

Building Humanity: Breaking Barriers Overcoming Social Exclusion

By Chitrlekha Choudhury

"Why do those people need toilets? They are dirty by birth and can never have clean habits" remarked Ghanasyam Malik of Banjor village in Ganjam district of Orissa. This is an often-repeated question faced by our community organizer in villages where the MANTRA (Movement and Action Network for Transformation of Rural areas) programme is being implemented by Gram Vikas. It also shows the deeper and pervasive exclusionary practices still prevalent in the country after sixty years of freedom. Social exclusion is the bane of Indian society, with disadvantaged communities like Dalits being systematically marginalized from development for centuries. This malaise has led to a psyche where the excluded think that it is their fate and those who exclude think it is their right. The result is a continuing cycle of poverty, indebtedness and helplessness among the socially excluded groups.

Gram Vikas realized quite early that most development interventions promoted by government or non-government organizations that were meant to be for the most marginalized and vulnerable groups, in practice were rarely successful in reaching the last 10 percent. It was the constant search and trail for a range of alternatives to reach out to the most excluded that led to the design of MANTRA- with an entry point as "Sanitation and water supply". Sanitation and clean water, a basic need for all, provided an opportunity to bring all sections of the community together and work for the collective good. Since 1992 the water and sanitation initiative under the umbrella of MANTRA has been a vehicle to promote 100% inclusion while providing basic amenities to people in rural areas.

The context

In the course of working across villages in Orissa, Gram Vikas observed that chronic

poverty and underdevelopment were related to ill-health and limited livelihood opportunities. A majority of the cases of ailments and mortality could be traced to poor quality drinking water and an abysmal attitude towards human waste disposal. The latter finds its way in its raw form to the same water bodies that the village is dependent on for drinking and other purposes. 94% of rural villages in Orissa do not have access to safe and protected water sources and sanitation coverage is still less than 1%.

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.

The task of fetching water is usually relegated to women of the household who end up spending hours on this one task alone. It was then recognized that until the whole community came together to address the problem, total sanitation and protected water would remain a distant goal.

An inclusive approach

In 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 an estimated per capita consumption of water (of 40 litres per day), projected for a population twenty years hence. This is done so that every household can have 24-hour running water supply on their taps. The water is pumped using electricity where available and in the hilly areas, is sourced from perennial springs using the gravity flow

system. Where either of these possibilities does not exist, solar power, diesel and kerosene pumps have also been used.

The intervention is simple and as such is nothing new, but the edge lies in using it to promote equality. MANTRA promotes social inclusion by involving all families of a habitation without exception. One hundred percent coverage is not only necessary for effectiveness vis-à-vis public hygiene, but also ensures that the poorest and socially excluded are not left out. The same facilities are available to the poor as to the rich. There are mechanisms whereby it is ensured that the poor have as much say as the rich in making decisions that affect the community. Therefore, when faced with the questions posed by Ghanashyam Mallick and many others alike, the usual response is "Presently you are drinking water that is polluted from everybody's waste, but if you do not allow those poor people to build the toilets, then you will be drinking water polluted by the waste of the Dalits!" It definitely hits the nail on the head!

Besides serving social equity, the "All or none" approach creates a unique opportunity for the entire village to work together for a shared purpose. Institutional mechanisms are developed around the programme, creating the first experience of community members managing their own resources and finances. It also provides a platform for the weaker sections to elucidate their views and influence the decision making process. In the process, people learn the ropes of managing their own institutions, resolving conflicts and acting as pressure groups against vested interests. Gradually the impact of this becomes evident in the larger governing process of the villages.

1. Gram Vikas is a rural development organization working in the hinterlands of Orissa since 1979. It works with tribals, dalits and other marginalized communities on health education, land rights and improving livelihoods and infrastructure in rural areas.
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. Today, they are designated as Scheduled Castes under the Constitution of India.

The towering water tank that is a common water source stands as a symbol of collective action and social inclusion in 522 villages across Orissa.

An important factor that governs the successful implementation of the programme is the creation of a corpus fund. The acid test for inclusion is the creation of this fund wherein each household has to contribute an average of Rs. 1000. Equity is maintained and the better-off pay more while the poor pay less, thus maintaining the average sum. The corpus is generated to make the programme sustainable. When new households come up in the village, the village committee uses the interest from the corpus, to extend the same facility to the new families, thereby maintaining 100% coverage at all times.

Challenging exclusionary mindset

Inherent to the idea of exclusion is the notion that the excluded groups/ sections have no dignity and self worth. Such mindset is prevalent not only within social caste and class groups in villages but spans beyond villages too. The ever-increasing rural-urban divide is deepening and creating new forms of exclusion. This is further compounded by the double standards in policies related to urban and rural areas. While in urban areas, provision of basic amenities is taken care of by the government, the rural population is expected to bear a substantial cost of the infrastructure. Added to this is the fact that rural areas and the poor are often equated with "poor quality solutions" which is evident in the way sanitation is being promoted under the Total Sanitation Campaign. A history of several short-term, low-quality fixes to the problems of rural poor has contributed to the low self-esteem and dignity that the rural poor have internalized.

Gram Vikas strongly contests such exclusionary approaches and seeks to address this feeling of being "sub-human". The belief that rural poor can and will pay for services that are for their development, determines the design of the programs and built-in mechanisms of financial and institutional sustainability. However, there are social costs involved in making basic services available to the disadvantaged, which the government and society at large is obliged to bear. Gram Vikas sources government and donor funds to meet the social cost. Each household contributes 60% of the cost of construction in the form of material like stone, sand, brick, aggregate

and unskilled labour. The subsidy or "social cost" from Gram Vikas is used to meet the cost of external materials like cement, doors, iron, toilet pans and pipes. In this process all households, across barriers of caste, class and gender are able to enjoy the facilities of the same quality.

