



# **RALEGAN SIDDI**

*A brief introduction*



**Ralegan Siddhi**, with a population of 2,500 people, is a drought-prone village. It gets an annual rainfall of 500mm, which is very sparse against the same amount of rainfall received by some parts of Maharashtra in a single day. Besides the scanty rainfall, there is also no method to retain rainwater so it flows away. This leads to an acute shortage of water in the months of April and May.

In the entire geographical area of Ralegan Siddhi, which has 1700 acres of cultivable land, there was no water for irrigation even for one crop on the 300-400 acres of cultivable land. Hence, villagers would migrate out of the village as there wasn't enough grain to feed the families of 70-80% residents. Due to this precarious situation, the villagers had neither work on their hands nor food on their plates. Those who stayed behind in the village did not get adequate food to eat and remained hungry.

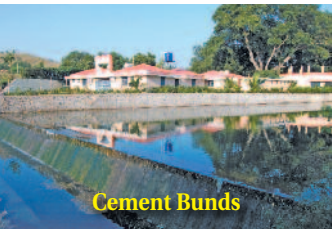
From 1940 to 1950, about 35 to 40 country liquor dens sprouted, as there were no other means of livelihood. Against this dismal backdrop, without taking any foreign funding or individual donations, the people of Ralegan Siddhi united together. Keeping aside party politics, they focused on the water conservation schemes and village development schemes and pursued them in right earnest.

To ensure participation of people, the Gram Panchayat took the decision of going door-to-door and making it compulsory for two people per house to do *shramdaan* every month. It is irrelevant to only give theoretical knowledge to people regarding village development as it would not solve the basic problem of getting a meal every day. **In order to overcome hunger, it was imperative to implement the watershed development programme.** And we embarked upon it with right earnest. It was a three-fanged approach comprising funds for



government schemes, peoples' participation and when needed, procuring bank loans. We also believed that any development cannot be one-sided and unbridled as it would be harmful in the long run. We therefore focused on sustainable development, keeping the individual, the family and the village's benefits in mind. This ensured that we did not destroy nature for the sake of development.

Ever since we embarked upon the **Watershed Development Programme**, we built 45 earthen nullah bunds, 10 cement bunds and 16 Gabbier bunds. We also made a large water retention lake. We built a 1x1 metre Continuous Contour (CCT). In order to retain water in the village and prevent it from flowing out of the village, we made loose boulder structures. We planted three lakh saplings and ensured that they survive. For this, we banned open grazing of the cattle as the grass has the power of retaining soil. We asked the cattle owners to cut fodder



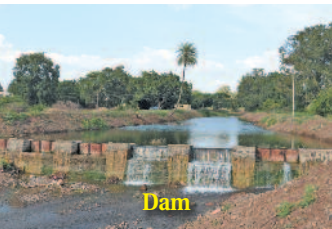
Cement Bunds



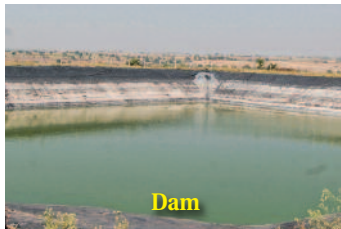
CCT



Retention Lake



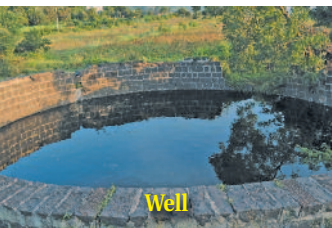
Dam



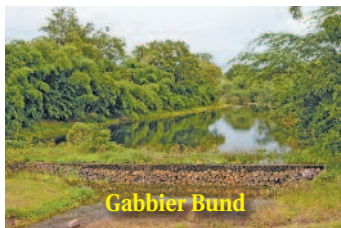
Dam



Earthen Nullah Bund



Well

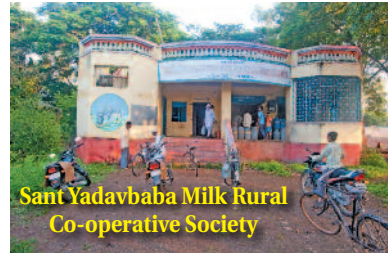


Gabbier Bund



Well

from abandoned land. Due to the grass which grew, the topsoil which used to be washed away into the rivers and lakes was now retained within the soil itself. **Thus, from the top of the hills, hill slopes and the ground level, all efforts were made to retain rainwater and the soil that would be otherwise washed away.** This led to augmentation of groundwater level.



