

Taking Responsibility – Learning to Lead

Swati & Michael, Juna Mozda, May 2003

May 2003
Juna Mozda

Dear Friends,

Whatever be our shortcomings and limitations, we belong to a community that believes in the efficacy of virtue and trying to do our best for a better society. It is also true that as we are up against the tide, all that we attempt to do is extremely difficult; so facing up to this challenge becomes our paramount task. Yet, for the first time something fundamental changed in what we are. The meaning and purpose of what we are doing came into question. Where does one escape if human beings are to abandon the most basic value of life? The events of 27th February 2002 and all that happened in the aftermath of the Godhra, carnage in Gujarat, not only shook us, but perhaps forever changed the life of every sensitive human being. Communalism, violence, and discrimination are not unknown, but the role of the state and a large section of the middle class in justifying and taking pride in all that took place is shocking and raises far-reaching questions. A xenophobic atmosphere dominates the public discourse with various incidents being reported in a perverted form, be it the tragedy of women and children who were victims of the cruelest carnage or those who are blamed for most things that occur in our state today.

It shakes one's faith in human beings as sane creatures on the one hand, while on the other, vested interests in connivance with Governments do everything to suppress people anywhere they organize themselves to fight injustice. Whether it be the attack on the Magsaysay award recipient Rajendra Singh of Tarun Bharat Sangh, or the one on Medha Patkar and others on 7th April at Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, or that on activists of Paryavaran Surkaksha Samiti by the hired goons of a polluting industry - the efforts of those attempting to maintain power are taking violent forms. The common citizen, struggling for the basic and urgent needs of resources and livelihood in these surcharged and difficult times, is not impressed by the communal flames of fascist tendencies. S/he, cutting across barriers of religion or caste, toils to feed children who exclaim, "Mama, maybe tomorrow there'll be more food."

The Mozda story, in spite of this depressing backdrop, is a heart-warming experience. The unspoiled "children of the soil" engage in constructive pursuits such as tilling the land to grow food or collecting forest produce. However, something that improves the condition of their soil and increases productivity means a whole lot more. Hence, newer villages want to join our soil and water conservation activities as its efficacy becomes more visible to people. "Samaj," the women's cooperative, processed 10 tons of pigeon peas. Health work continues at the initiative of our volunteers, as do the youth camps and other programs. It is the villages that benefit from a group of volunteers coalescing into an effective team. We too learn from their innate knowledge and ability to deal with various problems. That mutual trust, friendship and mature understanding are the basis of collective work gets clearer to us.

Having received 45 inches of rain, the greenery in Mozda would be the envy of many. The agricultural year was pretty good, thanks in some measure to the bunds.

We fervently hope that some of the good fortune of beautiful Mozda rubs off on other places too.

Swati-Michael

Watershed Programme

Thirty-six young people from 15 villages participated in the youth camp in Mozda in November 2001. They spread the word about various developmental activities, as a result of which people from these villages started attending our monthly meetings. As reported in our last report (Report 10, 2001), four new

villages have joined, bringing the total number of villages where the watershed program is in operation to nine, and the number of farmers to 700. The table below gives the details of the work done.

Training in watershed techniques for both new as well as existing volunteers was conducted in Mozda. While we were

away from Mozda "fire-fighting" during the violence last year, Jayantibhai, Sonjibhai, Heerabhai,

Ramesh and others took over all of the activity very efficiently and ably.

**Watershed Work in Juna Mozda
May 2002**

Sr. Nr.	Name of village	No. of farmers	Total Volume of bunds (cubic meters)	Total length of bunds (meters)	Land protected directly (acres)	Land protected indirectly (acres)	Approximate person days of labor generated	Cash contribution by farmers (Rs.)	Distributed food grain (kg)	Additional work done by farmers (cubic meters)
1	Mozda	57	1221	2996	77	35	2136	3169	4885	430
2	Vedchha	106	2448	5002	257	125	4200	6267	9793	772
3	Anadu	31	641	1495	69	30	1100	1744	2565	190
4	Nani Singloti	107	2421	5573	169	90	4200	6350	9683	571
5	Gadh	178	4020	9927	216	110	7000	10877	16079	975
6	Matha-Bhat	37	876	2114	39	20	1500	2270	3507	388
7	Danda-wadi	35	835	1603	56	30	1460	2191	3341	195
8	Matha-Mogar	104	2392	5343	134	60	4100	6256	9567	888
9	Gumina (Patvali)	48	1124	2699	72	35	2000	2881	4497	419
	TOTAL	703	15978	36752	1089	535	27696	42005	63917	4828

