

# Swavlamban by Drishtee: Gandhian Perspectives on Village-Centric Development



Satyan Mishra and Dharendra Mani Shukla

## 1 Introduction

This chapter presents reflections of Mr. Satyan Mishra, a social entrepreneur who co-founded Drishtee as a social enterprise, on his and Drishtee's experiences and learning over the last 25 years. The chapter begins with his views on the deepening problems of rural life and the role of social entrepreneurship in responding to these problems (Dees, 1998; Hota et al., 2019, 2023). The co-founder has described how his interpretations of Gandhian thought have shaped Drishtee's paths over the due course of time. The chapter documents the key initiatives undertaken by Drishtee in the last two decades of its journey, as the social enterprise continues to be inspired by Gandhian thoughts. Toward the end, the chapter also presents some of the ongoing experimentations of Drishtee at the organizational level to enable village self-reliance through decentralization and self-managed teams (Goodman et al., 1988; Napathorn, 2018). Finally, it briefly mentions the future paths of Drishtee to improve the self-reliance and sustainability of the rural ecosystem, which it has been enabling over the last two decades.

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This chapter is co-authored by Satyan Mishra and Dharendra Mani Shukla. "I," "we," or "our," in this chapter, refer to the experiences and thoughts of Satyan Mishra as a leader (co-founder) of the social enterprise "Drishtee," or the social enterprise as a collective.

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B. Bhatt et al. (eds.), *Social Entrepreneurship and Gandhian Thoughts in the Post-COVID World*, India Studies in Business and Economics, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-4008-0\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-4008-0_10)

## 2 Views on Issues of Rural Life and the Role of Social Entrepreneurship

In its 25 years, Drishtee has played a small, yet meaningful role, in developing entrepreneurship in the villages. Its efforts have resulted in the creation of livelihood opportunities for more than 25,000 households in rural areas. Drishtee's intent is to continue this journey armed with a promise, and in collaboration with the local communities, to ensure that every community offers a source of livelihood to all its members without having them migrate from their natural habitat. We believe that rural-to-urban migration and reduced interest in agriculture create a serious threat to the sustainability of both rural and urban lives. In the below sub-section, I have presented my views on the deepening problems of rural lives, which challenge the sustainability of rural lives and livelihood opportunities. Following this, I have presented my opinion on the relevance of the Gandhian perspective in inspiring social entrepreneurship and suggested how social entrepreneurship can be an effective response to the deepening problems of rural lives.

### 2.1 *Deepening Problems of Rural Lives*

Revolutionary technological changes have shaped our lives over the last century (Morgan, 2019; Qureshi et al., [this volume](#)). From television to the internet and from computers to smartphones, technological advancements and changes in businesses have commenced at a swift pace, leading us to an era of industrial revolution 4.0 (Ghobakhloo, 2020; Morgan, 2019). One important implication of faster technological innovation and the industrial revolution has been the increased appeal of urban lifestyles and the migration of the rural workforce into urban areas (Rogers & Williamson, 1982). This phenomenon has increasingly affected not only the labor-intensive agriculture sector but also several aspects of rural life including local production and consumption of goods and services (Choithani et al., 2021).

With nearly 600 million people living in Indian villages (RBI, 2022), there is increasing pressure on land to provide for livelihood. With every generation, the division of land makes it harder for farming to remain economically viable. While the country is boasting to possess the youngest population in the developing world, most of the young population is being lured away by cities, and India is transitioning from farming to a non-farming economy (Majumdar, 2020). Farming as a profession has not just lost sustainability but apparently has also lost the respect, which it deserves, before any other profession.