From a mere 35 wells, the village now has 135 wells. **Earlier, there was no water for even one crop on 300-400 acres of land but now two crops are sown and successfully harvested on 1200 acres of land.** Earlier, due to paucity of the crop, the villagers had to buy food grains from outside. Now, there is a surplus of grains, sold outside the village. Vegetable farming began in full swing with the cultivation of various vegetables and onions in particular. Annually, 100-150 trucks of onion crop are sold. **Dairy farming too began in right earnest. Earlier, not more than 300-400 litres of milk used to be sold. Today, 6,000 litres of milk is sold daily.** The economy of the village improved as it receives two lakh rupees, on a daily basis, due to dairy farming. Earlier there was a problem of unemployment and villagers had to migrate to other villages, towns and cities for employment. Now, that has been annihilated as the youth has embarked upon dairy farming. Earlier, villages would go out in search of casual labour. Today, it is impossible to get labourers in the village. Earlier, villagers lived in mud houses; today, houses are made of RCC concrete.



Around 1935, people used to be fascinated to see a bicycle. **Today, in 400 homes, there are 215 motorcycles, 52 cars, 11 tractors and 25 tempos, due to the economic prosperity of the village.**

Deposits of the village funds to the tune of Rs.10 crore, are with the **Rural Co-operative Society** of the village, There are several women self-help groups who have deposits of Rs.10 lakh. Self-help groups of women of ex-defence personnel also have deposits of Rs.10 lakh, Loans disbursed, comprise. Rs.19, 22,000. This is the incredibly progressive scenario of a once famine village where villagers migrated in search of work and where people found it hard to make two ends meet.

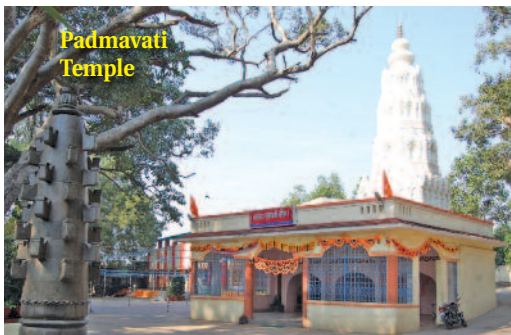
Sometimes when the village progresses economically, the attitude of some people downgrades; thus the percentage of people taking to alcohol has increased. They do not take cognizance of my appeal to stop this addiction and that's the sad reality. Earlier, there used to be 35-40 country liquor dens; now, there are 10-12 grocery shops. **It's been 20 years, since not a single shop, sells cigarettes, beedis or gutka.**



Twenty years back, during the Holi festival, youngsters of Ralegan Siddhi took a decision not to use wood and cow dung cakes to light the bonfire on *Holi* day as it creates air pollution. So, they called all the shopkeepers for a meeting and appealed to them not to sell cigarettes, bidis and gutka. The youngsters then went a step further and bought off all such material in the shops and burnt it in the bonfire. Ever since the shopkeepers do not sell these addictive kinds of stuff. It is common sense that no youngster has become a wrestler by addiction; instead, there are instances when he is afflicted by cancer due to such addiction. What does not nourish the body and instead poses as an invitation to illnesses should not be made available. This was the objective of banning the sale of addictive products. It has sometimes been observed that a village has succeeded in watershed development but along with it, comes the flow of water of addiction. Also, the money that a farmer gets due to watershed development project, goes into alcohol. Then, what is the use of development?



Sant Yadavbaba  
Temple



Padmavati  
Temple

When you are undertaking the development of the villages, building huge concrete buildings does not imply development. The people for whom you are doing this development must stand tall and be worthy of it.

**It should be the responsibility to understand, that in your lifetime, you should spare, one hour, two hours or three hours or as much time as you can spare, in the service of your neighbours, society and village development, over and above the time that you give to yourself and your family.** History has time and again demonstrated that you might be a millionaire or billionaire but if you live for yourself, you die a thousand deaths every day. In contrast, those who live for others never die; they remain in the hearts of those around them, forever. Therefore, it is important for every person to devote his time to the service of society. When we are born, we come out crying but people around are smiling out of happiness. After having been welcomed to this earth through naming ceremony celebration and distribution of goodies, we should contribute constructively when we grow up so that when we die, people will shed tears.

