

Call of the Commons: People vs Corruption

Report of a CSE Media Task Force to Ralegan Siddhi

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Usha Rai

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**Centre for Science and Environment
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To

The villagers of Ralegan Siddhi

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PREFACE

IN our class-ridden society, who cares for an ex-army jeep driver? And yet Kishan Baburao Hazare, now so fondly called Anna Hazare, has emerged one of India's leading environmental warriors.

His stewardship of Ralegan Siddhi, a village in Ahmadnagar district has turned it into an environmental model. Every slope is afforested and every nullah bunded. The result is a green village far more capable of dealing with the area's recurrent droughts than its neighbours. A lot of money for the 'environmental works' has come from the government's rural development schemes except that Ralegan Siddhi has set its own priorities and made honest use of government money.

Hazare is today on the warpath, threatening to return the wonderful medals he has received from the government. He is doing this in a bid to stem the corruption among officials. The district's drinking water schemes on which lakhs of rupees have been spent remain non-functional. The social forestry department has purchased expensive farm equipment for which there is no use. Hazare's moral war is today a matter of embarrassment for the state's leaders.

Corruption has always been of interest to the media and, not surprisingly, there have been news reports on Hazare's effort. But where will they get us? To a few enquiries? To a few transfers and suspensions? While the system goes on as it does now? Even though everyone talks about corruption, the media and the politicians get most excited about corruption in high places and not about the widespread base of corruption which is eating away at the entrails of the country and is, today, a source of constant harrassment and fear for every honest citizen of India — from a tribal woman who wants to collect grass from the neighbouring forest to a city dweller who wants to get a building plan authorised.

Gunnar Myrdal in his celebrated Asian Drama wrote more than 20 years ago that although corruption is very much a public issue in all South Asian countries, yet it is almost taboo as a research topic. Indeed, how many times has the scholarly Economic and Political Weekly published research articles on the phenomenon of corruption compared to the

magnitude of the problem?

A dramatic case of corruption is the afforestation programme in India. Between 1980 and 1988, the country is said to have planted roughly 12 million hectares (equal to the total area of Kerala and Assam), according to official statistics. This gives us an average of about 40,000 new trees per village. It is rare to find a village with even 500 new trees. To achieve this vast forest area (on paper), the country has spent over Rs. 3000 crore.

Low survival of trees planted is not the entire story. First, there is the **corruption factor**. The number of seedlings that are actually produced are possibly nowhere near the figures found in official records. At a recent meeting organised by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), a senior official claimed he had found 1000 per cent overreporting in certain districts. A forest official present did not even deny the charge. He simply retorted, "What do you expect if the National Wastelands Development Board sets such ambitious and impractical targets?"

Secondly, there is the **pressure factor**. Seedlings taken by farmers, often under pressure from local forest officials to meet targets, do not get planted at all. Finally, of course, many seedlings that do get planted do not survive. All combined, the result is that India is forest-rich only in government records.

The saga of corruption does not end here. Whenever it suits the bureaucracy or the political system, it takes advantage of the widespread feeling about corruption to denigrate people, knowing that whatever the facts, the mud will stick. When we had publicly raised the issue about a tehsildar in Alwar district of Rajasthan having levied the first fine of the world for planting trees — local villagers had built a wall on revenue land without permission to protect the planted trees — the district authorities immediately responded by labelling the local voluntary agency corrupt. But, of course, they did not take any action. So the phenomenon of corruption today works both ways -- to fill your pocket when it suits you and to use it to besmirch good people when they are a nuisance.

Essentially, three factors contribute to corruption: shortage of essential needs, excess of power and secrecy. Shortage of seats in schools or of fodder grass are not going to disappear fast in India and, therefore, this factor will continue to force corruption. Only economic development can solve it. But the factors of power and secrecy can be greatly moderated

and that too immediately.

Since it will be impossible to get rid of **power** completely, powerful people will always be tempted. Mahatma Gandhis are not easy to find. Corruption in high places continues to exist in the United States, the United Kingdom or Sweden.

But the extraordinary power that exists at every level of the bureaucracy and the political system — from a patwari to a secretary to the government — can be systematically reduced through a system of participatory democracy, which may also have some impact on corruption in high places.

Officials are not inherently corrupt. The problem really lies in our system of governance — a closed bureaucratic system with enormous power to conceal. Why can't the forest bureaucracy in Ahmadnagar report to a public institution headed by Anna Hazare, or to Chandi Prasad Bhatt in Chamoli, or to Priya Ratna Mishra in Palamu? These are some of the outstanding sons of India but they do not participate in its governance. What is so outstanding about an IAS officer who becomes the forest secretary or an elected representative that everyone thereafter must be kept out of the governance of this country? True, there may not be many Bhattis or Hazares but there are hundreds of dedicated people who are prepared to see the country green and grow. Ralegan Siddhi is a model village only because of the decentralised governance that Hazare has provided to it.

Furthermore, by systematically reducing secrecy, people will themselves become aware and fight against corruption. Rampant corruption in Panchayats has been a convenient excuse not to decentralise power and finances. But our experience with village-level natural resource management shows that institutions which encourage participation of entire communities and not just of a few elected representatives invariably force open discussions. For example, encroachments regularly take place on village common lands. But these encroachments get legalised only because of the nexus between the local administration and the powerful in the village. In Seed, near Udaipur, a rare village which is legally empowered to keep its own land records and take its own decisions by majority vote (instead of a few elected panchayat members), there has been no encroachment.

