

*Saaraakassh – An attempt
towards a village republic
in the footsteps of
M.K.Gandhi...*

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Abstract:

Realizing our own social responsibility and that it was time to give back to the society, Saaraakassh Trust, was founded on the 2nd October 2015, by doing its first Annadaanam distribution on this day. Though not planned it was by a happy coincidence that Gandhiji's birthday became the Foundation Day of Saaraakassh Trust too. Saaraakassh believes in the principle of Sarvadaanam which encompasses not only Annadaanam but Vidyadaanam, Aushadadaanam, Vastadaanam, Vastradaanam and daanam in any capacity based on the needs of the poor, underprivileged and downtrodden people of our society.

Over the days, the trustees of Saaraakassh realized that if this large and widespread goal was to be implemented and executed well then it needed to be streamlined. Meetings and discussions with likeminded people led the trustees to the interiors of Maharashtra in the adivasi villages of Murbad district. Thus, it dawned on them, about the new scope of rural development which became a major impetus to take the Trust's work forward. This led to Saaraakassh Trust starting its work with tribal villages in Murbad district since the year 2017. Over the days, the model espoused was to adopt a village and try and render all possible help that they required by holding discussions with the villagers of their requirements. Thus, a partnership and inclusive model was put in place where the villagers too were actively involved.

In this present project paper, we showcase the journey of Saaraakassh through each village in its attempt to make it a model village to the best of its capacity by rendering different and varied services to enable education, eradicate malnutrition, and encourage sanitation.

We hope to now achieve what Gandhiji had envisioned for an ideal village or village Swaraj, that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary. Saaraakassh does not know the time that may be required but it has started taking its steps in this direction hoping to achieve this dream someday soon.

Vision Statement of Saaraakassh Trust:

To bring a smile to every wanting soul.

सारा आकाश

झोप त्याग, श्वास भरू, जयाची ललकार रे
चाल चाल चाल चला ध्येय करू साध्य रे
चाल चाल चाल चला ध्येय करू साध्य रे
हो जी हो जी हो जी जी

कठीण आहे खेळ, त्यातून नाही मेळ
करू नका हे भेद, तुमच्यात आहे देव,
जाळू मनाचे जाळ, घेऊ चला ही झोप,
सैतान तुमच्या पाठी, द्यावी तयास मात

स्फोटरे ..विस्फोटा रे ..स्फोट करू युक्ती अन – पेटवूया रान रे

चाल चाल चाल चला ध्येय करू साध्य रे
चाल चाल चाल चला ध्येय करू साध्य रे
हो जी हो जी हो जी जी

होऊ नको उदास, अग्नीचा भारी श्वास
आकाशी घेई झोप, मन पाखरा जणूच,

मन घे तू ही भरारी, काही नाही कठीण
 कुचळू रे सारी भीती, दे बजरंगी हुकार
 पेटवू ... अरे पेटवू ..पेटवूया आज ..मनाची ही मशाल रे
 चाल चाल चाल चला ध्येय करू साध्य रे
 चाल चाल चाल चला ध्येय करू साध्य रे
 हो जी हो जी हो जी जी

Saaraakassh Anthem English Adaptation

Sacrificing sleep, taking a deep breath, giving the clarion call
 Let's march, march, march ahead to accomplish our goal.
 Let's march, march, march ahead to accomplish our goal.
 Ho ji, Ho ji, Ho ji, ji.

The game is difficult; there is no option to that
 Do not discriminate, in you resides God
 Burn the mind's cobwebs, let's take this leap
 The Devil is behind you, Defeat him!

Explode. Blast... Let's Explode with ideas and burn the jungle.

Let's march, march, march ahead to accomplish our goal.
 Let's march, march, march ahead to accomplish our goal.
 Ho ji, Ho ji, Ho ji, ji.

Do not be sad, there is fire in your breath
 Take a giant leap towards the sky, as if the mind is a butterfly
 Oh my mind take this flight, nothing is difficult
 Crush all fear, Shout Bajrangi's name

Burn... burn.. Let us burn today.. the torch in our mind

Let's march, march, march ahead to accomplish our goal.
 Let's march, march, march ahead to accomplish our goal.
 Ho ji, Ho ji, Ho ji, ji.
 Ho ji, Ho ji, Ho ji, ji.
 Ho ji, Ho ji, Ho ji, ji.