Additionally, over the decades, several societal problems such as malnourishment and hunger have been considered linked with poverty and poor productivity from agriculture. This has attracted the attention of the government and development organizations, who introduced fertilizers (and associated subsidies) and the mandi system as solutions to enhance productivity and income generation. Thus, with increased usage of chemicals and mechanized tools, the volume over variety

was a natural choice for the farmers looking to make a decent living off the land. It has slowly led to the abandonment of old farming practices, which included subtle nuances of multi-cropping, soil balance, and organic waste usage. These practices are used to lead to a healthier diet. Moreover, the failure of the existing supply chain and assured local market (i.e., *mandi*) has steadily led to the degeneration of the concept of integrated farming. Single crop fields and volume production for the *Mandi* (commodity markets) have further damaged the prospects of sustainable agriculture (Tabriz et al., 2021).

Overall, increased migration from rural to urban areas, decreased focus on agriculture, and altered farming practices have not only impacted the prospects of sustainable livelihood opportunities through agriculture but have also undermined the potential of rural economies in generating sustainable well-being for the rural inhabitants.

## 2.2 *Social Entrepreneurship as a Response to the Problems of Rural Lives*

As we reflect on some of the deepening issues of rural areas, it reminds us how yet we have been unable to fully comprehend Gandhi's perspective on the integrated nature of economic, ecological, and social spheres of life. We believe that his vision of ideal villages, where artisans and farmers epitomized self-sufficiency, can still provide a pathway to address most of the abovementioned concerns and help make rural life and livelihood sustainable. We have deep faith in the view that the "spinning wheel" (*Charkha*) symbolizes freedom and self-sufficiency (Parel, 1969). However, we believe that the "act of spinning" is a symbol of entrepreneurship. Self-sufficiency and freedom can only be achieved by constantly engaging in the entrepreneurial exercise of "spinning the wheel." In our interpretation, the Gandhian perspective has always emphasized that entrepreneurship is the primary tool to bring social and economic transformation. Gandhi was never against profit making, but, in his view, entrepreneurship must be driven by a sense of social responsibility and commitment toward community development (Bhatt, 2017, 2022; Bhatt & Qureshi, [this volume](#); Bhatt et al., 2013, 2019, 2022; Iyengar & Bhatt, [this volume](#)), which is often construed as social entrepreneurship by academicians and practitioners (Bhatt et al., 2023, [this volume-a, b](#); Dees, 1998; Hota et al., 2023; Qureshi et al., 2023). He believed in prioritizing the needs of workers and customers over profit-making and advocated for developing businesses that were driven by social, economic, and environmental responsibilities (Ghosh, 1989; Javeri et al., [this volume](#)). Further, he envisioned autonomy and self-reliance for entrepreneurs and warned against external dependency on resources (Ganguli, 1977). His view was that entrepreneurs should create businesses that are self-sufficient and require leveraging local resources and support (Trivedi, 2007). However, Gandhi was aware that the path of entrepreneurship would be challenging for the marginalized and downtrodden, and, hence, he viewed a greater role of civil society and community in providing support and enabling entrepreneurial capabilities in those who were marginalized (Ghatak et al., [this volume](#); Ghosh, 1989;

Iyengar, 2000). We believe this is exactly where Drishtee sees its roles and responsibilities to enable marginalized in rural areas and make them capable of earning a livelihood in a sustainable manner.

Indeed, if one looks closely, entrepreneurship is not a choice but a necessity in rural areas, be it in agriculture or other livelihood opportunities. Entrepreneurial capabilities are necessary to create sustainable livelihood opportunities for households in rural areas. Further, a substantial increase in productivity over the next few years would be required to make agriculture and rural context attractive to the younger workforce (Brooks et al., 2013). Moreover, to retain them in the village, further changes will be needed in the education system, banking, health care, and basic infrastructure. Such improvements may not be feasible without developing entrepreneurial capabilities in rural communities (Bacq et al., 2022).