The message of Anna Hazare should not get lost in a few enquiries. If we are serious about controlling corruption, we should ask for a change

in the very system of governance in this country. But that is precisely what politicians — red, blue or saffron — don't want.

* * *

Anna Hazare's moral fight is a fight for all of us. It is important to document why and how this man moved to take such a step after 15 years of dedicated work with village development. Surely, the issues raised by Hazare have wider connotations and deserve to be brought into a greater focus.

Soon after the newspapers reported Anna Hazare's struggle in Ahmadnagar, CSE decided to constitute a media task force to visit his village and discuss the matter with district and state officials. We did not want the issues to die away. The idea of constituting such media task forces had been suggested to us at a meeting of environmental journalists last year.

We were delighted to get an enthusiastic response from some of India's leading environmental writers who readily agreed to participate in the task force. The team finally consisted of the following:

- (a) Usha Rai of The Times of India;*
- (b) Mukul of Navbharat Times;*
- (c) Sarosh Bana of The Indian Express; and,*
- (d) Dinesh Kumar of CSE.*

The team visited Ralegan Siddhi, Ahmadnagar, Pune and Bombay to interview numerous officials and villagers and see Anna Hazare's work for themselves. We hope that their report, which presents a grim story will be read widely. If their story is one of despair, it is also one of hope. But only if we want to learn our lessons properly.

**ANIL AGARWAL
SUNITA NARAIN**

Trees: A Source of Corruption

The planners in the country base their projections upon certain assumptions. Like the Archimedes principle, it is assumed that the volume of funds pumped into rural development projects shall displace an equal amount of backwardness and poverty. There is no scope in these assumptions for the finer points of community management or for a remedy to the cancer of corruption that holds the development process in thrall.

Fortunately, Ralegan Siddhi is one such example where the fruits of community management are clearly visible. On the other hand there is the social forestry department of Maharashtra, which purchased useless agricultural implements at twice the price they cost in the market. Obviously here the Archimedes principle has failed to work.

The village of Ralegan Siddhi stands in direct contrast with its surrounding areas. With an average rainfall of only 400 mm per year, it lies in a drought prone area. Yet the village is today free from the hardships caused by recurrent droughts. Today, every slope is afforested and every *nullah* bunded. There is enough water throughout the year and villagers are assured of regular crops.

But this miracle of environmental regeneration, Ralegan Siddhi, today is angry. The village is fighting against corruption — a system that prevents the fruits of development from reaching the people. A question that the villagers often ask is: why after 43 years of independence our villages continue to be poor and backward, cut off from the mainstream of development despite huge sums of money being pumped into them?

Anna Hazare, who is today a father figure in Ralegan Siddhi, has won many awards and trophies for making the village a green oasis in drought-prone Ahmadnagar district. In two vital areas of rural development — social forestry and drinking water — Anna

Hazare has forced the government to conduct inquiries and the findings are shocking.

His *andolan* is gathering momentum with several social action groups joining in. Instead of just periodic inquiries and investigations, they are demanding the setting up of permanent vigilance squads to monitor rural projects from the time they are conceived right through to their execution.

It was in June 1990 that the first rumblings of discontent about the purchases made by the social forestry division of Maharashtra began trickling into Ralegan Siddhi, situated about 90 km from Pune on the Pune-Ahmadnagar road. When the news reached Anna Hazare, he just could not sit back.

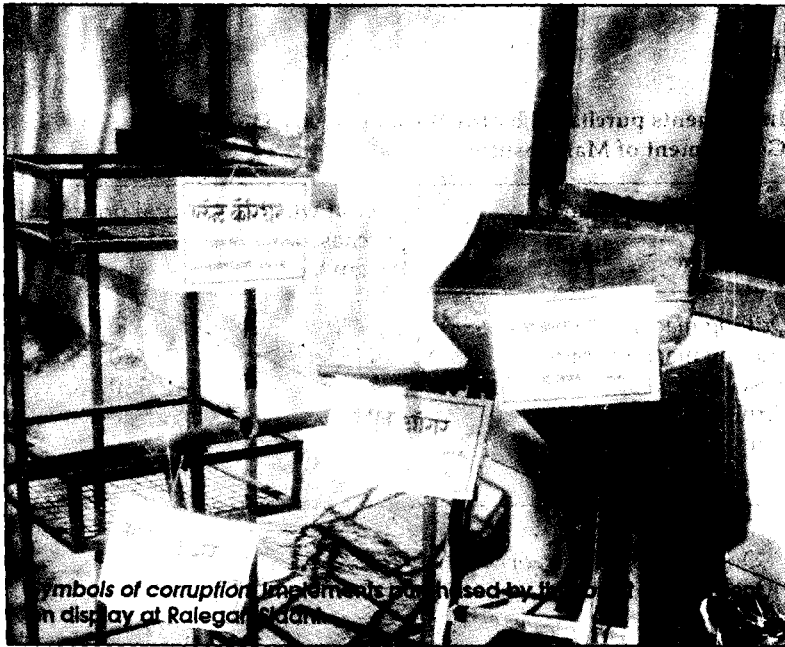
Hazare's preliminary inquiries revealed that a range of equipment that was useless had been purchased at a great cost by the government. He then went about systematically collecting evidence. He wrote to 350 *tehsil* forest officers and found that two varieties of drilling machines, first aid boxes, *girnīs* (implements to fill mud into polythene bags) and plant carriers had been purchased from just one or two companies in Bombay though they could be easily fabricated locally.

