

A bright beginning in the desert

Rajesh Singhi

Ibtada

“Tell me, who will fight for these problems?” said Rajesh, in his rustic adaptation of Mewati dialect, to a group of 20 women during a village meeting in Khuteta Kalan village in Rajasthan. The women were complaining about issues related to public distribution system (PDS) and disbursement of money for constructing toilets. Rajesh listened to them without interrupting. When he posed the question, the group was silent for a while till an elderly woman said, “We have to fight for it”. With a smile on his face, Rajesh asked them to take help from the adhikar sakhi in the village and to pester the panchayat for getting their disbursement done. Having said that, he took leave.

Rajesh Singhi is credited with empowering girls and women through education and livelihood projects in the underdeveloped Mewat region of Rajasthan, through Ibtada, the organisation he founded.

“Of late I have begun to take interest in the concept of rights. With so many government schemes in place, it would be good if we could help the intended beneficiaries access them. At Ibtada we have started a project on this,” he explained. Looking back on his life, while on our way back from the village, through the forests of Sariska, Rajesh said, “I often wonder if I would ever retire. If I do, I’d want to go to the mountains. They are mystical and carry a unique charm. But then, what would I do there? I would have no work, nothing to keep me occupied. I don’t think I can ever retire,” smiling, as he said the last line.

Early life and education

Rajesh was born in Saidpura village in the year 1969, which was then under the district of Patiala in Punjab. The village was 6km from Sirhind, a town of historical importance. His parents were teachers in government schools in villages near theirs. His mother Indra Vati Singhi taught in a village which was at a walkable distance from their village.

Rajesh could still recall his initial days of schooling. Ram Chand used to take Rajesh in his cycle, since Rajesh studied in the school where his father was teaching. He was later shifted to an English medium school in Fatehgarh Sahib. His father who taught social studies in school took great interest in teaching Rajesh mathematics. “During our board exams, we did not get text books in English and were told to write the exams in Punjabi. My father however translated the entire textbook from Punjabi to English for me,” he recalled fondly.

In an environment where physical strength was flaunted by boys, Rajesh was a weakling. However, he was not concerned. "Once I was challenged to lift something heavy on my head. I replied that the head was for thinking and not for carrying weights," he had said, eliciting laughter.

His family members belonged to the Radha Soami sect and were not practising Hindus. It was therefore easier for him to be engrained in a world view where empathy was a central value. His schooling coincided with the time when insurgency was on the rise in Punjab. The insurgency made him shift to S A Jain College in Ambala in Haryana.

He took admission in commerce major and fared well in studies in the first year. In school he had remained one of the top scorers. In college however, when he started interacting more with students from other cities, he realised that his achievements in school had been based on rote learning. This was also the time he realised the language disparity between rural and urban students. Almost everyone was fluent in English. So he decided to expand his faculties beyond academic achievement and joined theatre groups and debating clubs. He started reading beyond his academic subjects.

When he was in his final year, his uncle urged him to study MBA abroad on scholarship, as management studies had started to become popular then. However, in a career guidance seminar, he learnt that he would need to study for two more years, as universities in the USA demanded a 16-year study prior to applying for MBA. Or he would have to enroll in a bridge course in the USA for a year. Instead he shifted to Chandigarh to pursue a master's degree in public administration, as Chandigarh had a special appeal for students, perceived as offering good exposure for career development.

During his postgraduation, Rajesh dropped the idea of going abroad. For he had become used to going home often or spending time with friends in Ambala. While some students tried to crack Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) and to get admissions abroad with scholarships unsuccessfully, pragmatic Rajesh decided to enroll for coaching and correspondence courses and apply to Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA).

"Being in a group discussion with students from Delhi was very discouraging for someone like me. So I was not too confident about my interview at IRMA and had absolutely no hopes of getting selected," Rajesh recalled. Much to his surprise, the letter from IRMA arrived when he went home to Sirhind for a casual visit. It was a matter of prestige for the family that Rajesh would become a manager. His friends looked up to him for having cleared the entrance exam. "At least 20 boys from the village came to drop me at Ambala, an hour's travel from Sirhind, the day I was leaving for Anand," recalled Rajesh.

