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Village Reconstruction Organisation (VRO), Coromandel Coast. Landless rural Indians build new villages.
Building Community: a third world case book, Ed. Bertha Turner, Building Community Books, London, 1988

Rebuilding homes and community confidence in rural Indian villages

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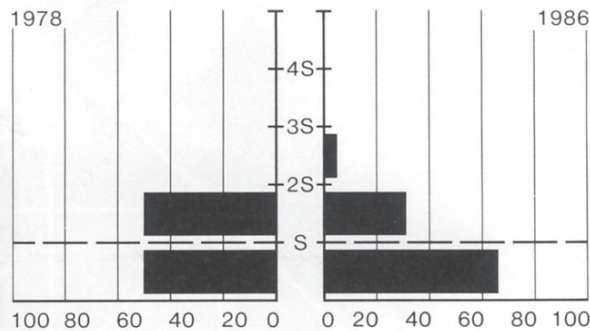
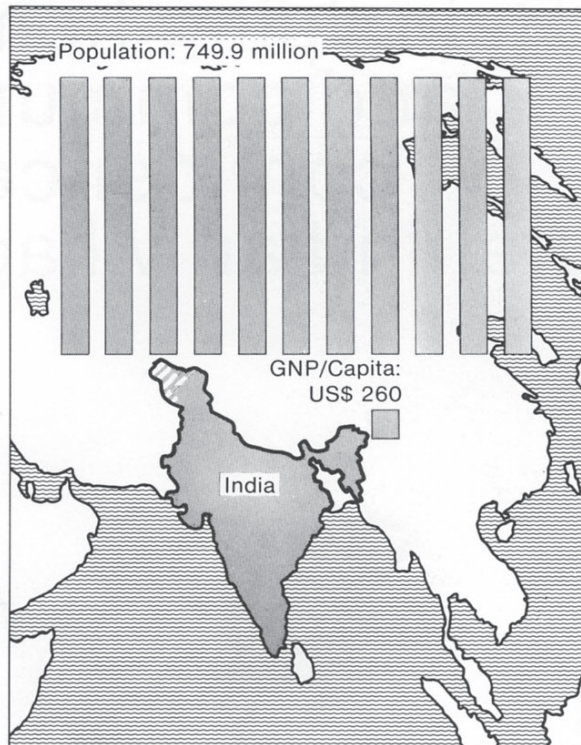
Village Reconstruction Organization

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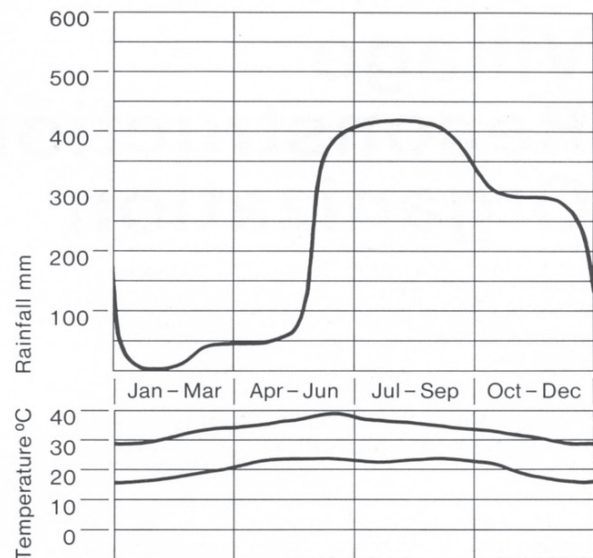
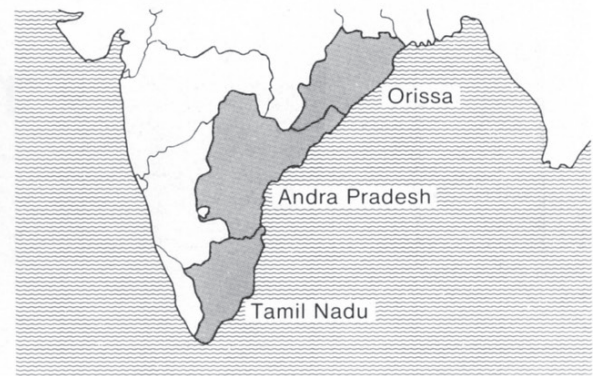


VRO



Percentage Distributions of Population by Income Level
S=when 85% of household income must be spent on food

Population of rural regions where VRO works: Andra Pradesh, Orissa, Tamil Nadu (1986): over 100 million
73 per cent of India's population live in its 500,000 villages.