Despite the recognizable need to improve entrepreneurship in rural areas, the collective efforts toward this end are yet to achieve the desired focus and scale from civil societies, governments, or businesses. Thus, from the rural community development perspective, it is apparent that our actions over the last seven decades since independence have not been consistent with Gandhi's vision of self-reliant rural communities (Dasgupta, 1996; Kumarappa, 1951). Perhaps, in the pursuit of economic growth, we have moved in the opposite direction, making rural economies largely dependent on the urban markets for both production and consumption (Bryceson, 2002).

Nonetheless, there are a few organizations, such as PRADAN, Association for Sarva Seva Farms (ASSEFA), BASIX, and Seva Mandir (Ghosh, [this volume](#); Kumar et al., [this volume](#); Mahajan & Qureshi, [this volume](#); Mehta & Jacob, [this volume](#)), which are inspired by Gandhian view to develop self-reliant rural communities and improve rural life. In a similar vein, Drishtee, over the last two decades, has been constantly striving to improve the sustainability of rural lives and bring shared prosperity to rural areas. However, I believe our journey has been evolutionary. It was not that, in our initial days, our vision was fully inspired by Gandhian thoughts. We started with a for-profit motive to exploit the opportunities created by the booming internet era. However, as we developed commitment and affection for the rural areas, our understanding of the Gandhian views and paths became clearer. Consequently, the later part of our journey has been strongly inspired by Gandhian thoughts. Below, I present the evolution of Drishtee.

### **3 Evolution of Drishtee: Drawing Inspiration from Gandhian Perspective**

#### ***3.1 Changing Focus from Urban to Rural***

Drishtee started as a for-profit social enterprise in the year 1998. It aimed to create economic and social value. Its start in Bhopal (a town in Central India) was modest. Its facilities were used as a small cybercafé at night coupling with a computer training center in the daytime. However, with the growth of the internet and our

entrepreneurial spirit, our first venture soon became the talk of the town. Within 2 years, we have expanded to two more cities and started realizing our dreams of generating an economic surplus. Early in the year 2000, Drishtee got an opportunity to set up an internet-based service center in a rural area, which villagers could use to connect to provincial administration and access E-Government services. We decided to adopt a model in which we engaged local village-level entrepreneurs for service provisioning. Our initial idea was that such a model will improve accessibility for the citizens and also generate livelihood prospects for village entrepreneurs. Rural citizens could access E-Government services in their own village and save their time in commuting to blocks or district headquarters. Moreover, as it engaged local entrepreneurs, we believed that this model will invoke trust in the rural people and encourage them to avail of internet-based services. In the early days, this opportunity in the rural context did not seem most exciting. However, sooner, it became a game changer for Drishtee and for many other organizations who were seeking to empower rural communities.

Having my roots in one of the most backward areas in Bihar, it was not surprising for me to see a lack of jobs, poverty, and illiteracy among the rural population. However, what stood out was the quotient of happiness that oozed out from the community toward a new system or a new device in the form of the computer and IT. This motivated us, and as we started investing more time and resources in the rural areas, our affection toward the area and desire to help rural people grew. The decision of Drishtee to move from town to village was almost unimaginable at the start of our journey. However, as we became more emotionally invested with the rural communities, its affection drew Drishtee with such fortitude that we all were swept off our feet.

### ***3.2 Developing an Ecosystem Approach of Scaling***

From a business perspective, our initial venturing into rural areas was not lucrative. We could only earn a couple of cents for each dollar, which was earned by the village entrepreneur, who used to manage the rural E-Government provisioning service. Having large costs and with a diminishing focus on the urban business, we had to scale up faster in villages to make ends meet. The challenges of scalability of social businesses have been a matter of concern for both practitioners and academicians over the years (Kistruck et al., 2008, 2013a, b; Qureshi et al., 2021d). Scholars have suggested several approaches to scaling the impact of social businesses, which include scaling up, scaling by diversification, scaling across and deep, and scaling by using an ecosystem approach (Qureshi et al., 2021d). Being new in the rural areas, we believed scaling up by focusing on our service provisioning can help get a deeper insight into the rural areas and build our strengths and also increase our reach to several geographies (André & Pache, 2016).