From commerce to rural management

Rajesh joined IRMA in Gujarat in 1990. Being far from home and missing his family and friends, he is candid that he found it difficult to adapt to the new place. But the course took him to newer places.

The village fieldwork at IRMA took him to Bikaner in Rajasthan, to an organisation called Uttari Rajasthan Cooperative Milk Union Ltd, popularly known as URMUL. URMUL had been started by Sanjoy Ghosh who belonged to the first batch that graduated from IRMA.

Rajesh was not very certain of his career at that time. He had joined IRMA with the intention of doing MBA. "Those days IRMA stood fifth among management schools in India, only behind the three Indian Institute of Management schools (IIM) and Xavier Labour Relations Institute (XLRI), as per a ranking done by a magazine," said Rajesh. But his days at IRMA gradually steered him towards his career.

While doing his fieldwork in Bikaner, Rajesh got fascinated with the idea of social mobilisation. He tried to understand how Joy, as Sanjoy was called, started from scratch in Bikaner after having worked in Tribhuvandas Patel Foundation in Anand. He had mobilised people and was working towards establishing market linkages for them. Rajesh could observe how the NGO mobilised the community and how the education at IRMA was being put to best use.

"When we came back to the campus I told my friends that I had decided to join a VolAg," said Rajesh. NGOs were called voluntary agencies then, shortened to VolAg. In 1991, Rajesh interned with Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN) in Jharkhand. They had to prepare a road map for employment opportunities for those displaced by a dam construction. "PRADAN was the most respected VolAg at IRMA. I loved travelling and I wanted to explore," he recalled.

He reached Hazaribagh, then in Bihar state but presently in Jharkhand, where Narendranath Damodaran, an IRMA alumnus, had just begun work. "We put techniques like participatory rural appraisal (PRA) that we had learned, to practice, to understand the needs of the community," he reminisced. By now it was clear to Rajesh that he had a calling to work in the development domain. He interned at Hindustan Packaging Company Limited (HPCL) in Anand too. However sales and understanding consumer satisfaction did not fancy him much.

Years of vagrancy

After completing his course, Rajesh joined PRADAN in 1992. He was sent to Alwar in Rajasthan, a region where the language and geography were completely different from what he was used to. PRADAN was working in Kishangarh block in Alwar. They were working

with 14 farmers in five villages on poultry farming. “Joseph, a veterinarian from the PRADAN team at Kesla village in Madhya Pradesh, was sent to teach us the methods in poultry farming. I also went to Kesla several times, to learn more,” he recalled. He found the work exciting. Villagers in Lal Pahadi hamlet recall Rajesh’s work and how he stayed in the village late into the night discussing work.

At that time, the team was working only on natural resource management (NRM) and poultry. Rajesh was assigned the work of starting a poultry and scaling it up. With team members leaving and having to single-handedly look after the project, Rajesh lost interest. He decided to quit PRADAN after working in Alwar for two years. Rajesh admitted it was a tough decision. Deep Joshi, one of the founders of PRADAN, visiting Alwar, told Rajesh to continue, perhaps with a change in location. But Rajesh had already made up his mind.

His brother, who was still in college, started a factory to manufacture spare parts for sewing machines. In 1994, ceding his parents’ request, Rajesh moved to Sirhind, where the family was living. Though he sold the products that his brother made and secured supply contracts with leading sewing machine manufacturers, his interest waned. The factory was later closed.

Times were unsettling. He was 26 and lacking in direction. He handled brief assignments in PRADAN and in Seva Mandir, Udaipur. To find a footing and to overcome the solitude he was beginning to experience, he joined Venkateshwara Hatcheries, popularly known as Venky’s, as a sales person. Unable to compromise on his work ethics, he quit Venky’s too.

When he went to meet Dr Rakesh Kaushik, an IRMA alumnus and former PRADANite with the hope of getting consulting assignments, he met Nijjar, who had also worked in PRADAN earlier. Nijjar’s organisation Grassroots Action for Social Participation (GRASP) was working on water and soil conservation in Aurangabad. Nijjar had plans to set up a project in Himachal and invited Rajesh to handle it.

