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MAN OF THE YEAR

Lighting up the darkness

Nilesh Desai and his NGO helped uplift more than 35,000 Bhil adivasi families in MP

By Deepak Tiwari Photos Sanjoy Ghosh | December 15, 2018 11:18 IST

Soil solutions: Nilesh Desai discussing organic farming techniques with women from Panchpipla village in Jhabua district.

Every March, poets, artists and tourists visit Jhabua district, in the southwest corner of Madhya Pradesh, to enjoy the vibrant Bhagoria festival. Celebrated a week before Holi, the festival marks the end of the harvesting season. Local tribal communities set up festive markets, wear colourful clothes, and sing and dance to traditional tunes. The star attraction of the festival is the haat, the marriage market, where young men and women from the Bhil and Bhilala communities elope after choosing their partners. They later return to be formally accepted as man and wife by their families and the village elders.

> A family earns around Rs1,00,000 a year through backyard poultry. They can now afford to buy cheaper farm-bred chicken for self-consumption; their diets have become more nutritious.—Nilesh Desai

Jhabua is home to the Bhil adivasis, who along with smaller tribals communities, make up 85 per cent of the district's population. While famous for its festival, until a few years ago, the district was infamous for having one of the highest crime rates in the country; the Bhils were notorious for their aggressive behaviour, especially after drinking the local brew.

Traditionally, the Bhils of Jhabua were hunter-gatherers who later practised shifting cultivation. During the 20th century, their agricultural output diminished continuously because of forest depletion, reduction in soil fertility, and barrenness of land caused by urbanisation and increasing population. Moreover, Jhabua is a low rainfall area; hence the proportion of irrigated area to net sown area is low, leading to dismal agricultural productivity. Faced with decreasing incomes from agriculture, around 70 years ago, the Bhils started migrating to Gujarat for work and soon became the primary source for construction labour in the state.

Being an underdeveloped region with a low literacy rate, Jhabua has, for decades, been home to numerous missionaries and social workers who have worked for the uplift of the adivasi communities.

Nilesh Desai, 57, is one among them. Over the past three decades, his efforts in the district have raised incomes and elevated the lives of thousands of tribal families.

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Distantly related to former prime minister Morarji Desai, Desai is from Valsad district in Gujarat, but grew up in Ratlam, a city in Madhya Pradesh. His father, Dinakar Desai, a railway clerk in Ratlam, was joint secretary of the All India Railwaymen's Federation. As a child, Desai saw his father interact with prominent trade unionists such as Umraomal Purohit and George Fernandes.

During the famous railway strike of 1974—about 1.7 million employees stopped work for 20 days in the largest recorded industrial action in history—Dinakar Desai was jailed and later suspended. “During those days, our home was the hub for hundreds of suspended railway employees,” says Desai. “After my father was jailed, I started participating in rallies and organising children's protests.”

Those heady days sowed the seeds of social work and labour welfare in Desai's mind. “I wanted to pursue my passion for labour welfare, so I took a master's degree in social work from the Indore School of Social Work,” says Desai. “By the final year of my course, I was sure I wanted to commit myself to rural development.”

The influence of Tilonia and the establishment of Sampark

Learning new skills: Nilesh Desai meeting with murgi sakhis in Saluniya Chhoti village in Jhabua district.

In 1972, eminent social worker Bunkar Roy founded the Social Work and Research Centre—popularly called Barefoot College—in Tilonia village in Ajmer, Rajasthan, to help rural communities become self-sufficient in education, skill development and health, and to ensure drinking water, women's empowerment and electrification through solar power. Today, Barefoot College ranks among the top 20 global NGOs, and Tilonia has become a model for education and economic and social development in remote villages.

Desai was blown away by an article Roy had written and went to Tilonia to meet him and ask for work. “Roy's personality and the idea of Tilonia had a mesmerising effect on me,” says Desai. “He sent me to a village in Rajasthan to manage an informal education section for three months where I learnt the nitty-gritty of working in such an organisation. Thankfully, I passed Roy's field test.”

Desai told Roy of his desire to work for the uplift of the Bhil adivasis of Jhabua. In 1987, with Roy's consent, 26-year-old Desai went to Raipuria village in Jhabua district, and set up the NGO Sampark, as a unit of the Social Work and Research Centre. Roy also deputed Desai to work on the Drinking Water Mission, an initiative by former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, to improve water quality and increase water availability in Indian villages; Jhabua was one of the 10 chosen districts for the pilot project.

After completing a three-year stint with the Drinking Water Mission, Desai focused his efforts on the impoverished Bhil adivasis, who were struggling to make a living. From Sampark's campus called Sampark Gram, Desai began addressing the survival needs and development aspirations of this marginalised community, with a mission to eventually empower them with sustainable sources of income.

