

OUR INVOLVEMENT AND ACTION PROGRAMMES :

In our perception, marginalization, exploitation, oppression and the low level of consciousness were not the result of poverty but its root causes. And, if poverty and underdevelopment were to give way to justice, freedom and joy its underlying causes had to be effectively tackled. Our involvement and action programmes among these tribals ment to organize them in order that they be able to transform the dehumanizing systems that surround them. And this required proper assessment of the causes of poverty and backwardness which is a need for any concrete action programme.

In our first plans certain basic issues like ill-health had to be given immediate attention as short term objective. Given the constraints of language, newness to their culture, transport, personnel etc., all activities had to be planned on a low key. The following are some of the important action programmes undertaken.

FORMAL AND NONFORMAL EDUCATION.

Literacy in any culture is the most powerful tool of social change. The primary reason for the low level of consciousness of the Savaras is the deplorably low literacy level which was at 6% (1981 census). Hence education became one of our priorities.

Many villages in the area had single-teacher schools. But their functioning was more of an exception than a rule. Since opening new schools was not in our agenda, we decided to revitalize the existing ones. The teachers were persuaded to show a greater sense of responsibility to duty. Children themselves were given incentives for regular attendance. Some of us started teaching in villages with no schools. The process of learning was made an interesting activity with songs and games. Those who showed an aptitude for study were encouraged to join the residential schools run by the Integrated Tribal Development Authority (ITDA)

Adult literacy programmes were started in the evening hours for the youth and the children who go for grazing cattle during the day. The adult literacy classes were not limited to the teaching of the three R's. But they were aimed at bringing awareness on social, economic and political issues. And they were helped to discuss the problems that concerned them.

YOUTH ACTION GROUPS :

Discussions in the adult literacy classes began to be focused on specific issues like illiteracy, de-forestation, low prices for agricultural produce, exploitation by money lenders, and bribery in Govt. Offices etc., the rise in the level of consciousness gave them confidence that they were capable of altering the existing situations, if only they could stand united. Along with the power of knowledge came the ability to look at society from their perspective. From this awareness was born 'Yuvajana Sangam', (Youth Action Groups). They received immediate acceptance and acclaim in some villages while others responded slowly. To promote a friendly spirit among the members of the different units, games like volley ball and kabaddi were organized and matches were held periodically. There were regular meetings help for these groups.

The Youth Action Groups soon became agents of social change in the area. They formed a 'Cultural Troupe' which became the torch-bearer of awareness programmes. Through music, songs and role plays they communicated to their fellow tribals, their newfound awareness. Slowly there emerged 'Core Group' of youth leaders who could think objectively and decide wisely. Besides striving against issues of injustice and exploitation, they organized adult literacy classes in different villages on their own. These volunteers are mostly primary school drop-outs. Their slogan is 'each one teaches whatever he/she knows.

THRIFT SCHEME

The land protection and regulation act after the tribal uprising of the 60's put an end to land alienation (as seen in 2.3.). Problems were not all over as usury came into practice. Since the Govt. Agencies did not provide economic assistance necessary for agricultural activities, the tribals once again turned to the ever obliging money-lenders who only waited for such an opportunity. The loans were given at exorbitant rates of interest amounting to

as high as 800% per annum. The repaying had almost always been in kind. The moneylenders took on the dual role of business and banking, and controlled the whole economic process. In order to extricate themselves from the clutches of money lenders, a 'Thrift Scheme' was started with some of the enlightened youth as members.

The Youth Thrift Scheme which began with 15 members developed into a 100 member group. It involves the payment of Rs. 10/- (as decided by the group) every month. Once the individual has saved up to Rs. x/-, he/she can take loan to the tune of Rs.3x/-. This is to be repaid in installments with a nominal interest of 1.5%. Today this scheme has a rolling capital of Rs. 50,000/-.

The members gather on the first day of every month at different villages by turn. Besides financial transactions the gathering also provides a forum for the youth to discuss the various issues that concern them and plan out courses of action for their improvement.