Climate Graph



Flimsy structures cannot withstand cyclones.

VRO

The Director of the Village Reconstruction Organization (VRO), Professor M.A. Windey, S.J., describes VRO in these words: "The Village Reconstruction Organization is the result of many efforts to seek a way out of rural poverty and oppression. It is born out of silence, failure and disaster. And out of faith. The silence of 30 years' observation and active participation with the National Community Development (agency), and an analysis of its relative failures; a faith in the future of the village as a way of life in India and the world and in the way of Gandhi as the Indian way to progress and to Christ; and a frequent experience of natural calamities in many parts of the country."

Crisis as a starting point for rural reform through housing projects

Disasters can be blessings in disguise

VRO was started in 1969, after a major cyclone in central eastern India. It has been operating ever since in the three poverty-stricken states of Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Tamil Nadu – an area over 2,000 kilometres long, and

up to 400 kilometres wide. The area population is more than 100 million people, 20 per cent of whom are landless and often homeless as well. Most of the poor are exposed to cyclones, floods, droughts, fires and famine. Industrialization is only beginning. Agriculture is treacherous because of the climate, and provides an insecure occupation for the poor, since both the land and the law are controlled by the rich, upper castes.

Surrounded by such hazards and driven by desperation, the very poor are sometimes willing to abandon traditions and the false sense of security that they provide. For VRO, crisis provides opportunities to use village reconstruction projects as stepping stones of progress.



The growth of VRO

VRO's basic unit is the village community. As E.F. Schumacher has said: "World poverty is primarily the problem of 2,000 million villagers..." Of the 500,000 Indian villages, which are home to 73 per cent of the country's population, at least 300,000 are in extremely poor and vulnerable situations of the kinds that VRO selects for their projects.

By 1987, VRO had contacts in some 10,000 villages with populations of between 50 and 100 families. VRO has an active presence in 900 villages and integral development projects in 160, of which 140 projects are in varying stages of completion. Selection of villages is done through a detailed survey of several hundred on the waiting list. An average of one village project per month is initiated, giving priority to the lowest-income groups.

VRO has 500 full-time staff and 250 temporary volunteer workers, mostly young graduates, who assist village leaders with the various tasks involved in carrying out a comprehensive programme. These volunteers live and work in the villages, sharing the villagers' lifestyle.

Village access roads are impassable in the monsoon season: VRO test community spirit by requiring the village to improve it.



VRO's aims and approach

VRO's programmes are not primarily housing projects, although they might seem to be at first sight. The focus is on building community. Community is the agent of change. Developmental change is understood as setting in motion a process that has its vital locus in the minds and feelings of the people. All action has to be timed in accordance with the people's consciousness, if it is to develop into self-reliant initiative and financial resourcefulness. Only in this way can rural community life become a 'ruralization movement' in a context which is urbanizing.

The ruralization movement makes use of the special qualities of rural life: its integration of everyday tasks; its closeness to nature; its decentralized energy and technology; its own concepts of space and time. The movement aims at bringing communities together as a counterforce to challenge urban oppression: Ghandi's dream of a non-violent deep structural change. VRO is more oriented to qualitative structural reform than to material construction itself.

VRO projects progress through four stages:

1. When a village applies to VRO for assistance, the villagers' community-sense is tested through encouraging them to improve a road, level a site, dig a well or some other relatively simple task.
2. When a development programme is agreed, work generally starts with improvements to the physical environment: building houses, planting trees, digging wells and so on.
3. Community development through the provision of basic social services and income-generating activities usually follows physical improvements.
4. The final step is the withdrawal of VRO, once the village council is set up and continuing assistance is assured from other villages or the local authorities.

A typical case history

Background

The typical village taken as an example is near the Coromandel coast of India, famous for its frequent cyclones. In 1986, the population was made up of 230 individuals from 25 families who lived in 51 households. While the number of households hardly changed between 1978 and 1986, the population increased by 20 per cent. During the same seven-year period, the income-earning



population fell by 18 per cent, from 105 to 89 persons. Due to a decrease in agricultural jobs, the 99 persons formerly thus employed dwindled to only 62. Those employed in higher-paid government and service employment rose from 6 to 19 persons. The number of households living below the poverty line increased from one-half to two-thirds. While this suggests increased rural-urban migration, surveys indicate a decrease. Although figures are imprecise, the period has seen a substantial drop in the number of absent youths and men between the ages of 15 and 25. This may be due to declining employment opportunities in the cities, to increasing expectations in the village, or to both.