A handicrafts session at Buniyadi Shala.

He interacted with the youth to understand the area's problems and began awareness drives to rid the adivasis of social evils like dapa (bride price) and nuqta (death feasts), and curb the custom of extravagant gifting during Raksha Bandhan. Sampark also revived the age-old cooperative system of adji-padji, where villagers voluntarily offer each other their services towards construction work. These measures helped the adivasis save lakhs of rupees every year.

Desai started development efforts in various areas including education, financial empowerment, water harvesting and watershed management and agriculture.

In Jhabua, 70 per cent of the population depends on seasonal migration for their livelihood. “Livelihood is not stand-alone, there are other related issues,” says Desai. “Higher incomes need to be utilised properly. Though income from migratory labour exceeds that from agriculture, this increased income did not have positive consequences on children’s health and education. For our efforts to have an all-round positive impact, we divided our work; one side was creative development while the other was advocacy. I have learnt from Tilonia that any good work on the field cannot sustain without the people of the area being sensitised, and the community itself demanding the change.” On the creative side, Sampark started a school, and looked at alternative means of supplementing income, improving agricultural productivity and empowering women.

On the advocacy side, Sampark started Lok Jagriti Manch, a community-based organisation to tackle local and policy issues. This forum ran self-help groups which became the basis for watershed development committees, poultry farming groups, health and education committees, forest management committees and conflict resolution groups. “We realised, however, that our efforts were not getting the desired results as there was not enough women's participation,” says Desai. “So, we started Saajha Manch, to address women's issues. We found women to be much more serious about issues than men. When we started the poultry initiative, it was the women who were its backbone.”

Farmers look on as Desai shows them indigenous seeds collected at Sampark Gram’s seed bank.

The moneylending trade in Jhabua was the domain of moneylenders from Andhra Pradesh, who had migrated to the district decades ago. They exploited the adivasis by charging exorbitant rates of interest and had cruel methods of loan recovery. They were known as kali banks (black banks). To stop this exploitation and offer an alternative, Sampark started the dhodi bank (white bank) movement to help villagers borrow money at reasonable rates of interest. Through Saajha Manch, women lenders began small self-help group saving banks. Once the women's banks grew stronger, the moneylenders from Andhra Pradesh had no choice but to shut shop.

In 1990, Desai was awarded the National Youth Award by prime minister V.P. Singh. Over the next six years, his work expanded from 13 villages to 28 villages and Sampark gradually evolved into a multi-faceted organisation. Today, 717 villages and 55,000 households in Madhya Pradesh benefit from its initiatives. There are 75 full-time volunteers and more than 300 part-time volunteers managing its activities. Sampark has helped build 13 check dams and several water conservation structures. The Manmohan Singh government felicitated Desai for his work in water conservation and irrigation in Jhabua, and nominated him to its advisory council on artificial recharge of groundwater. Desai's initiatives have been supported by organisations like the Church's Auxiliary for Social Action, Family Health International, Actionaid, Capart, Tata Trusts, Child Fund India, Swiss Aid, Galvmed, Food and Agriculture Organisation, Oxfam, Small Industries Development Bank of India and the Madhya Pradesh Council of Science and Technology. He also receives support from the Madhya Pradesh agricultural department and the ministry of water resources. “While doing development activities, we always keep three things in mind: it should be replicable, low-cost and sustainable.”

Education

While in Tilonia, Desai had received a book from Roy's wife, eminent social activist Aruna Roy, the co-founder of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathana. The book, Letter to a Teacher, written by eight Italian schoolboys about the injustices of the schools towards poor students, was a bestseller in Italy. Desai was so influenced by the book that he got it translated into Hindi and distributed thousands of free copies.

Steadfast support: Nilesh Desai discusses agriculture practices and social customs with tribal farmers in Saluniya Bada village in Jhabua district.

Later, along with his wife, Prakshali, he set up Buniyadi Shala, a residential school in Sampark Gram for the children of migrant labourers. Prakshali, who comes from a family of freedom fighters, was keen on establishing the school based on Mahatma Gandhi's principle of ‘nai talim’ which states that knowledge and work are not separate. Thus, along with academics, students at Buniyadi Shala learn vocational skills. They manage their own dairy and vegetable garden on the campus; the waste from which is made into compost and sold. They also make and sell candles, balms, and ayurvedic oils and powders. “Our focus is to create good individuals who seek a higher education,” says Prakshali. The school has a bal panchayat (children's parliament) where the children discuss and try to solve their problems. They also decide on the menu for the school canteen and choose which games to play. “We try to increase the children's participation in the decision-making process to improve their leadership skills,” says Prakshali.

