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On 'rejuvenating' Vidarbha...?

Saturday, March 03, 2007 7:50:4 IST

Apparently a farmer kills himself every eight hours in this region despite the Rs. 3750 crore relief package announced by the Prime minister in July 2006

Apparently a farmer kills himself every eight hours in this region despite the Rs. 3750 crore relief package announced by the Prime minister in July 2006. While the budget this year has attempted to address some of these issues by allotting a chunk of money to irrigation and by expanding farm credit it is entirely possible that a holistic solution lies elsewhere.

Trapped in the vicious cycle of unyielding crops, the vicissitude of climate, the inexorable delays in payments coming from the debt-ridden, government-appointed

Marketing Federation, bank loans, money lending sharks, an unregulated open market and corruption in grading various qualities of cotton, the farmer often has little recourse. The heady cocktail of gut-wrenching stress, alcohol, gambling and of course the temptation to collect the compensatory package which can see their families through to some small extent often proves fatal for the poor cotton growers who end up swallowing pesticides, or hanging from trees or jumping into wells, leaving their wives and families to deal with an even more crippling crisis.

I was wondering if there might be a more creative out-of-box kind of solution especially after Muhammad Yunus' visit to Mumbai. Famous for the extension of small loans to entrepreneurs who are too poor to apply or qualify for loans from traditional banks Yunus has successfully introduced the concept of micro-credit to the world by proving that the poorest of the poor are credit-worthy with bad debts accounting for less than 3% in the Grameen Bank. Instead of re-inventing the wheel it would be fabulous if micro-credit could be introduced in the troubled Vidharba belt to the wives of these farmers for entrepreneurial purposes, like operating a mobile phone service in the village, thus empowering women on the one hand while creating alternative means to generate second incomes amongst the beleaguered community members.

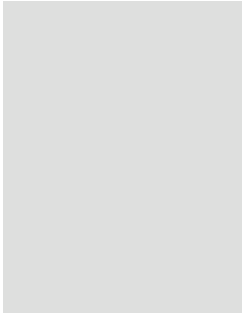
Another inspiring idea comes from the Isha Foundation's 'Action for Rural Rejuvenation' programme in Tamil Nadu where farmers are trained in modern techniques of agriculture and where each of the 2432 villages under the scheme now have a yoga centre, a gymnasium, a library, a computer and craft centre along with herbal gardens and access to mobile medical vans. Working on the premise that rural people are no longer as sturdy as they used to be thanks to the shift from subsistence farming to cash farming that has left most of them seriously undernourished and doing away with the nostalgic view that rural life is a peaceful haven for people living simple, fulfilled, community lives, Isha's ARR programme actually rejuvenates hope in the villages by addressing the hopeless socio-economic situation there prevalent with disease and despair. Inner balance and community joy are enhanced by organizing yoga camps, volley ball, kabaddi, tug of war and throw ball tournaments. These activities have actually brought women out of their homes often for the first time and helped build confidence and community bonds which successfully develop at times into building entrepreneurial skills and sometimes even co-operatives while weaning the men away from gambling and spirit abuse.



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These are the kinds of initiatives required to save our villages. It is up to the government now to work out a cohesive and holistic solution for the problems that plague us. It would be efficacious if existing knowledge, experiences and systems are shared and utilized while adapting these to the unique needs of particular villages to avoid wasting both thinking and action time that is tantamount to lives, at least as far as Vidarbha goes!



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