Total expenses for 17 volunteers and overheads:	Rs. 15,283.81
Total cost of food grain:	Rs. 405, 937.50
Training and field trips for farmers and volunteers:	Rs. 31, 791.00
Total expenses:	Rs. 453,012.31

The first showers last year were very heavy, resulting in a great deal of damage to the bunds. After the rains, we noticed that one to one-and-one-half feet of soil had collected on the bunds in many places. Had the bunds not been in place, this soil would have been washed away! This way, we were able to protect at least 1425 acres of soil from erosion, in 9 villages. This year we also planted around 5000 guava, pomegranate, custard apple (sitafal), teak, and bamboo saplings. Even as our work in the 2002 season was yet to finish, people from new villages started thronging our monthly meetings, come rain or flood. They insisted that, "they wanted to join

the organization and wanted soil and water conservation work in their villages too!" The volunteers deliberated over this and decided that the work quality would suffer if any more than three new villages were taken up in a year. Lessons in the last few years helped us develop the following rules:

- i) Work would be initiated in a village only if there is complete unanimity amongst all of the villagers – villagers have one, two, and sometimes four meetings to evolve a consensus.
- ii) The villagers would have to select volunteers from among themselves, who we would train in watershed related work.

- iii) The villagers would form a committee of representatives from each hamlet, with at least two women and a total of eleven members who would meet every month to plan, review, report and take overall responsibility for the work.
- iv) A village undertaking watershed work with us would not engage with any other organizations for the same work (though they would, of course, be free to get involved in other activities with other organizations).
- v) Every farmer who wants bunds constructed on his farm would join the "soil conversation committee" of the village by paying a membership fee of Rs. 11/-
- vi) The beneficiary would have to contribute Rs. 4/m³ of work to be undertaken on his farm. He would also get 4 kg of food grain as wages for his family's labour.

While we have brought three new villages into this program, there are 10-12 villages interested in joining in the future, and they regularly attend our monthly meetings. Villages where no employment is available, where no electricity, school or health care facility exist - i.e. villages without "developmental" activities - especially recognize the import of protecting their soil and the land's moisture retention. People also realize that this creates employment without having to migrate, improves the soil condition, increases agricultural productivity and income, as well as compensating their labor. Our effort is to make the whole process participatory, democratic, empowering, and one that creates a sense of responsibility. Our challenge is that this activity does not remain confined to conservation work but serves as a vehicle to catalyze the overall human and material development of the area.

Activities with women

The most visible impact of regular meetings, study tours and other activities with women of the Samaj Cooperative is in the quality of their participation, the

ideas they generate, the discernible self-confidence in decisions that they are called upon to make, and their enthusiasm for their work. They decided that they would like to work harder and process 10 tons of pigeon pea dal (lentils) this year to supplement their incomes. The women of the Mozda and Vedchha cooperatives did accomplish the task, but the dal could not be sold easily as road transport was closed for over a month due to communal violence last year. Apart from the marketing of dal, the whole project is run independently by Ishwar, Jayanti and the women. The older women, very ably and patiently, train new entrants to ensure that quality does not suffer as the cooperative grows. Ishwar and Jayanti too take special pains, sometimes with tough demeanor, to maintain the quality of the dal. It is a great feeling to see their dedication as they slog day and night. *Samaj* in Gujarati means "understanding," and the cooperative members justify that name in ample measure.

Health Activities

That health services do not reach remote villages does not need reiteration. In the last 8 years, we tried to train two to three young people as village health workers, but the activity did not take off. However, our team of volunteers felt that as they were engaged in soil and water conservation work mainly during the summer, they could surely do other things in the rest of the year. Hence nine volunteers underwent training at Sewa Rural, an NGO working in Bharuch district.

