

REBUILDING A CONFLICT-FREE SOCIETY

(*Ramrajya* as envisaged by Mahatma Gandhi can only be achieved when there is freedom from crime and fear. For a conflict-free society and nation we would have to begin from our villages as India lives in her villages. The first step required to make these villages prosperous and self-reliant would be to help free them from all disputes).

Mahatma Gandhi always had the feeling that the dream of an ideal village cannot be fulfilled until it is free from all kinds of ills and crimes. He once remarked — "India lives in her villages but unfortunately, our rural India, the real India, is afflicted with poverty and social squalor". "We can improve the condition of India only when we improve the conditions in our villages". "If villages thrive, we all would thrive". The great philosopher, Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya, also stressed many a time that no society can prosper so long as it is entangled in disputes, litigations, etc. However, this area – of making society conflict-free — has remained neglected in all the social work being done by thousands of NGOs working for rural development throughout the country.

Deendayal Research Institute (DRI), realized that this indeed should be the first task in the field of rural development. Because the Institute believes that only a mind free from all encumbrances can think of development. And as it believes in the philosophy of Integral Humanism, the Institute is of the firm belief that only a society not afflicted by social hindrances can progress. In the year 2002, the Institute took upon itself the task of making 500 villages in its area of operation dispute-free by the turn of the decade. And what it has achieved in 80 villages in the first phase so far has been encouraging.

Till date, more than 80 percent of the disputes have been resolved with mutual consent with the motivation of the Samaj Shilpi Dampattis (Social Architect Couples) who are deputed by the Institute in these villages to help them become self-reliant. The target is to make these 80 villages litigation-free by August 15th this year. And the work is running ahead of its schedule.

But first, the genesis of the problem: Why rural India is afflicted with so much litigation. Nanaji Deshmukh, the visionary behind this unique concept, feels that majority of the crime in villages has erupted from the growing consumerist culture that we have adopted from the West. Consumerism leads to competition and competition leads to enmity and then to litigation. Our villagers too, falling prey to this culture, started migrating to cities in search of more wealth and got involved in all kinds of criminal activities.

There can only be a change in above situation when there is a change in attitudes, and the greed for wealth diminishes. As the cities are result of the consumerism culture, it is not easy to change them instantly. However, it is easy to change the attitude of villagers, provided we make them self-reliant and stop their migration to the cities. The Samaj Shilpi Dampattis (SSDs) work on the premise that every dispute can be solved if the villagers, particularly the womenfolk are explained the ill-effects of litigation on their progress. In many cases, it takes weeks and months to make them understand as to how important it is to live without any encumbrances.

The 'modus operandi' adopted to implement this concept was to make the villagers think that freedom from litigation would be a panacea for them against all ills, and happiness would come, bringing enthusiasm with it. Self-reliance and a cooperative way with the realism of coexistence would help their village to progress. To be on the path of development with voluntary realization — for their own rights and duties vis-à-vis the rights and duties of others — would be necessary. This motivation developed an enthusiasm amongst the people of the villages, and age-old cases for which they made rounds of the courts came to an end with good gestures by mutual agreement. Thus, gradually a village becomes a litigation free village.

Says Nanaji, “There is poverty; unemployment; homelessness; landless labourers; an acute water scarcity; lack of roads, electricity and sanitation; communal divisions; political and caste-based polarisation; broken families; administrative corruption; communicable diseases; chronic health hazards; and many other problems that are responsible for the sufferings of the people in the villages”. With pain, he adds, “Crime is the byproduct of these maladies. If we are able to address these socio-economic and cultural concerns, we are confident that we'll be able to control criminal offences and will gradually be able to do away with criminal activities in the village.”

SSDs go to villagers with a positive attitude towards life. Villagers understand the language of positivism more easily than that of negativism. Freedom from crime means freedom from many things –

- 1 litigation,
- 2 hatred,
- 3 unemployment,
- 4 communicable diseases,
- 5 illiteracy,
- 6 poverty,
- 7 drug abuse,
- 8 vandalism,
- 9 domestic violence,
- 10 sexual offences,
- 11 gender-based discrimination,

- 12 mutual distrust,
- 13 child labour,
- 14 desertion of the elderly,
- 15 environmental degradation and pollution,
- 16 mental distress, and
- 17 suicide. It means total development.

It means the welfare of the people and the community. It means social tranquility and cooperation. It means culture and civilisation. It is the highest mode of life one can ever attain.

What is important here is a change in the attitude and aptitude of the people, as it is they who fight. To build trust in the minds of the people, and through constant contact and interaction with the person or family, to create in them an attitude that seeks peaceful solutions rather than court verdicts. This is the qualitative change that needs to be introduced in society through motivation.

Almost all kinds of crimes can be resolved once the attitude changes. If we can inculcate a feeling of unity, harmony, brotherhood and cooperation amongst the people there would be no cause for litigation. A litigation-free village means a community where disputes are resolved by the people themselves, freeing them from going to a police station or a court of law.

According to Nanaji, in ancient times, when there were no police, courts and lawyers, people used to have quarrels and fight, but they used to solve such discords amicably through peaceful negotiations and mediation. There were elders in society who were part of the community, and they mediated between the parties involved. There was neither bribery nor favouritism. There were no expenses involved and no delay. If people are capable of committing wrongs, they are also capable of resolving such mistakes. They should use their potential creatively and for the good of the entire community. The whole process is participatory, ensuring the involvement and cooperation of the parties concerned.

SSDs have come to the conclusion that the women can play a more important role in solving several disputes, as she is the worst sufferer in any dispute. Disputes arising within the family can be solved with her help as she is the axis of the family and she can influence several decisions. She can also motivate the male members of the family to solve other disputes by mutual discussions instead of going to courts and police.

