

Systems Leadership for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The paper sketches the transformation of Piplantri, a small village in Rajsamand district of Rajasthan, having a population of 8,000 residents. The paper revolves around the protagonist Shyam Sunder Paliwal*, the Sarpanch of Piplantri. Piplantri witnessed twenty-five years of imprudent mining activities and extreme environmental indifference. When Paliwal was elected as the Sarpanch in 2005, he inherited a village that was deforested, semi-arid, polluted, environmentally devastated, economically fatigued and socially shattered. Paliwal espoused the cause of social, economic and environmental sustainability and turnaround the village by his exemplary leadership. He demonstrated inclusive, holistic, collaborative, and indigenous leadership with a firm belief that community problems can be best resolved with community engagement.

Research questions/ Objectives

The aim of this study is to explore the nuances of systems leadership for sustainable development with reference to the process of change and development undertaken in Piplantri by Shyam Sunder Paliwal, the village Sarpanch. Piplantri was an economically and environmentally debilitated village, with a host of accompanying social challenges. Paliwal introduced a lot of systemic changes to solve the community problems. Thus, practicing the concept of systemic leadership to initiate a massive systemic change. The paper revolves around the systems leader, Shyam Sunder Paliwal and his initiatives and raises a question whether the changes introduced by Paliwal would be scalable and sustainable or they would dilute over a period of time.

Links to Theory:

The study is based on the Systems Leadership for Sustainable Development model which “is a set of skills and capacities that any individual or organization can use to catalyse, enable, and support the process of systems-level change” (Drier, Nabarro and Nelson, 2019). It has three interrelated elements, viz. the individual, the community and

the system. Systems leadership is the most appropriate approach towards solving community challenges that need collective action and where no single entity is in control. It involves a shared vision for systemic change and mobilizing alliances of diverse stakeholders around the shared vision by empowering extensive collaboration, innovation and action and enabling mutual accountability for progress to shift systems towards sustainability.

Phenomenon Studied

Paliwal championed the cause of social, economic and environmental sustainability and through his excellent leadership, he was able to turnaround the village. He exemplified inclusive, holistic, collaborative and indigenous leadership, and he was a great believer in community engagement as the best way to solve community problems. Paliwal's leadership style is outlined in the paper, and he is established as a systems leader for long-term sustainability.

Context

The paper is relevant from the angle of understanding how systems leadership moves beyond the traditional boundaries of leadership and helps resolve complex problems. It highlights the characteristics of systems leaders and provides a guiding framework for leadership capacity building. Besides, it also demonstrates the power local leaders such as Paliwal towards developing a cohesive approach to working together for resolving community problems. Since Paliwal was not anticipating the success of such a magnitude, he did not prepare a blueprint for making these changes scalable and sustainable and that made him a little worried on how to scale and sustain the changes that he had initiated with great toil and ingenuity.

Findings

Organisations and policymaking bodies globally have started recognizing the force of systems leadership as a concept for bringing about systemic sustainable changes for addressing the complex, dynamic and multi-dimensional challenges that we face as a community or organisation. However, one needs to understand that as a

practicing systems leader both in social or corporate setting, one has to develop a broad multi-stakeholder coalition for effectively bringing about scalable changes.

Keywords:

Leadership, Leadership for Sustainability, Eco-feminism, Community Engagement

Introduction

The term "Systems Leadership" first appeared in Australian and British research (Coffey & Geoffrey, 2009) and was piloted by the UK's Leadership Centre (Atkinson et al, 2015). The problems of sustainability are interconnected and thus require synergy, integration, and engagement of multiple stakeholders to address them. Systems leadership approach is based on mobilizing and empowering all stakeholders towards a common goal of creating transformational systemic change (Timmins, 2015). The change is incremental and requires widespread action and innovation. Senge et al. (2007) asserted the need of cross sector, multi stakeholder coalition for achieving systemic change using innovative and action driven approaches which were breakthrough and without a precedence.

Theoretical Underpinning - Systems Leadership has three key elements

1. The individual: The skills of collaborative leadership to enable learning, trust-building and empowered action among stakeholders towards a shared goal.
2. The community: The tactics of coalition building and advocacy to develop alignment and mobilize action among stakeholders in the system, both within and between organizations; and
3. The system: An understanding of the complex systems shaping the challenge to be addressed.