WOMEN'S ACTION GROUPS (MAHILA SANGAMS) :

The capacity of tribal women for combined and consistent effort was one potential that went unnoticed and untapped for too long a time. A few factors like their lack of communication abilities and improper knowledge of Telugu contributed to this. However the state-wide anti-liquor agitation provided the needed breakthrough. This was an issue that concerned them directly and had a lot of emotional appeal. The otherwise coy and gentle women organized 'Mahila Sangams' and successfully stopped the distilling and sale of liquor in the area. The taste of success has given them the much needed impetus. Today they feel confident to organize themselves to take up issues like health care, literacy and income generating economic programmes for self-reliance.

HEALTH CARE :-

Health care facilities in the area a few decades ago were as good as non-existent. The loan primary health centre was ill-equipped and understaffed. Even ordinary fevers and diarrheas often resulted in deaths. Infant mortality was very high. Since ill health was associated with their displeased ancestral spirits, sacrifice of fowls and animals as prescribed by the village priest was resorted to, to appease them. This ignorance was an additional cause for frequent deaths.

We followed a two-pronged approach to health care: curative and preventive. A fairly well stocked dispensary was run to provide curative medication. People were educated to understand the importance of sanitation and healthy food habits. Mothers were instructed on child-care. Serious cases were referred to the hospitals in the towns. The fact that the child mortality rate today is minimal provides ample proof of the success of the health care project.

ISSUES TAKEN UP:-

Involvement in the lives of the poor often found us on a confrontational course with the oppressive powers that are at work. Along with the rise in the level of consciousness, the tribals began to understand the dehumanizing that surrounding them. So the next step in our approach was to organize the people to positively confront and transform these inhuman realities. We took up specific issues and stood along with the people in their fight. The following are a few of the important issues taken up.

LAND ISSUE AT PEDDURU VILLAGE:

Pedduru is a tribal hamlet consisting of 25 families. They have been cultivating in the surrounding forest land for several years. All of a sudden in 1986 the forest department occupied the 150 acres of their cultivable land for raising a eucalyptus plantation. Standing crops of paddy and jowar were destroyed indiscriminately to plant the eucalyptus saplings. We organized the people to stand against the gross injustice. The matter was represented to the district administration and protests were organized. In a rare show of solidarity hundreds of tribals from the area gathered at Pedduru and plucked out the eucalyptus saplings. An enquiry was ordered by the District Collector, and the forest department and the local revenue official (M.R.O) were jointly held responsible for this anti-people programme. Thanks to this prompt action, the tribals of Pedduru have continued to live on their land, enjoying the fruits of their labour.

MONEY-LENDERS ISSUE:

Money lending at exorbitant rates of interest as already mentioned (3.3 Youth Thrift Scheme), is one factor that has contributed immensely to the economic slavery of the tribals.

The problem was discussed at length in the village meetings. With the help of the cultural troupe the magnitude of the problem was explained to the people in detail. The Yuvajana Sangam came forward to provide financial assistance to all who refused to borrow from money lenders. A fund raised through contribution from schools run by our Brothers was also used for the purpose. Cases were then booked against money lenders for their illegal activities. In spite of threats from the powerful money-lenders and sometimes even from the police, people refused to buckle under pressure. Thanks to the courage and determination of the youth, many villages today are debt free.

PRESERVATION OF FOREST WEALTH:

The Savaras have been aptly called 'The Children of the Forest', as their entire life is centred around forest and what it provides. The wealth of the forest is nature's bounty to them. Most of their agricultural activities are on the hill slopes. Their meager economic income is supplemented by minor forest produce. To destroy forest is to cut off the very life line of the tribals. Hence it became very important to preserve what was left of the once lush green forest cover.