With the respect that Hazare now commands, he was able to solicit and get information from forest officials on how the equipment was actually purchased and how useful it was for the work of social forestry. But it was found that the drilling equipment could not be operated by just one person limiting its use; in hard soils it could not be operated at all. Nor was it particularly useful because the pits made by it were narrow, allowing little area for the roots to spread.

Letters were then sent to the head of the social forestry division in Nasik and the rate at which the equipment purchased was found out. The drilling machines had been purchased for Rs.650 (small) and Rs.1150 (big) each, first aid boxes for Rs.450 each, mud *girnīs* for Rs. 2750 each and plant carriers for Rs.850 a piece.

Letters were also written to local fabricators at Ahmadnagar and the rates were asked for at which the same equipment could be available locally.

In a shocking revelation, it was found that the implements purchased



Symbols of corruption: Implements purchased by the government in display at Ralegan Siddhi.

by the social forestry department were at least two to four times more expensive than if they were procured locally. It was a mystery why these implements were purchased at all, which had such limited use, at such high prices, and from one single source.

With this documentary proof in his pocket, Hazare met the Chief Secretary in Bombay in July 1990 and demanded an inquiry. The Chief Secretary was also invited to Ralegan Siddhi for a social audit. The Secretary (Social Forestry) was asked to conduct the inquiry. But when the government did not get back to him till September, Hazare again wrote to the Chief Secretary and said that he would return his Vrikshmitra award given by the National Wastelands Development Board.

It was then that the government swung into action. Inquiries were held in Nasik, Ahmadnagar, Dhule, Thane, Raigarh and Jalgaon districts. The Chief Secretary then wrote back to Anna-saheb and said that the preliminary inquiry had established a case of corruption.

Table

**Implements purchased by the Social Forestry Department,
Government of Maharashtra**

Name of the implement	Price at which purchased by the govt.	Local price
Drilling machine (small)	650	350
Drilling machine (big)	1150	650
First aid box	450	150
Girnis	2750	350-610
Plant carriers	850	365-440

Once again the government went slow on its follow up action. How does one move a lethargic bureaucracy? This time Anna-saheb threatened to return his Vrikshmitra award and go on *maunvat*. Both threats had to be ultimately carried out. On December 26, the Vrikshmitra award, which had occupied a pride of place among the umpteen trophies and awards displayed in his room in the village temple, was returned.

The forest secretary, K.K. Gokak, however claimed that there was no attempt to delay or suppress the investigation. If there was a delay it was because he was on long leave and all the purchase books and cash receipts had to be looked into. Based on the preliminary findings a statewide inquiry was held.

Gokak admitted that the statewide inquiry revealed serious irregularities in purchases made by the social forestry department of the state. Two officers of Ahmadnagar and Kolhapur were chargesheeted. At least nine other senior officers of the department were allegedly involved in the deal which involved the purchase of equipment worth Rs.46 lakh.

The government inquiry further revealed that no tenders were invited though the rules say clearly that they should be called for whenever purchases over Rs.10,000 are to be made. Nor was

permission sought for a waiver of the rules: Hazare's contention that they were purchased from a Bombay dealer though available locally at cheaper rates was also upheld. The equipment purchased was not even used, as alleged by Hazare.

Ironically, this major scandal in purchases by the social forestry division was not made public. If the Centre for Science and Environment team had not visited Ralegan Siddhi, Ahmadnagar and Bombay the findings may well have been brushed under the carpet.

But Gokak was extremely helpful to the CSE media task force. As forest secretary, he feels there are three distinct areas in which corruption is rampant and needs to be plugged. These areas are:

- (i) protection of forests during which illegal felling is common and in which forest officials often collude with contractors;
- (ii) allotment of contracts; and,
- (iii) bulk purchases.

Gokak admitted that the case investigated by Hazare was not the only case where irregularities in purchases have been detected. The Maharashtra government is, therefore, thinking of enforcing a system in which bulk purchases are to be reported to senior officials. It is hoped that this will serve as a deterrent. Monitoring of all purchases is also on the cards.

The recent decision of the central government to allow village communities to grow trees on government forest lands and get a share of the usufruct is seen as one way out of the impasse. The community will then protect its own plantations and forests. In Kameri village in Satara district of Maharashtra, due to the motivation of the social forestry staff, farmers had planted 1.5 million trees on their own land in 1984-85. After seven years they will now be cutting these trees. With the help of the forest division, the marketing of the wood is being worked out.

Water schemes without water

While Hazare was investigating corruption in the forest department he also saw several reports in the local papers about taps that did not work and valves that leaked. Water supply schemes in villages were in perpetual disorder and there was an

acute shortage of drinking water. In his inimitable way, Annasaheb decided to find out the extent of the problem. He wrote to 425 sarpanches to find out about the rural water supply schemes in their area and whether they were working.

What started off as a simple inquiry virtually opened up a Pandora's box. Some 165 sarpanches responded to his letter and said that the water supply schemes in their areas were as good as dead. A huge file of complaints was prepared by Annasaheb.

It was with this basic evidence that Hazare virtually forced the government to take a look at the rural water schemes of Ahmadnagar district which come under the Maharashtra Water Supply and Sewerage Board (MWSSB). At stake was the Padma Shri and the Krishi Bhushan awarded to him, which Hazare threatened to return if no action was taken. A three member inquiry team consisting of the superintending engineer of MWSSB, the chief executive officer of Ahmadnagar district and assistant commissioner of Nasik division studied 661 schemes and found that 40 to 50 per cent of the schemes were not working. Each of these schemes, in existence for about a decade, had cost the government a whopping Rs. seven lakh.

