

Ignored lands of the mighty republic

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “I want to wipe tears from every eye of this country.” He said this because he believed the soul of India lies in its rural areas. This is my record of the visit to the soul of India. Last week, I had the opportunity to visit a village called Askavadi in Velhe Taluka that lies in Pune District. The village was small, consisting of around 670 people with 460 active voters. With 95% of its population in farming and cattle herding as their primary source of income, the village represents the agrarian heart of the nation.

The village has one Anganwadi and Asha worker respectively. Now, for readers wondering what an Anganwadi and Asha worker is an Anganwadi worker takes care of the children from age 3 to age 8 in the schools. They check daily upon these kids for vaccination and nutrition and are also the early educators in the school. In the village, there is a famous saying that the Anganwadi worker is the second mother of the children in schools. It is a part-time and voluntary service.

An Asha worker is the one who keeps track of the minute details about the health status of the village. Who gets sick? How often do they get sick? Is there any epidemic in the village? How many women are pregnant? Other than this, an Asha worker acts as a bridge between the rural population and the public health system; they spread awareness about sanitation, hygiene, and nutrition amongst the population residing in rural parts.

My friend Abhishek Hange and I had got a brilliant opportunity to interview the Asha worker of Askavadi. She was a full-time farmer who used to go to her farm in the morning and in the evening do her duties as an Asha worker a woman who was dedicated to her cause. While interviewing her, she highlighted the need for a dedicated clinic in the village which has been missing for years. This village is deprived of basic healthcare needs like a clinic with a full-time doctor, some nurses, a ward boy, and a medical store for any emergency situation because the nearest hospital was over two kilometres away from the village.

She also showed us the box full of medicines like Paracetamol and Combiflam basic ones for anyone in the village who needs it; they can ask her. She also spreads awareness about the availability of these tablets. I was taken aback; the

medical store of the village was just segregated in one small box. How bad the condition of healthcare is, we can only imagine it.

However, the "medicine box" faces a unique cultural hurdle. During our conversation, the Asha worker revealed a challenging mindset prevalent among the villagers: a scepticism toward free government aid. She noted that despite having medicines for common ailments, villagers often rush to private doctors, believing that "paid treatment" or injections are superior to the tablets she offers. She tirelessly works to convince them that the government supply is valid and effective, often acting as a guide as much as a healthcare provider.

Her role extends far beyond dispensing pills. She serves as a vital confidante for the village's adolescent girls, who share personal health issues with her that they would not dare discuss with their own fathers or brothers. Since her appointment in 2018 marking her as the first Asha worker in the village's history she has bridged a critical gap in gender-sensitive healthcare.

Yet, the system she serves often fails to serve her. She highlighted a stark lack of resources, specifically pointing out that her blood pressure (BP) machine has been broken for some time. Despite submitting four separate applications to the Gram Panchayat over the last two years for a replacement, she has received nothing. Driven by dedication, she eventually spent her own money to buy strips for the sugar testing machine to ensure her patients didn't suffer due to administrative apathy. While she receives support from the 'Police Patil' and her family, the lack of responsiveness from the local governing body remains a significant hurdle.

Just a short distance from where the Asha worker battles for public health, the village school stands as a testament to similar neglect. Established in 1961, the Zilla Parishad Primary School serves a small cohort of 25 to 30 students. The conditions described by the school teacher paint a grim picture of the infrastructure meant to shape the next generation. The school's kitchen shed, intended for preparing mid-day meals, has a rusted door with large gaps. This structural failure allows rats and insects to potentially enter, posing a severe risk of food poisoning.

The teacher, who travels daily from 10:30 AM to 5:00 PM to teach the handful of students, expressed frustration at the security and hygiene issues. In a disheartening example of the lack of respect for the institution, she noted that the

rope used for hoisting the flag was stolen, and villagers often intrude into the school premises, sometimes opening windows to take items. Perhaps most shocking is the lack of basic sanitation; the school has no functional toilets and no water pipeline. While the Gram Sevak has visited, the promises of repair remain unfulfilled, forcing the staff and students to manage in sub-par conditions.

Despite this, the spirit of education survives. The teacher proudly displayed a computer used for digital learning, showing students educational videos on history and English from YouTube to ensure they aren't left behind in the digital age.

The neglect of Askavadi's infrastructure has consequences far worse than inconvenience; it has cost lives. The village's internal roads, built just 3-4 years ago, are already deteriorating. Even worse, the village is plunged into darkness at night due to a complete lack of streetlights, resulting in zero visibility for commuters.

This combination of poor road maintenance and lack of lighting led to a heartbreaking tragedy documented in the village's recent history. A mother and her son were traveling on a motorcycle during the rainy season when they hit a pothole hidden under rainwater. The impact caused the vehicle to lose balance, and the mother fell, suffering fatal injuries. This accident was not merely a misfortune; it was a preventable death caused by civic negligence. It stands as a grim reminder of the price villagers pay for the state's failure to provide basic road maintenance and warning signs.

At the heart of these issues lies a struggle for administrative autonomy. Askavadi does not have its own Gram Panchayat; instead, it is part of a Group Gram Panchayat in Margasani, with only one member representing the village. The residents argue that with a population exceeding 600, they deserve a separate Gram Panchayat to focus specifically on their development needs. The current arrangement has left them feeling unheard, with their applications for basic tools like a BP machine or school repairs vanishing into a bureaucratic void.

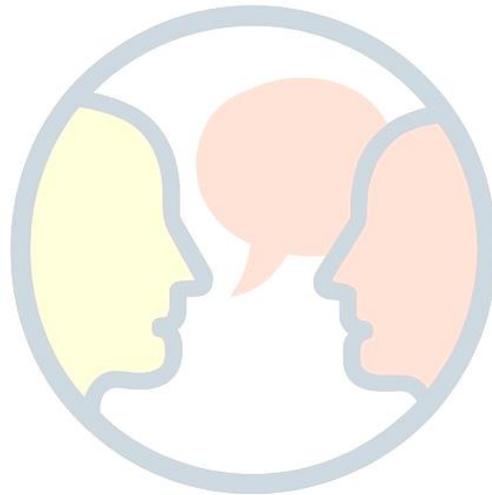
The visit to Askavadi reveals a great characteristic of rural India. On one side, there is the crumbling infrastructure the collapsed kitchen sheds, the broken medical equipment, and the unanswered applications. On the other, there is the indomitable spirit of individuals like the Asha worker and the school teacher.

They are filling the cracks of a broken system with their own dedication, money, and time.

As we left the village, I had a single question revolving in my mind why after 80 years of Independence we as nation could not do enough for our soul i.e the rural India and why have we ignored them for decades despite the message from the father of the nation? we as Indians should question ourselves and the government only then the ignorance will come to an end

By – Zain Pathan

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