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OTHER ACTIVITIES

WE HAVE not made any big headway in working together with any panchayat or in persuading it to involve people in its work, but there is one thing we have helped achieve that we must mention. This is about putting some real life and meaning into the meetings of the gram sansad.

These meetings are meant to be occasions where the villagers ask questions, place demands, make suggestions, etc. Unfortunately attendance has usually been meagre, to the extent that meetings at many centres have frequently had to be cancelled because of a lack of quorum. Even when people did come they kept quiet, mainly because they thought there was no point. Their experience had convinced them accountability was only in name and decisions were taken regardless of what they said. We thought the situation was ripe for a change.

And changed it has. At four booths of Bajitpur Gram Panchayat, the attendance at the November 1999 meeting of the Gram Sansad was 14, 4, 8, and 23. In May this rose to 86, 76, 73, and 111 respectively.

More significantly, women were more than 30 % of those now present. Quite a few things had happened in the meantime.

The first was a brainwave that struck the panchayat job assistant. He suggested that the Swanirvar children's cultural team be asked to put up a show before the meeting, so that people would come to the venue. But would they stay back for the main thing once the show was finished? It was then decided that the items of the show would be interspersed among those of the meeting.

This would, and did, ensure attendance but what about active participation, with emphasis on both words? Usually those who speak at such meetings make demands that concern individual households; the interests of the community are rarely considered. Staff from the State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development, the Panchayat Pradhan herself and the job assistant, and workers of Swanirvar held a meeting with people in one booth. They were divided into five teams, and each asked to discuss among themselves one particular issue that should exercise the community: education, roads, health, drainage, and agriculture. At the meeting itself, they presented well thought-out opinions on their respective subject. Women were as vocal as they had promised in their self-help groups to be. This experiment being so successful, the pattern was repeated at the three other booths also, with Swanirvar workers taking the leading role, as the others could not make the time to come to each booth.

The North 24 Parganas NGOs forum continues to struggle to do anything beyond surviving. In April we took the initiative to organize a workshop on micro-finance for its members. This was conducted by CARE, some members of the faculty of the State Institute of Panchayat and

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Rural Development, and two leading micro-finance NGOs of West Bengal - Village Welfare Society, and Taj Mahal Gram Vikas Kendra. In July the first annual meeting of the forum was held at Swanirvar, with 30 members participating. It met again at Madhyamgram in August. Then in September there was a workshop at Vikas Kendra on globalization. In March we met at Jana Samhati Kendra at Badu to discuss members' role during the floods and to seek opinion on how to prepare ourselves for such a natural calamity in future. But nothing much has come out of these.

Apart from being a member of a State-level network on sustainable agriculture and of a national network on education, and from being an active member of the district forum, we keep in touch with NGOs, individuals and other organizations in and outside West Bengal whose work we admire or feel may have something to teach us. Our supervisors often attend seminars in Kolkata and it is only the language constraint that keeps them from going beyond West Bengal. Thus it is on our Coordinator that the main responsibility of interacting with others devolves. We do not wish to sound immodest but there are many now who wish to hear what we have done and how, and it is again our Co-ordinator who represents us at these sessions. We give below a brief list of meetings he attended and places he went to during the year. The Rajya Samanvay Upadeshta Parishad is a committee formed to co-ordinate NGOs' activities with the ideas of the State Planning Board. It invited us to its meeting this year. He was one of the speakers at a 2-day Eastern India Consultation on Non-violence for Sustainability of Life organized by VANI. He addressed a group of rural journalists on sustainable development at a workshop organized by Service Centre. He attended a State-level workshop on micro-finance where among the participants were representatives of the West Bengal Government, the SIPRD, NABARD, various nationalized banks, SIDBI, the co-operative department, Sadhan which is a national apex NGO on micro-finance, and an NGO from Andhra Pradesh instrumental in the promulgation of a new co-operative Act there. On another occasion he also addressed a large conference of women in self-help groups from many places at a conference organized by Gana Unnayan Parishad. He went to Sevagaon at Wardha for a 3-day conference on education where he met leading educationists from all over the country. He addressed a workshop on floods where many organizations participated. He was a key participant at a SIPRD workshop called to draw up a training module for women panchayat pradhans.

He went to Britain on a brief visit on invitation from the Friends of Swanirvar. He met the trustees of FoS and gave them a first-hand account of the activities that they have been so assiduously supporting over the years, explaining our position and philosophy, answering questions, and clarifying uncertainties in the process. He discussed with the NLCB the progress of our micro-finance project until then, and addressed members of the Society of Friends, a church group, Worcester Fourth Form College, and University College, Worcester. He was interviewed as a development activist by the Worcester centre of the BBC.

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Unfortunately, some of his other engagements had to be cancelled because of floods in England. Our patrons in the USA, particularly in and around Los Angeles, Chicago, and in New Jersey, and some of our active supporters on various campuses there, most of them Indians or of Indian origin, also want him to visit them but a definite plan is yet to take shape.