This is how we dreamt a dream!! At first it was a small dream, of helping others in our own small capacity, thus trying to bridge the gap between 'the have and the have not's'. For the last 5 years, the Trust, in the Dombivili area has been distributing

food packets to around 40-50 poor people on a daily basis. What started as an Anna Daanam initiative later spread its wings in many directions.

Saaraakassh Trust, a Sarvadaanam initiative started its work on the 2nd October, 2015, by doing its first Annadaanam distribution on this day. Though not planned it was by a happy coincidence that Gandhiji's birthday became the Foundation Day of Saaraakassh Trust too. Saaraakassh believes in the principle of Sarvadaanam which encompasses daanam in any capacity, which includes not only Annadaanam but also Aushadadaanam, Vidyadaanam, Vastradaanam, Vastadaanam; based on the needs of the down trodden, underprivileged and poor people of our society.

However, if this large and widespread goal was to be implemented and executed well then it needed to be streamlined. Meetings and discussions with likeminded people such as Dalal bhai of Motilal Dalal Trust led us to the interiors of Maharashtra in the adivasi villages of Murbad district. Thus, it dawned on the trustees, about the new scope of rural development which became a major impetus to take the Trust's work forward. This led to Saaraakassh Trust starting its work with tribal villages in Murbad district since the year 2017. Over the days, the model espoused was to adopt a village and try and render all possible help that they required by holding discussions with the villagers of their requirements. Thus, a partnership and inclusive model was put in place where the villagers too were actively involved.



Saaraakassh Trustee, Ravi Narayanan in discussion with villagers of Musrundi Village.

To quote Gandhiji, “Take the village people and slum-dwellers in your hands and give them the benefit of your knowledge, skill, insight, constructive work and patriotic spirit. Give the people this true education through the example of your own lives. Let all your activities be directed to the welfare of the people.” This became the roadmap for Saaraakassh too.

Thus the long-term vision is to keep adopting villages one by one and reach out to maximum people. Till date, Saaraakassh has worked extensively in three villages namely Musrundi, Pezwadi and Karpatwadi. Here we showcase the journey of Saaraakassh through each village in its attempt to make it a model village to the best of its capacity.

1. Village Musrundi:

Situated just 18 kms away from Kalyan which is a hustling and bustling city with all the latest amenities, is a village called Musrundi. The Saaraakassh Trust team visited the adivasi village of Musrundi on 14th January 2017 to distribute Tilgul and clothes on the festive day of Makara Sakranti.

It was unbelievable that a village which is only a couple of hours away from Mumbai has only one well of potable water for a population of 400. That too this well starts drying up by February until the rain gods are benevolent and fills it up by July!!! And hence the thought germinated that something has to be done to get potable drinking water available to this village through the year. Easier said than done is what we realized as the nearest river body, the Murbadi river was 4 kms away from the village and the path in between is a hilly terrain.

However, where there is a will, there is a way. And after a couple of meetings with the villagers, work started on January 26th 2017. It was decided that the villagers would contribute by doing the physical labour. Thus, the villagers were going to be involved partners in this project and not just passive beneficiaries. The cost was nothing less than 7 Lacs for this whole project. Being a novice in such grass root level work, Saaraakassh did not know that many documents are required to

be in place before such a work can be undertaken. Getting the forest department permission was mandatory which the Saaraakassh team realized only after the electric poles had been delivered to the village! Once the required documents were in order, the permission from the forest department too was forthcoming.

Jain Irrigation came into the picture and at a very reasonable price gave the underground water pipes. Their engineers themselves came to survey and later supervise the laying down of the pipes. Many of the villagers had by then lost steam and on the day of the laying down of pipes there were hardly any menfolk in the village. The Saaraakassh team went from house to house to gather the womenfolk to come and help in the physical labour as promised. With the Saaraakassh team leading from the front, and the womenfolk and children of the village the laying down of the water pipes over a stretch of 4 kms was achieved in a day's time. Thus, the herculean task of bringing water to the village from the Murbadi river through the mountainous terrain by laying a pipeline was achieved by 17th June 2017. However this water was not potable. And hence to make the water potable, a filtration plant too was installed. A year went by to achieve this project. But there is much gratitude towards all those people who made this dream project turn into a reality.

