

A Field Worker's Diary - Part 16

It was 2005, and I was working with the rural poor in the villages of Guntur district under Andhra Pradesh Rural poverty Reduction Project (APRPRP - Velugu) which being implemented by the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA). At that time, we had made efforts to try and understand the major problems faced by rural poor and came to know that these people had a lot of legal problems, most of which were land disputes.

In spite of cultivating the land for numerous generations, the farmers here didn't have the land deeds proclaiming that it was their land. While some had land deeds but the land wasn't in their possession. There were many other problems around the lands assigned to dalits and tribals. Even though the land under Scheduled Areas for tribals were not supposed to be held by non-tribals under the Scheduled Areas Land Transfer Regulation Act, we found that over 40% of the land in the area was held by non-tribals. Apart from these kinds of land problems, we could see that there were more problems such as family disputes, disputes related to Common Property Resources in the villages, etc.

As it dawned on those of us that the poor were losing out on their entitlements due to lack of awareness about laws, rules and regulations, and lack of access to legal aid and support, we came up with an intervention program.

Under the program, we aimed to select and train smart and interested women at the village level as paralegal workers. These paralegal workers had to identify the land disputes related to the poor in the villages assigned to them and conduct a village level preliminary enquiry about them. They then had to prepare a representation with the details and the necessary papers and submit them to the revenue department officials. In the same way, they also had to collect primary information about different types of disputes and cases in the village and had to send the information to the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) and try to settle the cases as soon as possible through DLSA.

I was given the responsibility of coordinating the trainings that were going to be given to paralegal workers in our district. Our staff had already selected some thirty sharp women from the field level at that time. These women did not have much education and were from a poor background, nonetheless, they had come to attend the training with a lot of interest and earnestness. Not only did the DLSA indicate the aspects to be included in the training but the District Judge himself had come to give the training to the workers. Apart

from him, the First class Magistrate and the then District Collector Ms. Jayalakshmi also spoke to the workers on their way forward.

For a new joinee like me, working alongside the District Collector and the District Judge was like walking on a tightrope.

After collecting the signatures of our Project Director on the program approval papers, with the intention of not delaying the program unnecessarily, we had to wait for hours at the district court for the District Judge's signature and at the camp office for the Collector's signature; at last, we managed to get the approval on time and finish the program on schedule.

Even though the program had not given the desired level of results as had been hoped for, but it was still a very good experience for us. Personally, I had learnt a lot. For a person who didn't know what pattadar passbooks were, I got to learn about land records, revenue records, land rights etc. It was as though I myself had received the trainings along with the paralegal workers.

The APRPRP still holds a special place in my heart for giving me opportunities to learn so many diverse aspects related to village development.

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