

A Field Worker's Diary - Part 26

Those were the days when I had been working in the Andhra Pradesh Rural Poverty Reduction Project (APRRP) and our teams had just started forming Self Help Groups (SHGs) and their Village level Federations (VLFs).

Homogeneity was the main feature of the SHGs. As we facilitated people from the same backgrounds, the same economic and social needs to form into a group.

On the contrary, the VLF is a heterogeneous group formed with representative members of diverse backgrounds from all SHGs in the village.

Two members from each of the SHGs (there are about ten to fifteen members in each of the SHG) represent the groups in the VLF; these members form the General Body (GB) of the VLF.

From among the GB, five Office Bearers (OB) are selected, and various committees are also established with different members.

One day, we had gone to Krosuru mandal in order to establish a new VLF in a village there. We had already brought almost all of the poor people in this village into the SHG coverage.

As mentioned in one of the earlier posts, most of our meetings with the groups took place in the night after 8 p.m.

That day, right from the time we started the meeting to set up the VLF till the selection of the General Body, everything went smoothly.

Alas, when it came to the selection of the Office Bearers, we instructed the General Body to pick a woman member from the poorest of poor (PoP) category for the post of President; moreover, as the village had some ST households belonging to the PoP category, we also suggested to the members to pick somebody from among those households.

Those were the instructions given to us in trainings conducted by our project. Our poverty reduction scheme was meant to be implemented through public participation. Since all the programs related to the project are implemented through village and mandal level federations, the rationale behind this decision was that the poor must get to lead those federations.

In that particular village, our suggestion, however, was unpalatable to the majority of the members.

As the village had a large population of BC category people, the BC members insisted that the president must be from the BC community.

Some of the members even went to their houses and brought their husbands along for a fight.

The argument went on and on! It was past 10 PM, and we still hadn't reached a consensus however much we argued. It appeared to us that we were nowhere nearer to finding a solution.

While there were poor people even among the BC community people in the village, we felt it was fairer that the president must be from the ST community as it was even more backward and poverty-stricken than the BC community.

We weren't denying the fact that there were other poor women in the village; however, it made sense to us to give leadership to a person who was carrying the burdens of being a woman from the poorest of the poor category that too from the most vulnerable class.

That night, we had tried a lot to persuade them but couldn't convince them.

Feeling that it was no use to argue with them anymore, we told them that we wouldn't form a VLF in their village and left. Once we reached Krosuru, we called up our Project Director and told him what had happened.

As our work generally went on late into the night, our Project Director was always available on phone at any time of the night.

After hearing our story, our Project Director was very supportive and told us not to worry and advised us to focus on other villagers, and that we could see about that village later.

Some days had passed and we had been busy with our work in other villages. One day, the Sarpanch from that village came to our office and apologized for the way the members behaved and asked us to come to the village. He told us that this time he was personally going to set up the meeting.

We don't know what he had told the members but everything went like clockwork in the second meeting.

Poor people belonging to the majority group have the advantage of collective voice. They have better opportunities to voice their opinion and chances of having it heard by someone.

The main purpose behind giving leadership responsibilities to communities that do not have such a collective voice is to facilitate them to work towards solving their problems. Even though we had to face many hiccups and headaches in this journey, we must acknowledge that all of our field staff managed to ensure that the most disadvantaged communities take leadership positions in the community based organizations.

@ Bharathi Kode