In 2008, Congress president Rahul Gandhi spent a day at Sampark Gram to learn about the issues faced by the Bhil adivasis. Desai recalls Gandhi taking an interest in the children's science centre, where he tried solving a puzzle involving ropes and knots. “That day, we had a meeting with women health workers and he listened carefully to their experiences and problems,” says Desai. “He was also excited seeing the functioning of our solar lights and panels.”

In 1994, Sampark started night schools in 10 villages for first-generation learners. Later, when the government opened primary schools in these villages, the night schools were turned into 'quality education centres'. Today, around 1,500 students attend classes in these centres to strengthen their skills in languages, mathematics and general knowledge. “We teach mathematics through games and poetry,” says Prakshali. “We have trained a large number of teachers from government schools in alternative methods of education. Our belief is that the empowerment of students makes them alive to their rights as future citizens.” So far, around 28,000 students have benefited from this initiative.

Backyard poultry and murgi sakhis

Desai was always looking for ways in which the Bhils could make a living off their land, instead of migrating for work. In 2012, he considered poultry farming, which could be undertaken in their backyards. “With land depleting quickly and holdings shrinking with every new generation, the district could not sustain the livelihoods of the masses,” says Desai. We needed to look for alternatives and felt that poultry farming could be a sustainable livelihood measure.”

Beating hunger: Mealtime at Buniyadi Shala.

Desai first considered Jhabua's prized Kadaknath chicken. The breed, which received the Geographical Indication tag in July, is black in colour and has a lean body structure. Its meat, which is sold for around Rs1,000 per kg, is much in demand as it is considered an aphrodisiac and recommended for people suffering from cardiac disease because of its high iron and low fat content. However, because of its high mortality rate, farming it was a non-lucrative initiative for the Bhils.

Desai then looked at another local breed of country chicken that many Bhil families reared in their backyards. This, too, had a high mortality rate, but lower than the Kadaknath's. It was low maintenance, and being sturdier than farm-bred chicken, it was less susceptible to predators. It also got a better price than farm-bred chicken.

Desai consulted experts on how to reduce the mortality of the country chicken, and with the support of the government's Krishi Vigyan Kendra, conducted numerous workshops to teach the Bhils how to rear the birds. They were taught the importance of sanitation in and around the backyard for the quick and healthy growth of the birds, and the necessity of vaccinating and deworming them to protect them from diseases. They were also supplied with poultry waterers and feeders.

To make the poultry business successful for the Bhils, Desai introduced the concept of 'barefoot veterinary doctors' called murghi sakhis (friends of poultry), where women from the community were taught to rear poultry in a scientific manner and trained to inject vaccines. For a small fee, the murghi sakhis go to houses that farm backyard poultry to deworm and vaccinate the birds, and impart advice on the right feed and care necessary. Thanks to their efforts, the mortality rate of the local breed reduced from about 80 per cent to 30 per cent.

This model of vaccinating backyard poultry through murghi sakhis has been emulated in many other districts and states. It also caught the attention of international organisations like the Food and Agriculture Organisation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which commissioned a documentary on the subject—Giving women a voice: Vaccinating poultry empowers women of rural India.

Today, in 352 villages in Jhabua, 35,000 Bhil families farm country chicken. "The birds sell for around Rs800 each," says Desai. "On average, a family earns around Rs1,00,000 a year through backyard poultry. They can now afford to buy cheaper farm-bred chicken for self-consumption; their diets have become more nutritious and there is less malnutrition among the children. Though the Kadaknath fetches a good price, its predation and mortality rates are high. So, we created a criterion to rear the Kadaknath. Villages with the best-performing murgi sakhis and active members in the poultry-extension group meetings were given preference, and specific households were selected."

Bhuri Bai and her husband, Kalu Charel, from Jampada village are a Bhil couple with two children. They used to work as migrant labourers in Gujarat. In 2012, life changed for the Charels when they received a dozen free chicks from Sampark and were encouraged to try poultry farming. A murgi sakhi vaccinated and dewormed the chicks, and advised the couple on how to rear them. "They don't require a lot of feed as they love to nibble on plants and flowers around the house," says Bhuri Bai. "They eat nearly everything except for onions and a few other vegetables."

Dedicated duo: Nilesh Desai and his wife, Prakshali, with the children of Buniyadi Shala.

About a decade ago, when ATMs began sprouting in rural India, the word caught the fascination of the Bhils who were unfamiliar with the idea of saving cash in banks. They began referring to anything that gave them cash as 'ATM'. "It is like an ATM in our backyard," says Kalu. "Every week, we earn about Rs5,000 selling chickens. Whenever we need money, we sell a chicken."