Some Rs. 675 crore was spent during the Seventh Plan on rural water supply schemes of the state. Another Rs. 145 crore has been invested in 1990. The inquiry report, which has also not been made public, shows clearly that projects worth crores of rupees are being created in the rural areas of Maharashtra but there was no one really to ensure that they were functioning efficiently.

The CSE media task force was informed that there are five basic reasons why the schemes have not been functioning properly:

- (i) the source of water goes dry;
- (ii) the electric motor of the pumping sets gets damaged due to power fluctuations;
- (iii) pipelines develop leaks and are not repaired;
- (iv) the reservoir itself gets damaged, and,
- (v) power is often just not available.

Of the 661 schemes, 266 were not functioning when the inquiry was held in December 1990. Thirty-seven had closed down because the source had gone dry and 67 because of poor power supply. The electric motors of 67 schemes were under repair and 25 reser-

voirs had been damaged. Leakage was detected in 108 pipes. Thirty eight schemes were not working for various reasons, including non-payment of bills by the gram panchayat. Many of the schemes had multiple defects.

The inquiry team found that the schemes were based on the assumption that power would be available for 16 hours a day whereas it was available only for eight hours or even less. Low voltage was a chronic problem. The schemes had also been prepared on the assumption that only a particular number of standposts and house connections could be made, but these had in almost all cases been exceeded.

The inquiry team has pleaded for a realistic assessment of the water consumed as well as the connections to be given in the future. The consumption of water, it has said, should be fixed more realistically at 70 litres per capita per day as against 40 litres now. Pipelines were broken at several points and sometimes as much as 100 litres was consumed. Furthermore, the water did not reach where it should because of tapping en route.

A realistic assessment of both the water consumed and the increased domestic connections, is expected to push up capital costs substantially. Bigger pipelines will have to be laid and more powerful pumping sets installed.

The report also points out that of the 80 watersheds in Ahmadnagar district, five are in the dark zone (where there is no hope of a new source), 15 are in the grey zone, and 20 are in hilly areas where new sources are difficult to locate.

The inquiry team has recommended that a separate maintenance department be set up at the zilla parishad level. It could be under a deputy engineer. A quality control unit for the water supply schemes, as in the PWD schemes, has also been mooted. This could be an independent organisation headed by a superintendent engineer.

The charge of corruption in the rural water supply schemes has not even been investigated so far. To get prima facie evidence of corruption, the committee has suggested a detailed inquiry of at least three schemes - by removing the earth and measuring the

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RAGS TO RICHES, INDIAN STYLE

By Rahul Singh

It is not often that one reads an article in an Indian newspaper that sums up so much of what is wrong in our country. I read one such article the other day in an unlikely publication, *The Afternoon Despatch and Courier*, one of Bombay's evening papers. It is written by Velly Thevar, a name unknown to me till then but who, I have subsequently discovered, is a young reporter with only three years experience in the profession.

Her article makes absolutely rivetting reading. It traces the astounding career of one Bhaskar Wagh, who began life in 1972 as a junior assistant in the minor irrigation department of the Zilla Parishad of Dhule, a tribal district in Maharashtra. In just 10 years, he became a multi-crorepati who had a former chief minister and a state minister, apart from sundry politicians, officials and journalists, eating out of his hands.

Wagh's is a true rags-to-riches story. Except that it is an "Indian-style" rags-to-riches story, because all the money he had made in those 10 years — a mind-boggling Rs 50 crore — came from the Indian taxpayer. In other words, from you and me. The Rs 50 crore that he appropriated for himself was all government money meant to help the poor tribals of Dhule. And the way he did it was so simple, yet ingenious, that it takes one's breath away.

Wagh discovered that the minor irrigation department that he had joined was receiving a variety of grants from the state government totalling some Rs 10 crore a year. These were for the implementation of schemes such as the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS), the Jeevan Dhara Wells Scheme, the Drought Prone Areas Programme and the Rural Land Employment Guarantee Programme. In addition, since the area was heavily tribal in composition, it got extra funds for their upliftment.

Having observed the lie of the land, as it were, Wagh began his crooked career in the usual fashion — underinvoicing of bills, selecting contractors for projects who would give him kickbacks, skimming off materials like cement from these projects, and so on. In a few years time, Wagh had pocketed several lakhs and built for himself a large house just outside Dhule city. But he had not yet hit the big time. For that he needed a different strategy, one that could shroud his ill-gotten gains.

He found it in religion. He renovated a dilapidated temple and befriended a local godman while starting some religious "trusts". In a short while, Bhaskar Wagh had acquired the saintly aura of being a deeply pious man who gave generously to the needy. His generosity, needless to say, came from the millions he was busy filching regularly from the government coffers. But who dared question the source of funds of such a devout man?

One person who did was a local editor, Jagatrao Sonavane, who had earlier been an employee of the same Zilla Parishad — in fact, he had helped Wagh get his job there — and who had also worked in the minor irrigation department. Sonavane did some snooping around and concluded that Wagh's suddenly acquired wealth had come from defrauding the Zilla Parishad, though exactly how Wagh had done so, Sonavane was not able to yet figure out.

Sonavane wrote about his suspicions to Rohidas Patil, the then state revenue minister who belonged to Dhule. Patil did nothing. Sonavane then wrote to S.B. Chavan, the chief minister at that time. He, too, did nothing. Sonavane even tried to inform the prime minister of what he had uncovered. Realising that Sonavane was hot on his track, Wagh did what a lot of guilty people with clout do when their game is threatened with exposure — he first had his goondas threaten Sonavane's family with dire consequences and then had Sonavane assaulted and tarred.

