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DEVELOPMENT

Kunariya: A model panchayat in Gujarat

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The gram sabha, where officials of all line departments can be questioned by anyone in the village.

The remarkable story of Kunariya panchayat in Gujarat, noted for its best practices in education, employment and ecological regeneration, and from where not a single case of Covid-19 has been reported in the last 10 months.

“When we heard of COVID first, we immediately swung into action,” Suresh Chhanga told me with a hint of pride. “Entry to the village was restricted to residents coming back, traders of essential goods and officials, house-to-house surveys and awareness programmes were carried out, masks were made for everyone, and families or elders who could not move out were provided supplies at home. Not a single COVID case has been reported from here in the last 10 months.”

“So you avoided COVID,” I said, “but what about the economic lockdown, since that has affected people across India more than the virus itself?”

Chhanga responded: “We ensured that employment work carried on as usual, ensuring, of course, safety; we also managed to get our produce to markets though this did suffer a bit. We had no food shortage at all. Overall, our people were affected much less than those in many other parts of the State. Now, several months into the COVID period, village activity is nearly back to normal, though of course we continue to maintain safety precautions, and are also discussing ways to counter any such future crisis.”

Chhanga is the *sarpanch* (village head) of Kunariya panchayat, a cluster of three settlements in Kachchh district, Gujarat. With a population of about 3,500, the village is largely dependent on agriculture (farming and animal husbandry), crafts, and labour. I had heard that over the last few years Kunariya had undergone a remarkable transformation towards full employment security, democratic participation, ecological regeneration, and high-quality education. So, in January 2021, finally shaking off the shackles of COVID fear, I visited it to explore the dimensions and causes of this transformation.

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Kunariya is a sprawling village. As a panchayat, it has three settlements, and large areas of agriculture and commons. It is set amidst a dry landscape of scrub, grassland, and desert-like features characteristic of the Kachchh district, with the seasons alternating between a torrid summer, scanty but welcome monsoon rains, and a cold dry winter. Its people have traditionally depended on animal husbandry and farming, and a variety of crafts. In more recent times, these have been supplemented by labour in nearby areas, including the town of Bhuj, and on the commons as part of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

Over the last few years, the village has worked hard to shake off the mainstream image of rural India as backward, dirty, ignorant and illiterate. When I visited the girls' and boys' schools, the impact of this resolve was noticeable. Cleanliness was only one visible aspect; everywhere there were colourfully painted walls (and even steps!) depicting flora and fauna, ethics and values. The classrooms had all basic facilities and more, an activity centre in each was full of play and experiment objects as also computers. The physical presence of students had still not been allowed, so I found several teachers on their mobile phones taking online classes.

Bharatiben Gharava, a young woman handling education for the panchayat, told me that during the initial period of the lockdown, they realised that bored kids and worried parents do not make a great combination, so the schools innovated. They encouraged elders with traditional or new skills, such as pottery, music, singing, gardening, tree-planting and cooking, to teach these at home, and devised various online sessions that would be both fun and educative. Over the last few years of transformation, the dropout rate of students has come down to nearly zero; and remarkably, several have left private schools to come back to government schools.

Gender equity

At the anganwadi (childcare centre), a similarly pro-active approach has been adopted in the past two to three years. Earlier, children would have to be dragged to the anganwadi; they now clamour to come because they find lots of fun and meaningful activities to do, as also get nutritious meals (millets, not only wheat and rice). Geetaben Ahir, one of those who handle the anganwadi, said that a number of programmes had been launched to empower girls in line with the panchayat's resolve to reduce gender inequities.

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Chhanga told me proudly that the sex ratio in Kunariya was 1,144 women to 1,000 men, in stark contrast to the ratio of Gujarat State (854:1,000) and the country (900:1,000). He believed that this achievement was owing to the explicit awareness programmes on girl and women's rights (taking place for well over a decade), better health facilities for all, and economic empowerment, all of which may have led to reduction in the desire to have more than one male child. Not entirely convinced, I asked if this needed more study, and Sureshbhai readily agreed.

Access to adequate nutrition was a challenge for several families in Kunariya. During the initial period of the lockdown, 87 families that did not have adequate access were provided relief packages entirely by the village, with the the more well-to-do families pitching in through donations. Since then, they have also been specially targeted to provide employment under the MGNREGA or work in other programmes. A sum of Rs.3 crore has been disbursed to workers in the last three years, 70 per cent of them women. As Sakinaben Ramjhu Node told me: “Earlier, we had to go long distances to find work, now we find it right here.”

On one of the village commons where watershed and erosion-checking work was going on, I spoke to several labourers. One of them said: “Now we have adequate work in the village, we don't need to go out in search of jobs.” Another added: “We are happy if we can contribute to making the village more well-off, because the panchayat has helped us find employment.”

How has all this been achieved? In 2016, when standing for the post of sarpanch, Chhanga had already decided that he wanted to do something to change the face of Kunariya. Although he grew up in a well-off family with land and business in the village, he had seen the hardships that less fortunate residents of the were going through. The voluntary relief work he undertook after the devastating earthquake in Kachchh in 2001, and the experience he gained while working with civil society organisations for several years after doing a Master's in Social Work, gave him a broader social orientation. He realised early on that traditional divisions of caste, religion and gender had to be overcome if the entire community was to rise up. After becoming sarpanch, Chhanga and others who had a similar mindset set about trying to realise their dreams.

