CHAPTER III

Historical and Geographical Sketch of Ralegan Shindi
In the earlier two chapters the meaning and working of voluntary organisations has been examined. In the light of this, a stage has now come to examine how far the project in hand is delivering the goods.

Before this examination, one has to know the socio-economic and geographical background of the area under study. Effort has been made in the current chapter to know the geographical as well as socio-economic background of Ralegan Shindi. Today the village has come to be known all over the country as a model village. The transformation of Ralegan Shindi brought about by Shri. Annasaheb Hazare not only ear marked it as a very important one on the map of India but the whole of the world.

The information presented in this chapter is drawn from the Panchayat records and from the inhabitants there.

With the backdrop of running hills Ralegan Shindi is situated in Parner Taluka of Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra, which is about 75 kms. from Pune.

It lies in the drought prone area of Ahmednagar district which is periodically drought prone zone of Maharashtra state.

The geographical area of Ralegan Shindi is 982.31 sq. kms. The important feature of Ralegan Shindi's area is that it is at the service of the people i.e. the land is no desert land or there are no valleys either.
The village is an identified hard drought prone village.

Physical Features

Topography of Land

Of the total area of 982-31 sq. kms. One third is covered by hillocks and mountains. The land is generally slopey. Plains cover only about 500 acres. In the mountainous and hilly areas, nearly 95% of land is unsuitable for cultivation.

The ridge line bounds the village on three sides and the drain/stream flows towards the west of the village.

Climate

There is greater striking contrasts of meteorological conditions. The mean maximum temperature goes up to 110° F in May and the mean minimum to 45° F in December. The humidity in the air is nearly 0%. There is great dryness of air, prevalence of land winds and little or no precipitation. The severity of heat or cold is greatly felt during different seasons. Winter is cold and the summer is hot and the air is generally devoid of moisture.
Seasons

The climate is mostly of a topographical monsoon type.

1. Cool dry season from October to the end of February. The skies are clear, the weather is fine and no humidity which results in little or very little or no rainfall except the blowing of northerly dry trade winds.

2. A hot dry season from the beginning of March to the middle of June, usually accompanied by dry scorching winds.

3. A hot wet season from middle of June to the end of September with cloudy weather and infrequent rainfall.

Monsoon and Rainfall

The season is wet summer season or south-west monsoon. The monsoon sets in June, spreads by July and August and gradually gets weakened in September. During this period rains are very important because they provide necessary moisture for agricultural operations for sowing of kharip crops which account for more than 70% of the total area sown under crops.

The annual rainfall of Ralegan Shindi is 10 to 12 inches i.e. about 25-30 cms. A feature of considerable importance is the variability of monsoon rainfall. Any decrease in rainfall makes it impossible for agricultural operations to be carried on and the result is famine. The
rainfall of Ralegan Shindi being below normal, normal being 50 cms. a year, it can be termed as one lying in the famine zone. Since the rainfall is scanty the settlers are independent of rainfall changes but total failure or a prolonged failure of monsoon invites disaster.

Soil

The soil is of poor quality. It is comparatively dry, the absence of moisture in land has made vegetation very sparse. Major portion of the soil is deficient in Nitrogen and organic matter resulting in poor fertility. The soil is saline and alkaline giving rise to saline and alkaline efflorescence, which adversely effects cultivation. Out of 982.31 sq. kms. nearly 700 sq. kms. of land is highly eroded and has very shallow soil. Out of 700 acres of cultivable land 500 acres have a depth of 6" to 12" of soil and the rest are good soils having depth of more than 12".

Water

The village is totally a separate watershed. There is no river or dam nearby. The underground water is very limited. The wells have no source of water except rainwater.

Padmavati the Goddess of the village is a symbol, a religious totem, a primitive deity. The Goddess shares the immense and unique responsibility of looking after the village.
Padminavi is the manifestation of the fierce Hindu goddess Durga, who is one form of 'shakti' or strength and also the female principal of Gods. She is supposed to be the protector of the village.

The annual festival of Chaitra Saptami in the month of April-May is the time when the village fair in also organised. This is the time when once a year all the villagers gather and pay their respects to the Goddess.

Drum beats rent the air, trumpets sound and mass sacrifice of several goats was the usual practice after which the flesh was distributed as "prasaad" to the villagers.

