

Note for Record

By: Shoaib Sultan Khan
July 22, 2008

Subject: Two Days with Mr. Rahul Gandhi, MP

I received an invitation (attached) from Rajiv Gandhi Charitable Trust.

We drove into Munshigunj (Amethi) Rest House late in the evening of July 14 and the place was bristling with security personnel. Mr. Rahul Gandhi (RG) had already arrived. We were received by the Project Manager of Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Preyojana (RGMVP) Mr. Y.S. Yadav. The Rest House is the camp of Shrimati Sonia Gandhi and RG as both of them have been elected MPs to the Indian Parliament from adjoining constituencies Amethi in Sultanpur district and Rae Bareli. It seemed that the suite under use of RG's associate next to his suite was given to me.

I briefly met RG in the morning as there were hundreds of people sitting in the lawn under an elegant shamiana waiting to meet him. It was at 8.00 p.m. in the night when I had been taken for a village dialogue by Sampath Kumar (SK), CEO RGMVP that RG joined us there. Under gas lights the deliberations started with the Project Manager Y.S. Yadav (YSY) doing the introductions. All the households in Teri village had organized in Self Help Groups (SHGs) and the SHGs had federated in a Village Organisation called Cluster Level Association (CLA).

At this juncture RG along with his Secretary Kanishka Singh (KS) being guided by a torch light, came and sat down on the floor by my side. At our back, there were a few goats sitting and munching quite disinterested in the proceedings.

RG asked SK if I had been introduced to the gathering and then asked if he could speak for a minute and again introduced me to the VO and asked me to address the villagers. I thanked RG for inviting me and expressed great pleasure in meeting him especially as I had met his great grandfather Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru as a young student, when as head of the Interim Government Panditji had come to visit Ghazipur, where my grandfather was Collector in 1947. I explained to the gathering the three principles of social mobilisation based on the conviction that even the poorest man or

woman has the potential to improve their economic and social condition, if helped to unleash the potential within them. I illustrated the effectiveness of the principles of organisation, human resource development and generation of capital through savings by describing my experience of working with a million people of Northern Areas of Pakistan and thereafter especially in Andhra Pradesh, where 100,000 families organised by South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme (SAPAP) initiated by UNDP has now blossomed in over 9 million organised households and how they have improved their economic and social status beyond recognition.

Thus I explained that the success of this approach is dependent on i) peoples willingness to get organised to enable them to unleash their potential; ii) presence of an honest and committed leader within the group willing to acquire through human resource development training human skills to lead the group and iii) presence of a sensitive support organisation of dedicated and committed staff to be the catalyst in organizing the poor in SHGs and facilitating removal of obstacles in the way of the SHGs to achieve the full potential of what they are willing and capable of doing.

I emphasized that the Social Mobilisation approach demands of the poor in the beginning to fulfil their obligations of organisation comprising SHG meetings and participation of all on a fixed day (initially weekly), fixed time and a place in full knowledge of everyone and initiating a capital generation programme through weekly savings and finally willing to fully participate in human resource development training. It is only when SHG fulfils these obligations that the support organisation can enter into a partnership with them. Being a Development Partnership both partners: communities (SHGs/CLA/BLA and support organisation (RGMVP) have to discharge their obligations on equal terms.

I asked Teri CLA how RGMVP is different from scores of government departments and other development agencies. It is only RGMVP which focuses on unleashing the potential of the people by organizing them. Secondly RGMVP has no pre-conceived package of interventions to reduce poverty. It is SHGs which identify the interventions which could facilitate unleashing of their potential. And thirdly RGMVP, by organizing SHGs reaches the household level, most of the government programmes and projects only reach the village or gram level. Poverty prevails at household and family level and unless a programme helps and facilitates the family to rise above the level of subsistence, poverty from the village would not go away. I congratulated the

women of Teri because they had fulfilled their obligations of the Development Partnership they have entered in with RGMVP.