Systems Leadership: An Emerging Approach for Solving Complex Problems

The Systems Leadership is an emerging approach for addressing complex global challenges facing humanity – such as hunger, poverty, health, environmental degradation, and violence. The 17 Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015 by 193 countries and these SDGs lay ambitious targets to improve global sustainability, health, economic development, and equality. Progress on these global challenges requires collective action through alliances and networks, innovative approaches, harnessing complementary capacity of diverse stakeholders to bring about a systemic scalable change. Being closely inter-linked, the SDGs call for synergistic, holistic, and people-centered approaches –engaging all stakeholders – to achieve them. Traditional approaches based on hierarchy, authority and control cannot bring about systemic change. Alliance building with a collective impact approach is a highly effective strategy for driving large-scale change. Senge, Hamilton and Kania (2014) define a “Systems Leader as someone who catalyses collective leadership, action, and innovation to address society's most complex challenges. Systems leaders focus on creating the conditions that can produce change and that can eventually cause change to be self-sustaining.” Systems leaders have a deep understanding the system, catalyse collective action by engage diverse stakeholders meaningfully, empower others in the ecosystem and act in new ways.

Systems Leadership and Turnaround at Piplantri

Shyam Sunder Paliwal was sad today. Like every evening, he came to see a kadam (burflower) tree, the tree that was too special for him. However, unlike other days, he was extraordinarily emotional today, for he hugged the tree tight in a warm embrace and shed a silent tear and murmured 'Long live my Kiran!' This day, in 2007, was the worst day in the life of Paliwal and it ought to be thus. He had lost his eighteen years old daughter, Kiran. Kiran, as the doting father reminiscences, was a chirpy, bubbly, and affectionate child of the family. Standing near the kadam tree, Paliwal travelled back in time. His mind was abuzz with recollections of Piplantri , 'his' village as he prefers to call it. The dense vegetation had earned it the sobriquet of 'green heaven' of Rajasthan. A feeling of pride drenched him when he saw the mountains carpeted with gregarious trees.

What today appeared as a picturesque village was once a dry, parched, and arid land-thanks to the indiscreet mining activity . The span 1980-2005, as Paliwal recalled, were ill-fated years for Piplantri. The phase was characterized by indiscreet mining activities that had made the land barren. Deforestation was a norm, and the hills were blatantly naked and wore an exhausted look. In the absence of the layer of vegetation, the soil got eroded and deposited in water bodies, resulting into a flood like situation even amidst meagre rains. Pollution was at its ugliest high. Mining essentially was a water intensive activity and rampant mining lowered the underground water table level, thus making water a scarce resource. Paliwal vividly remembered the water wars amounting to vendetta between kin. Government had to rescue the situation by sending water trains in 2005. Agricultural activities had come to a dead halt and livelihood opportunities were almost non-existent. There was a mass exodus of the youth to urban centers in search of employment. The exodus was painful as they could not adapt to urban lifestyles and most importantly could not do well there because of lack of contemporary skills. The village wore a deserted look. The women, old and children, who were not mobile were forced to stay back in the village. They were largely unattended to and left to live miserable life.

Paliwal-The Indomitable Leader

Twenty-five years of despair and gloominess prevailed at Piplantri until it got a new identity in 2005, under the able leadership of its Sarpanch Shyam Sunder Paliwal. Paliwal could be termed as an enthusiastic environmentalist and a social crusader. He could collaboratively restore the sense of community and actively engage the community in transforming the erstwhile political, social, economic, and ecological realities of Piplantri. The problems that Piplantri encountered were complex and required addressing the root cause of problems. Working towards change was the only choice for Paliwal, a difficult one though. Addressing the issues involved a lot of conflict, chaos, uncertainty, and inertia, but Paliwal's determination made it all possible. Paliwal could create a shift in consciousness and promote community action for sustainability. Collaboration,

inclusiveness, relationships, common purpose, and change rooted in values were the hallmark of Paliwal's leadership. Paliwal personified leadership for sustainability. He essentially empowered the inherent leader that existed in each individual and nurtured sustainable change through collaboration and creativity. He did not lead others, rather he led with them. He created ample opportunities for Piplantri residents to come together and generate their own solutions to the intricate problems. Paliwal was an astute leader and could foresee that nothing could be achieved without community engagement and coordination between the government schemes. With meagre resources and a minimalistic budget, he garnered the support of enthusiastic youth, experienced elderly folks, skilled local laborers, government employees and former public representatives. He did have initial hiccups, but eventually could gather the unprejudiced support of by all in his journey.