The present village site was settled in the 1940s, since it was then the closest available unclaimed land to the nearest town. On the advice of the traditional village surveyor or 'karanum', the village moved to its present, less vulnerable and more convenient location 5 kilometres away. In 1969 the villagers' tenure was secured when the government issued rights of use or 'pattas', to each family, with a nominal rent of one-tenth of one Rupee.

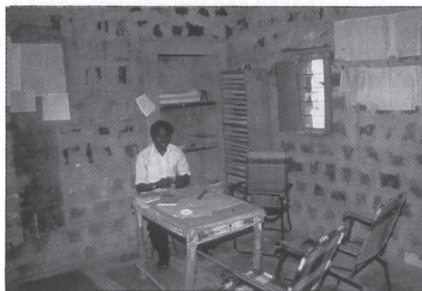
Starting a VRO project

The VRO staff saw this history as evidence of community initiative and selected the village for a project. VRO introduces its approach in two ways: implicitly, through practical actions, starting with the tests; and explicitly, in meetings. The villagers' community spirit was tested by asking them to make an access road from the village to the main road. In a second test, the villagers' were asked to make 1200 bricks. VRO provided a loan for haulage and an artisan to train villagers in making moulds and bricks.

As the community proved its potential, VRO provided a full-time voluntary community worker, the leader of a previous project, who lived in the village. He assisted in setting up a village council, the 'Graham Sabha', which aimed at restoring the community's autonomy. Over the years, local control had been usurped by the district authority, the 'Panchayiti', whose powers over the community should now be turned into services and supports for community initiatives. The first Graham Sabha had 13 members: 5 were traditional elders, 4 were young people and 4 were women, one of whom was also the vice-leader. This council, now a formally recognized body, meets every Saturday. Several years after completion of the project, they can still count on a VRO contact person for advice and assistance.

Had this project been started a few years later, VRO would have used their current community-generating technique: about 15 to 20 experienced village contact persons from different completed VRO projects set up a working camp in a village, preparing for a new project. They donate a week's work without charge to the village, whose only obligation is to provide them with accommodation and food. These experienced believers in the VRO approach serve to animate apprehensive villagers and to give them confidence.

The resident voluntary community worker lives in the model house.



The first village council had 5 elders, 4 youths and 4 women.





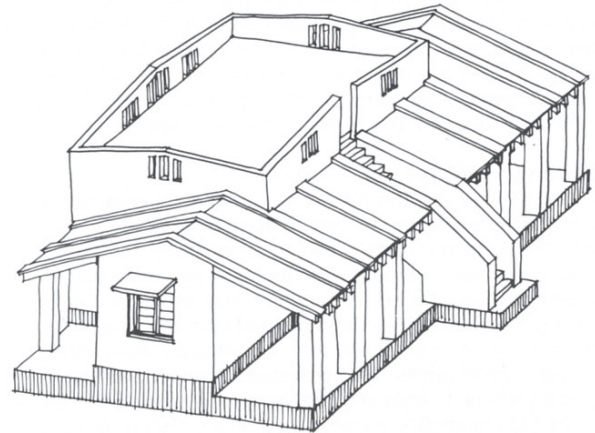
Obtaining resources

On condition that its relatively-high building standards are met, government provides up to 50 per cent of financing for village building projects. This presented no problem to VRO, whose standards are even higher. In this case, however, government allocated only 28 per cent, disbursed to VRO after completion. In addition to their labour, each household had to contribute 12 per cent or R1,050 equivalent to 9 months' income for a median income household, and a very heavy financial burden for those living near or below the poverty line. VRO provided 10 per cent and the remaining 50 per cent was provided by the Canadian Mennonite Central Committee of Calcutta.