Rajesh went to Aurangabad in August 1995. He spent his time interacting with the community and observing the work being done by GRASP. Though he did not get a salary for the most part, he got a fellowship and hence was not financially dependent on his parents. “My parents were happy that I had a job. They wouldn’t even ask me where I worked,” he said.

He went to Nahan in Himachal Pradesh, to set up the GRASP project. His assessment showed that work on irrigation and soil conservation needed to be done immediately. It was a phase where he was confident of settling down. He liked the work, the new place and the team he was working with. However the project was getting stalled. He decided to quit after a considerable wait.

In 1996 he went back to PRADAN office in Delhi. Ved Arya, who is the director of NGO Srijan, was working for PRADAN then. Ved asked him to work on a survey they were doing in

Mewat region on infrastructure gaps. "You do the survey and then decide which location you want to work in," Ved told Rajesh. By then PRADAN had started working in Ramgarh block, in addition to Kishangarh. The self-help group (SHG) federation was set up in Kishangarh and PRADAN had an office in Alwar.

Rajesh met Sudhir Katiyar, a senior from IRMA, while doing the survey. During the course of work, they interacted with all the stakeholders, mainly religious leaders. The religious leaders played a major role in the everyday life of Meo Muslims, who formed the majority of the Mewat population. After completing the survey in five blocks both of them realised that girls' education was the primary need of the community.

The personal front

In the meantime, his parents were urging him to get married. Aarti, an Ayurvedic doctor by training was working in her uncle's nursing home. When he first met Aarti, he told her very clearly that the kind of work he did would never make him rich and that he travelled a lot due to his work. "I could not have told her about NGOs as people in Punjab then were not aware of them. I was frank with her and told her everything," he said. "By the time my marriage was fixed, I had decided that I would work in Alwar," he recalled. So they looked for a job for Aarti in Alwar. She joined a nursing home and has always remained working since then at different places. They have a son Nishad who was born in 1998. His parents retired in the year 2003. In 2004, with help from his parents, Rajesh settled down in Alwar.

Recalling those days, Aarti said, "I spent most of the time with Nishad, as Rajesh would mostly be occupied with his work. I had no intention of interfering with his work or be a part of it. The work seemed too tiring and exhausting, the way Rajesh was committed to his work."

Ibtada - the beginning

When Rajesh went to do the survey that Ved had asked him to, Asif Zaidi, Rajesh's team member during his first stint in Alwar now headed the team there. He had always told Rajesh that they should start something on their own. However Rajesh never took him seriously. This time Asif said that he was keen to start an organisation and had even thought of a name. "He had even decided on the board members," said Rajesh, "He wanted to work on girls' education. But with a background in livelihoods, it was not easy."

Asif had thought that PRADAN would support his organisation, but that was not to be. In an informal meeting Asif had mentioned that he would continue to work for PRADAN at least for two more years and Rajesh would lead the organisation on his behalf. Rajesh stepped in as the executive director, apprehensive that there was no concrete agenda to work on. Asif

proposed that the organisation be named Ibtada, the Urdu word meaning 'beginning'. Asif, later withdrew from all activities of the organisation, before they started work on the ground. Ibtada was registered in November 1997 under Rajasthan Society Registration Act.

Rajesh decided to work in Alwar, located in the northeast of the state of Rajasthan. The name Alwar, according to Cunningham, comes from the Salva tribe. It was called Salwapur, which became Salwa and Alwar eventually. Alwar is bound by Rewari district of Haryana on the north, Bharatpur and Mewat on the east, Dausa on the south and Jaipur on the west. The district also falls in the Mewat region of Rajasthan. Mewat, spread over 8,380 sq km, is the name of the geographical region that covers parts of Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Meo Muslims are in majority in the Mewat region; they speak Mewati which is a Rajasthani dialect, heavily influenced by Brij Bhasha, the western dialect of Hindi.

Thematic detour

The vision with which Ibtada was started was to have a society in which economically weak and deprived communities take part in development processes to ensure equitable and sustainable development of society, environment and resources.

