

Experiment that's revolutionising Vidarbha

Vipin Vijayan in Yavatmal | November 01, 2007 | 21:45 IST

"Bassa, Bassa (please sit down)," came the mystic voice on the microphone as dust settled over the barren parch of land teeming with men, women and children in their rural best.

The gathering followed suit -- it was 'the one', who had turned their lives around in a span of around two years, addressing them.

Chants of *Lo Aagaye Krishna* (Lord Krishna has arrived) spread through the maidan when the black Sports Utility Vehicle parked outside the venue. An entire village jostled to catch a glimpse.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, their spiritual savior, waved as he made the way to the specially-erected pandal through waves of devotees who fell at his feet to seek blessings.

Ravi Shankar is here for a reason.

Over the past few years, the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra has been making headlines for the wrong reasons -- first due to the growing number of farmer suicides and then owing to an outbreak of life-threatening chikungunya.

The failure of monsoons in this part of Western India caused a decline in the produce of cotton -- the cash crop of the region. Add to that some lopsided government policies and red-tapism, and you have the perfect recipe for disaster.

Though reluctantly, the state government did acknowledge that farmers in the region were a worried lot. Over 1,800 farmers had committed suicide by then.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh did announce a Rs 3,750-crore aid package for farmers in six of the worst-affected districts in the region -- Yavatmal, Amaravati, Akola, Washim, Buldhana and Wardha.

How that money was or is being utilised is a different story. Our story is all about an experiment called Art of Living.

Art of Living, a non-governmental organisation founded by Ravi Shankar, sought to revive an asset that the debt-ridden farmers in the region had lost over the course of time -- self reliance.

About a year-and-a-half ago, the NGO introduced the Swavalamban programme in the same worst-affected areas as the ones identified by Dr Singh in his aid package. The programme seeks to induce positive thinking while at the same time spiritually uplift the farmers. It also trains them in new farming techniques.

The programme assists them in conserving rain water through soak pits. It preaches the revival of the age-old farming technique of using compost for crops instead of the more expensive pesticides and fertilizers. The reason: reducing the input cost for the crop to increase revenue.

Besides helping out the farmers, the programme also seeks to create better living conditions for villagers and empower women through vocational courses. In a nutshell, it seeks to address the psychological breakdown of farmers and their financially-unviable farming techniques. Sensing a ray of hope, over 507 villages are lapping up the advantages the programme.

In these villages, the mornings begin with the village folk gathering for breathing exercises and meditation under the supervision of the Yuvacharyas, individuals who have been trained in the techniques at the Art of Living's Bangalore headquarters.

The NGO organises various camps and courses that sensitise villagers about community activities and human values.

Ravi Shankar's first visit to Yavatmal district (second to Vidarbha) came during the three-day Kisan Sanjeevan Shivir.

The fact that Art of Living had caught the fancy of the farmers could be gauged from the numerous pandals welcoming Ravi

Shankar at various junctions along the route to be undertaken by the latter.

Having reviewed the work done by his NGO, the spiritual leader told villagers: "Committing suicide is foolishness. It offers no solutions to any trouble. If one family has no food and the neighbour has enough to survive for two days, the latter should offer help without hesitation. The country's progress has suffered due to party and caste divisions. Do away with all such inhibitions and help the needy."

"This is just the beginning. I am glad our efforts are bearing fruit. Suicide rates have dipped in 507 villages across the six districts. However, there are thousands of villages where this good work has to be taken. You should take it ahead. Pass on the word."

The state government too acknowledges the work done by the Art of Living.

In a statement, Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh said: "It is a matter of gratification that Art of Living has initiated grass-root projects and programmes to relieve stress and change the attitude of the affected farmers in Vidarbha."

"The project has certainly restored normalcy in the lives of farmers and relieve them of trauma. Art of living has given them a new lease of life and reduced the rate of suicides. The government is grateful that Art of living is working in remote parts of Vidarbha by expanding their services, especially the Youth Leadership Training Programme, which is helping the youth to be strong, both mentally and physically, and serve the society at large."

The state government also urged the Collectors of the other affected areas to facilitate the implementation of the Swavalamban programme.

Going by the number of villagers (about 2 lakh) who attended the satsang (prayer meet) in Nehru Stadium in Yavatmal on October 29 evening, this experiment is bound to usher in a revolution in Vidarbha.

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