Sonavane, however, was made of sterner stuff. He decided to write about Wagh's financial manipulations in his paper, *Matdar*. But the rest of the local press, instead of following Sonavane's lead, attacked and vilified him. Wagh had been smart enough to keep the Dhule press so contented with generous advertising revenue that they regularly praised his "philanthropy" in their pages.

Wagh led a truly charmed life — charmed by his political connections. In 1987, the income tax authorities raided his large house and recovered Rs 5 lakh. The case was hushed up. Two years later, the anti-corruption bureau also raided his house and found almost Rs 14 lakh there. The raiding officers were promptly transferred. Incredibly, S.B. Chavan, who had initiated the earlier investigations into Wagh's case, virtually gave him a clean chit by subsequently visiting his house, though Chavan was advised not to do so by the collector and the superintendent of police.

Wagh's close association with Surupsinh Naik, the minister for tribal welfare — Naik is a tribal himself — also came in very handy. Naik lavished praise on Wagh in public and is believed to have benefited from Wagh's "generosity". Naik is reputed to have protectors like R.K. Dhawan and M.L. Fotedar of the Congress (I). With such powerful connections, little wonder that Bhaskar Wagh imagined that he could not be touched.

But his bubble was finally pricked when a young IAS officer — yes, there are a few honest ones still around — Manu Kumar Srivastav, took over as chief executive officer of the Dhule Zilla Parishad. Srivastav found that contractors had not been paid by the minor irrigation department. When he zeroed in on Wagh the latter started making various excuses. Probing further, Srivastav started to uncover the staggering fraud that Wagh had

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been perpetrating for years unchecked. Crores of rupees had been amassed by Wagh, using the simplest of devices: self-addressed bearer cheques were used to withdraw huge sums from the local cooperative bank and the State Bank of India. Wagh was clever enough to put the regular amount on the counterfoil of the cheque, whereas the main cheque had an entirely different and much larger figure.

After four months of careful investigation, Srivastav, satisfied that he had sufficient proof of Wagh's misdeeds, informed the collector and the superintendent of police. Wagh was taken into custody. At the time of writing he had made a confession of his crimes, which runs to over 400 pages, to the chief judicial magistrate of Dhule.

Meanwhile, investigations are on at various levels — at the minor irrigation department, at the collectorate, at the cooperative bank — and many leading questions are being asked: how was the earlier chief executive officer of the Zilla Parishad ignorant of the financial affairs of the minor irrigation department for all the years that Wagh siphoned off crores of government money? Why did Sonavane have to fight a lone battle, and can the local press be bribed into inaction so easily? Does the cooperative bank in question have no proper audit and is it so easy for somebody like Wagh to defraud it of such huge sums of money?

These questions apart, the real tragedy is that the tribals, for whom these grand sounding schemes were meant, got nothing at all. They continue to eke out their living in backwardness and in poverty, the Jeevan Dhara wells unbuilt and the Employment Guarantee Scheme existing only on paper. It was not just the Dhule Zilla Parishad and the District Development Co-operative Bank that were defrauded by Wagh and company; the ones who were really defrauded were the Dhule tribals.

Bhaskar Wagh's is not an isolated case. There must be hundreds of Bhaskar Wags all over the countryside. And there are hundreds, if not thousands, of crores of the tax payers' money that does not go where it should be going — for rural development and for the poor — but is siphoned off by the Wags of this benighted land.

Courtesy The Indian Express, New Delhi, 24th March, 1991.

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depth of the pipes besides also testing their quality. This will require additional money because labour has to be engaged to do the digging work. As no funds are available with the government for the purpose, it is unlikely that such an exercise will ever get undertaken.

Action at the village level

Anna Hazare is, however, pressing for the setting up of *Dakshata Samitis* (vigilance committees) of about five non-government officials with a proven track record of commitment to development, at the village, tehsil and district levels. These *samitis* will monitor all schemes being implemented, oversee opening of tenders and supervise the selection of contractors and the work they are doing.

He is also demanding a social audit of all government schemes and official recognition for the three tier watchdog committees. The government seems reluctant to accept this suggestion because it feels there is already a mechanism to ensure implementation and to prevent corruption. But in spite of various government audits, corruption has only increased. Clearly, the answer lies in creating public committees, but if this is to be done, a policy decision at the cabinet level will have to be taken.

Hazare has another suggestion. Notices ought to be put up at the village chowk or chaupal giving details of all schemes — work to be done, cost, and the schedule of work. It is felt that by displaying this information, the work being done by government departments would be open to scrutiny by all the villagers — for whom the schemes are taken up in the first place. The media task force was informed that this idea appeared to be more acceptable to the government.

Even if the government does not accept the suggestion for setting *Dakshata Samitis*, Annasaheb is determined to go ahead and set up public watchdog committees with or without government recognition. These committees would be called gram *samitis* and they will keep a watch at the village level on the quality

of purchases made and amount spent. When they are able to collect proof, they will go to the tehsil headquarters and demand action. Each complaint will be followed up, if necessary, with morchas and gheraos. "The last step will be to beat up the corrupt officials but I hope that will never be necessary," says Annasaheb. The other alternative will be to collect evidence and give it to the Lok Ayukta or ombudsman. Though this facility for justice exists, it is not being used. "Under the 1988 anti-corruption law, we will fight against corruption in rural development schemes," says Annasaheb Hazare.