Addressing exclusion of women

The MANTRA programme is well directed towards addressing women's physical needs and eliminates the drudgery of fetching water from distant places. Women are the victims of greater indignity of having to defecate in the open and bathing in the common village pond, often in the presence of men. Bathing in unclean water without any privacy of a closed enclosure, force women into insufficient cleaning of themselves. This in turn, brings in skin diseases and gynecological problems. Constructing bathing rooms along with toilets takes care of this problem adequately.

Besides addressing the practical needs of women, the programme has been able to demonstrate a perceptible change in the relationship between men and women at the community level. In an environment where women's involvement in public activity is nearly nil, where actions such as both men and women sitting on the same mat are frowned upon, women showing their faces to older men are considered taboo and where women themselves think that their involvement in village affairs is not necessary, the MANTRA programme has been able to surmount such segregation and change gender imbalance.

The initial start though has not been easy. The norm of 100% inclusion in MANTRA necessitates that representation from a man and woman from each household should be there in the general body meeting of the village where all the important decisions concerning the programme are

Where women lead the way.....

Mohakhand village in Bargarh district having 156 households had invited Gram Vikas to implement the Water and Sanitation programme in their village. The village faced scarcity of water and the rate of illness was high among the population because of unprotected water. Initially many people in the village were interested, but 100% consensus could not be reached. After many meetings and motivation processes, a few men still resisted it and the programme could not be initiated. All the women were convinced about the benefits of the programme but could not come out openly to oppose the men.

Meanwhile, in the adjoining village of Karnapalli, which had similar socio-economic conditions, the Water and Sanitation programme was completed successfully. Witnessing the dramatic improvements at Karnapalli, the women of Mohakhand were once again inspired to make Water and Sanitation materialize in their village. On knowing that the Programme Manager of Gram Vikas was visiting Karnapalli, a delegation of spirited and energetic women from Mohakhand village gathered at Karnapalli village to convince him that they were prepared to take up the Programme.

The Programme Manager was reluctant, as twice before the village had assured him but still could not come to a consensus. The women were insistent. As Suprova Mahakur and Probhati Kampo, women's committee members said "If the men do not cooperate in the implementation of the programme in our village, we will engage labourers from outside for construction of water and sanitation infrastructure and will go on an 'indefinite kitchen strike' to ensure their cooperation."

The women's commitment was overwhelming and it was decided to undertake the water and sanitation programme in Mohakhand. The programme was completed successfully with active participation of both men and women. Thus the strong determination of women has changed the life of the entire community.

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REFLECTIONS

taken. In practice it did not have the desired results. Therefore the strategy adopted was to have separate bodies, exclusively of women, where attempts were made to involve at least one adult woman from every household. This body is commonly an aggregation of SHGs, each consisting of 10-15 members, formed on the basis of household clusters or hamlets. In course, the groups go beyond the narrow definition of working on savings and credit and take up social action, including

A villager stated that earlier, men thought that women couldn't do anything. But on seeing that women are taking equal responsibility, men are convinced that women can do the job. Another village leader famously commented "So now women will wear pants and go out of the house." His wife went on to become the leader of the woman's group. Questioned about his comment a few years later, he refused to admit to what he had said earlier, observing sagely, "This is a village and hundred people will say a hundred different things. This is the twenty first century, after all. Women should have the same opportunity as men."

addressing problems of alcohol abuse, wife beating, and wage inequity.

From the perspective of village residents, the most important and visible change is in the social interaction of men and women at the community level, with women actively participating in village meetings and community development, jointly discussing their views and shouldering responsibilities. Another major change is seen in the interaction of women with outsiders. Women's mobility has increased and they are confident of making their own choices.

The signs of change....

Across 552 villages covering a population of over 200,000 MANTRA has been able to effectively bring in total inclusion of all sections of the population and establish quality infrastructure to meet the primary needs of people in the rural areas. The programme is spreading across Orissa and in different states in India through the "demonstration effect". While there is visible contribution of the programme in improving the health and environmental conditions in the villages and eliminating the drudgery of women, it has also been able to unite and bind divergent strands within the community, create new relationship dynamics between men and women and different sections of the communities,



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and trigger new strands of development. It also provides scope for values of democracy, governance and accountability to be experienced by the people and thus gain confidence to bargain with outside forces.

MANTRA has perhaps, for the first time made inroads into societal divisions and has challenged the inequitable structure. It has also been able to demonstrate that total inclusion is possible and has made it a reality for those who have been excluded from most development efforts for centuries. The ripples of this experiential learning have spread beyond the life of the programme. Several villages have in fact leveraged the community bonding to improve management of other common services and resources in the village, including the village school, health centre, common ponds, and wastelands.

The process of working together has played a crucial role in revitalising the social fabric of villages and creating an environment of inclusion in a predominantly patriarchal, caste- and class-ridden society. Many villages had common funds prior to Gram Vikas' interventions, but

today there is greater transparency and accountability, with the leaders playing a proactive role in sharing information. Village committees are reconstituted every three years and an environment of democratic functioning is slowly being actualized. There is a gradual increase in participation in different levels of governance like Palli Sabhas and Gram Sabhas.

The experiences of Gram Vikas over the last decade demonstrates how utilities as basic as drinking water and sanitation can be converted to stimulating activities that raise the enthusiasm of the villagers. In the long term, it enables convergent community action, breaking down the inertia caused by a history of marginalization and deprivation. Thus achieving hygienic sanitation and water is a small step towards a larger objective. It is a part of the process that enables people to decide their own destiny, and is a journey from a life of being victims of circumstances, to becoming the makers of one's own destiny.

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