A survey done by DRI in some villages out of the total 80 villages to find the status of disputes in villages near Chitrakoot revealed that only one village, Khodari, had no disputes. Almost all villages had some or the other disputes and majority of the disputes were related to revenue, *faujdari* and others were petty disputes related to family and neighbours. However, after DRI began its work in these villages with the help of the SSD couples, within two years, seven villages, namely, Kuin, Bhargawan, Devlaha, Kehaura,

Khodari, Malgausa and Patna Kala attained the ‘litigation-free village’ status. Some more villages are on the verge of achieving this feat.

The model would be replicated in more villages and at the end of year 2010, a total of 500 villages would be made litigation-free. Table -1 given below highlights the summary of disputes in some villages surveyed and their status as on August 15 2002 and January 26, 2002. Table -2 highlights the achievements and status of villages as on December-2004.

Table-1

Summary of Disputes.

Status as on 15 August 2002

Cluster	Types of Disputes			Total
	Revenue	Faujdari	others	
North region				
Babupur	4	1	6	11
Baihar	15	0	9	24
Ganivan	5	7	0	12
Kucharam	7	1	2	10
Kuin	7	0	3	10
Lodhwara	14	6	4	24
Nonar	17	3	1	21
Paikaura	5	2	0	7
Rampuriya Avval	3	1	3	7
Total	77	21	28	126
		Status as on 26 jan 2002		
South region				
Barua	4	0	0	4
Bhargawan	1	0	0	1
Devlaha	1	3	1	5
Kelhaura	10	1	0	11
Khodari	dispute free			
Malgausa	4	0	0	4
Patna Kala	0	0	6	6
Total	20	4	7	31
Grand Total	97	25	35	157

Table-2

Status as on December-2004.

S.No.	Cluster	No. of Disputes		
		Total	Achieved	Remaining
North Region				
1	Babupur	11	8	3
2	Baihar	24	8	16
3	Ganivan	12	9	3
4	Kucharam	10	4	6
5	Kuin	10	10	0
6	Lodhwara	24	14	10
7	Nonar	21	6	15
8	Paikaura	7	4	3
9	Rampuriya Avval	7	5	2
Total		126	68	58
South Region				
1	Barua	4	2	2
2	Bhargawan	1	1	0
3	Devlaha	5	5	0
4	Kelhaura	11	11	0
5	Khodari	0	0	0
6	Malgausa	4	4	0
7	Patna Kala	6	6	0
Total		31	29	2
Grand Total		157	97	60

A random survey in these villages has found that people in such villages are happier than in those inflicted with litigation. They have also become aware that fighting with their own people would bring no peace and happiness in their life. In fact, the family of any litigant who has to go to the court every other day is never happy. It suffers on many a count:

1. The mental agony.
2. Social stigma.
3. Animosity among the community.
4. Financial strains.
5. Loss in terms of opportunity cost.
6. Wastage of precious time in commuting from village to courts.

Initially, the reaction of legal community was that of skepticism and non-cooperation, but when they found that villagers were getting united, they gave up and started supporting them.

When the experiment in one village was successful, requests from neighbouring villages start pouring in. They too want to get rid of police and court proceedings. DRI through Samaj Shilpi Dampatis is motivating these villages also to achieve the litigation-free environments. Nanaji says, “DRI is always there to help villagers achieve happiness and open new vistas of development. But our workers can only be motivators and facilitators. The real urge lies with the villagers themselves. If they want it, they can achieve it. Nobody can stop them.”

When SSD Ashok and Seema Pandey reached Arjunpur village on 12 January 1998, they were assigned the cluster of villages Michkuria, Ladheta, Ladha Guthaupur, Raghunandan Purva, Purab ka Purva and Arjunpur as their area of operation for five years. The village had a population of 2,057 and was inhabited by Brahmins, Kurmis, Yadavs, Kumhars, Harijans, Kahars, Darjis, Lohars, Badhais, Bhujvas, Kacchis, Jamadars, Kayasthas, Nais, Arakhs and Lodhs.

Like any other village, casteism dominated in these villages also and was main reason for several disputes. Majority of the disputes in the village were between Brahmins and Kurmis. One Pandey family had a dispute with his neighbour, a Kurmi family, over giving land for the construction of a road. The Brahmin family was against the idea of allowing the Kurmi family to walk through their land. Thus, the road could not be constructed in the village for several years. Because of the dispute, the funds sanctioned by the government for the construction of the road in the area also lapsed.

The dispute lasted for almost ten years before the SSD couple, Ashok and Seema Pandey, settled it. When the SSD couple convinced both the parties, the Pandey family went to the Kurmi family and settled the dispute. The Pandey family also gave way for the construction of the road in the village. Inspired by this, other villagers also donated their lands for construction of roads and drains.

There were also disputes within the families. Legal fights over properties used to be a daily affair in the village. There were family disputes between husband and wife, son and father, and also neighbours. But all the disputes have been settled and the villagers live amicably. There were families that went into economic ruin because they hired expensive lawyers to fight property cases. But now people have stopped going after lawyers, spending their time and money in courts cases. Instead, they sit together and solve the problems amongst themselves. They have also started sitting together to discuss issues for development of their villages and also contribute their lot in every task.

Besides, there were some fake cases registered by the police to harass the villagers and extract money from them. Many villagers had false charges against them for illegally cutting trees in the forests. When the SSD couple and villagers intervened, the police had to withdraw the cases.

Say the beaming Ashok and Seema, “We are happy to see the village that was once mired in a plethora of court cases transformed.” Earlier, raging fights and scuffles used to be a

routine affair here. Now it is a peaceful village. People have realized that they can live in harmony if they do not have legal cases to fight on”.