Over a hundred non-governmental organisations have assured their support in this battle against corruption. "We never get a return from the crores of rupees being poured into rural development because there is rampant corruption," says Annasaheb emphatically. "Only a struggle like the battle for our independence, can end corruption."

Undoubtedly, we need to keep a close watch on the programmes being implemented in our villages. Government machinery has failed to do so and it seems pointless to even try and bolster it using the same officials. The public vigilance committees should, thus, have independent people with a sense of commitment. What is needed now is the sanction of the community and not the government.

The CSE media task force is convinced that if such blatant corruption and inefficiency exists in Maharashtra, one of our progressive states, things are likely to be much worse in states like Bihar and Orissa. Just like water cannot be stored in a leaky tank or container, so benefits cannot be obtained from inefficient projects. Sample inquiries should be held in every state into drinking water programmes and afforestation projects to find out the amount of money that is being squandered away.

It is also a poor reflection on our bureaucrats and the government machinery that the voice of a common man will not be heard because the system has become totally unresponsive. In the case of Ralegan Siddhi, some action has been taken only because Anna Hazare has used his awards as a weapon to achieve his ends. **Would his voice have been heard if he did not command this stature?**

A look at his work for which he was given his awards is, therefore, necessary.

Ralegan Siddhi: An Environmental Model

It is significant to note that Anna Hazare did not commence his fight against corruption before transforming his village. Today, Ralegan Siddhi stands in direct contrast with the parched appearance of the surrounding areas. The road leading to the village is lined with young plantations of eucalyptus, subabul and other species which can be seen on either side of the road. Further down the road are lush crops and fruit trees.

The CSE media task force was impressed with the strategy of Anna Hazare. Just a few years ago, the villagers were not even assured of one regular crop per annum. In summer, they took to drought relief measures undertaken by the Maharashtra government or left the village in search of work. Today not even a single villager from Ralegan Siddhi is available for drought relief measures. "The per capita income has increased from Rs.250-300 in 1976 to Rs.2,000 today", says Anna Hazare. The savings of the village in the bank is a tidy Rs.23 lakh.

Not only has Ralegan Siddhi solved its problem of water scarcity through watershed development and a system of small bundhs, but it is successfully utilising the most modern technology whether it is of drip irrigation, solar energy or gobar gas.

Even more surprising is the social transformation of the village. Men do not drink or gamble here. Prosperity has increased and today the villagers are actually selling their surplus grain. The CSE Media Task Force was able to see the village and interview many people.

Watershed development

Prior to the watershed development work done by Anna Hazare, Ralegan Siddhi suffered chronic drought conditions. Most

of the rain water was wasted as runoff through the *nullahs*. Food production of the village was only 30 per cent of its requirement.

Government spending did not have much effect on the village. A percolation tank had been built by the government at a cost of Rs.4.8 lakh but it was all but useless because the water seeped away from the bundhs.

Hazare gave top priority to traditional watershed development by constructing storage ponds/reservoirs and *nullah* bundhs in series along the 30 to 45 metre high hills surrounding the village. Due to this, the runoff was significantly reduced. Ground aquifers got gradually recharged. Due to the slow percolation of water, the ground water table has risen from nine metres to 60 metres. There is now enough water for the whole year.

Simultaneously, social forestry schemes have been utilised to plant trees and reverse environmental degradation. Some four lakh trees have been planted in and around the village, with at least one lakh of them having being planted by the local school children. The government's Comprehensive Watershed Development Programme (COWDEP) was also tapped. Thirtyone *nullah* bundh sites were identified and an area of 605 hectare covered with bunding. The storage capacity of these bundhs is estimated at 2,82,182 cubic metres.

Today the area around Ralegan Siddhi is covered with fodder, grass and trees. The total area under farming has increased from 630 hectare to 950 hectare. The average yields of crops such as bajra, jawar and onion have increased substantially. The cultivation of sugarcane, which requires a large quantity of water, has been voluntarily stopped.

Social reforms

Along with economic upliftment, Hazare took it upon himself to improve the social conditions of the villagers. All the 40 liquor *bhattas* were demolished and today nobody drinks in the village or comes into it drunk. Social consciousness against drinking has been raised to such an extent that a drunken person can be brought to the centre of the village and thrashed and no one will object. So far there has not been the need for this kind of public

humiliation. No shop in Ralegan Siddhi sells bidis or cigarettes. Film songs and movies are also banned. On the other hand, the villagers wake up to the sound of bhajans every morning which are put on the public address system at 5.30 a.m.

"It is necessary for people to retain their humanity along with prosperity," says Anna Hazare, as he gives examples of places where economic prosperity has led to social evils. But in Ralegan Siddhi, due to the moral leadership provided by Hazare, people have not lost their humanitarian instinct.

One innovation in the village is the help that the prosperous persons give to those who are not well off. When Hazare came to the village there were 17 Harijan families who were debt-ridden. They had taken loans totalling Rs.60,000. In a unique show of solidarity, villagers donated their free labour to work on the farms of these families and grow crops like jawar and onions. With this help, these families were able to repay their bank loans.

Unhealthy customs have also been reduced. Community marriages are organised and wasteful expenditure is eliminated. Gifts of sarees and household utensils are given to needy couples and the expenditure is borne by the whole village. Homeless Harijan families have been provided with one room tenements. Social evils, such as the sacrificing of goats to a local deity, have been completely stopped.

