

UNIVERSITY NATIONAL SOCIAL SERVICE UNITS: PARTICIPATION IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS, NIRMAL VILLAGE (MAHARASHTRA)

INTRODUCTION

A number of programmes were carried out throughout India by the National Social Service (NSS) Units of the different universities for non-formal education in urban and rural areas. One such project was started in 1974 by the students of the SNDT Women's University, the only Women's university in India. They adopted a village called Nirmal, the home of one of the students, and worked for the economic and educational uplift of women.

Location and Economic Background

Nirmal Village is a small village in Bassein Taluka, Thana District, Maharashtra, which is about 45 km north of Bombay and is accessible by the Western Railway. The population of the village is about 800 out of which about 250 to 300 belong to the scheduled caste/scheduled tribe groups. The total area is 88 acres out of which 56 acres constitute the lake area.

Nirmal has no industries, small scale or large scale, except for a sawmill which is a centre for wood cutting, making planks etc. It is a very lucrative business for the owner. Fish tanks are a major source of income for whoever happens to lease the tank for a year. The majority of the people are from lower economic groups, namely the Harijans and Adivasis. They go to the fields and work as casual labourers whenever work is available. Among Adivasis and Harijans the literacy rate is very low. In the whole Adivasi community, only two boys have so far passed the Secondary School Examination. There are two high schools in the village, one run by Christian missionaries and the other by the Barve Education Society of Bassein. By contrast, in middle-class society, women have leisure time which they use to visit friends while their men find politics a favourite pastime. Most of them have education up to secondary level.

THE PROJECT - ORGANISATION AND ACTIVITIES

During the vacation 30 students of the University camped in the village and helped the women of the village by conducting health education programmes, and created an awareness about nutrition. They set up a Women's Organisation in the village called *Mahila Mandal*. They chalked out a useful programme for the village. They started a nursery for children and organised a free medical check-up with the help of the Nursing College of the University.

A skills-training programme was started under the auspices of a *Gramin Stri Sahayak Mandal* (village women cooperative society). They organised seminars for farmers and guided the women of the village in the preparation of packed lunches and snacks for picnickers, since Nirmal Village has a beautiful environment and is a picnic spot. Skill training for women for the preparation of *agarbattis* (incense sticks), seasonal masala powders, soap etc. was also organised to help the families in the village to generate income. They continually added to their activities. This helped the women to supplement their income and thus raise their standard of living. It also brought together women of all sections of society in Nirmal Village. They initiated the construction of a well for the people and planted fields and kitchen gardens.

Experts in larger industries were invited to help in the training programme. The women earn on an average Rs.10 a day. These activities raised the expectations of these women and they made a request for further facilities such as:

- a free reading room,
- two libraries for women,
- a health centre for check-up of women,
- a tailoring school for women,
- encouragement to deserving students by giving them prizes and fellowships,
- construction of homes for homeless (about 100 homes were constructed during two years with material obtained from the Government);
- seven centres for adult education and literacy.

To meet the rising aspirations of the women of the village, some of the women took up the work of organising canteens, or contracts for supplying meals. They cooked these for groups that went out on tour in trains. These women, in addition to cooking and serving nutritious food, were paid Rs.600 to Rs.700 per month as kitchen managers. They organised a rural conference in which about 1000 women participated from the neighbouring area. It created a consciousness among these groups for improving the quality of their life, better health, better agricultural practices. The local Gram Panchayat gave a free plot of land to the organisation, and now for seven or eight years the organisation has been doing good work.

Services Provided

Balwadis, Mangal Van and Madhu Van

Two *balwadis* (creches) were started at two villages, namely Nirmal and Bhilgaon three miles from Nirmal. A total of 60 children attended from all sections of society. A suitable teacher was appointed and a clear-cut role was assigned to various participants. Panchayats of both the villages took up the financial responsibilities. The fees charged from children were nominal, only Rs.2 per month. During one vacation NSS students made teaching aids for the use of the balwadis.

Medical Facilities

The Adivasis of the village had practically no medical facilities and they could not afford the fees of the private doctors and those of the missionary hospital. Swami Shraddhanand had an incomplete hospital building and was on the lookout for personnel to run it. An Out patient department and dispensary were set up with the help of a City hospital. About 600 people from Nirmal and neighbouring villages took advantage of this treatment. Once a month operation camps were organised. The NSS students did the clerical and administrative work and at times substituted for paramedical staff as well. For six to seven months this scheme went on very smoothly. However, owing to differences of opinion regarding the management of the newly established hospital, the project had to be discontinued. Though this disheartened everybody the one redeeming feature that emerged was that the Panchayat and villagers have realised the need for a hospital and a clinic and are determined to bring up one with their own efforts.

Udyog Mandir and Udyog Van

From past experience it was evident that women were not interested in mere cultural activities of Mahila Mandal but in something more concrete. They were encouraged to get together and form a kind of cooperative society which would eventually yield them some monetary returns. Formalities for registration of such a society are under way. Meanwhile the women have organised themselves to offer a catering service to the picnickers or any other groups visiting the village.

Tailoring is the next activity to be undertaken by the women's Udyog Mandir. On their behalf we are carrying on negotiations with a large hospital in Bombay to place an order for making uniforms for the hospital staff and patients. Efforts are being made for procuring loans or donations to buy a number of sewing machines.

Building Homes for Landless Labourers

Last summer, our NSS volunteers, under a 20-point programme, built 51 homes for landless labourers of three villages, Nirmal, Gaas and Madras. The Maharashtra Government gave free land and provided each family with materials worth Rs.600 to build the homes. Land given to each family is a plot of 30 square feet and the houses are built on plots of 10 square feet. We began to get grants from the government and then, through the Panchayat, enlisted the help of villagers to level the land and build the homes. The new colony is named Sahajeevan Vasahat and the occupants have also received the legal entitlement to the land (*sanad*).

Future Programmes

Providing Amenities for the Newly Built Colony

- Digging a well as there is a scarcity of water in Nirmal Village.
- Teaching the occupants of the colony to construct soak-pits, latrines etc. for sanitation purposes.
- Planting trees along the roadside of the colony.

Agricultural Conference

A conference is to be held for discussion and demonstration of some of the problems faced by farmers. A survey has been conducted to identify major problem areas in farming. The help of agricultural experts is being sought on this subject.

Technical Education for Youth

Despite two high schools in the village, very few students go for higher education especially from the Adivasi group. They seem to be interested in more job-oriented technical education. The possibilities of having a technical education section at either the high school or separately are being explored.

OBSERVATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE PROJECT

In the initial stage, the village women showed indifference and sometimes resentment towards the activities of the university students but soon rapport was established and the community came forward to cooperate and participate in the village development programme. It was not only a time-consuming job but it demanded dedication and sacrifice on the part of the students. The experiment suffered a setback in the initial stage when a number of women students were not able to adjust to the needs of hard work and dedication demanded by the project. Where students are participating, it is more appropriate to hold the programme during the vacations when the colleges are closed and they can do intensive work in the village.

An effort was made to develop leadership at the village level. This was a very healthy thing to do because the active participation of the people themselves accelerated development as well as reducing the village's dependence on the work done by the university. Adoption of villages on the lines of the scheme operated by the National Social Service Units of Colleges and Universities has been gaining momentum in India.

The experience of group living in camps and working with a totally strange group of people enriched the students and led to their emotional and social development. It gave them a feeling of being responsible citizens contributing to national development and made their education more relevant and socially useful.