During the survey, the idea of working on girls' education had appeared feasible. However, Rajesh realised that there were difficulties in engaging with the community. There was a mismatch between traditional, cultural and religious beliefs and the modern, formal education system. The former is referred to as deeni taleem and the latter as duniya-ki-taleem. Rajesh felt that if they were to start the girls' education project, they were most likely to fail. Therefore he decided to engage first with the women of the SHGs.

Ibtada had sent a proposal for a development grant of Rs 37,000 from Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) for forming SHGs; and was working on PRADAN's infrastructure gap survey assignment too. Just when Rajesh finished his work for PRADAN, his proposal to promote SHGs and link them with banks was approved by Tata Trusts in early 1998.

The proposal for girls' education submitted to AKF did not get approval. Things fell into place for SHGs and hence Rajesh decided to go ahead with the SHG work and keep looking for funds for the girls' education programme. He also decided to limit the scope of work to Alwar.

Bringing women together

The Tata Trusts grant was for a period of three years, with the target of forming 50 SHGs and linking 25 of them to banks. This was when Rajesh felt the need for a team. Rajesh was running the office from his rented residence. "The first assets of Ibtada were the six chairs

we bought for conducting the interview,” Rajesh said with a touch of humour. He advertised in the newspaper for the position of female field coordinators. Only one candidate turned up for the interview, who promptly rejected the job offer.

Rajesh then printed pamphlets of the job announcement and distributed them in colleges and in villages, besides advertising in two newspapers continuously for four days. This resulted in a reasonable response. After interviewing seven candidates, Rajesh selected three - two girls and a boy. They had to engage with the community and form self-help groups. Rajesh sent them to Sakhi Samiti, an NGO in Kishangarh Bas town for an orientation visit.

As they did not have facilities to work beyond Alwar city, the team decided to work in Ramgarh and Umren, the blocks closest to Alwar. By September 1998, all of them were in the field, mobilising women to form SHGs. “We used to go to unknown villages and approach men first to explain our proposed work,” shared Rajesh. In 1998-99, the first year, 16 SHGs were formed in seven villages. The district development manager (DDM) of, NABARD asked them to operate through kisan clubs in villages. This earned the team good will from the community as being representatives of the government, making expansion of their work a little easier. Sakhi Samiti, being run with PRADAN’s support, sent some experienced workers to Ibtada to assist them. In three years, 141 SHGs were formed and 103 of them were linked with banks, achieving multiple times their target.

The next project given by National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation (NMDFC), helped Ibtada give buffaloes to 30 SHG members on loan. With subsequent grants from Tata Trusts in 2007, the project expanded to Thanagazi and Lakshmangarh blocks. Today five federations, which are groups of SHGs - Savera in Umren, Sangharsh in Ramgarh, Chetna in Pratapgarh, Kranti in Lakshmangarh and Jagriti in Thanagazi stand as a result of Ibtada’s 11-year-long work. These federations have a total of 1,678 SHGs and 19,766 members. The federations have a consolidated saving of Rs 8.23 crore.

Ibtada is also a banking correspondent (BC) for Yes Bank and ICICI Bank through which loans are given to the SHGs.

From SHGs to livelihoods

By 2001, scouting for funds was of primary importance to Rajesh. Board discussions too centred on livelihoods. Even in villages where SHGs had been formed, women started demanding for avenues of self-employment. The UNDP Small Grants programme came in as a boon for promoting biogas plants among the SHG women. In the first year, 35 biogas plants were made, and 45 in the second. This was projected by donors as a landmark achievement in sustainable energy solutions. For the first time, with the help of Tinni Sawhney, a board member, Ibtada hired a technical expert for construction of biogas plants.

Women as dairy and farm facilitators

Krishi sakhi and pashu sakhi schemes emerged from the brainstorming discussions held with the communities. Pashu sakhis or friends of animals act as catalysts for promoting good cattle rearing practices. Clad in a blue sari and carrying a black bag, pashu sakhis are distinct and travel from one place to the other, providing necessary inputs related to cattle to the farmers. Having been trained, the women give injections, make diet charts, provide support for cross breeding, besides motivating women to rear more cattle to improve non-farm income.