The great Marathi poet-saint, Sant Tukaram has said that **“awaken the villages and villagers. Development of villages is the light of progress and prosperity.”**

In order to bring unity in the village, it was pertinent to break discrimination based on caste, which comprised banning the lower castes from entering temples; designating a separate

well to draw water and allocation of a separate sit out for meals during marriage functions. **Villagers belonging to the backward castes had accumulated Rs.60 lakh of debts and they didn't know how to return it. The Gram Sabha took a bold decision that other villagers would cultivate their land and pay back the loans, from the crops that they cultivate and sell.** In two years' time, they achieved the target of paying back the entire loan. This helped in building up the sentiment, of one village, one family.

**A unique bullock carnival** is held annually, Traditionally, there was always a conflict on the day of `Pola' when this festival is commemorated, as to which bullock should lead the carnival. This often led to scuffles. Now, since the last 20 years, the bullock belonging to the Dalit community is given the honour of leading the carnival, followed by the village's bullock. Members of the backward castes always take part in all the village celebrations. People of all castes and communities come together to make and serve meals during such public functions. In the invitation cards for public events, the name of the organiser is written as 'from Ralegan Siddhi family' and not any other individual name.

### **Birthday of the village**

People celebrate their own birthdays but in Ralegan Siddhi the villagers celebrate their village's birthday. This is how a united family has been built. Revering the most elderly man and woman as parents of the village, the villagers gift the duo, new clothes and pay obeisance to them as they would to God. It doesn't matter, which caste they belong to. The newborn babies of that year are also felicitated with new clothes, as they are considered the wealth of our village and the nation. The newlyweds and the girls who come to Ralegan Siddhi as daughters-in-law are also felicitated with



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sarees, blouse pieces and coconuts. The youngsters who have excelled in their profession are also felicitated on this occasion. Gratitude is shown to those who have excelled in their respective fields. At the end of the felicitations, meals are served.

We are like a family because of this annual event, which enhances the feeling of oneness amongst everyone. Because of self-centeredness, there are differences of opinion but just like the vessels that make a noise while keeping them next to each other but settle down in harmony, people too forget their differences. This is the difference that is seen in this event.

### **Annual pilgrimage of the village deity, Padmavati Devi**

Earlier, goats and roosters were sacrificed at the sanctum sanctorum of the village deity during the annual pilgrimage day. Thirty-five years back, the youngsters of the village took a decision that if the sentiment of the devotee is to sacrifice the goat or rooster, so be it, but then they should be completely doing the ritual and not consume the meat, after slaughtering it. For this, the youngsters brought a vehicle loaded with wood to make a holy fire and appealed to each devotee to put the slaughtered animal into the fire, after the sacrifice in front of the deity, as it has been made in her name. Not a single devotee was ready to do so as they were used to having a sumptuous meal after the slaughter. **From the subsequent year, not a single villager sacrificed an animal or a bird. They offered 'puran polis' (sweet chapattis stuffed with gram dal and jaggery mixture), thus ending the violent tradition.** The deity is certainly not angry – she has indeed bestowed all her blessings on Ralegan Siddhi.

Sant Tukaram has said: **“In the name of the deity, people sacrifice a living creature. This tradition should stop by improving the thought process of the people.”**

### **Best of waste**

There are 1,000 students in the secondary school of Ralegan Siddhi, which houses 300 residential students. The entire



toilet, bath and kitchen waste is disposed into six or seven septic tanks. Through a procedure, it is all turned into manure, which is then given to the plants through the drip irrigation system. This is how the best use is made of waste.

### **The two-megawatt Solar Project**

We are blessed with plenty of sunshine and wind, by nature. Therefore, solar systems have been installed in the hostel, in the Hind Swaraj Trust office, in the common kitchen and the bathrooms.

**Now, with the ambitious two-megawatt solar energy project, five to six villages around Ralegan Siddhi are supplied with solar power.** Use of solar power is the need of the hour. In the new Hind

Swaraj Trust office, all the rooms which used to use power from MSEDCL, the monthly bill would come to a whopping Rs.8000 per month. Now the power comes from 15kw solar energy, thus saving nearly one lakh rupees for the village. Thus, with one-time investment, we save power as well as avoid pollution.

Solar System



### **The Hind Swaraj Trust**

**The Hind Swaraj Trust provides expertise and guidance in watershed development and village development schemes for people of various States. In the last 20 years, it has held training workshops to 22,000 individuals.** The various awards that Ralegan Siddhi has received from various countries like the USA, South Korea, Canada, Sudan and from various institutions of the country, have been deposited in the Swami Vivekananda Gratitude Fund Trust. Various kinds of social works are undertaken through this trust. We believe that we should give back to society as the society has given so much to us.