However, soon, we realized that the village was not looking up to us for what we had to offer, rather they were more interested in meeting their needs. E-Government

service was a part of their need, but definitely their priorities included livelihood opportunities and financing needs, in addition to the availability of health care services and banking. After a few years, we realized that our offerings required adapting to the needs of the rural population. It made sense to us to develop an ecosystem through which the diverse needs of the rural population can be catered to (Acs et al., 2018; Bhatt et al., 2021). Hence, over the years, our approach changed from scaling up to an ecosystem approach scaling (Bhatt et al., 2021). We aimed to build social businesses driven by their needs and owned and operated by them. In this regard, we visualized our role as an enabler of the ecosystem (Bhatt et al., 2021; Qureshi et al., 2021d).

Indeed, Drishtee is still learning to function within its new role as an ecosystem provider. However, the initial challenges were prominent for its learning. We observed that the culture of free service, free products, and above all subsidies had made it difficult for social businesses in rural areas to even break even. Consequently, hardly anyone in the village was interested in engaging in entrepreneurial activities. Most of them did not wish to start any business in the village but rather wanted to move to the cities with assumptions of better earnings prospects. Even many of the landowners had moved out of their villages, because of lacking basic amenities and services in the villages such as health care, transportation, education for children, etc. Those who had remained in the village were feeling the pain in terms of the quality of products and services, which were on offer. Drishtee realized that any intervention had to start with expectations of better quality and differentiation with what was on offer through the subsidized or free channel: be it healthcare, education, or even basic vocational training.

Drishtee understood that a viable ecosystem may not be possible without fixing the issues of an effective supply chain in rural areas. We started our efforts to develop a supply chain. We believed that with an effective supply chain, the villagers cannot only get products that they need at a desirable price but also be able to get their products to reach outside markets, as there was hardly any local market for the rural products. However, our initial efforts could succeed only in getting some aspirational products to the local communities.

However, over time, Drishtee became fully invested, both emotionally and materially, in the village. We were desperate to ensure that villagers built their livelihood with the limited resources they had and the minimum ecosystem support that we could offer to them initially. With the intent to bring the required change, we started providing paid vocational training and encouraged men and women to form enterprises. We kept a token fee to provide a behavioral nudge to move out of the prevailing subsidy culture while ensuring the affordability of our services to budding entrepreneurs. Over the due course of time, we realized that women were more interested in paying the token money to avail of training whereas men were willing to wait for the “free courses” offered through subsidized sources such as government and nongovernment agencies. Also, we noticed that women, after getting trained, were willing to come together for production leaving aside their caste and even religious boundaries. Although these changes were very gradual, it was nothing

short of a miracle to us. We started realizing that it was the rural women who bore the potential of bringing change in the rural areas.

It was interesting to learn how women approached their businesses. We observed that their priority was not profitability but sustainability. They evaluated a business based on savings and reduction in cash outflow perspective, rather than looking at it from a revenue perspective (i.e., cash inflow). For example, they assessed to what extent a product can be consumed by them or their family and can thus reduce their dependence on the external market where they needed to pay for a product. Then, they assessed whether some part of their products can be consumed by their neighbors through monetary or nonmonetary transactions. At times, they saw their neighbors buying their produce in exchange for other goods for which their families needed to pay. In other words, we observed that rural women evaluated the presence of the local market and also explored the potential of nonmonetary transactions, which could further reduce their cash outflows, before deciding whether to engage in any business or not. Thus, we learned from them that income earned in monetary terms as a measure of impact may not be appropriate because of women's broader consideration of a market (local exchanges and mandis) and modes of exchanges (i.e., monetary and nonmonetary). We learned that rural women measured their success differently. They considered production and productivity as the first benchmark, while the fulfillment of their basic needs was the primary expectation. Also, they regarded savings as more sacred than income. We believe that rural women's approach was partly shaped by the culture and history of the rural areas, where "barter" used to be a prevailing mode of exchange (Verma, 1980).