Rajanta in Jhiri goatery says she received training in Jaipur. She gets an honorarium of Rs 700 per month. She does not have a daily fixed schedule, but works according to the needs of the community. "Even if I am called in the middle of the night, I go and give injections to the cattle," she said.

For a project Terre Des Hommes (TDH) wanted to execute in Alwar, they chose Ibtada as the implementing partner. The project centred on girls' education and women's empowerment. However, as it was designed by the donor, it did not fit into the scheme of Ibtada's programme for girls' education and women's empowerment. Ibtada negotiated the components of the project with the donors and started work in Tijara block.

Through officials from TDH, Rajesh learnt about goat rearing being promoted by Heifer International and was fascinated. The Heifer International project came with a concept of Pass on the Gift (POG). Every household was given a set of three goats. The family would rear them for eighteen months, after which they had to gift three goats from the offspring to others. Pashu sakhis made valuable contribution to make it a robust programme, by providing the otherwise lacking veterinary services to farmers rearing goats. Today there are roughly 4,000 goats with the farmers through this project.

Rajesh plans to run the operations through the farmer producer company that has been registered. With a large base, linking farmers to potential buyers could be explored. "It's a tricky business, but we are up to it. Our women and pashu sakhis have shown a firm resolve in doing business out of goat-rearing. All we need now is a workable plan, which will come from the community," affirmed Rajesh.

The krishi sakhis or friends of farmers have been trained to promote better seeds, improved fertilisers and pesticides and irrigation methods for each crop. Saliman, a krishi sakhi in Harsana village, narrates how she visits houses during the time of sowing, to teach women better sowing methods. "The men in the village thought that I would not be able to do anything. I had no knowledge about agriculture. But after I went to Naugaon for training, I learnt a lot. I grow paddy on three acres and also do share cropping like most others. The yield has increased in the last few years, after I participated in the training and implemented

what I learnt. I also have a kitchen garden in my backyard, which I have promoted among a dozen households in the village so far," she added.

The set of krishi sakhis and pashu sakhis is an example to the entire state for promoting sustainable practices in agriculture and animal husbandry. These women travel far and wide within the state to encourage other women to adopt these practices and to engage more women as pashu sakhis and krishi sakhis.

Running krishi pathshala that translate as agriculture classes, forming common interest groups, preparing demonstration plots, providing tools to reduce drudgery of labour and conducting fortnightly meetings are part of the scheme. Initially the schemes were supported by UNDP (United Nations Development Program). Presently grants from Tata Trusts and Heifer International enable krishi sakhis and pashu sakhis to receive an honorarium to work full time. A total of 90 pashu sakhis and 62 krishi sakhis work in the field.

Under Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) scheme of the government, kitchen gardens are promoted. "I always thought that producers are not the consumers when it comes to vegetables. Therefore, we decided to promote it as a package of six or seven vegetables so that the nutritional level in the diet of our women improves over time," said Rajesh Agarwal who leads the livelihoods programme.

Market linkage for milk

Based on community's demand, dairy promotion has been included as a part of the livelihoods programme. When Ibtada team worked in animal husbandry, women approached them and said, "Now that we have increased production, where do we sell the milk?" The team was sceptical of further involvement. "But I was clear. Only if we try, we will know if we can help the farmers," recalled Rajesh.

Sakhi Mahila Milk Producer Company was registered in 2016 in a tripartite agreement, wherein Paayas, a commercial dairy company procures milk from the producer company. Milk from the 5,000-litre capacity bulk milk cooling unit (BMCU) at Nimbheda village is taken to Jaipur. The company covers 30 villages as of now in Lakshmargarh, which is being extended to Ramgarh, Umren and Thanagazi blocks. Roughly 3,000 litres of milk is being procured every day.

Towards comprehensive development

In 2012, SM Sehgal Foundation extended support to Ibtada for work on soil health and water conservation. A pilot project was conducted among 70 farmers to address micro

nutrient deficiency in the soil. This programme covering 18 villages has been integrated with the other projects.

