

Sustainable Economic and Educational Development Society (SEEDS)

India is poised for a significant growing economy in the next few years as a result of its abundant supply of trained man power, improving quality control, and its inherent competitive price structure. While a few states and urban areas are going to reap the rich rewards, many states including Orissa and specially the people already disadvantaged to begin with are unlikely to share the same experience.

Why? It is not because Oriyas haven't strived to jump into the bandwagon of globalization. It is not due to complete short term inaction on part of its government or populace. A more plausible cause is its structural weaknesses such as lack of a critical "mass" in almost all areas, such as proper technological pipelines, trained man power, support services, ancillary industries, so on and so forth. It is not that Oriyas are not brilliant, or lack the drive to excel as much as their compatriots; it is just that there are not enough of them. It is not that Orissa lacks urban centers, or that there is no support service such as construction, transportation, human care, etc. available. Rather, their numerical strength is below a critical "mass" required to make certain life-enriching sectors viable, and there is a debilitating imbalance at that, as well.

If that is the case, what can be done? While the answer is not likely to be simple, a most likely common denominator is going to be paying attention to the structural issues, such as education, infrastructural development, attention to rural economy, and propagation of a sense of social justice across the board. Even though many of these issues require large scale investment and action at the government level, surprising results can be achieved in other areas by infusing modern methods and techniques at the grass-root level, which have proven to be successful elsewhere. We need social entrepreneurship: people and processes that "open up major new possibilities in education, health, the environment, and other areas of human need." SEEDS believes it can make a significant contribution in the latter by being a catalyst in sustainable transformations in areas such as rural education, micro-credit systems and mass computing.

Why SEEDS

SEEDS rose out of Non-Resident Oriyas' despair and the student activism in the wake of shocking news of widespread misery and deprivation in famine-afflicted KBK area in early 1990s. With the initial goal of motivating the affected people on effective self help through appropriate training, functional education, and providing seed capital for a sustainable process to guard against future natural or "man-made" calamities, SEEDS has grown significantly over the years to addressing grass-root structural issues, such as education and micro-credit. Initial experiments working through local NGOs or educational institutions such as ASRA, Baji Rout Chatrabas, BISWA, KVP, REACHD, UAA and UNNAYAN, have resulted in many successful programs such as pani-panchayat projects, water harvesting schemes, community gardening, sponsor-a-student, and bamboo plantation for income generation, etc. (Full list is available at www.seedsnet.org.) Over last 12 years, SEEDS has generated and disbursed over 60,000 US dollars towards grass-roots developmental activities, and untold number of volunteer hours, not to mention the amplifying factors.

SEEDS, catalytically, helps high-integrity development workers (NGOs) and ordinary people alike to empower and help themselves by sponsoring sustainable projects in mostly rural Orissa. SEEDS doesn't believe in simple charity and we are not just a funding agency. We work in partnership with the beneficiaries and the executing bodies (NGOs) before, during, and after a project is undertaken. SEEDS volunteers from different regions of the world periodically visit the project sites and report progress and problems encountered. They try to understand the impact of the project and analyze reasons for success or failure, big or small. Most of our volunteers continue to donate their time, energy and expenses so that all money donated to SEEDS can be applied to the sponsored project without overhead.

Current Focus Areas

SEEDS is actively participating in or driving a variety of programs targeting the disadvantaged people, primarily in rural areas. In keeping with its philosophy on sustainable and equitable processes, current thrust is in the following four major activities that we hope to have a system-wide beneficial influence.

Micro Finance Bank: SEEDS is collaborating with a Sambalpur based NGO, BISWA on starting a micro-financing bank in western Orissa, similar in line with the much acclaimed Grameen-bank. Micro finance helps reduce poverty through increase in income, allowing the poor to build assets and reduce their vulnerability. Microfinance has been widely credited for empowering their major clients, women, by increasing their contribution to household income, the value of their assets, and control over decisions that affect their lives. Households that have access to microfinance spend more on education than non-client households. You can support this effort to found a streamlined and self-supporting microfinance enterprise by either investing your money returnable with interest, or by making targeted donation through SEEDS.

Computing for Masses: Rural Orissa is a perfect test bed for propagation of education through technology. Access to internet and productivity software can easily be provided by a single server with several cheap terminals. Dramatic advantages to this idea of computing are: lower system maintenance and overall hardware costs by using old, cheap PCs networked as thin clients, and near-free open-source software, and, quite importantly, a mechanism to create linkage between technical colleges and counter-part schools for socially-conscious projects. Working with institutions like JTM (Paralakhemundi), SEEDS is starting to drive a vision of appropriate technology and knowledge-economy preparedness for the digital have-nots.

Mahila Shanti Sena: SEEDS is extending its support to establish Mahila Shanti Sena (MSS) in Orissa. This *Peace Brigade* has been instrumental in uniting and raising socio-political awareness among women in the eastern states of Bihar and Assam. They also build self help groups for income generation activities, and learn to elevate their role into policy-making. Upliftment of a society is strongly tied to the success of its women folks. Consistent with this goal, SEEDS is funding local training camps organized by Unnayan.

Rural Mathematics Talent Search Examination: This program is meant to identify and support promising youngsters in rural areas of all districts in Orissa. SEEDS is in partnership with the Institute of Mathematics and Applications to popularize mathematics, and financially sponsor and provide valuable mentorship to groups of budding talents.

We are also contemplating college-level distance lectures from experts around the world.

Join us to make a difference

Within SEEDS we have tried to combine our vision of an economically and educationally developed rural Orissa with our action to enable and sustain such change. We have seen small successes and faced great challenges. We recognize the fact that successful project implementation and idea dissemination requires many different kinds of help and involvement of the society at large. Some ways you can help:

- If you are working with an NGO and have a project falling within SEEDS focus area, you may send us a proposal (See guidelines in our website). We also participate in collaborative projects.
- If you are not working with any specific project but want to be informed about SEEDS activities you can join our electronic network or look at our website periodically.
- You can donate your time to SEEDS. We are always looking for volunteers for implementation, and monitoring of projects.
- You can donate your money toward a SEEDS sponsored project.

Our address is SEEDS, 12688 NW Naomi LN, Portland, OR 97229, USA. Please check our websites myseeds.home.comcast.net and www.seedsnet.org . You may join the SEEDS yahoo group: seedsnet.

Let's forge ahead together for a better tomorrow.