

The foundation's dream: Self-sustaining villages to reverse urban migration

Swades has identified 300 'dream villages' - communities they hope will soon become independent and self-sustaining

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Swades Foundation co-founders Ronnie and Zarina Screwvala. Photos: Swades Foundation

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It has been 72 years since Mahatma Gandhi fell to Nathuram Godse's bullets. However, till date, his dream of empowering villages to become self-sufficient little republics is far from being realised. Which is why at a time when Indian cities are bursting at the seams from rising migrant populations, the work of the Swades Foundation bears mentioning.

At the heart of their work in rural Maharashtra lies the aim of developing "dream villages" — self-contained units with good infrastructure and livelihood opportunities to enable migrants to reverse their decision. In order for their intensive, 360-degree intervention model of development to work efficiently, Ronnie and Zarina Screwvala, co-founders of Swades, focus on a small geography — the Raigad district of Maharashtra.

"We'd been running SHARE, a small NGO that undertook projects mainly centering around water and sanitation since 1999," Screwvala says. However, in 2013 after his wife Zarina and he sold their television company UTV, to Disney, the couple realised that providing clean drinking water and sanitation was only a piece in the puzzle. "Rural development has to be holistic; unless community health services, schools, livelihood opportunities, and water and sanitation aren't upgraded simultaneously, the overall quality of life of beneficiaries doesn't improve," he says. This is

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Simultaneously, the overall quality of life of beneficiaries doesn't improve," he says. This is how they developed an unusually intensive model of rural development, which hinges on four key verticals — health and nutrition, education, water and sanitation, and economic development. Their impact has been discernable in the 2,513 villages Swades has been able to reach in Raigad.

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Consider the case of 57-year-old Abdul Gaffar Rahatvilkar, who used to be an oil rig worker in Kuwait. He returned to his village in Raigad, learnt innovative farming techniques at Swades and today reaps a lush crop of beans from his small farm. He now mobilises fellow farmers to adopt farming techniques that provide lucrative output in smaller plot sizes. Like him, 27,086 farmers have learnt to implement new farming technologies to enhance yields at low costs through Swades. All in all, Swades' interventions have benefitted over 550,000 people thus far.

"It's been a challenging journey," says Screwvalla. Their very first task was to create a professional team which could run Swades like a corporation and not an NGO. Since its inception, Swades has trained over 1,000 community volunteers and over 300 full-time staffers to work at the grassroots. Building trust with the community was another challenge, especially as the Swades model entails that each beneficiary household buys in to the project with a small monthly amount. But the toughest task remains to create projects with a sustained, permanent impact. "Our strategy is to hand over a project to the community only after every household agrees to contribute a monthly amount towards the maintenance and the community forms a special committee to operate and maintain it," he says.

Developing community heroes, people who have used their training with Swades to motivate, enable and empower others, is a conscious effort in this direction. Also, Swades has identified 300 "dream villages" — communities they hope will soon become independent and self-sustaining, allowing them to exit.

Swades works on an initial endowment made by the Screwvalas and individual, corporate and institutional donors. Tata Trusts is a major funding partner. Others include Australian Aid, Oracle, ONGC and IL&FS. The Foundation matches each donation made by its partners. Future plans include expanding to other districts (they have already started working in Nashik). However, they already spend between Rs 120 and 130 crore per annum, necessitating an ongoing search for more partnerships. "We also want to document our impact," says Screwvalla, "in order to refine our model and make it easily replicable."

Meanwhile, Manali Sawant, a Swades hero, has set up her village's first vermicomposting unit and has a ready-made market within her community. Young widow Vidya Kule has become a community health worker at Swades and ensures her community gets the medical treatment they need. Among the million people Swades aims to lift out of poverty in five years, they show that Gandhi's dream of Swades can still be realised, one dream village at a time.

To learn more, visit swadesfoundation.org or follow their YouTube channel

Read our full coverage on Urban Migration

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