### **Sant Yadavbaba Education Awareness Trust**

This is a registered trust under which a school comprising Std V to Std XII classes is run. Eight farmers donated 12 acres of



**Shri Nilobaray Secondary & Higher Secondary School**

land to build this school. Without taking the help of any government funds or outside donations, the people of the village tirelessly toiled and built an impressive school building, costing Rs.75-80 lakh. It is rightly said that what

the villagers can do for their village with their heart and soul, no outsider can do so. This school gives admission to those children who have failed; those who are addicted to cigarettes, tobacco



**Computer Room (Secondary & Higher Secondary School)**



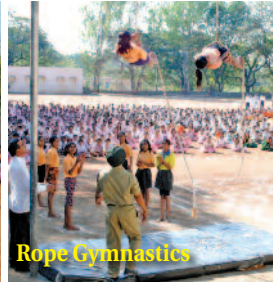
**Computer Room (Z. P. Primary School)**



**Lezim**



**Kabaddi**



**Rope Gymnastics**



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**NCC - National Cadet Core**



**Gymnastics**



and gutka. It is not a credit to mould children who are good in character but to mould and discipline children who have succumbed to addiction and are out of control of their parents' hold, is indeed an achievement. The school takes the onerous task of reforming them. It was a challenging task but the Ralegan Siddhi family has achieved the impossible. Now, the village has school up to Std X as well as Std IX and Std XII. Thanks to donations by well-meaning individuals, all classrooms have been digitalized and are installed with 85 computers. Laboratories have been set up for students from Std V to Std X and for Junior College. The village boasts of a four-acre playground and a gymnasium which is being built. For, it is important that today's student should grow physically, mentally and intellectually. This is our effort towards comprehensive development of every student.

In the last 40 years, villagers have involved themselves in various village development programmes. To spread information amongst people, an information centre has been set up, wherein all information regarding village development and other schemes is made available. For this, documents are available.

**Similarly, in the last 30 years, to curb corruption at various levels, several laws have been made like the RTI Act, the Transfers & Delays Act, The Lokpal Act, the Prohibition of Liquor Act, more powers to the Gram Sabha and altogether 10 such Acts have been established, which have empowered people.** In order that people know about the various agitations

that have been held in the last 35 years to bring such Acts into existence, the information centre has been established. The two information centres in the village do not take any donations from any State, Centre or from any foreign agency. For this, the **'Bhrashtachar Virodhi Jan Andolan Nyas'** (a public trust for public agitation against corruption) has been established and is registered with the charity commission. This trust, along with the Ralegan Siddhi family and its members from various parts of Maharashtra, hold agitations when required. To know the activities of this trust, the information centre has been established at a cost of Rs.40 lakh. The objective is to inspire the youth.

Every year, a week is celebrated in the Sant Yadavbaba Temple as **'Harinam Saptaha.'** Kirtans and lectures held during these seven days enhance the intellectual calibre of the villagers.



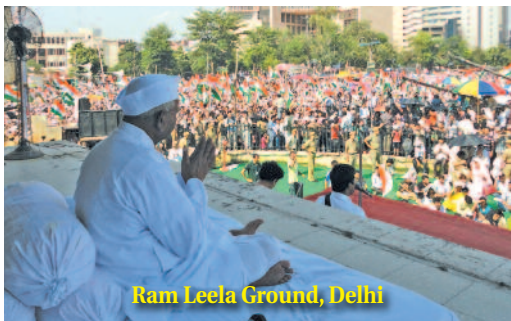
Every day, meals are served to around 1,500 people and villagers take pride in serving them. There is a competitive spirit to savour these meals. The village also celebrates the annual yatra of the village deity, Padmavati Devi. The

nine days of Navratri are also celebrated with kirtans and lectures, followed by meals. Villagers book their places for free meals, a year in advance. Youngsters also celebrate 'One Village; One Ganpati' during the 10 day Ganesh Festival. Bhairavnath Festival and birth anniversaries of stalwart public personalities are also celebrated. All these occasions are celebrated with harmony and without asking for financial donations.

In order to curb corruption, the **Ralegan Siddhi family and the Anti-corruption Trust** holds public agitations and silent agitations in a non-violence way. These agitations compelled the government to make the 10 laws, that have empowered people.



Entering Ram Leela Ground



Ram Leela Ground, Delhi

Though corruption has not completely stopped, they have helped in curbing it. These agitations have achieved what would not have been achieved even after spending several crores of rupees on public awareness and education.