With the money earned from the sale of poultry, Kalu got a tube-well installed to irrigate a small plot of lands he owns. He now looks after the agriculture, and Bhuri Bai rears the poultry. She has also become a murgi sakhi, overseeing five villages. "Most of the time I move from one village to another, as families add on new chicks each week which need to be vaccinated," says Bhuri Bai.

Jyotsna Garwal is a murgi sakhi who volunteers at Sampark. "When backyard poultry started in Jhabua, families owned between one and five chickens," says Jyotsna. "Now, they own between 20 and 25 chickens. If women have a fridge to store the vaccine, I train them to inject it themselves." She also monitors the health and education of the children in the homes she visits.

"After the huge success of backyard poultry, the incomes of the womenfolk have increased and they now have cash in hand," says Laxman Munia, a Bhil leader, who volunteers with Lok Jagriti Manch and serves as a counsellor to hundreds of families that undertake backyard poultry. Adds Kanna Bai, sarpanch of Saluniya village: "Money generated from the sale of birds empowers women to take their own decisions. Besides gaining leadership qualities, we have noticed that they now spend money on books and children's school fees."

The seed bank

Desai formed small groups in villages to persuade villagers to plant trees on barren land. While touring villages and interacting with farmers, he would hear complaints of the poor quality of seeds. At some places, he saw healthy crops but without any grain in them. Farmers would tell him that the new seeds bought from the market often did not germinate properly or needed lots of supplements to grow.

When Shobharam, a farmer from Gavadi village, told Desai that he had quit farming because of successive losses and the barrenness of his land, Desai persuaded him to restart farming instead of becoming a migrant labourer. He told Shobharam to try planting native old seeds instead of the new ones developed by agriculture universities. Shobharam, however, did not have any seeds to sow, let alone money for fertilisers or irrigation. Desai loaned him a bag of old seeds of maize, on condition that he return double the quantity, if he got a good crop. Shobharam sowed the seeds, was blessed with a bountiful crop, and was able to fulfil his commitment to Desai.

"The old seeds have inbuilt genetic strength gained through the ages and can grow in difficult conditions," says Desai. "The new seeds distributed through government channels and the local market are too weak to withstand the vagaries of nature." Sampark started a seed bank in Sampark Gram. "Before starting the bank, a survey was conducted by two volunteers from Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, who were associated with the National Biodiversity Action Plan, on the availability of traditional seeds and their usage patterns in nine villages in Jhabua," says Desai. "They collected information from farmers about traditional seeds and provided us with technical expertise." Based on these studies, seeds like bawata, satpani, doodh mogar, sathi makka, deshi chana and kali moochh dhaan were collected and organic clubs for farmers created. These seeds, when sown and grown, fetch a good price.

"Anyone is free to pick up seeds from here and use them in their fields," says Harishankar Pawar, a journalist who volunteers with Lok Jagriti Manch. "The only condition is that they return double the quantity taken." Many farmers have availed themselves of this facility and revived their farming practices.

Narayan Solanki, from Chhota Salunia village, planted a small field with lemon seeds borrowed from Sampark's seed bank. It turned out to be a golden goose. He earns Rs30,000 every year selling lemons, besides the income from the sale of his other crops.

"To address the issue of sustainable agriculture, we created a statewide network called Beej Swaraj Abhiyan [BSA]," says Desai, who campaigns against genetically modified crops and seeds. The BSA advocates policymaking to secure the future of agriculture and food availability locally, and has created four seed banks of old seeds in three districts in Madhya Pradesh. There are more than 18 varieties of wheat, 115 varieties of paddy and 140 varieties of vegetables in these seed banks. "From various Indian villages, we collected and revived seeds that were facing extinction due to the prevalence of new, high-yielding seeds," says Desai. To protect traditional seeds and agriculture biodiversity, Desai organises fairs for farmers from across the state under the Desi Beej Samagam programme, where seeds are exchanged and information and knowledge shared.

Naresh Biswas, THE WEEK's Man of the Year, 2015, who works for the uplift of the Baiga tribe eastern Madhya Pradesh, is also associated with Sampark's seed bank. "Madhya Pradesh has a rich agricultural diversity and there are thousands of varieties of seeds suited to local conditions," says Biswas. "However, because of the government's apathy and the push by multinational corporations for monoculture of hybrid and genetically modified seeds, traditional varieties of seeds are disappearing quickly."

To promote organic cultivation, Sampark taught farmers in field schools, about new methods of ploughing, soil and seed treatment and insect management. They were advised to plant calendula, whose flowers fetch a good market price. Fields of the bright yellow and sunny orange flowers are now a common sight in Jhabua.

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