The SHGs members of Teri who had now federated in Cluster Level Association (CLA) at village level narrated their experiences since getting organised

After formation of SHGs and CLA, the women said that many of their problems have been solved. Many narrated how they were indebted borrowing money at 10% per month, now the SHG offers credit at only 2% per month, thus saving them Rs. 8 per month per Rs. 100/-. One member described how she was able to redeem her plot of land by paying off her debt through acquisition of cheap credit from her SHG. Another one described how an initial loan of Rs. 2000 from SHG for a sewing machine helped her build her credibility and subsequently enabled her to borrow money for buffalo and even a tractor. Another case study was of a member who started borrowing small sums from SHG and repaying in time graduated borrowing large sums for buffaloes which has enabled her to send her children to school for education. Another story was of starting with a Rs. 5000 loan from SHG going upto Rs. 30,000 and now she possessed cows and buffaloes and repaid every penny of the loan. Another heartwarming story was of a women whose husband was out of job when their son fell ill. With SHG support, she got her son treated in hospital. Even her house fell down due to heavy rains but the SHG did not give up on her and helped her in every adversity to get on her feet. Today she was in a position to send her child to a good school paying Rs. 2600 fees per term quarterly.

When asked how many of the 104 households of Teri were destitutes and what the SHGs or the CLA has done for them. A couple of destitutes came forward and described how they have been helped by SHG/CLA. In one case the villager sold his land to build a house for himself and had nothing now for livelihood. The SHG was debating how to help the family for livelihood.

The women claimed to have been empowered since they got organised in SHGs and formed the CLA. One of their members complained against her husband for maltreatment and beatings. The SHG/CLA decided to act and confronted the man against his cruel behaviour towards his wife. The man threatened to beat the SHG women and shouted at them saying it was a domestic matter and none of their business. A group of thirty women went to local police station and complained against

the culprit. The Police Officer came immediately and took the man away and locked him up. The next day the women asked the Police Officer to release him without registering a case against him because they only wanted to teach him a lesson. The man has been on his best behaviour since then towards his wife and towards all the women of the village. The women stated but for their SHG/CLA, they would have suffered in silence as they used to do prior to RGMVP. Now even the Pradhan (Chairman) of the Panchayat takes them seriously if they go with any request.

RG in his address said that six years ago people said that what was achieved in Andhra Pradesh can't work here in UP. People are divided because of caste. RGMVP was begun in 2002 and it is now the biggest programme of poverty reduction and women empowerment in UP. It all happened because you stood together. If you unite, people are not divided. Wrongdoings can be stopped if you are united. Today you are united at village level. Hopefully soon you would unite at Block, District and national level and may be one day at the Regional level. United you are our strength.

The dialogue ended with a song and we all headed towards our vehicles. RG invited me to sit in his vehicle along with KS and SK. On the way he discussed how social mobilisation can be scaled up and can it really be? Recounting my experience of last 55 years and especially of the last 30 years including 12 years in Northern Areas organizing one million people, there are three pre-requisite for the success of social mobilisation approach. Firstly willingness of the community, secondly presence of an honest and committed activist as community resource person (CRP) within the SHG and thirdly a sensitive support organisation like RGMVP. If these three ingredients are there, all you need are resources to scale up. What I have seen in Sultanpur Amethi, I have no doubt that all the three pre-requisites are present in UP. The main constraint is resources.

For resource mobilisation, I described to RG the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF) structure and proposed a similar organisation to be set up by the Union Government. In case of India unlike PPAF, the Fund needs only two windows to fund sensitive support organisations like RGMVP namely Social Mobilisation window supplemented by a Community Investment Fund (CIF) window. The RGMVP experience shows a requirement per Block of roughly ten million rupees for social mobilisation through CRPs and CIF. I suggested to RG to set up a US\$ 500 million

Fund to mobilise each and every poor household in nearly 1000 Blocks of UP. RG and KS seemed most interested in the proposal.

By now we had reached Amethi Rest House and RG asked me if I could wait for a little while for dinner as he had asked for food to be brought from Lucknow including the famous Tundaywaley Kabab. I was simply overwhelmed at RG's humility, kindness and hospitality. It was indeed a feast to remember.