Superstition also had it that if goats were not offered to the Goddess, disease, famine and death would ravage the village. People gave more importance to the deity and spirits.

Followers of the rural development programme in India are well aware of the fact that, though programmes are well designed, there are a number of shortcomings during its implementations. The parameters used to measure the success of the programmes in terms of financial achievement, are not a clear indication of the state of poverty. There are other issues in anti-poverty programmes like the political aspects, attitude of the poor to the programmes and their organisation into groups etc.\(^1\)
It goes without doubt that the number of poor people in India as well as the number of anti-poverty programmes are the highest on this planet.

Though eradication of poverty has been the objective of every political party, only since 1961 has it received serious attention at the government level when the Planning Commission prepared a perspective paper of 15 years to eradicate poverty.\(^\text{2}\)

Poverty programmes have been of two types, beneficiary programmes for target groups and transfer of assets of the well to do sections in the society to the deprived classes, particularly the landless class, in the shape of tenancy reforms, public distribution systems and so on. They have no doubt served to give some relief and support to the poor.

The sixth five year plan marks a watershed in the anti-poverty programme. According to statistics 15 million households were to be reached during the plan period. IRDP, TRYSEM, Women And Children's Development Programme, Area Development Programme are some of the poverty alleviation programmes. The Maharashtra government has ear marked large sums of money for the programmes under the Rural Integrated Development Scheme and the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) to improve the standard of living of the backward classes observed the minister of state for tribal welfare, Mr. Shivaji Rao Moghe.\(^\text{3}\)
There has been a number of conceptual discussions on poverty and rural development however, there is a tremendous gap between practice and precept, both in terms of quality and quantity.

Ralegan Shindi was also in a very sorry state: "almost a quarter of the people were on the brink of starvation". They were surviving on 'bhakris' made of hulga (horse gram). Many of them used to get food only four or five days a week and go hungry the rest of the time. When they got work, it was to break stones at a site some 13 kms. away. Over 60 percent of the villagers had to buy food grains from outside (other villages) to last throughout the year.

The village money lender was still the important source of borrowing.

Since the villagers suffered from ignorance and poverty and were indebted to the village Mahajans, their need for ready money to pay off land revenues and family burdens like marriage, sickness and lack of bank facilities compelled them to dispose off their crops at the wrong time, wrong place and at the wrong price. Over and above that, they had the local money lender at hand who charged exorbitant rate of interest.

Like all other creditors the farmers also require credit. A farmer cannot carry on his business without outside finance is a fact, proved by history and evidenced by the poverty and indebtedness of the persons engaged in the business of agriculture. Agricultural credit is a problem when it cannot be obtained, it is also a problem when it can
be obtained, but in such a form that on the whole it does more harm than good.

In the very nature of things the villagers were often isolated and remote from the normal opportunities of obtaining credit.

Agriculture requires the following goods, which they were deprived of due to lack of funds.

1. Land and its improvement

2. Agricultural implements, machines and live stock

3. Requisite input such as seeds, irrigation, fertilizers, oil, cement, etc.

4. Stock of food and clothing to maintain the farmer and his family during the period of production.

In short, capital/credit in agriculture which is needed both for productive and non productive business needs of the cultivators was deprived to the villagers.

Successive droughts had dampened the spirit of the villagers, it had crippled the society. In 1970 and 1971 there was very less rainfall. Most of Maharashtra's interior was under the grip of drought. Some social institutions/voluntary agencies started collecting funds for the drought hit and provided the villagers with clothes, food etc. But it was a temporary relief followed by 1972 famine which also proved disastrous. There was very little rainfall
in 1972. The conditions became very severe. Farmers became helpless. This time it was so severe that the already parched land started developing huge crevices. Ralegan Shindi wasn't very different from hundreds of other villages which were severely drought stricken. The condition here was very pitiable. Rivers, streams, nullahas had gone dry. Wells also had gone dry. There was very little or no drinking water for the villagers.

There were demands for the Famine Commission. After 1972, EGS schemes were started. Thousands of villages undertook the work of nullah bunding and percolation tanks. But the work done was of very poor quality. Villagers did not pay much attention to the quality of work, crores of rupees were spent without much benefit. Corruption at every level in the government departments, careless attitude of the villagers, their helplessness, neglect of local organisers were all responsible for making the programme unsuccessful.