A Turning Point-The Tree of Life

While Paliwal was busy transforming Piplantri, life had a different design for him. He lost his 18 years old daughter Kiran owing to heat stroke and diarrhea. Losing Kiran was akin to losing his body, his soul. He was distraught and to channel his grief, he planted kadam tree and named it Kiran. The intent behind planting a tree and naming it Kiran was that he would still feel the live and pulsating presence of Kiran in his life. He visited the kadam tree every day and had long conversations with the tree. The tree was intended to fill the void created by Kiran's death. Little did Paliwal know that his 'act of catharsis' would soon become a relentless mission for him and Piplantri. Overtime he realized that if his daughter could mean so much to him, how some parents could decide to kill a girl child while she was still in womb. He was testimony to a number of female infanticide and soul stirring stories of how a family member would push a hard grain into the newborn girl child's mouth to cause infection eventually leading to death. Kiran's death created in him an empathy towards the cause of saving the girl child. An introspection revealed that the cost of education, marriage, dowry, and other social customs made parents unwelcome a girl child. This was precisely the

reason behind the distress and wailing that accompanied the birth of a girl. The premise was all set and the time had arrived for a solution to this serious social problem. Paliwal took a firm resolve to address the grave social concern and to create an ecosystem, wherein the girl child is received with warmth and affection, as much as its male counterpart did. 'Auspiciousness and gaiety should accompany the birth of a girl child', said Paliwal to himself. The occasion should be celebrated, and he devised a very creative way of celebrating the birth of a girl child with planting of trees. For every girl born, 111 trees were planted. It became a ceremonious occasion, when mothers would take the newborn child to a predefined site, for planting the saplings (see EXHIBIT 1). The tradition had continued since 2007 and trees had been planted for each of the 65-70 baby girls born in Piplantri every year. A total of 3,50,000 trees had been planted. Indeed, the change began with Kiran's death and the consequent planting of the kadam tree. Later, the horizon of the initiative enlarged to plant the trees throughout the year. The villagers were encouraged to plant saplings also in the fond memory of a departed soul. The purpose was twin fold-a gesture for welcoming the baby girl and showing reverence to the land where the ancestors lived and died. Linking trees to the birth of the girl child was indeed a very ingenious solution that saved both, the trees as well as the girl child. Paliwal convinced the parents of newborn girls that if they planted 111 trees in the name of the girl and nurtured them for eighteen years, they could easily arrange enough finances for the girl's wedding. The parents, grandparents and relatives planted the trees.

The village panchayat nurtured the plants, so that the efforts of the relatives did not go in vain. Women self-help groups, elderly women, grandmothers, aunts were all motivated to take care of the maintenance from time to time. After all, by doing so, they were taking care of their daughter. The growing girl was reminded of the fact that the plants were her age and were a souvenir of her birth. A consciousness was thus created to tend and take care of both the trees and the girls. The inspiration for all this came from Kiran. The entrance to Piplantri, had a large hoarding carrying the names of all the girls born over the past years.

The idea was breakthrough but that next thing to ponder was the sourcing of saplings. Finance was an issue and Paliwal firmly believed that community problems should seek solutions from within the community itself. He brainstormed a lot with the members of the community and devised a creative solution to the problem. It was decided that the saplings should be sourced from varied sources from different stakeholders viz. greening schemes of the government, corporate social responsibility initiatives of the corporates and even donations from public, financially affluent individuals and NGOs that espoused the cause of girl child and sustainability. The saplings were in place but needed nursing and nurturing too. All this would have come at a cost, but for Paliwal's acumen, a sense of ownership for the plant would work wonders. A brilliant idea struck Paliwal and to give the girls a sense of ownership, he asked them to tie a rakhi to the saplings (see Exhibit 3).

