

19

Immersion as a form of apprenticeship at PRADAN

by HRD UNIT at PRADAN with a contribution from VISHAL JAMKAR

PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) recognises that grassroots community work requires young people to 'swim against the social current' of contemporary India. It offers an apprenticeship programme during which new trainees can reflect on their career choice. The account here includes views from the organisation and also an account of the experiences of one of their recruits, Vishal Jamkar.

Introduction

Established in 1983, PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) is an India-based NGO working with over 100,000 poor rural families. PRADAN's mission is to enable these poor families to live a life of dignity by strengthening their livelihoods and giving them access to sustainable income-earning opportunities. This involves organising them, enhancing their capabilities, and introducing ways to increase their incomes by linking them to banks, markets, and other economic services and opportunities.

PRADAN owes its genesis to a strong belief in a simple idea – that caring and capable people, rather than material resources, are crucial to accelerating the process of social

development in our country. Rural community development is a complex process involving the interplay of social, political, and economic forces. Capable and caring people can accelerate this process, and make it more humane, especially for the poor, by working among them in the village in a sustained way. Not everyone is cut out to be a 'helping person', which is at the heart of grassroots community work. Such work also requires youngsters to 'swim against the social current', and bear with unfamiliar and difficult conditions – in both work and life – by choice.

Because of this, PRADAN has developed an apprenticeship programme, which provides new development trainees with an opportunity to assess the pluses and minuses of life in grassroots work. It also gives time to reflect upon alternative career choices, and to think about the expectations of family and significant others, as well as the trainee's responsibilities towards them. The cost of apprenticeships is supported by reputable Indian and foreign donors (e.g. Sir Ratan Tata Trust, Ford Foundation).

PRADAN uses a carefully designed multi-tier selection process to recruit trainees to the programme. Trainees come from professional backgrounds or are post-graduates with social science/pure science backgrounds. Our aim is to prepare them to use their knowledge and skills to fight

Vishal Jamkar with his hosts sowing SRI paddy in Tetar village.



Photo: Vishal Jamkar

poverty and work for the benefit of the rural poor. The development apprenticeship runs for 12 months, and allows the trainee to experience and explore life and work in grassroots community development. Refined over the years, it is the main mechanism for PRADAN to train university graduates of varied disciplines as development workers.

Most of the programme takes place at the field level. A trainee is attached to a field guide who has been trained through a three-phase field guide development programme. This programme prepares PRADAN professionals with more than 3 years' experience in PRADAN and strong roots in development work to become a 'mentor' to the trainees.

The learning ground of the apprentice mostly overlaps with the work area of the field guide in the project location. The learning cycle is:

- guide does, apprentice observes;
- apprentice does, guide observes;
- we both experiment together to find better ways of doing things.

The programme offers these young people a 'reality check'. It gives them a chance for reflection 'inside', and for motivation and exposure 'outside'. It gives them the oppor-

tunity to make an informed career choice as to whether or not they want to do grassroots work. An apprenticeship allows one to experience the living conditions and broad content and pace of work in villages. The apprentices experience and learn about:

- the contexts in which poor people live;
- the conditions in which they would work; and
- the kinds of impact they might have/make.

While learning, apprentices also explore the changes they would have to make in their own lives. The programme aims to instil sound professional values in the apprentices and to help them develop attributes such as how to:

- adjust to difficult living conditions;
- manage with poor logistics;
- have empathy for the communities they work with;
- stay a step behind the community to facilitate them to take charge;
- facilitate women to manage their self-help groups; and
- facilitate the community to take up income-generating activities to improve their economic conditions and ultimately their lives.

Above all, they learn the practical skills of grassroots

Vishal Jamkar at the castor plantation in Bondri village with Jhingobai.



Photo: Vishal Jamkar

development work through this learning cycle. These values, skills, and attributes are the basic preparation for a long-term career both at PRADAN and in grassroots development. From time to time, apprentices and their team members also reflect whether they are suitable for this sector or not, and where they are vis-à-vis their learning agenda. All these processes have been institutionalised and fully integrated into the working of PRADAN.

For PRADAN, apprenticeships reduce uncertainties and contingencies in its core activities. We face many uncertainties in the external environment so it is important that our staff are highly professional. The development apprenticeship process allows us a higher degree of reliability. This serves the critically important purpose of building confidence in the organisation and in its ability to deliver.

PRADAN recruits 100 to 150 development apprentices per year. Out of these, 40 to 50 join PRADAN as executives at the end of the 12-month apprenticeship programme to pursue a career in rural development. Currently, more than 200 PRADAN professionals are spread out in small field-based teams across 3,044 villages in remote and poor areas of Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan,

and West Bengal.