The next morning RG wanted me to see the Eye Hospital he had set up at Amethi. KS took me there. It was a state of the art establishment comparable to any hospital anywhere in the world being run in a most professional manner. The beauty of the arrangement is that 30% of the paying patients cross subsidise 70% of the poor patients. The Eye Hospital named after RG's grand mother is indeed a blessing for the people of Sultanpur and adjoining districts.

RG joined us at the hospital and we drove together to the Jaisi Training Centre of RGMVP to attend the final session of the RGMVP Vision Building Workshop. On the way RG would stop even if a lone person would signal him to stop and listen to him or take his application. At one place, the man offered a hot mug of tea to RG who was nonplussed how to drink such hot tea in one gulp to save some time. However, his problem was solved when the man asked RG to take the mug with him. RG's sensitivity towards his constituents and his behaviour towards them left me most impressed. For his young age, he displays remarkable patience, empathy and compassion. A tribute to his parents upbringing him.

The workshop participants included SK's management staff and field level Block Coordinators, Community Volunteers and field workers besides CRPs. Some of the CRPs had come from Andhra Pradesh along with Vijayabharti. I had a session the previous day in the workshop and had emphasized the niche of RGMVP. An activity which neither the government departments nor the development agencies address. Because if the RGMVP tries to do the same things which the government departments are mandated to do RGMVP will get nowhere for the simple reason that what the government departments could not do in over sixty years with massive resources, how could RGMVP claim to achieve these activities with scarce resources. Thus RGMVP's vision should be focused on harnessing peoples especially poors potential to come out of poverty. If RGMVP deviates from this vision, it would not achieve its ultimate goal of

elimination of poverty. RGMVP has to have a very focused vision and a clear mission like the Persian proverb “catch hold of one and hold it firmly instead trying to catch many and succeed in catching none”. I quoted the incident when the Poverty Commission called on Prime Minister Narsimha Rao and the Vice Chairman of the Commission began by defining poverty, the Prime Minister cut him short by observing we all know there is poverty tell us how the Commission is going to eliminate it.

In his presentation before RG, how RGMVP is going to achieve its ultimate objectives of ‘Gharibi Hattao’ (eliminate poverty), SK made an excellent and focused Vision and Mission statement namely harnessing the potential of people through organisation and reaching 500,000 households in the 9 districts of the programme area by year 2015. He further elucidated the non-negotiable values, poverty reduction strategy, implementation strategy with the strength of RGMVP currently especially a sensitive support organisation and a pool of CRPs which has reached 130,000 households in 9 districts, 43 Blocks, 1224 Gram Panchayats, 4287 villages comprising 11312 SHGs covering 137200 families with over 40 million rupees savings, accessing bank credit amounting to Rs. 16.20 crores.

Some of the CRPs, after SK’s presentation, narrated their experiences after getting organised as SHGs. They described how SHG gave them confidence and recognition. Prior to SHG, they were only busy in domestic chores with no savings. Now they were tasting the power of capital from Rs. 850 of personal savings to Rs. 15,000 of SHG savings to Rs. 400,000 of village savings to Rs. 5 million of Block savings. Rekha said she now did not feel alone. She had the support of our own institutions which were well endowed with capital to at least come to our help in emergencies instead of our running from pillar to post.

CRP Gita described how her status increased. In the beginning when RGMVP staff took her to a high caste family’s house and she sat on the cot, she was ordered by the house mistress not to forget her status and sit on the ground. She apologized and sat on the ground. A few months later, the house mistress needed money for marriage of her son. She asked the RGMVP staff for a loan and he directed her to Gita as the competent authority to sanction loan on behalf of the SHG. The mistress invited Gita and herself offered her to sit on the cot.

