



OPINION

The three pillars of rural empowerment

Rural empowerment hinges broadly on three pillars, which when put together, can work wonders. And for rural India—home to 68% of the nation's people—this has never been more urgent.

By **ZARINA SCREWVALA**, Nov 7, 2020



Image: Illustration by Anirban Ghosh



Would you believe that a village committee led by women participates in regular Zoom sessions to upgrade their understanding of nutrition? Or tribal women get together to put an end to the menace of illegal sale and purchase of alcohol? If such stories of empowerment interest you, please read on.

Transforming rural India has perhaps never been so urgent as it is now. We know that rural India is home to more than 68% of the country's population and 72.4% of the workforce (Census 2011) and it is projected that post 2050, the urban population is estimated to take over the rural population (United Nations, 2012). And we also know that our urban infrastructure is not equipped to handle this.

I write to share with you our journey in the hope that it may help pave a path for others who are interested in this transformation of rural India. This transformation is hinged, broadly, on three pillars: community empowerment, partnerships, and holistic development.

Community empowerment

We believe that poverty is not just material but also mental, it is the lack of hope or aspiration for a better future. The hardest work one can do is to transform this mental poverty into empowerment.

We believe the key to development is a community that is deeply involved in creating a roadmap for their own village and executing it. During our early days, we made an error in pushing the community, perhaps driven by our corporate mindset of meeting targets. We soon realised that it wasn't working and we changed the strategy and began to build the institutions that would allow the village to take charge and ensure their full buy in and participation. They also contribute a small percentage of the overall costs or provide sweat equity in the form of Shramdaan (voluntary labour) which we like to do as a joyous activity as a community. To go fast, you first have to go slow.

For true empowerment, we recommend the formation of a Village Development Committee (VDC) of motivated volunteers, with equal representation of men and women and also youth. We chose the village because it is a small, cohesive, homogenous unit making decisions easy, fair, and quick. The VDC is envisioned around the concept of self-governance to ensure the socio-economic synergy in the village community. They are fully trained and responsible to put together a village development plan and execute it along with many stakeholders. We help form the many bridges needed between the community and those stakeholders. E.g. Majare (in Sudhagad, Raigad), a small tribal hamlet of 11 homes and all were kaccha (mud) houses. The empowered VDC ensured that every house in their village gets a pucca house. They applied to the Government of India's Gharkul Yojna, followed-up and got approval for their cemented homes. In Poladpur (Raigad, Maharashtra), the village Divil, had a very poor road that made travel long and tiring for villagers. Their VDC decided to take charge and got in touch with the Gram Panchayat. They sought government help for money and committed one member of each house to do labour work and eventually got the road after 70 years.

During Covid, these VDC's took charge of quarantining returning migrants, enforcing social distancing and wearing of masks, ensuring the elderly were taken care of, and

much more. These VDC's enabled us to keep working right through Covid and Cyclone Nisarga.

Holistic development

We strongly believe in taking a geographical approach and building a holistic 360-degree model. Everything is interconnected, you can't have health without clean drinking water or a toilet, you can't educate your girl child if she is busy fetching water. Our holistic model of development is certainly hard and was initially met with skepticism when we began. But today we believe it is the key to our success. Our holistic approach works to ensure that every rural household have access to an individual household toilet, potable drinking water through taps at home, access to healthcare services, an education that makes learning joyous, and that the community has opportunities for a diverse range of livelihoods.

Collaborate and partner

Holistic development cannot be achieved alone. It is extremely important to collaborate and forge the right partnerships, with the corporate for financial resources, with the government for support and guidance, with markets, suppliers or with fellow NGOs, and organisations for expertise. Getting this ecosystem right is critical. It is also extremely important to acknowledge the gaps that one has and use partnerships as a means to bridge those gaps. Always remembering that the community we serve is our first and most important partner.

Our experience with rural development, woven around these pillars, has been inspiring, enriching and is a result of many failures and learning. We believe these three pillars of rural development will eventually build a stronger, happier, and more stable India.



Views are personal. The author is co-founder, Swades Foundation.