Besides these interventions, Agarwal promotes pigeon pea seed production as an income generation measure for farmers. He has been promoting best practices to grow onion and peas in rabi or winter season and okra in zaid season in between the winter and monsoon crops.

Although not directly related, but internet sathi programme is also being seen as a source of knowledge for women, related to health, education, agriculture and animal husbandry. A total of 54 internet sathis are working in the field, covering 120 villages in three blocks. They have a four-hour daily schedule to train every woman in the village. With a set of tablets and smart phones, they help the women look for information pertaining to them. Recently they have also started demonstrating the use of tablets and smart phones to young girls.

The work on rights, which Rajesh has shown keen interest in, is being done in 32 villages. Adhikar sakhis or rights workers, are key to this work on bridging the gaps in the implementation of government schemes. Village level rights committees have also been formed for this purpose. The project is being supported by Edelgive Foundation.

Exclusive educational interventions

Rajesh went to Kaman in Bharatpur in 1999, to see the work of Lok Jumbish or People's Movement, a joint initiative of the state government and a few local NGOs. Then he went to Digantar in Jaipur, an NGO working in the education domain. "We wanted to work towards perfection in education, and not just for the sake of working or for getting funds," he said.

Ram Singh who had worked in Digantar and hence had a lot of experience in the field of education, joined Ibtada. Action Aid offered support for starting primary schools for girls. The initial idea was to start schools in madrasas or masjids so as to use an existing space. Rajesh and Ram Singh visited villages in Umren block, talking mostly with men. "In my interactions with people in masjids, I realised that the education we were trying to impart had its foundation in logic, whereas the existing knowledge of these girls was based on faith," said Rajesh, recalling the conflict. The idea of conducting classes in masjids was dropped.

Interactions with the community revealed that teaching girls in the conventional system of education would not work. Keeping the reservations of the community in mind, the Ibtada team decided to start taleemshalas, exclusive learning centres for girls.

Learning here is flexible. Children learn at their own pace and there are no exams to evaluate the students. The basic premise is that learning should be an enjoyable experience, at the same time empower the girls with knowledge and promote rational thinking.

In May 2000, seven teachers selected from the villages were sent to Digantar in Jaipur for a 40-day residential training. They had been identified as the primary motivators for the work, with a minimum qualification of senior secondary education. Taleemshalas were to be started in villages where SHGs had already been formed. The Action Aid grant helped Ibtada start taleemshalas in five villages.

A typical taleemshala consists of 25 to 30 students with one facilitator. Classes are held for three to four hours. Digantar has offered the use of their teaching and learning resources. Initially the community was very suspicious of the taleemshala model. Girls had become expressive and it was seen as impertinence. The parents even raised objections to girls singing poems and playing at taleemshalas. Ibtada team had a tough time convincing the parents and maulvis that the activities were designed for better learning. Within a year the community could see the results and was convinced about the teaching methods. They started demanding similar facility for their sons too.

With differences over Ibtada's strategy, Action Aid did not offer to renew the grant. When the taleemshalas opened in July 2002 after summer break, the staff started working without salary. Deep Joshi of PRADAN who was highly impressed with the taleemshalas enabled Ibtada get funds from Tata Trusts.

With grants from other organisations, Ibtada had opened 120 taleemshalas by 2009 in four blocks, besides Kishangarh Bas town. Between 2010 and 2014, 1926 girls cleared grade 5 from taleemshalas. On being asked what they remember the most about their taleemshalas, they said, "We used to really like the games we played. The only reason we went to taleemshalas was because of the games and the way we could address our teacher by name." The schools' approach benefitted non-Muslim girls also get educated.

Some facilitators continue to work in Ibtada. "We could do nothing once a girl passed fifth standard. It was her wish or rather her family's wish to encourage her to study. However, a large number of girls did continue till upper primary and even twelfth standard," said Panini Bhatt who leads the education programmes.

With the coming of RTE Act (Right to Education), Ibtada slowly phased out the taleemshalas and took to improving the quality of education in government schools.