**Such village reforms can be done by every youngster in every village.**

**Only he must have pure thoughts in his mind, he should have good habits, he should possess good character and the will to sacrifice and suffer humiliation and; never to be tempted to move away from the path of truth.**

If the youth makes this resolution, the progress of the nation is not far away. In order to see a bunch of healthy maize cobs together, one corn has to be first buried – this is the law of nature. If that one corn does not sacrifice, how can its plant blossom and give us maize corn? The corn grain that blossoms is sent to the flour mill, crushed and consumed. However, the one that made the sacrifice of sowing itself is never destroyed; it gives birth to thousands of other cobs. Youngsters have to decide whether to go underground or to be crushed in the flour mill. Anna Hazare, at the young age of 25 years, made a resolution to live by the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi and be that one corn, to be sown underground. Today, the village of



Releasing from Tihar Jail

Ralegan Siddhi looks as full as a harmonious bunch of corns. In the last 13 years, over 12 lakh people from the country and overseas have visited Ralegan Siddhi and taken inspiration from it.

Your village can replicate the Ralegan Siddhi model but not with tall talks but it has to have a leadership which will



Deep CCT

channelize the idealism into reality. When a leader speaks, people hear with great intent. They follow him all through the day – the way he talks, walks, what he drinks and eats and whether he delivers what he has assured and promised. Hence, it is very crucial that the

leader must have pure thoughts, untainted character, no blemish of any kind, the spirit of sacrifice and the power to withstand any humiliation. If the leader has these qualities, then he can make his village, better than Ralegan Siddhi. It is stated in the Bhagwad Gita that keep doing your duties without expectations of the results and accolades. This is the true spirit of service to the people and you get tremendous joy by doing so.

**A person like Anna, who had limited education, made a resolution that he does not need wealth and power nor does he have any bank account, led his life like a hermit, residing in the temple, and working for the betterment of his village and the nation.** He has land in Ralegan Siddhi, his house and a brother but in the last 45 years, he has not visited his home, even once. That is the deep level of commitment he has towards his village and his country. Living on the modest Army pension he receives, he is a sterling example of what a person can do with total commitment and relentless efforts. That does not mean that every youth should not get married and not have a family. Or that he should live in the temple. The message is that he should have his own small family but there is a lot of tension and sorrow in it.

He should build a larger family of people in his society and serve them – this gives a sense of happiness and contentment. Anna Hazare did not get married but he has a large family, instead of a small, personal one.

The 74th Amendment lays down the ways of decentralization of power by a democratic process by which the powers rest with the common man; because, democracy means - for the people, of the people and by the people.



So, now the funds of various village development schemes are disbursed to every village panchayat through the Finance Commission. Earlier, it was routed through the State, Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti. Hence, **it is the responsibility of every Gram Panchayat to ensure that the public money allocated to it, is spent only after the consultations with the Gram Sabha, which is the Parliament of the people at the village level, and that the money is spent only for village development.** The Maharashtra government has further strengthened this law by the clause that, if the gram panchayat spends the money it receives without consulting the Gram Sabha then 20% of the voters of the village can send an inquiry petition to the CEO of the Zilla Parishad. This inquiry must be conducted within one month and if the investigations point towards financial irregularities, then the sarpanch and deputy sarpanch can be dismissed. Hence, it is crucial that gram panchayat funds are spent only for village development schemes and by taking all villagers into confidence through the gram panchayat. Since the last 40 years, Ralegan Siddhi has been following this policy which has resulted in the transparency of every paisa spent. There is no room left for suspicion.

For the comprehensive development of any village, the decision of the gram sabha should be final, as has been

mentioned in the 243K of our Constitution. The Gram Sabha is more superior to the Gram Panchayat. It is also over and above the Lok Sabha and State Assembly. For it is the Gram Sabha that elects the elected representatives of the Assembly and the Lok Sabha. Thus, it won't be far off to say that the Gram Sabha is the mother of the Assembly and the Lok Sabha. Gram Sabha has not been made by any individual but it is created under the Constitution of India. Every Gram Sabha voter becomes eligible to vote once he attains 18 years of age and remains a voter till his last breath. It is the Gram Sabha that elects the Assembly and Lok Sabha representatives, every five years. **Just as Lok Sabha is the country's parliament, Assembly is the Parliament of a State, the Gram Sabha is the Parliament of the village.** Therefore, the Gram Sabha is more important than the Gram Panchayat. So, while the Gram Panchayat should only be collecting the village development funds into the bank, it is imperative for it to consult the Gram Sabha while spending them. So, if people are aware of the power of the Gram Sabha, they can use the law to dismiss the Grampanchayat, if it spends the funds without their consultation.

(Translated by, Vinita Deshmukh, Senior Journalist & RTI Activist)

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