CRP Urmilla thought that poor were a burden on society and can do nothing except to beg. SHG gave her confidence and when as CRP she was required to go outside the village, she was most apprehensive. However, she went to one village she got such a pleasure in helping her other sisters that she started going to many villages.” When her family members complained who was going to look after her children, she replied God will look after them. Some outsiders made sarcastic comments, she must be getting a good salary that she is roaming around all the time. One day she received a message that her house has been damaged due to rains. However, as she had given time and women were waiting, she did not tell anybody about the message and went to the village where women were waiting. When I reached home, family reprimanded me but I retorted you all were there and I had to go because women were waiting for me. I told them if we take care and think of others, they will also take care of us”.

CRP Gita Panday described how helpless they were before formation of SHGs. After SHGs when the landlord refused to pay two of us our wages, we went to our SHG and described our plight. Two SHG members numbering 30 volunteered to help us and came with us to the landlord’s house. Seeing so many women coming to his house, the landlord immediately paid us our wages. We have no fear now. We have now power. We can fight for our rights.

CRP Mahbooba Begum was kept in purdah like a prison by her husband. When he died, she came back to her village with her children and after getting introduced to RGMVP and becoming a CRP, she made 17 SHGs and opened their bank accounts. My children were out of school, however after joining SHG, I have got them admitted in English medium school. At Aganbari, I did work but the madam refused to pay my three weeks wages on the plea that she had not received resources from her superiors. I put the matter to SHG and they accompanied me but madam had gone. Next day the SHG members went again and demanded from madam to show the registers that she had not received resources. She started sweating and was forced to give my dues.

CRP Rubina Bano described how before SHG as her husband who is working in Mumbai, a demagogue came to the house and in her absence, frightened her little girl. No one came to her help. Now that is history. With formation of SHGs, CLAs and BLA, no one dare harass us. In Jagdishpur Block, the entire households have been organised. There is peace in the Block and we are forging linkages with government departments.

When I was asked to address the Workshop, I complimented SK on his presentation of a very clear Vision and Mission of RGMVP. However, I submitted to RG that reaching 5 lac poor households by 2015, would hardly make a dent on the poverty profile of UP where over 50 million need RGMVP support. I urged him to scale up the RGMVP operations to entire UP as the three pre-requisites, described earlier by me, for harnessing the potential of the people to come out of poverty, are there. All that is needed to scale up the operations are the resources.

RG in summing up said that he was reminded of a story when he saw some people cutting iron with a machine but it was not visible how the machine was cutting the iron. When RG asked the person operating the machine, how it was being done. RG was surprised to see that it was through a water jet that the iron was being cut. Listening to the CRPs and looking at the work done by RGMVP, the potential of the people is like water jet of the machine cutting the iron. Like the jet, the potential of the people is also not visible. People have potential but it was lying dormant. SHG is like the water jet. RG posed the question why not harness the potential of every poor instead of targeting numbers. RG admitted that since yesterday his thinking has changed. He would like RGMVP to reach every poor in UP instead of putting numbers.

Sometime back when Raju and Vijay, my friends in Andhra Pradesh, had mentioned the possibility of my visit to UP on the invitation of the Rajiv Gandhi Charitable Trust to look at their social mobilisation project being implemented by RGMVP, it was not in my wildest dreams that the visit would turn out the way it did.

From the moment I stepped out of the train at Sultanpur station, SK took care of me in a way I have no words to thank him. But what really was the most pleasant surprise to me was the way RGMVP is being implemented. The Project Manager Y.S. Yadav who initiated the project in 2002, laid a very good foundation on which SK in a short period of nine months has done wonders. I could only encourage them to do what they were already doing. I agreed with RG that finding the right person to implement the programme is like winning the battle. In finding SK as CEO of RGMVP is the best thing that could have happened to the programme. I mentioned the case of SAPAP to RG. How for one year we got nowhere till my friend Venugopal identified K. Raju for the job. Thereafter I had to do nothing Raju did all even finding his team of persons like Vijay Kumar.

Above all it was RG who left a deep impression on me and the people who are around him like Kanishka Singh. RG's perception and grasp of the problems of the poor and the understanding of the strategy of social mobilisation to harness the potential of the poor left me in state of euphoria. Here is a champion of the poor who will leave no stone unturned to reach each and every poor in UP and hopefully in India to pull them out of poverty. That will be the day India will be really shining.