To add more to the sense of ownership, community marriages were encouraged around the trees planted at the birth of the bride. This indeed had added to the excitement and helped in curtailing the unnecessary and ostentatious expenses associated with Indian marriages. Gradually, the scale of the initiative increased as more and more trees were added. Structured interventions were needed to take care of the trees. This could be made possible only through a formal employment. Paliwal leveraged the Government's scheme of MNREGA and thus made tending to the trees a source of employment under MNREGA. The initiative was worth complimenting as it served manifold causes of re-vegetation, respect for trees and respect for girls and generating mass employment at the same time.

Kiran Nidhi Initiative-Piplantri's Identity

Paliwal knew celebrating the birth of the girl child by planting the sapling was not enough. The notion about a girl being a liability had to be changed to sustain the initiative. Out of the box as he was, he conceived the idea of motivating the parents to set aside a sum of Rs 10,000 in the name of the newborn daughter. He promised to add Rs 21,000 to it to make it a fixed deposit of Rs. 31,000 in the name of the girl. The balance Rs. 21,000 were raised through the village panchayat and from persons of

prominence and affluence. The fixed deposits were conditionally designed to mature and were disbursed to the girl once she attained the age of 18 and was not married before that. With interest accruing to it, investment could meet expenses for decent marriage of the girl. A noble cause though, it was not a free lunch, for it came at a pledge by the parents. The pledge was in the form of an oath on a stamp paper (see Exhibit 4) that read as follows:

“No one from my family will perform feticide. The 111 trees planted on the birth and the girl child will be raised with equal care. I will not keep my daughter from education. I will not allow child marriage of my daughter in any condition. I will spend this money on my daughter's wedding and/or higher education. The trees planted at birth will be property of the village”

Besides giving financial aid to the parents, the idea also translated in pre-empting child marriage, a banal practice in Rajasthan. The parents thus got encouraged to educate their daughters and school enrolment figures soared at Piplantri. Inspired by Paliwal's move, the Union Bank of India had given Rs 60 lakh for 300 girls to get an education in the 6,500-strong village. Pailwal was hailed, especially for the Kiran Nidhi initiative. He ceased to be the Sarpanch in 2010, but his ideas continue as an integrated part of the system at Piplantri. "We all support this because it is very good for our society and environment," says Suresh Bheel, the new Sarpanch of the village.

Piplantri in a New Avatar

Vegetation Restoration

Unimaginable ideation, collaboration and inclusivity had gone in the makeover of Piplantri. Community forestry by local labor helped organize terrace farming on the hillsides using staggered contour trench method. The technique was especially useful in slowing surface water run-off and soil erosion from sloping land, and in re-vegetating degraded land. This was an appreciable feat because the terrains were difficult to access, with even a small vehicle lacking maneuverability. The hills now donned a verdant and fresh look as the slopes were completely wrapped with green vegetation. It was indeed a visual delight!

Livestock Growth

The benefits of restoring vegetation were far reaching. The cattle now could graze on rich fodder, giving a spurt to the growth and productivity of livestock. The income levels of farmers saw a rise and the farmers took to growing garlic, potatoes, sweet potatoes, sugarcane, vegetables, fruits and many other cash crops. Not all this would have been possible without the strong support of excellent watershed management.

Processing Industry Hub

Terrace farming led to the farming of multiple crops, medicinal herbs, fruits, cash crops. Rich harvest of aloe vera, amla, ginger, turmeric, bamboo, honey, medicinal herbs and many other such plants made Piplantri a hub for the processing industry.

The gram panchayat had a unique distinction of having around 50 thousand bamboo trees, 27 thousand amla trees, 8 thousand spring roses and more than 27 lakh aloe vera plants. Women self-help groups processed aloe vera to make a livelihood (see Exhibit 2). The aloe vera was marketed under the brand name Piplantri and it sold like a hot cake. Rosewater, gulkand, amla products, bamboo products, honey, saffron, sindhoor formed a part of exports from Piplantri.

Agricultural Reforms

The milk yielding animals were fed on a special kind of grass to ensure a better yield. The special quality grass was also used to incentivize the laborers for working overtime. To add to the community engagement and excitement, the laborers could cut the fresh grass themselves for their livestock and take it home in exchange for the extra hours invested at work. Thus, the entire village became custodian of grass as they were aware that the grass shall be the payout for extra labor. The plan had enduring effects on conservation of grass, improving livestock quality, adding to the income of the laborers, and generating adequate employment.

