

Wardha: Gandhiji's Legacy and Modern Development Initiatives

Wardha is both a place and a concept. It is a district town 70 kms South West of Nagpur, which too is both a town and a concept, in a way an anti-thesis of Wardha.

Wardha became a well known place and a concept because of Gandhiji, who lived or was head quartered at Wardha from 1933-1946. The freedom struggle was directed from it. During that period it was the moral, intellectual and political capital of the country. One of the reasons for our lack of development is that today we have no such place. Nor does the World for that matter. This is why Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, Manipur continue to burn.

Gandhiji had a program for not only the political future but the economic and social future of the country. Consequently myriad organisations were set up at Wardha to pursue these tasks, from Goras Bhandar, to Rashtrabhasha Samiti to Gram Seva Mandal. Most of these have become defunct but even their ruins are inspiring.

Being a small town, the vestiges of that period, still survive and one can still touch and feel the independence movement. Bapu Kutir epitomises it, but there are other places. At the Gandhi chowk ancestral house of the Bajaj's is a stone that marks the place where some one was shot dead. At Bajajwadi is a bench on which once Rajendra Prasad, Vallabhai Patel, Jamnalal Bajaj sat (a photograph adduces to that). We tell our students and visitors to sit on the bench. I live in a house in which Gandhiji stayed thrice. The room in which he stayed is now our study from which I write these words.

I have been involved with Wardha since 2006 and in a more intense way since 2019 when we shifted to it. My responsibilities are in managing a century old educational trust running 8 colleges with over 9,000 students. 6 of these colleges are government aided. I am also responsible for a reasonably large rural outreach in irrigation and school education. This has taken me to over 100 of Wardha's 900 villages. As a part of our work, we have brought 15,000 acres of land into cultivation, which was hitherto lost to submergence in the monsoons. This adds Rs 30 Crs/year to the farmers' income. All this without government funds, 10% is contributed by farmers and the balance by a trust. Our work in school now covers over 30 schools, which exposes one to the current situation and also students, teachers, parents.

Most thinkers do not do, and hence are flimsy in their thinking and lack judgement and credibility. Generally, we have suffered from poor thinking. Most doers do not communicate and lack a feel for the broader canvas.

As a thinking doer, all these responsibilities and exposures to almost all strata politicians, bureaucrats, farmers, students, gives a lot of material for thought and action. Our programs, initiatives have changed as we understand the variables better. In my view policy or systems are not the key to development, people are.

Not to tom-tom but to simply establish credibility may I briefly mention what the institutions I am responsible for have achieved. Our aided colleges provide as good if not better quality than those charging 5 times as much. There is a rhythm of work and learning which translates into jobs. In our Commerce colleges 300 students get jobs each year after doing their B.Com. We do not advertise but our seats get filled with students with a first class or more. We have no management quota. We have 80% attendance in our institutions, compared to 20% in others. We started our teaching on June 18 this year, within 3 weeks of Board exams. Others started in August, if not later. 3 of our colleges have become Autonomous and we will soon be a Cluster University. We started a Science center in 2007 for school students to enjoy Science through doing experiments. Outside of Pune and Mumbai, this is the only such institution in Maharashtra. We started an Engineering College in 2017 when others were closing down and achieved 95%+ intake from the first year. The college was 4th nationally amongst 2,000 colleges in Smart Hackathon of 2022. In our institutions a meritorious student does not need a penny to study, if he does not have it. Education is the basis of development and all children deserve good, quality education drives our efforts. Strong people have a responsibility to take their society forward is another key thought. There are so many things we have done along the way from taking care of a herd of a very good indigenous breed of cow during covid to building much needed bridges to ensuring that a bus comes to an unserved village etc. We have managed to inject hope that problems can be resolved, in the district.

This blog is to document the diverse situations and people I encounter; from which pointers to the future may emerge.