People's participation and equity

The system of decision-making in the village is impressive. There are 14 committees in the village looking after separate subjects like cooperatives, water supply, rations, etc. which ensures people's participation in all decision making. The sarpanch and other members of the panchayat are all women. Hazare firmly believes that for real progress women have to walk in step with men.

The system of equity extends to everything done in the village. For instance, all families get their share of water. A farmer will not get a second turn of irrigation until all families have had their first round. Anna Hazare believes that village resources belong to all and even the landless families (which are four to five in number) should have a right to the water available. As such the farmers who benefit from the water would have to compensate those who

are without land and unable to use their share of it. Secondly, even where individuals have dug wells, they have been persuaded to share water with others. All landholders have been persuaded not to take up water intensive crops such as sugarcane.

Grain Bank

Another unique feature of this model village is its Grain Bank. Every farmer contributes to it a share of the harvest. As a result, the grain bank is always full and the threat of drought is now a thing of the past. Poor families are allowed to withdraw from the grain bank with the promise that in the subsequent year they will return the loan along with 10 per cent more grain to the grain bank. In this way, the poor families are always looked after by the village community. At the end of the year surplus grain is sold in the open market. In 1989-90, about 100 bags of grain were sold. For a village lying in a drought prone area, this is indeed a miracle of sorts.

To ensure that the landless too earned a decent wage they were given the job of rope making. "Prosperity and the sharing of wealth brings equity," says Anna Hazare. "The differences between the rich and the poor will remain, but today the poor man has grain in his house and he can sit with the patel because he no longer has to beg before him. Cloth on your back, food in your stomach and a roof over your head are vital to fight inequality. With *jan jagriti*, differences will go," he assures.

Shramdan and education

The school and a hostel building have been built through *shramdan*. Mr Thakaram Rout, headmaster of the Sri Sant Niloba Rai Vidyalaya, said the village school is run by a trust with a grant from the government. There are about 450 children in the school, of which 135 live in a hostel. There is a clamour for admission to the hostel. The children come from Bombay, Pune and surrounding villages.

Whereas most schools give preference to intelligence and achievement, the school in Ralegan Siddhi gives preference to school dropouts and rejects of society. Reshaping and moulding them is the challenge that principal Rout enjoys. Physical



education and sports is given top priority and due to this a large number of students are selected for the defence services.

The second priority of the school is cleanliness: of self and of the surrounding areas. Children clean the school compound everyday and once in a week undertake to clean public latrines. "It is important that the children have good *samskar*", says the village headmaster. Instilling culture and values is equally important. Academics is his lowest priority but still the pass percentage is over 90 per cent. Special classes are held for the underachievers as well as the brighter ones, the latter being prepared for the admission test to the Navodaya and Sainik schools.

When it rains there are no classes. Children take their spades, dig pits and plant trees. One lakh trees have already been planted

by the children. With funds provided by the state forestry department, the children run a nursery. For two years, till the plants are strong, the children carry water all the way from the village and water them.

Village bank

Near the school is a branch of the Bank of Maharashtra. H.V. Huprikar, its manager, said the village was highly motivated and conscious of savings. Even school students have accounts under the "minty" scheme and have deposits of nearly Rs.18,000. The recovery of crop loans in Ralegan Siddhi is excellent, about 80 per cent. The savings of Ralegan Siddhi alone is Rs.23 lakh out of the total deposits of the branch of Rs.42 lakh. This clearly indicates the economic prosperity of Ralegan as compared to its surrounding areas.

Gram panchayat

Men and women are like the wheels of a cart. They should move together in harmony. It is this simple philosophy that has led to the establishment of a nine member village panchayat of women in August 1988. It is true that the real power behind the women's gram panchayat is still Anna Hazare. It is his way of ensuring that the women come out of their shell. All nine panches have studied upto to class seven and some even upto matriculation. They are conscious of the need for literacy and are changing the face of Ralegan Siddhi. All 700 to 800 women of the village have joined the *andolan* against corruption.

Use of modern technologies

The manner in which the villagers have adopted the use of all possible modern technology and alternate energy sources is indeed heartening. Whether it is drip irrigation, solar energy or gobar gas, the village is attuned to it. Street lights with solar fittings are a common feature. Some 2,000 litres of water at the school hostel are heated by solar panels. Further, the local people are fully trained to maintain the solar panels. The television fitted in the hostel is

also powered by solar energy. For about 250 students, rice and dal is cooked in giant solar cookers every day. Chapatis are made on large smokeless *chulhas*.

Some 37 hectare of land is on drip irrigation, including 14 hectare of *mausambi* orchards. Since this water conservation technique is expensive, a collective of 28 farmers has taken bank loans and installed this irrigation system. Between the *mausambi* trees, vegetables are grown ensuring that the village's immediate needs are met.

Gobar gas is being widely used for cooking. There are two biogas and 32 gobar gas plants in the village. However, the task force found that some gobar gas plants were not working properly. This was due to non-availability of sufficient cowdung.

Collective action

Perhaps the single most important achievement of the village lies in collective action to obtain government grants and in utilising them. Ralegan Siddhi has shown that government schemes can be taken out of files by the people for the common good of the community. Further, it has also shown that collective action can be used for highlighting problems and getting a reprieve. At every stage, the village has fought to solve its problems.

There are many instances when the village has taken recourse to collective action and highlighted problems of the area. Three years ago, due to low voltage and new unchecked electricity connections, pumpsets were getting burnt leading to crop damage. The villagers approached the government for assistance in the form of a sub-station. When the government did not respond, an agitation was launched. The villagers demanded compensation for the pumpsets and the crops destroyed. Anna Hazare went on a hunger strike and had to be hospitalised after nine days.