One of the most disturbing features was that it had passed into the hands of vested interests which lacked proper accounting practices, indulged in irregularities of loans and maintenance of false records. While constructing the percolation tanks, most of the technical aspects were overlooked giving rise to inferior quality of work. From the village level to the district level every leader became a contractor and the aim of these leaders could be ascertained by just having a glance at the work done, which spoke volumes of lack of competence, knowledge, integrity, efficiency and sense of dedication.
After the drought of 1972, the government scheme that provided manual labour jobs on Public Works Project were started. To retain more water thirty five projects of nullah bunding were undertaken. A site was selected for percolation tank and the work was started. A local leader took the contract for nine lacs of rupees. At that time the villagers were in abject poverty and their condition was very pitiable. Nobody paid any attention to what the contractor was doing "we had full faith in him. But his performance was very unsatisfactory. The percolation tank had structural deficiencies, without digging the base for the tank, he just dug the lower side of the tank and filled it with sand and mud and built a bandhara", said the villagers.

The main aim of having the tank was to augment and firm up the water in the village wells. But due to lack of technical knowledge and common sense there was loss of water due to seepage and the wells remained dry as they were before. After two years it developed huge cracks and the rain water could not be checked, it just flushed away.

Most of the villagers took work under the EGS schemes. The work they got was to break stones at a site some 13 kms. away. The labourers employed under the Employment Guarantee Schemes (EGS) were not being paid regularly, were the complaints of many workers on the sites. A few others said that the ration coupons for them had not been supplied. Attendance registers and muster rolls were not found in order, at many places, senior government officials rarely visit the sites were the complaints. These and many other problems had started affecting the proper functioning of
drought relief programmes. Moreover these problems seem to be identical at all places. Curiously enough the government did not want to listen to any criticism of its drought work. This is evident from the fact that the 40 voluntary organisations working in the drought affected states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Orissa have expressed extreme unhappiness with the response of the government to their suggestions for drought alleviation. They have described their recent dialogue with the centre as "Primarily an exercise in non-communication". Again at relief works the workers were paid very less than the minimum. While the government ignored the criticism of the voluntary sector, it cannot possibly ignore what the then Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, himself found out on his visit to the drought affected areas of Gujarat. He was surprised to find that relief workers were not being paid even the minimum wage. At one of the relief sites he visited, he was shocked to find that some women workers were being paid only Rs. 2/- for a hard day’s labour as against the statutory guarantee of Rs. 11/- per day. Although Gujarat has made the flaunting of the act "official", in no other drought affected state were relief workers being paid more than Rs. 5 to Rs. 6 per day. Even when this amount is paid, there is delay of weeks, forcing people into debt. From some states like U.P. there were already reports of political big wigs manipulating drought relief so that the free mini-agricultural kits (containing seeds, pesticides and fertilizers) were being cornered by rich farmers. In Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra, drought had reportedly led to the revival of the abnoxious bonded labour system. In Gujarat "well-grabbing
by higher castes to deny water to Harijans has already led to four incidences of violence in Kheda district. To an extent these are consequences of inadequate relief funds. Inadequate relief had forced people into incurring debts and distress. Sale of cattle had become common in most areas. In many states poverty alleviation programmes like the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and the Rural Labour Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEG) had been converted into drought relief works without any additional budgetary allocation. However at Ralegan Shindi the extent of drought was such that people took to illicit distilling. At that time Ralegan Shindi’s most distinctive feature was its 40 illicit distillaries that made the village a popular haunt for drunkards and gamblers. Thefts and brawls were very common. Liquor had blighted the lives of Ralegan Shindi’s residents.

With water available only during monsoon, its farmers could barely grow one crop a year and 70 percent of the villagers comprising of 315 families lived in abject poverty. Uncertainty of rainfall and consequent abject poverty with ill health and misery coupled with no conscious desire for any thing better was the way of life, for, they had no idea that anything better was possible.