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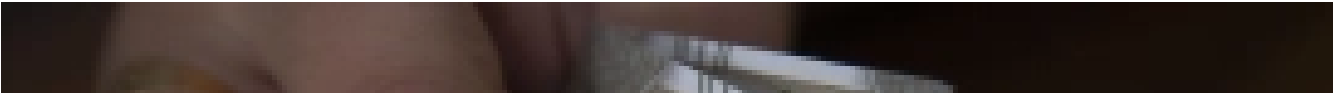
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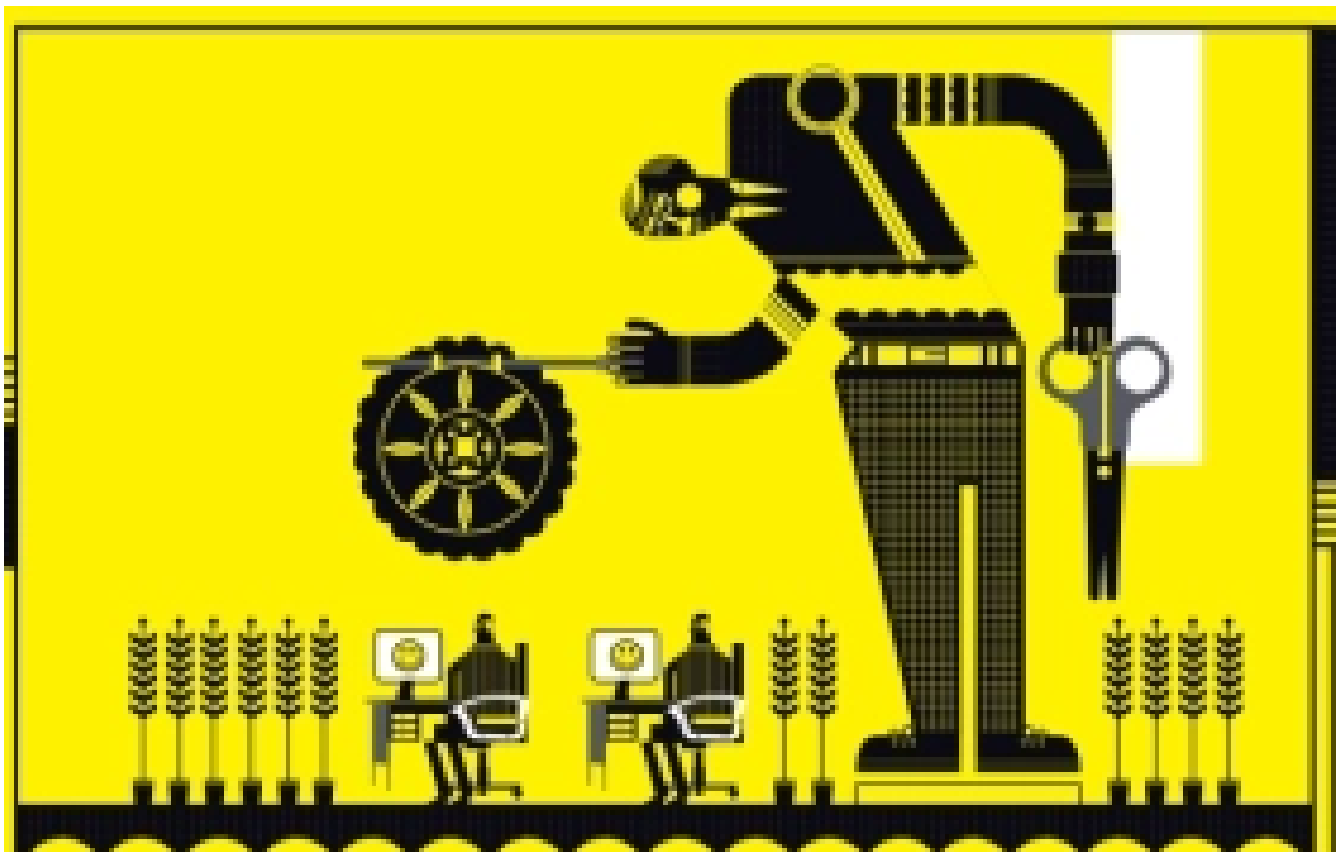




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