Some 10,000 to 12,000 angry villagers came out of their homes for a *rasta roko andolan*. In the police firing that took place, four people were killed. But as a result of the collective action, Rs.350 crore were sanctioned for setting up sub-stations of which Rs. 38 crore were earmarked specifically for Ahmadnagar.

A simple suggestion was made. The government could insure

all village irrigation pumpsets and recover the premium paid through a marginal increase in their electricity bills. Certainly no farmer would mind a small increase if it was known that the pumpsets were insured against accidental damage.

The same was the case of drip irrigation systems. Upto 1987 government rules in Maharashtra permitted drip irrigation for only one crop. It was only after collective action and a hunger strike that the government agreed to allow drip irrigation facilities to sustain two crops. What the farmers were trying to establish was that, through drip irrigation and by using the same amount of water, they could get two crops instead of one.

On another occasion, the government refused recognition to the school which the villagers had constructed themselves. They had even made the furniture for the school from the trees that they had nurtured. It is said that recognition was not given because the village had voted against the education minister in the elections. After several unsuccessful meetings, Anna Hazare threatened to go on an indefinite hunger strike. "If I die, don't cremate me but bury me under the steps of the village temple," he told the panchayat. The villagers were moved to tears and some 250 of them gheraoed the zilla parishad the next day. Recognition was, thus, obtained for the school.

Collective action means collective responsibility. Today even the government does not hesitate to put in funds for the development of Ralegan Siddhi. It is the faith in the collective responsibility of Ralegan Siddhi that has led to investment of well over a crore of rupees in the village in the last nine years. Money was disbursed under the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), and other anti-poverty programmes as well as under the scheme of welfare of Harijans. Every paisa invested has got dividends.

Because the villagers were eager to learn and were responsive, the Urja Gram Udhog Medha (Rural Energy Development Centre) installed solar panels for heating water. Solar cookers were supplied at subsidised rates. CAPART has provided the funds for putting up a windmill that is used to pump water. The bank has given a loan of Rs.60 lakh to the village for drip irrigation, for installing pump sets and as crop loans. In other villages

politicians influence the peasants by promising them loan waivers. But at Ralegan Siddhi, bank investments not only bear fruit but all the loans are returned.

Shramshakti Dwara Grameen Vikas (rural development through labour) is Anna Hazare's slogan. Today it has been adopted by the state government for generating development and employment. At least two able bodied persons (in the age group 12 to 58) from each family, excluding those of landless labourers, have to offer *shramdan* for a day once a month on development works. The village or cluster of villages where such a project is to be taken up has to ensure attendance of a minimum of 50 labourers on such a scheme. If it is not possible to do *shramdan*, the villager has to offer one day's salary towards the fund for the project. This means that each family in the village is involved directly or through donation of a day's wage for village development.

Fifty per cent of such work will be treated as subsidy and the balance as loan. The work to be taken up could include forest farming, digging of wells and construction of percolation tanks or bunds. Like *shramdan*, the other two conditions for assistance are that stray cattle will not be allowed to graze freely and illegal felling of trees is prohibited. The *gram sabha* of the village where a programme has to be implemented has to approve it by a majority of at least of two thirds.

Is Ralegan Siddhi Replicable?

The question that arose several times before the CSE media task force was whether the Ralegan Siddhi model of development was actually replicable or not. Clearly, such models depend largely on the leadership provided by one selfless leader. Can such a movement be sustained over long periods? Even if such a model is to be copied, how do we provide such selfless leadership, which is more of a natural gift? Again, can any village adopt such an autocratic discipline upon itself as Ralegan Siddhi?

The village of Ralegan Siddhi indeed revolves around Anna Hazare who is an extraordinary person. We, thus, put the question to him as to how he was planning to replicate the Ralegan Siddhi experience.

Hazare told us that similar projects and programmes have already begun in 65 villages of Maharashtra. There is a continuous stream of visitors who want to learn from Annasaheb. Some are moved sufficiently enough to go back to their villages and start similar programmes.

In response to this yearning to serve, Hazare is now proposing to start a rural development training centre at Ralegan. A one year course has been planned and CAPART is expected to fund it. It will complement the rural management course being run in Anand. The young development enthusiasts will have to slog for 15 hours a day learning by working in the village and not just through sermons. Watershed development will be given a place of pride in the course. One hundred students will be taken. But Annasaheb expects about 40 to drop out due to the rigorous schedule. Even then, there will be at least 60 trained men and women who can go back to their villages and start similar programmes. Simultaneously, Annasaheb proposes to set up a technical school for children who study till class 12 and still find it difficult to get jobs. Maintenance of hand pumps, repair of electrical gadgets and agricultural pumpsets, auto repair and other technical skills needed to keep the village services well oiled, will be taught here.

Having set Ralegan Siddhi on the high road to development, Hazare would like to spend more time in visiting other villages and encouraging the model of development he has propounded. Nebtipur, near Ahmadnagar, is already following this model. Raghunath Thanghe, a youth from Nebtipur worked with Anna Hazare for about 18 months before starting work in his own village. In another four years Nebtipur may even overtake Ralegan in its development work. "It is possible that Ralegan Siddhi may not continue as it is or even deteriorate. But what I am looking for is a multiplier effect", says Anna Hazare. "Even if some people start some of the work that has been done here, a lot of villagers can benefit". It is this tribe of dedicated young men and women that will create a thousand Ralegan Siddhis, he believes with confidence.