The forest is being destroyed day after day by vested interests. Stealing of timber was done by timber mill owners in connivance with the forest department personnel. After making sufficient study on the problem, The youth organized themselves to prevent this. Roads were guarded and carts loaded with timber were confiscated by the youth. They had to face the ire of the mill owners, forest department and the village elders. However they persisted in their action and as a result the tree felling is reduced considerably.

Raising the prices of minor forest produce like tamarind was another of our successful ventures. The village-owned tamarind trees were sold at a paltry sum of Rs. 1000/- per year to non-tribals. Realising the enormous loss. They incurred every year, the youth decided to buy the crop one year. They paid the villagers Rs. 5,000/- and had a net profit of Rs. 20,000/- in spite of giving away half the produce to the villagers for their own use. They have also been able to pressurize the Govt. run Girijana Co-operative Corporation (G.C.C.), which was buying tamarind

at a meager Rs.2/- per kg to raise the price. Once they tasted success, similar methods were applied for other forest and agricultural products.

THE IMPACT OF OUR LIFE AND MISSION ON PEOPLE:

32 years of involvement did bring about a major transformation in the situation. Poverty and exploitation continue to exist, though to a lesser degree. Many still remain illiterate. Yet people who observe closely will notice a qualitative change that has come about in the lives of the people. The children who grew into youth and the youth who grew into adults are of a generation with a difference, when compared to their predecessors. They look at things and face people with confidence and dignity. They have learned to face situations collectively and are able to resist the subtle forms of exploitation. Today they are able to meet Govt. Officials, development officers, contractors, teachers, bank officers, police etc., and get their work done. Most of the schools function today. Teachers are more regular to school. Parents are beginning to feel the need for basic education. They have better self-esteem and human dignity. The child mortality rate has become minimal. Most seek medical aid in time of sickness. The influences of ritual sacrifices for cures have become minimal.

As a policy we have moved away from the first village, Manapuram, to another village. M.M.Guda, 20 km away, after nine years of involvement and again moved from M.M.Guda to Savara Gopalapuram in the year 2000.. It was a painful decision both for the people and for us. But the result of this move is encouraging. The youth rose up to the occasion to organize themselves. Collective leadership has emerged. They have shown that they can stand on their feet.

Men like Addaiah, Singa and Sumbru now say: “Years ago we knew little about our situation, the outer world and our own capabilities. Even the sound of an automobile made us run into the forest. We now realize that some with vested interests have taken undue advantage of us even to the extent of depriving us of our human dignity. Today we stand on our feet. Reading and writing helps in getting our work done from Govt. Offices. We will not allow undue exploitation. And we will work for our development through every means

available”. Perhaps the ground is now ready to sow the seeds for a more participatory development.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST :

The approach we adopted requires years of patience and one cannot see quick changes or development within a short period. Looking for quick results would be like chopping a tree for the want of wood rather than sowing a seed for the same purpose. If it has taken centuries for the people to be as politically and socially conscious as they are today, can any worthwhile changes be brought about overnight. What we have been doing was to study the situation closely, identify the blocks that are on the way of development and reasons for their backwardness, and help them to tackle their own problems and set them on a new direction in which they can steadily move into a better future.

Looking back we realize there is much more that could have been done. There have been certain drawbacks in our involvement that could have been avoided with some planning and care;

- i) We did not purr to use the tool of scientific analysis of the socio-economic conditions of the people. No formal survey of the area was made. No proper records were maintained. Due to lack of accurate knowledge of the situation, we could not tackle the problems scientifically.
- ii) Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for these tribals. They still use primitive methods in agriculture. This results in low level of production. They are hardly able to make both ends meet. We could not provide a breakthrough in this field.

- iii) We were more involved with the village in which we lived. As a result, the surrounding villages got less attention. Each member of the team could have taken charge of certain villages. This would have enabled us to implement programmes in larger number of villages.
- iv) Lack of continued follow-up of youth groups resulted in loss of enthusiasm for effective action.
- v) Though we have lived among the Savaras for 32 years, we did not master their language. Nor did we promote their culture systematically.