The commitment and sincerity of our volunteers, also attested to by their trainers, resulted in the initiation of the health program in 16 villages. Volunteers who did not have bicycles were helped to buy them. Armed with medical kits containing medicines for ordinary ailments, they started making weekly visits to the villages. People in 16 villages now have cheap and easy access to medicines of assured quality. All the work and experiences are shared in our

monthly meeting when they also replenish their supplies. The "supervisor" duties rotate among the volunteers on a monthly basis.

Mendha-Lekha: A Model of Self-Rule

In November of 2001, thirty-six people from the Mozda area, twelve people from Dharampur (S. Gujarat), and twenty people from Lokmitra (Dhedhuki, Rajkot District), visited Mendha-Lekha village in Gandchiroli – a tribal area in Maharashtra. The village merits a book written about it. To quote Jatariya of Anadu village, Mendha-Lekha is "a village that cared for its forests like a grain of food." We saw 1800 hectares of dense forest protected by the village. A member exclaimed, "not a single stroke of the axe is visible here." The village has fought countless battles with the government, Forest Department and police and company, to win control for its Gram Sabha (village assembly) over its 1800 hectare forest.

It is a gripping tale of deceit, threat, fear, allurements, and retribution on the one hand, and understanding, unity, courage, and people's will on the other.

When we attended the Gram Sabha, we found that present in full strength were not only the villagers, but also the Talati (Secretary of the village Panchayat; a government employee), the Gram Sevak (Village Development Assistant), and Forest Department employees. Mendha-Lekha resonated with the slogan, "In Delhi-Bombay it is our government; in our village, we are the government." This was amply demonstrated in the Gram Sabha; even women, who tend to be reticent, were asking questions and demanding gainful employment. Government officials were sincerely sharing information about various development schemes with an almost deferential tone. The visitors from Gujarat, accustomed to more rudeness and insensitivity from government officials, were pleasantly surprised by some of the scenes at the meeting.

During our visit, the active participation of the villagers in the conservation of natural resources was the high point. Devaji Tofa, the visionary leader of the village narrated the following:

- It was a three-year struggle by the women, facing umpteen challenges that ultimately led to rooting out liquor distillation and consumption from village.
- Every issue concerning the village, from tribal culture to game cock-fights are all brought up in the village study circle, which facilitates and lays the foundation for Gram Sabha decisions.
- It is this study circle that has given impetus to the village's active participation in various government and forest department schemes and decisions relating to education, market, or health.
- Every decision of the Gram Sabha is arrived at unanimously, regardless of how long the process takes.

Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, who played a catalytic role in Mendha-Lekha's journey, had lived there over a year and a half. He said the real change comes about when a community acts collectively and by consensus, and that this is people's will and power. Meaningful change cannot be imposed externally or from the top-down. He underlines 'study-discussions' as an imperative for people's empowerment. We usually discount discussions and unanimity as valuable, finding them tedious and inefficient. The visit to Mendha-Lekha had a salutary effect on our people and they did not tire of narrating their experiences.

Attendance in our monthly meetings shot up. Consequently, they have resolved to activate Gram Sabhas in villages around Mozda.

Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti (PSS) Environment Protection Group

We also are part of a process in which public health activists, doctors, environmental activists, and scientists, come together to share skills to undertake environmental health surveys.

To aid in this, we have been conducting youth camps and other action programs to mobilize support on environmental issues.

March-April 2002

Gujarat saw the most cruel and inhumane carnage from 27 February 2002 onwards. Fortunately, there were no untoward incidents in our area, despite concerted attempts by some outsiders to foment trouble. But local leaders from both communities effectively counteracted such moves. Yet the scale and brutality was unknown in our lives and it was not possible to mutely observe the unfolding tragedy. We moved to a Muslim-majority area in Baroda where our friends Trupti and Rohit live. Their house had turned into a 'control room,' attending to round the clock complaints from attacked communities. Typically, it would be a call from a woman crying out for help to save her house or shop under attack from 300-500 people or it would be an old man telling us that his house had been set on fire. The control room functioned all day, but the busiest hours were late into the night. Most of the time we could only call up district officials, police officials pleading, pressurizing, and screaming for security in areas under attack. It is too shocking and shameful a tale to recount cases where officers would have simply switched off their cell phones, or would refuse to answer calls. Detailed fact-finding from victims, documenting incidents collecting names of people/politicians who led marauding mobs, going to threatened areas to spend nights, being at hand should the mad mobs charge into their area were among the other emergency operations we had to engage in. These fire-fighting operations were coordinated by a group set up in the name of the People's Union for Civil Liberties, Shanti Abhiyan (Peace Campaign). We conducted fact-finding investigations, both in Baroda and Bharuch-Narmada districts, along with 4-5 other groups and concerned citizens

who were willing to stand up in the face of the worst communally driven carnage.