Though the Saaraakassh team has moved on to do shramadaan in the further villages; the connection with the Musrundi village is still deep what with our visits for the Zilla Parishad school functions, festivals and even weddings. Distribution of school items, stationery, toys, clothes and so forth is also done regularly at the village.

2. Village Pezwadi:

On the first visit to the adivasi village, Pezwadi on January 14th, 2017 on the festive day of Makar Sankranti, the Saaraakassh Team observed that all the children appeared to be undernourished. A preliminary health checkup was organized on the same day, and our team realized that most kids do not have a healthy dietary

habit which negatively impacted their growth and development, thus hampering their overall health and well being.

This led to the creation of the **Pilot Milk Project with Ashwagandha Powder** for the children of the Pezwadi ZP School!

Various research studies have reported that together, Milk and Ashwagandha make a remarkable difference in the overall growth of children. An associate organization of Saaraakassh Trust, Vaishanvi trust had been successfully running this project for some time in Chennai and surrounding region, and it was from there that we got the inspiration to do the same.

Before beginning this pilot project, firstly we took the permission of the Upamukhya Karyakari Adhikari, Mahila va Balvikas Vibhag, Zilla Parishad, Thane Zilla and requested their assistance in monitoring and assessing the health of the children before and after the implementation of this project.

After acquiring the necessary permission, this project was rolled out in a full-fledged manner. Dr. Niraj Dandekar and Dr. Yadnya Dandekar, who are Ayurvedic Practitioners running Arogyakiran in Panvel headed a proper medical camp. Ayurvedic medicines, supplementary food such as Gul-Chana Chikki and Kharik was distributed along with the milk and Ashwagandha powder to arrest the issue of malnutrition. We, as well as the doctors organized and conducted talks with villagers to help them understand the importance of good dietary habits and maintaining daily hygiene. A slight moderation in their mid-day meal along with all of the above mentioned measures helped us combat malnutrition to a large extent. When the doctors visited the village 6 months later, the weight of almost 52 children out of the 55 children had increased ... Imagine our joy when the doctor declared that 52 children had crossed over and were no longer malnourished!!



Dr. Niraj and Dr. Yadnya of Arogyakiran, Panvel conducting the Ayurvedic Medical Camp in Pezwadi.

"Village sanitation, domestic cleanliness, personal hygiene and health care have the first place and also full scope, the underlying idea being that this done there can be no disease." (Letter to D.D. Joshi, 1-8-1946; 85:105.). Borrowing from Gandhiji's idea on village sanitation we realized that we needed to go beyond.

Thus we decided to make Pezwadi a model village and not just stop at one goal of eradicating malnutrition. The first initiative was to provide the village with a regular drinking water supply through a water tank. 'Sauch Khaddaas' were also constructed to help drain the dirty, sewage water. To make the village an area free of open defecation, we took up the project of building 38 toilets at the cost of Rs.11,000 per toilet. Not an easy task! However, knowing that open defecation in a closely knit place leads to numerous health issues along with contaminating the nearby water body, we took up this daunting endeavor. After lot of fund raising events, publicity of the project through word of mouth, and such sustained efforts, by October 2018, we had built toilets for all the families in the village.

Pezwadi has been our 'Karma-Bhoomi' in terms of learning. We realized that just having a desire to help is not enough and that arbitrary decisions cannot be made about the plans of action. Certain processes needed to be in place.

Thus, our vision was streamlined into certain processes that have been practiced henceforth. Hereafter, our three major aims would be on the Three E's:

1. Eradicating Malnutrition

2. Encouraging Sanitation

3. Enabling Education

Thus, school bags, uniforms, school stationery, and toys and games for education and learning are distributed on a regular basis. Before the arrival of monsoons, Saaraakassh also ensures the upkeep of the school building by way of plastic sheets etc to keep the school free from leakages and dry.

