

Changing Attitudes in Rural India

A Grassroots Worker's Struggle for Clean Water and Toilets in Rural India¹⁰

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Challenge

Shelgaon is a small village in Shelgaon Taluka in Buldhana District of Maharashtra State, India. It comes under Shelgaon Panchayath. It belongs to Vidarbha region and Amravati Division. It is located 66 KM towards East from District head quarters Buldhana and 519 KM from State capital Mumbai. There was an increasing incidence of water borne diseases in Shelgaon. It was found that the overhead water tank in the village was cleaned 12 years ago. In spite of repeated communication to government to clean the tank, it could not be cleaned.

Response

Pramila Maruti Sulke, is a government appointed Gram sevak (village worker) in the state of Maharashtra, India. Gram sevaks play a vital role in reducing poverty in rural India although they are rarely acknowledged. Gram sevaks are considered to be the lowest rung of the development sector bureaucracy in India. She has been gram sevak for six years. For initial few years, she treated it like "just another job". She did the tasks that were easy to achieve and let the others down in bureaucratic procedure.

In 2007, Pramila attended a training course supported by UK aid from DFID (Development for International Development) for Gram Sevaks. The training program changed her attitude towards work. During the program, she recognized the vital role that a Gram Sevak plays in implementing and monitoring government schemes and extending services to the rural poor. She also learnt certain skills that helped her in taking initiatives in the development of Shelgaon.

Actions Taken

After her training, Pramila was all excited to put her skills in to practice. Her first assignment was to motivate and encourage the community to take responsibility for themselves and their problems. The first problem she identified was that the overhead tank in the village was not cleaned for the past 12 years due to which there was an increasing incidence of water-borne diseases. Nearly 1000 villagers were relied on the tank for safe drinking water. The first propelling task in front of her was to get the overhead tank cleaned. In spite of repeated reminders to the state government officials to clean the tank, it had not borne fruit. Pramila decided to put her learnings in the program to put to practice in the village to get the support from villagers.

The very next day, at a village council meeting, Pramila asked for volunteers to clean the tank. Not even single individual in the village was volunteered for the task. Pramila did not give up. The following morning she picked up a broom and a bucket and all set for cleaning the tank. When she tucked her saree, climbed up the steps, a small crowd of villagers gathered at the foot of the tank, and looked at Pramila in amazement. Slowly, villagers also started joining Pramila in cleaning the water tank. She led them by being an example and the others followed her. The villagers were delighted by watching the clear stream of water flowing from a public tap. The Village Sarpanch (elected president of the village council) applauded her courage and told her that seeing her heroic effort, a group of men and women formed a group to clean the tank every 6 months. Villagers saw the decrease in water-borne

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/changing-attitudes-in-rural-india>, Published 8 September 2010, Ac-

diseases in a month.

Being won the minds of villagers, she set herself for an even more ambitious target of improving the livelihood conditions in the village. Her target was to get clean village award (Nirmal Gram Puraskar) for Shelgaon, a prestigious award by the Government of India. The award was given to the villages that achieve total sanitation (eliminating open defecation, providing 100% access to toilets for all villagers, providing toilets in all schools and nutrition centres and setting up drainage systems for all public water sources and a mechanism for garbage disposal).

Pramila saw a big challenge in front of her to tackle. The village still defecated in the open, and there wasn't a place for, or a culture of disposing of their garbage properly. There were two challenges: one, mindset and behavior change of the villagers and the second, the bureaucracy to deal with to get government funds released for toilet construction and garbage disposal units.

The first task that she undertook was getting the volunteers for the task to be completed. The group was named "Good Morning Squad". The objective of the group was to create awareness among the villagers on the need for toilets and hygienic practices. She facilitated the villagers to apply for government funds. She hand held the villagers for each application until the end. Leading by example, she could convince the villagers to clean up the village and dig pits to dispose of their garbage.

Within a year of her continuous involvement in bringing up change in the livelihood of villagers, the village was declared a recipient of Nirmal Gram Award. The village achieved 100 % toilet facilities in each and every home, and it has also become garbage free zone. After announcement of the award, the villagers had a week- long celebration. Pramila got transferred to another village shortly after that. She started her journey of exploration and developmental plans in new village.

Learning

1. Leading by example is the best strategy to gain the acceptance of the community
2. Empowering / creating awareness among villagers is very important to seek their support in implementing any developmental initiative
3. Training programs to Gram Sevaks will help them in updating their skills and motivate them to pursue further in developmental activities

Questions

1. What are the ways to entrust support from the villagers?
2. How do we empower or create awareness among the villagers?

Course Positioning

The caselet is suitable for a course in Organizational Behavior and Group Behavior. As the caselet throws light on the how leading by example is the best strategy to gain acceptance of the community. It also helps in understanding how training programs create awareness and empower the villagers for their development.