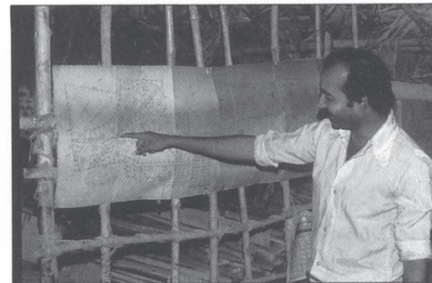
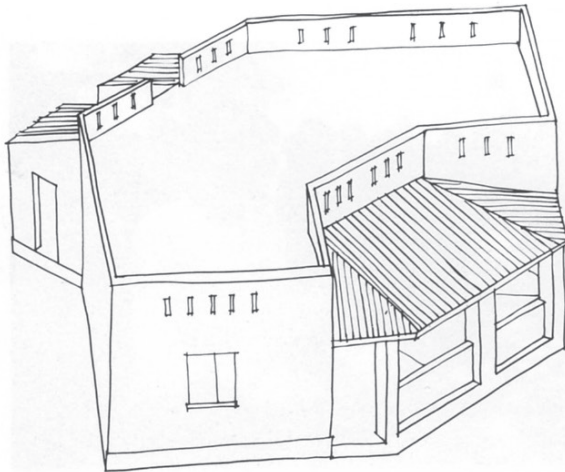
Additional land was purchased and the villagers agreed to pool and redistribute the land they had previously occupied. As well as enlarged 'patta' plots with hereditary rights of use, and community, income-earning pasture land or 'parambok', some plots were also provided within the village for communal use. Six years later, these were still fenced off and unused.

Planning and design

In its projects, VRO is responsible for village layout plans, building designs and management of the works. Despite major departures from traditional norms, VRO's layout plan for the village was accepted without question and formally approved by the 13 members of the Graham Sabha. But after being shown a model of VRO's proposed house design and visiting a built example, the villagers rejected it, due to its unorthodox form. A simplified, rectangular design was accepted which the villagers later modified, by adding a shared staircase to the roof terrace and a parapet. Other subsequent modifications, including lean-to additions, have been made by many of the households.



VRO prepares new village plans, house designs, and house models which are discussed with the community.





Building

Eight youths were trained in bricklaying, carpentry and rod-bending (for concrete reinforcement) under VRO supervision. Skilled labour was contracted on condition that village voluntary workers would be trained by them. Each household was required to contribute 100 working days.

Following the removal of all existing buildings from the site (most were temporary structures and easily moved), the site was prepared and ceremonially blessed. The model house was built by the trainees with villagers' voluntary help; surface-water drainage prepared; and trees were planted, because 'where trees grow, men will live'.

The building programme, scheduled by VRO to take five months, actually took three years. The main difficulties were over the villagers' own financial contributions, which competed with their need to buy food, and over participation and related benefits. These led to the adoption of mutual-aid building groups, under the principle of 'Building together or not at all'.

All dwellings were successfully completed, and house allocations were made, with first choices given to those who had contributed the most labour. The households moved in while the paint of the first murals was still wet.

Subsequent improvements include a school, a municipal water supply which provides piped water for four hours daily, street lighting and options for domestic connections, and various job-creation schemes.

Management and maintenance

A traditional village, under hereditary leaders, is well able to manage everyday, routine affairs. But they usually cannot cope with complex operations, keeping records and handling large sums of money or negotiating with government agencies. Members of the village councils set up with VRO's assistance are trained during the course of the projects. When these are completed and the resident volunteer leaves, the still-new Graham Sabha can count on VRO assistance at their weekly meetings or on help from experienced people from other villages.

Village youths are trained in building skills while building the model house.



Village rebuilding in progress.





Lessons learned

It is said that neither governmental nor non-governmental (NGO) schemes can provide durable and secure homes for sufficient numbers of the vast Indian population. The VRO experience challenges this view, showing what can be done on a large scale, by using housing as a vehicle for building community. It demonstrates the need and the value of NGOs building on the capacity for locally self-managed reconstruction, especially when following disasters.

The awakening of a village community and the emergence of its own community-based organization or CBO, can be a slow and sometimes discouraging process. Often, apathy is hard to overcome and the growth of awareness and community spirit is difficult to see. But small, scarcely visible activities may often signify big,

internal changes. Modest beginnings in identifying local needs and projects may often provide the starting point for more ambitious projects.

For example, villagers marking their roads with white stones to avoid stubbing their toes at night, or setting up a women's savings club, based on very small individual contributions of a single Rupee a week, has led to the foundation of a community creche. The creche involved the whole community, by demanding land, labour and cash contributions from all the villagers. Community involvement and accomplishments serve to increase villagers' belief in their ability to join together to work out what needs to be done, and to do it. The village then benefits doubly, both from the improvements and from their ever-increasing growth in strength and self-confidence.