Also to give an impetus for employment, Mahua Oil, honey and bamboo products are bought from the Pezwadi villagers, and then showcased in exhibitions and sold through word of mouth.



Saaraakassh Trustee, Shital Ravi exhibiting and selling adivasi village products in the exhibition **Samanvay** arranged by Rotary Group of Dombivli on every 2nd October.

It was in Pezwadi that we first organized the **'Urban-Rural Student Program'**, through which Urban children visited the village and helped teach the rural children through various activities such as drawing competitions, science experiments, drama skits, dance competitions and so forth. The takeaway from this experience for the urban children was no less. To actually see adivasi places with minimum facilities like Pezwadi does make anyone who experience it realize the immense opportunities and conveniences that one has in cities, allowing things to fall in perspective immediately. Guardian school of Dombivli was the first school to partner with Saaraakassh on this Student program. For the entire academic year 2018-2019, children of various grades visited Pezwadi with teachers and other school staff every month. Words fall short in expressing the hard work put in by all the teachers and students to make this program a success.



Guardian School, Dombivli students with Pezwadi Zilla Parisha School children in the Urban-Rural Student Program.

Continuing on the path of the third E, Enabling Education, Saaraakassh finally launched its dream project on 20th October, 2019: the P4 series- Pudchi Pidhi, Pudcha Paul, with the children of Pezwadi, undertaking the first Lifeskills workshop of the P4 series. To add a note here, Saaraakassh Trustee, Shital Ravi, holds a Post graduation degree in Counseling Psychology from Mumbai University and is also

the founder of Disha Counseling Center. Saarakassh trustee, Ravi Narayanan too holds, a post graduation degree in Social psychology from University of Mumbai. Having conducted many Lifeskills workshops previously too it had been a dream project in the pipeline for long which finally got rolled out. Under the initiative of Vidya Daanam, the vision is to conduct a series of life skills workshops with the underprivileged adivasi children to help them develop better leadership skills, self confidence and an ability to face the world that lies beyond their remote and secluded environment, thus hoping to help them become part of the mainstream society seamlessly.



First Pudchi Pidhi Pudcha Paul Lifeskills workshop in action.

In many ways, Pezwadi has been our testing ground where we conducted many of our firsts, be it the life-skills program, urban-rural student program, building of 'Sauchh Khaddes and toilets, putting up big water tanks to store drinking water for the village, cleaning of wells before the monsoons, among many others. Even though we have moved on to our third village now, Pezwadi holds a dear place in our hearts and work goes on...

3. Village Karpatwadi:

Karpatwadi, is an Adivasi village which we usually used to pass by while going to Pezwadi. By and by, it became familiar to us as the Sarpanch used to come visiting to Pezwadi as also children from Karpatwadi used to join some of the Saaraakassh distribution programs done in Pezwadi school. With the growing connect with people from Karpatwadi, we realized that here was a village with a difference! Education and overall awareness of the Sarpanch (Nathu Pardhi) and Upa-Sarpanch (Chandar Rama Pardhi) made a sea of difference facilitating the Saaraakassh work that we wanted to start there.

It was indeed a pleasure to know that there was a Karpatwadi Gaon Sudhar Samiti which had been established with a few villagers on board and a bank account too had been opened. This samiti with the inputs of all the villagers came up with ideas to make their village a model village. Also with the passage of time and growing experience, we too had learnt our lessons. We had gotten more focussed to keep ourselves within the fold of our vision. Within the Saaraakassh framework we first began with the repairing of school toilets, common kitchen shed for Zilla Parishad school and Aanganwadi with all facilities and distribution of stationery and sports equipments etc to the ZP school.

While we were working on all this we came across the problem of Alcoholism in the village. Thus it was decided to arrange a program in the village for the same. On the decided day, the rain gods decided to send a huge shower of untimely rain. However though the whole place was damp and the stage too had become wet, it did not dampen the indomitable spirits of the villagers and the Saaraakassh team. On October 19th, 2019 a full-fledged program was conducted with cultural events by the villagers, children and our team as well, and a motivational speech by Shri Ranjan Rao on Alcoholism. We also had a demonstration and a talk on the benefits of doing daily Agnihotra to help purify the environment. The program ended with Sankirtan by none other than a budding team from Pezwadi (to whom we have donated musical instruments such as the harmonium, tabla, dholak, flute and mike systems). This was followed by a dinner for the entire village where we all sat and talked together under the moonlit night and could sense a spirit of

positivity already seeping in. With sustained efforts the Alcoholism rate has come down to a small extent, though much more work needs to be done on this front.