Consultations and collective work

Possibly the most important part of this process has been a series of consultations in all the village wards, meetings of small focussed groups, organisation of public events on all important days, and conduct of eight or nine gram sabhas (village assemblies) a year. Vejiben Kanji Kerasiya, a panchayat member, told me that she regularly called ward meetings to discuss problems, priorities and plans. Such meetings culminate in an annual gram sabha in December, where the year's works are reviewed, and tasks set for the coming year. According to several villagers, while gram sabhas had been held before 2016 (they are mandatory under the panchayat laws), they were usually acts of tokenism. What the new panchayat did was to make them meaningful, by making it more participative; significantly the residents of the two hamlets that were away from the main Kunariya settlement were also encourage to take part in them.

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But consultations and meetings are not enough to sustain interest in the absence of visible, on-ground work. From the first year itself, the panchayat initiated an ambitious programme to make the village self-sufficient in water, reviving neglected wetlands and taking up watershed management on a large scale. Over 10,000 trees, a mix of indigenous and exotic species, have been planted every year. One of the common refrains of villagers I spoke to was about how “green” the village had become. On one part of the commons, they experimented successfully with grassland regeneration, reclaiming it from the invasive *Prosopis juliflora* tree that has invaded much of Kachchh. Many nesting boxes and platforms have been set up in the village; Chhanga was very proud of the large population of house sparrows, having heard of their decline in many parts of India.

Gram panchayat development plan

These and other economic, ecological and social issues have been incorporated into Kunariya's annual Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP). The formulation of such a plan is a mandate of panchayats, but it is often not implemented or is a superficial process carried out by a few power-holders in the village. The Kunariya panchayat has taken it seriously, not only making it participatory by trying to bring in the concerns and needs of various sections but also by bringing in both local and external scientific knowledge as a base. Chhanga's young colleagues Bhurabhai Karasiya and Kailash Chad explained to me, for instance, how they use the best available information and geographic information system (GIS) techniques to plan for water security for the village. Of the 11 members on the GPDP preparation committee, six are women.

When implementation of the GPDP is reviewed at the end-of-year gram sabha, officials of all line departments also have to be present, and can be questioned by anyone in the village. In the 2018 gram sabha, 23 front-line and 39 line department officials were present (facilitated by a responsive District Development Officer), which gave villagers enormous self-confidence. Kunariya has also set up a Sankalam Samiti (coordination committee) in which all relevant departments and village institutions report to each other and synergise their activities.

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One of Chhanga's most important decisions was to set up a team, consisting of mostly youth, with member choosing a particular responsibility. This team's work proved that much more can be done collectively than by individual initiatives. As Chhanga says, if the panchayat is supposed to deal with the nearly 30 functions that the law provides for, it needs a full team and a base of residents with the awareness required to fulfil this mandate. To make this happen, over 100 events are organised on specific topics every year: awareness programmes and training sessions on various aspects of village governance, economy, social dynamics, rights, health, education, and so on. Inputs from groups such as SETU Abhiyan, which works on governance across Kachchh, have also been vital. The village has also sustained an explicitly peaceful coexistence between Hindus and Muslims, founded on a history that includes the setting up of a mosque and temple about 300 years ago with their entrances facing each other.

Dhawal Ahir of SETU Abhiyan attributed several factors to Kunariya's visible transformation. Apart from Suresh Chhanga's leadership, they include the increasing participation of women, a heavy focus on socio-economic issues, implementation of MGNREGA, and linking all this to cultural activities that also attract the youth.

Vision document

One of the questions in my mind when I decided to visit Kunariya was, did it have a vision for the future? To my pleasant surprise I found that the village has gone beyond the annual plan to formulate a Vision 2024 document. Often the general impression is that perspective planning is done only in big cities, but Kunariya shows that this need not be so. Its vision document goes into various aspects of a future that would be more prosperous, with full livelihood security, ecological regeneration, greater economic self-reliance based on sustainable production and consumption, eradication of malnutrition, reduction of waste, reduction in inequalities based on caste, gender, religion and “disability”, and stronger self-governance. All of this is supposed to also be centred around women's empowerment and rights. There is even consideration of a happiness index, somewhat similar to what Bhutan uses, instead of GDP. Overall, the vision is to take the village further along in achieving the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals.

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In a final conversation before I left the village, I asked Sureshbhai if there were any other lessons from the COVID experience. He said that given the difficulties in reaching markets, one of the discussions was about access to items of daily household use such as soap, detergents, footwear, vessels, incense sticks, stationery and milk products. They did a survey of what people were spending on all this and found, astoundingly, that the village as a whole was spending Rs. 40 lakh a month on such items. Why, wondered Sureshbhai, could we not produce most of these items ourselves along with people from a few other surrounding villages? He said: “That would be true self-reliance, not what governments have promoted in the name of atmanirbharta. This way we can also help the landless rise well above poverty, which is still a big issue for us.” I told him there were similar notions from other communities and practitioners in India, such as the “network economy” of Elango Rangasamy, former Dalit sarpanch of Kuthambakkam village near Chennai, and SEWA founder Ela Bhatt's “100-mile radius communities”.

Sureshbhai had already met with Elango and was interested in learning ideas and practices from other persons like him. Smiling, he said: “If I get another term as sarpanch, I will move in this direction... or even if I don't get elected, I hope the youth in this village who have been involved in the last few years, will take the vision forward.” On that hopeful note, as I left the village, I reflected: imagine if, in Gandhi's footsteps, all of rural India had been enabled to do what Kunariya had done, how completely different India would be today.

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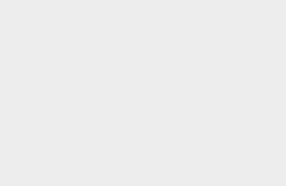
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