Previously, life in the village was of abject poverty, utterly lacking in social amenities. Their outlook towards life was apathetic and the hope of spontaneous leadership for improvement was almost nil. There was absence of zealous and properly oriented village level workers.
The village Ralegan Shindi bristled with problems and difficulties. The standard of living was very low. The agricultural technology was primitive. Facilities like irrigation were nil, electrification, transport, communication which are all necessary infrastructure for development were not adequate. Health and educational facilities were utterly lacking. Even potable drinking water was not available. Non farm occupations were not well developed. There was no encouragement to the traditional industries. Institutions like banking and marketing were absent.

Low standard of living was the cumulative effect of all these inadequacies. These were made worse by traditional attitudes and superstitions. There were Harijan Families in the village. Untouchability was deep rooted in the villagers. They had a separate well from which they had to draw water. Harijans were not allowed to enter the village temple. Their children were also not allowed in the school. They even had a separate cremation ground. The people were superstitious and fatalistic in outlook and lacked the urge to change and innovate. There were many social taboos. The traditional social customs were feudalistic and very rigid in character.

The semi stagnant economy of the village coupled with utter misery and deprivation had also put pressure on the natural environment leading to naked mountains, barren and parched lands, nothing to say of agriculture as the village always suffered from severe drinking water problems.
The problems seemed to aggravate every summer. Short of rain every year there were however some short term measures taken, which were inadequate and very uneven in their spread.

The economic backwardness of the region characterised itself here. The village suffered from isolation from urban centres, poverty, primitive customs and traditions, paucity of resources, untouchability, drought, gambling and crime.

Although elementary education was available upto 4th class, non-enrolment, drop-out was very high. A sizable portion of children belonged to weaker sections, socially disadvantaged and economically deprived groups and girls formed the bulk of non-enrolled, non-retained and drop-out population. However drop-outs and non-enrolment were due to socio economic factors also.

Adverse traditional values according to which education to girls is not considered necessary or desirable, ignorance of parents and school teachers who did not motivate the children to attend school, were among the reasons of this. Apart from this, inattractive school environment due to insufficient infrastructural material and unsatisfactory building conditions (class rooms) also acted as demotivating factors.

The Grampramukh operated with the backing of criminals. Generally castes and family were the important elements of elections. 40% of the villagers were with the surname Mapari, 30% with Pathare, 15% with Auti and the rest 15% were with other surnames. There were lot of family disputes which came
out in the open during Grampanchayat and Gramsabha elections. Dominant caste and family with the backing of vested interests played very influential role in the elections, resulting in unworthy people dominating the village affairs.

Political parties entered the election fray and created confusion, promoted homogeneous influencing centres like caste, kinship and individual families. For these vested interests which were the real internal enemies of the village, elections generally provided a forum for more aggressive and exploiting sections of the village scene. Such vested interests took the protection of ignorance of the mass villagers and were successful in keeping the village inactive and defunct. Leadership was thus in the hands of persons who were not genuinely interested in the progress and development of the village. The village had turned out to be a handy tool of self advancement in the hands of petty politicians. Their main aim was to promote their own end. In fact there had been an inadequate development of non official leadership which lacked selflessness, honesty, devotion and zeal.

Water was not only one of the scarce commodities but there was also shortage of social and moral responsibilities as well.

Local politics, graft, diversion of funds were the diseases which had plagued the village. It had become very difficult for any villager to rise above these. Even the youth of the village was wayward. The village had become more favourable to corruption and oppression.
Virtually all marriages in the village were arranged by the parents of the couple to wed. Weddings were very expensive for a bride’s family, the cost directly related to the family’s caste, status and income. The bride had to be given new clothes and jewellery and the groom and his family was to be given apart from other gifts a transistor, a wrist watch, a bicycle and dowry which was often very sizable. The gift usually a bicycle, a radio or a wrist watch was to be given to the groom in the poorer family, while cash had to be given to the father. In wealthier families apart from the cash to the groom’s father, the groom’s gifts were either bullock cart, a motorcycle or cattle. The brides father had to give gifts and dowry apart from the marriage expenditure which ran into thousands of rupees. The marriages were celebrated with lighting, music bands and entertainment which required money. For this the bride’s father usually sold some of his land or cattle or borrowed money from money lenders. Thus a girl’s marriage made the village poorer and indebted to the village Mahajan. Apart from this the marriage functions usually witnessed misunderstandings and fights over trivial things like arrangements for the grooms party (Maan Paan), food, gifts, etc. On the whole the marriage of a daughter of a farmer in Ralegan Shindi left him with disappointments, unhappiness and tears not to speak of needless expenditure. Thus at Ralegan Shindi mātrimony was a matter of money. Money based marriages were also the prime causes of impoverishment at Ralegan Shindi.

