

Towards Self Rule – Learning from *Chandapur*

It is a tale of the village that advised us on our first visit to 'not to waste our time and resources as people would not change'.

Chandapur, a remote village of Uchhal taluka of Surat district is home for 609 people. Its 99% of the population belong to tribal community such as Vasava, Valvi, Padvi and Konkani.



- Nearly 60% people are literate of which 70% male and 30% are female.
- Only 15 families own the dry, unfertile, hilly rocky land, where as 62 families cultivates forestland for their livelihood.
- In absence of employment in the village people have to migrate 70 – 100 k.m. in search of wage. The children have to walk 2 to 3 Km to nearby village to get education after std.4

Still we started work with them. With continuous efforts in the form of meeting social and political leaders of the village and imparting information on the new law of Bhuriya committee on Gramsabha and power given to them. The leaders started taking interest and demanded more information. So organization had provided them all the details in a two days workshop in September 2003. Day by day the people became more enthusiastic and optimist about the process. Soon after the date was decided for the Gramsabha the work on village level was started and steadily it got the pace. For the first time in their life in the village each and every one experienced the organized formal work to demand their rights.

And then there was a day. People of all age overwhelmingly joined in rally by shouting slogans and dancing on the beat of drums traditionally played on the festive occasions. Suspecting Government officials, journalist, neighboring villagers also joined to see first Gramsabha organized by the villagers themselves. It was started 11:00 O'clock. Gramsabha was chaired by Jairambhai Ravjibhai Vasava (Dy. Sarpanch) and Shri Kantilalbhaji Zallyabhai Vasava conducted Gramsabha by reading 12 point agenda followed discussion and passing resolution in the presence of 400 Gramsabha male-female voters. Now the small dot on the map of Gujarat became the first village that announced Self Rule!

Outcome of Chandapur Gramsabha

- **Regularized Services of Talati (village Revenue Officer) in Village:** Village Revenue Officer never used to visit village but people have to go in his place. So people use to suffer a lot and losing their time and money. But Gramsabha passed regulation by demanding Talati's services in village itself. Result of it Talati starts seating for a whole day in Gram Panchayat office every Friday. People of Chandapur started getting services of Talati in their village itself without paying extra money.
- **Health Services Regularized:** Health worker never used to visit Chandapur village as result the people had to walk 10 km for a treatment. Women and pregnant ladies were the major victim of the inhumane situation. This problem was getting worst in monsoon due to unhygienic condition. More people use to suffer from Malaria, Cholera and other diseases. Gramsabha passed the resolution demanding health services in village once in a week. Since then health worker is visiting Chandapur village every Friday. So, people are getting medical treatment in village itself on regular basis.
- **Problem of Drinking Water Solved:** Chandapur villagers were facing acute problem of drinking water regularly but during summer it was more severe. There were few hand pumps but hardly working. Gramsabha passed resolution demanding drinking water facilities for the village. They also highlighted this news in Gujarati daily Sandesh and new channel. As a result department of water supply officials started acting positively and existing hand pumps got repaired as well as two new hand pumps were also installed.
- **Gram Panchayat Income Increased:** River Nesu comes in Chandapur village area that contains plenty of sand and stones. The contractors were not ready to pay lease to Panchayat for excavating sand. On contrary they complained in the collector office to put pressure on Gram Panchayat. Gramsabha passed the resolution and Gram Panchayat started getting lease money regularly.
- Gramsabha set the example of social forestry by passing resolution and planting trees in 50 hectors of land.
- Library facilities got sanctioned in Chandapur village through Gramsabha resolution.
- The village got the road for the first time in the history of Chandapur and now it shows the way to other villages.

On the footstep of Chandapur 31 villages have declared Self Rule so far.

Development



Showing the way

Villagers in Gujarat's Chandapur use the gram sabha to take charge of their future

By ANISH KULKARNI, Chandapur

The people of Chandapur in Gujarat's Surat district are energized about their new road. The 2-km tarred road, which will connect the village square to the main road that leads to Uchhalid, the taluk headquarters, is something they have been waiting for since Independence. Though it is still only on paper, the villagers believe that they are closer to it than ever before. They must only have to wait till the end of the monsoon for work to begin.

"We just held a gram sabha meeting and resolved that a new road should be laid," said village elder Ajitkumar Pabli. "It compelled officials in Uchhalid to implement the decision." The tribal village of 450 people, is delighted to be the first in Gujarat to have realized the power of a gram sabha, which gives them wide-ranging autonomy and powers of self-rule.

The Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996, which led to the Gujarat Panchayats Act of 1998, empowers tribal households to

STANDING THEIR GROUND

Ramesh Vasava, chairman of Chandapur's dairy cooperative

manage their affairs in accordance with their customs and traditions. Thus the gram sabha can approve projects for social and economic development and ask the panchayat administration to implement them. "We did not know that such a thing existed," said deputy sarpanch Jaireshwar Vasava, referring to the Janshiksha Yojana, referring to the parliamentarian Dilipkumar Bhargava who headed the committee which looked into the working of Panchayat Raj institutions.) Jharkhand

gram was presert by the development officer in consultation with a sarpanch, who might be from another village, as Chandapur fell under the group gram sabha system. "It was often a game of one-upmanship among the half-a-dozen village groups together," said action-liaison Himanshu Vasava.

When Chandapur announced the gram sabha on March 14, the taluk-in-charge and development officer termed it illegal and threatened villagers with arrests. "We stood our ground, knowing that the 'special' gram sabha would compel officials to fall in line," said Ramesh Kankha, chairman of the village's dairy cooperative. "The entire village was present and ultimately, the village accountant and health worker, too,

EXERCISING POWER

Jaireshwar Vasava, deputy sarpanch of Chandapur village

Quasi, a field worker from a local NGO. Vasava, first told them about the powers of the gram sabha.

Until March 14, the gram sabha meetings in Chandapur not dissimilar to those in other villages, were an empty exercise held under orders from Gandhinagar. A talk development officer, on a whistle-stop ride, would meet with villagers who mattered. But there would be no discussions. The

turned up for the meeting." The gram sabha slogan, Delhi, Gandhinagar me samar sakar, amara gram me amar sakar (There are our governments in Delhi and Gandhinagar but in our village we are the government), has caught on in the vicinity. Residents from neighbouring villages flocked to Chandapur to witness the transformation. The resolutions are copied up to get lost in the euphoria. "We want to be practical," said Pabli. "The village has appointed Vasava and his fellow action-liaison, Puresh Chandashary, as

Development



FINDING THEIR VOICE

Bhishmi Vasava, who was imprisoned for cultivating forest land, (right) procession announcing gram sabha

to cultivate what had traditionally been their land. "We were often looked by the forest department for intruding into what they claim is the land," said Pabli. "We were just behind them on several occasions since 1982."

Now the forest department has agreed to regularize lands with pre-1980 cultivation records, like fine receipts. "We are demanding that soil testing results and evidence of the gram sabha be taken into consideration, as tribals were not used to maintaining records," said Chandashary.

Youngsters like Dhara-sinh Vasava and Vishva

their legal counsel.

The villagers formally announced in May that the gram sabha would function as an institution of self-government. "The inspiration for self-rule came from a village in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra we visited last year," said Pabli. There are about 600 self-ruled villages in Zaskhand, 200 in Chhattisgarh, 122 in Andhra Pradesh, 60 in Orissa, and 60 each in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

Since the March 14 meeting, the gram sabha has moved fast. It has imposed a tax on contractors collecting sand from the Nesu river bed, repaired 12 bore-wells and made daily attendance for primary school teachers mandatory. The visits of government officials, such as that of the panchayat accountant, were requested according to the needs of the village, and distribution of seeds was done in June whereas earlier it would be delayed. The rest are awaiting official recognition of their cultivation rights.

Elders like Pabli and 60-year-old Bhishmi Vasava, had been imprisoned in their fight for the right

mesh power connection. Then we can move on to other problems, perhaps on a grand scale."

The road work was sanctioned within days. A committee of elders had been set up to look into the issue of forest lands in the scheduled areas. "There are 60 traditional cultivators of forest land," said Ramesh. "About 35 have been granted land rights. But allotted land needs to be corrected. The rest are awaiting official recognition of their cultivation rights."

Pabli, however, doubts that the gram sabha will achieve anything unless it becomes more aggressive and inclusive. "It should become a reality across Gujarat for effective action," said Vasava. The gram sabha has given Vasava six months since May to wind up his honey business. He complained that nobody thought of asking him what his problems were or involved him in their solutions. "Kanshal must not be spoiled my happiness," he said. Vasava may not be pleased about the gram sabha, but the rest of Chandapur is enthusiastic about the invade they are making into governance. ■