The apprenticeship programme has been of enormous benefit to PRADAN.

- More than 936 university graduates have joined the apprenticeship programme since its inception.
- Of these, 303 apprentices graduated as PRADAN executives.
- Between April 2000 and March 2006, 66% of the graduating executives continued to work in PRADAN and another 13% continued in this sector after leaving PRADAN.
- In 2000, PRADAN's leadership pool had 25 executives with over 7 years' experience. There are now more than 60. This growth is entirely attributable to the apprenticeship programme.

Challenges ahead

PRADAN is currently one of the largest non-government public service organisations in India, with a wide outreach in regions with high concentrations of poverty. It has the largest endowment of university-educated women and men working directly with poor families in the country. We have strong relationships with those we work with, both in villages

Cooking food in
Khohra village, in
preparation for a
marriage.



Photo: Vishal Jamkar

and in an array of public and private institutions concerned with poverty alleviation. We believe this is due to our human resource development and a mission-level belief in the simple idea that **people make a difference**.

PRADAN is at a unique juncture in its organisational life. We are now in a position to grow rapidly and expand our outreach. Realising this goal presents a number of key challenges. At this point, we need to:

- enlarge the pool of human resources available to the organisation;
- develop career trajectories for young people within PRADAN, and also in the 'mainstream';
- develop curricula, systems, and processes to enhance effectiveness; and
- enable experienced staff to play wider leadership roles.

Our aim is to scale up the 12-month long development apprenticeship programme so that 50 to 60 new executives join PRADAN each year. In addition, PRADAN needs to develop new recruitment and induction strategies to bring in 20 new executives with 1 to 5 years' work experience outside PRADAN, across all sectors. Not only would this add to the numbers, we believe it would add new dimensions to

our work and enhance our diversity.

Vishal Jamkar recounts his experiences as a PRADAN apprentice

I am a chemical engineer and after graduating I felt I wanted to use my technical knowledge for social purposes. This is how I decided to apply for a job in PRADAN.

I had no social and/or field experience. So I enrolled with PRADAN's one-year apprenticeship programme. During my apprenticeship, I first went for a month-long village stay.¹ I then went on to do a study of a new village (where PRADAN was yet to work). Finally, I feel I've learnt the nitty-gritty of the project through a guided practice.

I remember my village stay in Khohra at Manturiyabai's house (Manturiyabai is one of the self-help group members). For the first 3 days, I interacted with nobody except the family with whom I was staying. I used to shy away from approaching neighbours. Villagers were very curious to meet

¹ During the village stay, the newly inducted apprentice stays with a family in a community where PRADAN is already working. The Field Guide and Team Leader look for a suitable, willing host family for the apprentice and discuss the stay with the host family.

me. Being from Mumbai, the youngsters were very eager to ask me how films are shot, and how the romantic songs and scenes are filmed. I was more used to reading books about rural India than actually speaking with people from rural India. For me, the ice-breaker was a village marriage ceremony, where I helped to cook food and danced the *chitkor*, a tribal dance.

As part of my assignment, I had to find out the income-expenditure levels of a number of families. After my initial attempts, I realised the importance of asking open-ended questions. I had spent a sleepless night thinking I was not fit for the job. I couldn't ask questions, such a simple thing! I then realised that I had become assignment-focused, manipulating data, as I used to do in my engineering laboratory. Some time later, when I became genuinely interested in people's lives and not just their incomes and expenditures, everything became easier. I found I could complete my assignment and enjoy the remaining time there.

I remember once talking with a few villagers at Shyam-

vatibai's house; I was 'lecturing' them on why they should have sent their children to school rather than sending them to collect *mahua* and feeding cattle. I repeated it three times, with a tone of superiority as if I was a graduate and knew all the advantages of it. Everyone went quiet and began to avoid looking at me. I could not understand why they were behaving like this. Then Mangat bhayya, Shyamvatibai's husband, replied silently,

Brother, we don't have or are able to get enough food here; what we can cultivate from agriculture is not enough to cook our meals for a whole year. We have to migrate to other places to earn, taking all our belongings with us. So first of all, let our food requirements be met, and then we will think of education.

This incident is embossed on my memory. I was petrified. Nothing taught me as much as this event did. I realised then that I can never say I know it all.

CONTACT DETAILS

The HRD Unit
PRADAN
Niti Bagh
New Delhi
110 049
India
Tel/Fax: + 91 11
26518619/46039245/460432456/26851171
Email: hrd@pradan.net
Website: www.pradan.net

Vishal Jamkar
Executive (Projects)
District Hoshangabad
Madhya Pradesh
India
Email: vishalmjamkar@pradan.net