The Girls Rising programme, promoted by Save the Children, brought together a group of girls and boys, in the age group of 10 - 15. The activities revolved around watching films that narrated stories of girls fighting odds to fulfill their aspirations. They had regular games and a mini library with story books in Hindi and English. Priya recalled her days from taleemshala as well as the Girls Rising group, "We came because we got a space to talk, and tell each other whatever we were thinking. In taleemshalas our teacher kept changing, but they were all nice to us. In Girls Rising programme, we had a group. We played cricket with the boys of the village. Initially everyone laughed at us. But we played. I like batting very much." She is

in eleventh grade, with an interest in history. The confidence with which the girls speak shows the impact of their education in the taleemshalas.

One of the remarkable impacts of taleemshala is the mini resource centre for girls in Jatoli village. They have a library. The centre is run by girl students. The girls who had their initial education in taleemshala now teach children in primary classes. These girls aspire to be teachers and lawyers among others. Some wish to prepare for service exams to land government jobs.

Vrihaspati, who anchored taleemshalas earlier, now handles the programme of life skills in Ramgarh, where participants learn communication skills and healthcare, besides sharing perspectives on social problems. She teaches a group of girls computer skills at the Naugaon training centre. The certificate course is conducted by NIIT Foundation, and the girls receive a certificate at the completion of the course. Apart from this Ibtada facilitates a certificate programme by Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, that prepares girls for employment by equipping them with typing and computer skills. Ibtada also runs a school, funded by Care India, on the borders of Haryana and Rajasthan.

Governance

Initially all the board members were from Alwar and Rajesh was the one taking decisions and diversifying portfolios. The structure of board has changed over the years. A six-member core committee is responsible for all the policy matters and managing the organisation. Rajesh is also one of the members of the core committee. Staff participation is encouraged in all important matters. For example, when salary is revised every three years, a staff committee is constituted to propose the revised salary, which is reviewed by the core committee and then proposed to the governing board.

“I was not an employee of Ibtada. During one of the board meetings it was suggested that I be appointed as the executive director for a tenure of three years. So today I work as an employee and my contract gets renewed every third year,” said Rajesh in a lighter note, highlighting the importance of establishing processes in an organisation.

“We take decisions after intense brainstorming on every aspect. For instance, rather than deciding to spread geographically to other parts of Rajasthan, we decided to work intensively in the same locality,” said Tinni Sawhney, one of the board members.

Way forward

Ibtada is seen as a pioneer both in SHG and in education domains. “There was a time when anyone I met in PRADAN would talk about our work in taleemshalas. Deep was so impressed that he told almost everyone about our work,” said Rajesh with pride.

Today Ibtada has infrastructure in terms of an office and a training centre. The training centre in Naugaon was established with a grant from Aide-et-Action, supplemented by Ibtada. With a staff of 110 and field volunteers, and work spread across two broad themes of education and livelihoods, the organisation is fairly well known in the development space.

The need for a second line of executives was felt when Rajesh got an opportunity to work with Aga Khan Foundation in Afghanistan. Rajesh flirted with the idea of bringing in a director who could handle both the portfolios. However, it did not fructify. The only one to have an understanding of both of the domains is Rajesh. Rajesh hopes to have a successor who would nurture Ibtada as meticulously as he has done for the last 20 years.

About Rajesh Singhi

- Empowers girls and women in the underdeveloped Mewat region of Rajasthan, through education and livelihood promotion, through Ibtada, the organisation Rajesh Singhi founded
- Expert in self-help group (SHG) and education domains, he enables intended beneficiaries of government schemes and entitlements access them
- Successfully brought women of the region together to form SHGs and linking them with banks, with a present consolidated saving of Rs 8.23 crore, a difficult proposition given the educational and cultural milieu of the region
- Trains women to become dairy and farm facilitators to help dairy and agricultural farmers tackle issues and solve them
- The most effective intervention has been introducing taleemshalas, exclusive learning centres for girls, where children had no exams and learnt at their own pace, thus empowering and encouraging them to aspire for higher studies

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