A Punch of Excitement-The Tree Horoscope

A local astrologer, Pandit Durga Shankar Joshi, created a tree horoscope, which identified the kind of trees to be grown by the person to augur good omens and prosperity in life. As the tree would grow, his planetary positions would

become better and good things shall happen. Contrarily, bad things shall accrue on not nurturing the tree or cutting the tree. The newborn girl child's horoscope too had the same information. Thus, Pandit Shankar could reinforce the idea of planting and conserving trees. It was a brilliant and exciting move to involve the trusted astrologer to engage people in planting and conserving trees.

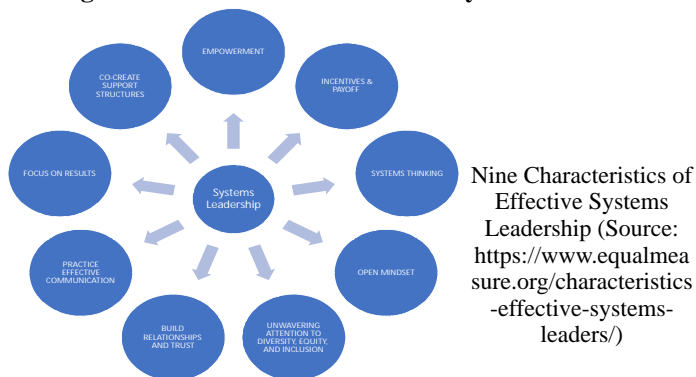
Panchayat at Your Doorstep

Paliwal realized that despite enormous government promotions and awareness programs, the village folks, especially women, senior citizens, and widows, did not participate in the panchayat meetings. They thus missed the opportunity of being beneficiaries to the Government schemes and initiatives. Paliwal reached out to these folks at their homes and premises along with his official Panchayat team and apprised them of the possible benefits that they could avail from various welfare schemes announced by the government. This initiative had a lasting effect in increasing the trust of the people in the Panchayat and Government.

Paliwal-A Truly Systems Leader

Piplantri saw a makeover, from a drought stricken, semi-arid land to a lush green and prosperous village owing to continuous farming development, forest breeding, conservation of water, re-vegetation. Rajasthan government acknowledged the transformation by announcing Piplantri to be an 'ideal panchayat' for the other panchayats to emulate. An administrative order was released to that effect. The agriculture tours organized by Rajasthan Government mandated a trip to Piplantri to learn lessons from the transformational journey.

Figure 1 Nine Characteristics of A Systems Leader



Systems thinking

Paliwal visualized the big picture as a pulsating ecosystem of inter-dependent entities. As a systems leader, he identified relationships and patterns to disrupt towards affecting positive systemic change. Paliwal thought systemically and thus had a clear awareness of what is happening in the system and used the awareness to learn, innovate, and test solutions.

Open mindset

Paliwal embraced risk, ambiguity and uncertainty and experimented to find an innovative solution to Piplantri's problems. He demonstrated ample courage to disrupt the status quo and created unexpected paths and opportunities. This is well exemplified by the Kiran Nidhi plan initiated by Paliwal.

Focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion

Paliwal applied a diversity, inclusion and equity approach to his endeavours, a hallmark of sustainable leaders. His deep commitment to social justice made him highlight the inequities embedded in the system and thus he galvanized people to act against female foeticide.

Building relationships and trust

Paliwal empathized with the parents of a girl child and understood that education, marriage, and the banal custom of dowry made parents consider the girl child as a liability and opt for female infanticide. He addressed the issue by gaining trust of the parents and led them towards a shared goal of gender equity and inclusion by planting trees to mark the occasion of a girl child and garnering a fixed deposit of Rs. 31,000 in the name of the newborn girl. The effort led to the social, economic, and environmental prosperity of Piplantri.

Effective communication

Paliwal was adept at discerning common interests of all stakeholders, could speak the language of diverse stakeholders and thus could design resonant narratives to create the levels of trust needed to work together. His experiments with ecofeminism addressed the twin agenda of gender inclusion and village self-sufficiency.

