be done.” Making things work involves, above all, a flexible approach. “Worldwide, agricultural

extension work is done through experts; we adopt a farmer-to-farmer method,” says Dr. Mane, an agricultural expert who works for AKRSP. The idea is that one farmer can learn from the other, that the farmer needs to share his problems and experiments, needs to go on exposure visits and training programmes.

Gopalbhai Ubadia, 35, is a small farmer who lives in Samarpada. He has been an active extension worker since 1988, motivating farmers to participate in AKRSP’s schemes.

“Five years ago things were very different,” he says. “Small farmers were forced to migrate to Surat (the nearby big city) every year and work as construction workers to supplement their incomes.” There was no food and no seeds. If there were seeds, there would be no bulls to plow the fields. Then the AKRSP workers came to the village. This made the bigger farmers uneasy, but they were won over through successive discussions.

The first scheme that the local GVM took up was an afforestation programme. Now there are many others – watershed development, farm forestry, rainfed agriculture, a saving credit scheme and better marketing facilities. Now there is less poverty and only four or five families migrate for labour every year.

The local primary school teacher also feels that the situation has improved. “Four years ago, only 12 children used to come. Now there are 30-35. They are better dressed, cleaner and more disciplined. There is also some improvement in academic achievement, perhaps because less migration ensures greater continuity,” he says.

To the question of how the AKRSP has benefited the village, everyone has a different answer: “We have learnt from them agricultural practices like contour bunding.” “Forestry and soil conservation measures.” “Unemployment and the migrant labour problem have been tackled.” “We have learnt that a lot of ideas come up in meetings.” “We have learnt to plan.”

“It takes a lot of time and effort,” says Shah, “for the development worker in the field to humble himself or herself to understand that the villagers have a sound understanding of their environment. Our role is to make the technology available to them and help them forge beneficial links with the outside world. The word that we like to use at AKRSP is not development, but support.”