Next, was the Ayurvedic Medical camp for the villagers. Though malnutrition was not a problem here, the villagers especially the women were anemic and had health issues. A medical camp with two senior Ayurvedic doctors and two juniors was conducted on December 14th, 2019 for the villagers of Karpatwadi. Medicines were also distributed on the same day by the doctors.

The next big project undertaken was the eye camp. We were fortunate to team up with Essilor Vision Foundation for this event. Team from Optifocus, Pune did the work of getting all the required machinery, for the check up. We had a training session for the Saaraakassh team and a few enterprising villagers who would carry out the initial screening process. This was done over a 2 week period and on 26th January 2020 we had the mega eye camp. We covered a total of 8 villages in the camp and 250 people got their eyes tested after the initial screening of 1500 people in these 8 villages. It was a herculean task managing the crowd and 9 hours of hard work by the team of 3 doctors and 2 technicians. Spectacles were distributed free of cost on the same day and for a few they were sent after 10 days.



Eye Camp in progress.

On the request of the villagers, Saaraakassh has now taken up the task of building a Samaj hall and a Vithal Rakumai temple in the village. The work for this has begun already. The purpose of a Samaj hall is to have a place where meetings, bhajans, and the Life skills camps for the children could be conducted. Any place of prayer helps the community to congregate and have an exchange of positive ideas. Since there was no temple in the village, we felt that this would be a right step to keep the atmosphere of positivity and brotherhood amongst the villagers sustained.

While our work thus goes on, the whole world is gripped by the Pandemic Covid 19. As soon as the lockdown was announced, we realized that Karpatwadi and the surrounding villages were completely isolated and would be without any means of food as most of these villagers work as daily wage labourers. Thus in this lockdown period, they would be in urgent need of ration supplies. Saaraakassh appealed to its well-wishers and donors to help in these challenging times. With the help of many such good Samaritans, Saaraakassh supplied groceries worth Rs.1200 per family, for immediate relief to help them tide through these tough times.



Sarpanch Shri Chandar distributing needs a noun in one of the villages on behalf of Saaraakassh.

In the first week of April 2020, Saaraakassh reached out to many adivasi families across five villages and in the coming days was able to reach out to many more such villages. In May 2020, Saaraakassh covered 11 such villages. This would not have been possible without the tireless hardwork done by Shri Nathu and Shri Chandar of Karpatwadi who spearheaded the ration supply distribution across the 11 villages. The grocery distribution was done over 4 months so as to sustain the villagers over these troubled times.

Here is a village which has shown us how much can be achieved by simple unity and team work. Beautiful learnings that we are learning from our fellow adivasi brothers and sisters. Thus goes on the work in our third village...

We hope to now achieve what Gandhiji had envisioned for an ideal village or village Swaraj, that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary.

"That village may be regarded as reformed, where everybody wears khadi, which produces all the khadi it needs which uses only oil produced in indigenous oil-presses, which consumes only jaggery manufactured in the village itself or in its neighbourhood and only hand-milled flour and hand-pounded rice; the village, in other words, where the largest possible number of village industries are flourishing, in which nobody is illiterate, where the roads are clean, there is a fixed place for evacuation, the wells are clean, there is harmony among the different communities, and untouchability is completely absent, in which everybody gets cow's milk, ghee etc., in moderate quantities, in which nobody is without work, and which is free from quarrels and thefts, and in which the people abide by the sevak's advice in all matters. This is possible in the existing conditions. I cannot of course say about the time required." (Letter to Munnalal Shah, 4-4-1941; 73:421).

Yes, Saaraakassh too does not know the time that may be required but it has definitely started taking its steps in this direction hoping to achieve this dream someday soon.