Women were treated as secondary citizens. Apart from house hold chores they had to treck miles in the scorching sun to fetch water for the family as there was acute drinking
water shortage during the summer months. They also had to grind, Jawar/Bajara on the traditional “Jata” as no flour mill was there, which also consumed lots of their time and energy.

Children were given responsibilities at an early age. The children had become integral to the survival of the family and were treated as equal members. Most of the children did not go to school and they were required to aid in the running of the household, to care for the family’s animals, and to help in the farm work. Young boys instead of attending school had to regularly spend the whole day far from the village and grazing their family’s cattle returning home only after dark.

Imbalanced diets, dirt and filth had created virtual breeding ground for virus and bacteria. Local cures distilled from herbs and minerals were popular. Western medicines had not found this place as religion still provided the majority of the villagers with a core of belief and the rural customs were filled with promise of cures for illness and misfortune if proper reverence were shown and the necessary rituals performed. The power of faith and its effects upon those who believed could not be undermined.

Most villagers travelled by foot or by bullock cart, bicycles were rare.

Ralegan Shindi was most alive at night. In the absence of books, radios, television or films people took delight in
ancient resources like stories, poetry or drama and dance. Handed down from generation to generation, recounted myths and legends gave expression to people's passions, hopes and dreams as well as justifying their traditions and beliefs. The memory of the illiterate mind was incredible. It was very difficult for most of the villagers to divide their self-images from their environment, to view the material world as separate from emotional. Astrology, palmistry and frequent consultations of the Gods through their priests were essential to most activities in Ralegan Shindi. In fact, the whole cycle of life in Ralegan Shindi was governed by what in the West might be termed as superstition.

The cause of rural poverty lies more in the weak economic base of many of our villages, which are mostly small and are not in a position to sustain even a low population that resides in them. There is also uneven development among the villages. In every district and taluka we come across certain settlements forging ahead by taking advantage of some of the rural development programmes and at the other end, a majority of the settlements remain stagnant and not showing any inclination to move with the times. Ralegan Shindi was one of them. It was a back-ward village.

In the absence of special effort the village Ralegan Shindi was left high and dry, thus resulting in aggravating the disparities in the income and standard of living between individuals. The people did not have sufficient capital, education, socio-political influence and the like that were necessary to achieve full potential of their capacities for work and production. All the good things in the village was
unused and untapped. Some of the programmes of the government which were implemented, exclusively concentrated on single aspect of rural life. They isolated one aspect of rural life from the other aspects, thus resulting in its uneven spread. The organic unity of the people of the village and the interrelations and the interdependence of its many aspects were thus lost sight of. Illiteracy, lack of motivation, vulnerability to social convictions and powerlessness reflected in their day to day life which was one of the major factors that went against them. The social stratification which was also quite strong made its contribution to the disadvantage of the poor people.

Meager incomes and limitations imposed by available materials were offset by customs and rituals. At Ralegan Shindi restrictions caused by isolation, environment, customs, ideals and economy did not allow them to grow.

Although education is a major priority of both central and state governments and massive funding has been directed towards the opening of new schools and expansion of the existing ones, illiteracy was widespread in the village. Only 9% of the population was literate.

The plantation scheme of the government was also a total failure. The progress was mainly hindered because the involvement of farmers was minimal since they thought that the benefit to them was negligible. The poor people did not accept the plantation scheme as their own, viewing it as the forest departments property. Again a major lacuna of the
scheme was the choice of the tree species. Far from solving the fodder shortage, it had aggravated it. The poor got little benefit from the trees.

Thus the village studied; suffered from physical isolation from urban centres, paucity of resources, drought, untouchability, alcoholism, gambling and crime, poverty, primitive customs and traditions etc. It provided a spectacle of misery, social disintegration, cultural backwardness in an all enveloping crisis.
References