After the madness subsided, we conducted youth camps in colleges, facilitated dialogs with students – some of whom may have otherwise been persuaded to join the violent mobs. It was an uphill task in light of the communally charged, riot-profiteering media inundating the youth with inflammatory reporting. We tried to highlight the disjunction between issues of livelihood, water, education, and health versus those issues being raked to fan communal flames in the name of temple and religion. From these efforts, the satisfying result has been the creation of an atmosphere where a significant section of society considers nonviolence, plurality, respect and tolerance for other cultures and such as afflictions rather than values.

Other Activities

National Alliance of People's Movements

NAPM is an alliance of some 150 grassroots groups. They are organizations involved in struggles for human rights, justice, right to life, and livelihood. We have been part of the alliance for the last 5-6 years. Various awareness-creation programs and campaigns against globalisation, privatisation, etc. were conducted in Gujarat in coordination with 9-10 organizations and groups over the last year. Through a yatra (tour) from Umargam to Baroda we were able to reach about 10,000 people. We were able to link up local issues with macro level policies which impact farmers, laborers, tribals and fisherpeople. While droughts, malnutrition, and failing agriculture drive many farmers to suicide, the government aggravates the predicament of the farmer by favouring private and transnational corporate interests that serve to deprive toilers of their resources of life and livelihood. Where people resist, repression is the patent tool employed by the powers that be. We feel it is imperative to make common cause

with all concerned individuals and groups across the board, and hence our active involvement with NAPM.

Visitors

Sharing ideas and experiences with various visitors is integral to the extension of our work and we greatly benefit from them. Over the last year, we have had young students, volunteers, activists and thinkers from various parts of the country and all corners of the world.

Programs and Actions

Other programs that we had occasion to participate in included the fast of Tom Kocherry, leader of the National Fishworkers Forum, against the draconian Aquaculture Authority Bill that delicensed foreign fishing trawlers and addressed other issues relating to fisherpeople's rights.

We hosted an awareness creating yatra initiated on the occasion of Shri Jayprakash Narayan's centenary celebrations, spoke at the industry policy and participated in various other meetings and programs to promote khadi, energy alternatives such as pedal power generators, solar energy, micro-hydel projects, etc.

Monthly meetings

What started as casual, informal sittings with women coming to deposit their savings, turned into regular meetings now attended by 80-150 women and men, as well as our own volunteers. These meetings are occasions where ideas and issues are discussed, plans chalked out, and decisions are made. The more informative and meaningful we can make these meetings the more it will help the team-building process.

Since we are not a formal institution, our activities have been identified only by their individual names. We have now decided to call ourselves the 'Mozda Collective' to convey the inter-related aspect of various works.

News

The Mozda Collective was awarded the 'Rural Development Award' for the year 2002 in October. Fourteen volunteers and members of the Samaj Women's cooperative accepted the award. It is an award for the collective concern of all for the purpose for which it is given; and is therefore it is to the credit of everyone with these concerns.

Some Voices and Reactions

Asking a question to gauge people's reactions at the end of a meeting in Gadh village, we asked "what is the objective of these activities?" "For life and well being," was the response.

"If we can sustain the soil and water conservation work for 5 years, we would be able to enrich all of our fields and engage the idle and lax," says Surji of Nani Singloti village

A farmer from Dandawadi confided that they'd tested us and verified the efficacy and genuineness of the program before deciding to join the watershed activity

Villagers of Chokimali turned up at a meeting in one village. On being told that the selection process for new villages was over the year, they refused to accept this and insisted that we would have to abide by their decision.

When some visitors asked Ishvar and Jayanti how many hours they worked daily, they looked around wondering why anyone would limit themselves by the hands of the clock.