



**MR. NILESH DESAI**

**Recipient of the Award in the Field of Constructive Work - 2022**

Born: September 7, 1962

Independence from the British, instead of ushering in Gram Swaraj as envisaged by Gandhiji, led to a near complete neglect of village self-rule and rural development resulting in the neglect of both agriculture and natural resources. This especially inconvenienced the Adivasis. Thus, by the 1980s, rural areas and particularly Adivasi areas were devastated. One such deprived area is the Jhabua district in Madhya Pradesh where most of the population, ninety percent, is of the Bhil Adivasis. Such was their deprivation that they had to mostly migrate seasonally to work as daily labourers in neighbouring Gujarat, to make ends meet, as their farms were not enough to ensure survival.

Then Mr. Nilesh Desai, a modern social worker with the distinction that he was imbued with Gandhiji's motto of learning from practice, came on the scene. He, after getting his Master of Social Work degree from Indore School of Social Work, had joined the Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC), an NGO in Ajmer district of Rajasthan and imbibed a new spirit of participation wherein both design and implementation of rural development programmes were led by the beneficiaries themselves and the NGO acted only as a facilitator. Soon, he decided to start work on his own and set up the NGO Sampark in 1987 in Petlawad Tehsil of Jhabua district, in Madhya Pradesh to address the serious problems being faced by the Bhil Adivasis there. The name of the NGO itself conveys the important message that development is all about equitable relationships.

Traditionally, the Bhil Adivasis had a very strong consultation system to run the affairs of the community, but this had decayed due to decades of top-down administration by the state. Nilesh Desai revived this system and began his work by holding meetings with the community using their traditional consultation methods. Men and women and especially the youth, were involved in the deliberations to determine the problems of the community and chart out the possible solutions following Gandhiji's oceanic circle methodology, wherein development is to take place with the village at the centre and delegation of authority is to be bottom upwards instead of top down. However, since the Bhil Adivasis had been economically devastated, they had no funds of their own to act upon their decisions. So, Nilesh Desai used his ingenuity and the credibility of the SWRC brand to access funds from government and other institutional sources for development programmes.

Conservation of forests, soil and water had suffered due to decades of decimation by commercial interests. The first issue to be tackled based on this consultative process was natural resources, this was followed by a programme of sustainable agriculture involving indigenous seeds and organic manure and various income generation schemes like durrie weaving and systematised livestock and poultry rearing. Gradually, programmes for education, health, gender rights, micro-finance and renewable energy were also implemented. The campus of Sampark in Raipuria village is a green haven of sustainable and renewable resource from where all these programmes are conducted, and which also has a residential school for Adivasi children called Buniyadi Shala. 30000+ children under the age group of 6-14 years have been benefited through various education programs like campaign to enrol the

children in Government Primary & Middle Schools, mainstreaming education program, community-based learning centres, girls' leadership program, mobile library initiative, buniyadi shala initiative, etc.

However, Nilesh Desai noted that despite enhancement of income there were leakages that were preventing sustained improvement. These were due to some of the regressive customs of heavy expenses during deaths and marriages ending due to alcoholism. So, a successful communitarian campaign was launched to limit these expenses and to control alcoholism. An offshoot of this was that the traditional customs of labour pooling, known as *adji-padji* were also revived, leading to a huge saving in labour costs for agricultural operations. All this helped to plug the leakages.

Implementation of livelihood programmes in a few villages in one tehsil alone cannot bring about sustainable development and so Nilesh Desai decided to leverage the local impact and scale it to the state and national levels. He first got the people organised in a mass organisation named Lok Jagriti Manch (People's Empowerment Forum). The organisation took up a long-drawn battle against a particularly ill designed lift irrigation scheme which never functioned, but the Adivasi beneficiaries were burdened by the loans that were given to finance the scheme. The organisation was able to use public demonstrations, legal advocacy, and research to force the Government to waive the loans relying on the special provisions for Adivasis that they are not to be penalised for mistakes made by others. The Lok Jagriti Manch also has a very active women cadre, which has used the reservation granted to them in Panchayati Raj, to successfully challenge the age-old patriarchy that stifles them. This success emboldened Nilesh Desai to launch national campaigns for sustainable agriculture, against the introduction of genetically modified agricultural crops, to waive the loan of tribals in the Jhabua district (under this more than 17000 tribal farmers got freed from over 60 crore rupees worth of loan), for water conservation, land development (of around 5000 hectare of land), for right to food and reached to over 35000 small livestock farmers through Pashu Sakhis program. Consequently, Sampark is now actively implementing development programmes not just in Petlawad, but also in several districts of the Bhil homeland in western Madhya Pradesh and in other parts of the state. Thus, in true Gandhian fashion, Nilesh Desai has taken the essence of small local successes to a wider level, challenging the hegemony of centralised systems.

Sampark has its presence in more than 2000 villages of 21 blocks of 9 districts namely Jhabua, Alirajpur, Dhar, Ratlam, Khargone, Khandwa, Burhanpur, Jabalpur and Satna of Madhya Pradesh and reached to approx. 200000 plus tribal households.

An important result of Nilesh Desai's public advocacy is that Sampark has a very strong communications portfolio ranging from street theatre and folk music to audio-visual, poster and book production in both Hindi and Bhili dialects, spanning all the issues of development and rights that it is involved in.

The journey of Nilesh Desai has been a relentless fight for equity and sustainability, and he has been well awarded for his efforts such as the National Youth Award of the Government of India in 1988, the Tarun Bharat Environmental Protection Award in 2013 for the National Water Community,

Ashok Gondhiya Award 2010, National Nanaji Deshmukh Award 2016, etc. He has also been featured as the Man of the Year in 2018 by The Week Magazine, Kerala.

Mr. Nilesh Desai is a new age Gandhian actively engaged in implementing Gandhiji's dictum that nature has enough for our needs but not for our greed, at a time when humans face serious challenges due its ecological profligacy and socio-economic inequity.

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