Focus on results

Instead of pursuing disjointed sectoral goals, Paliwal organized collaborative activities around results to ensure that the different parts of a collective coalesce toward common goals. Breaking down of silos through

collaboration with partners and stakeholders, with an eye on the results, was a major achievement.

Co-creating support structures

Paliwal made partners work together in new and innovative ways. He co-created joint processes enabling an exchange of ideas among representatives the community touched by the change process. Group-decision-making, stakeholders' commitments and agile governance together created an effective support infrastructure.

Empowering the collective

As an effective systems leader, Paliwal recognized that there were actors at multiple levels that needed to lead change in their respective contexts. Like a true systems leader, Paliwal shared power by abandoning "I for we" in all his endeavours. He strongly endorsed the belief that community problems can be best solved by people from the community and thus led to empower the collective, even if it meant diminishing his power.

Creating opportunities for individuals to see the benefits of their participation

Paliwal helped partners comprehend and articulate the benefits of participation in order accomplish more. He continuously refreshed the individual partner value proposition to keep all stakeholders engaged towards achieving a large system change. Doing this led to a long way to sustaining the change effort's initial momentum.

Awards and Accolades

Exemplary work done under the aegis of 'Kiran Nidhi Yojna' had been lauded unequivocally. The article in the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation newsletter by Purnima Ramakrishnan brought worldwide fame to the initiative. Two students from the Danish Imos Media, Kirstine Jacobsen and Rikke Mathiasen made a documentary film on this serious issue. A revolutionary step is being taken to add this documentary film to the curriculum in Danish primary. President APJ Abdul Kalam in 2007 presented 'Nirmal Gram Award' to the panchayat for its complete cleanliness (see Exhibit 5).

The Way Forward

Paliwal still stood near the kadam tree, in a pensive mood. There was a seething jungle of thoughts inside him. The entire journey of transformation was live before him. The struggles, the achievements, the small triumphs and the huge failures all were a part of the sojourn. The eldest girl

beneficiary of Kiran Nidhi initiative was still only nine years old, that is, nine years younger than the legitimate marrying age. The test of his experiment of changing the economic and social climate would happen in the next ten years. The gestation period of his experiment was a decade long time horizon. He was wondering whether his efforts would bear the fruits or shall get diluted as time passed by?

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Exhibit 1



A Ceremonious Occasion-111 Saplings being Planted for Every Girl Child Born



Women Self-help Groups processing Aloe Vera to Make a Livelihood

Exhibit 3



Building a Sense of Ownership-Girls tying Rakhi to the Saplings

Exhibit 4



Parents' Pledge on Stamp Paper

Exhibit 5



Annexure – 2 Testimonials

Better usage of limited resources

“How we can use limited resources to get better result, Piplantri is a perfect example of it. Following Pt. Deendayalji's ideology every scheme is well planned. One must visit here to experience it”-Sumitra Mahajan, Lok Sabha Speaker. The most successful village Panchayat!

“Piplantri is an example of most successful panchayat. A little love, a little knowledge and hard work changed this village totally. Best execution of government schemes. Most of the people should see it and follow it in their respective panchayats. Villagers

must carry forward this work. Congratulation to Ex sarpanch and villagers”-VasundhraRaje, Chief Minister, Rajasthan.Tremendous Work!

“Villagers have done a great job to convert bare mountains into green hills. Aravali hills are being desolate by mining. Climate was being ruined because of it. Tree conservation is paving a way for the good future of village. May this village touch new heights! Best wishes”-Rajendra Singh, Alwar, Magsaysay Awardee.

A Role Model for all Panchayats to Follow

“The Sarpanch and villagers have set an example for others. All Panchayats should follow this. It's the ray of hope”-

Dr. Raghuvansh Prasad Singh, Central Minister of Rural Development.

Impressive Panchayat

“Thank you for showing me the work of this very impressive panchayat. It has been very informative. It will be helpful for my research. I particularly liked the play pump. Well done”

-Danny Catherell, Washington, D. C., USA.

My Best Wishes!

“They are more concerned over environment; on the other hand, the training for non-violence and efforts to make addiction free society are also going on. My best wishes to the village”-Acharya Mahashraman, Chief, TerapanthiDharm Sangh