Our learning led to devising a "barter-based system" for the rural area. Since the urban market was far and practically inaccessible while the rural market was plagued by the issue of cash flows, which were rare and unreliable, barter had an acceptance with the rural women. Drishtee used the age-old system of exchange (i.e., barter) and converted that into an Android application, which now facilitates barter in rural areas and is executed through a local woman entrepreneur. Below, the key features and novelties of the "barter system" introduced by Drishtee are described.

### ***3.3 Barter: A Solution to Enabling Self-Reliance***

With around 70% of the population residing in villages, India is primarily a rural country (RBI, 2022). The rural economy contributes around 46% of the country's national income (NITI Aayog, 2017). Thus, inclusive development in India requires growth and development of the rural part of the country. If one looks at the value chain of most of the products, a crucial part of the value addition occurs in rural areas (e.g., in terms of raw materials). Yet, these producers of the raw materials earn relatively less margin compared to the various intermediaries (middlemen) engaged in sourcing raw materials or providing finished products to the rural areas. At times, rural consumers buy the finished agri-based products at much higher prices than



what rural producers earn by selling the agri-based raw materials. As the product goes through several intermediaries, the price of the final product used for consumption is significantly higher.

Further, it also increases the rural people's dependency on the urban market both for production and consumption. This dependency has a detrimental effect on the well-being of the rural economy when supply chains are broken because of external disruptions. For example, during the COVID-19 situation, most of the urban industrial units engaged in producing finished goods were mostly closed because of restricted transportation and logistics. This disruption broke the supply chain between rural and urban markets both for production and consumption (Reardon et al., 2020). Also, a huge migrant labor force was compelled to return to their villages for basic subsistence.

However, this reverse migration of the skilled labor force offers an opportunity for the rural economy if it can be channelized into setting up micro or mini enterprises for producing various goods and creating more local jobs and developing entrepreneurs in the rural areas (Behera et al., 2021). Effective functioning of the market will still be a challenge as the major cash inflow to the rural market is through urban trades and a constraint on this cash flow in rural markets because of the pandemic can restrict the buying capacity of rural consumers. Although this situation does not sound healthy, it may create opportunities for alternative nonmonetary transactions such as the barter system (Córdoba et al., 2021).

A barter economy is a nonmonetary economic system in which goods and services are exchanged based on a "double coincidence of want" (Starr, 1972). Barter-based economies are one of the earliest, predating monetary systems and even recorded history. People have successfully used barter almost in every field, but later, it was shifted to gold- or silver-based transactions and slowly toward defined currency-based transactions (Dalton, 1982; Starr, 1972). The traditional barter system has certain limitations compared to monetary transactions, such as a lack of a common measure of value and transactional inefficiencies (Starr, 1972). In a monetary transaction, as money is an established measure of value, equality matching is not an issue (Fiske, 1991). However, a traditional barter economy lacks a common measure of exchange, and equality matching becomes a challenging task, often leading to higher transaction costs (Starr, 1972). Moreover, the "unstructured" barter system mostly led to opportunistic behavior and exploitation by traders or resulted in dissatisfaction in transacting parties, affecting trust and prospects of future transactions. As a result, while the barter system had already existed in the rural marketplace historically, its scale diminished over time with increased reliance on monetary-based exchanges (Verma, 1980; Córdoba et al., 2021). Thus, we thought if some of the issues of the traditional barter system could be addressed by bringing a structured approach to the exchanges, it can improve fair-trading options and enable equality matching (Fiske, 1991), thus encouraging participation at a large scale.



To address the issues of common measures and equality matching, we came up with the idea of Livelihood Points (LPs).<sup>1</sup> LPs have money-like attributes in terms of providing a common measure of value, thus facilitating transactions. However, at the same time, as LPs could only be transacted within the village, they helped retain resources within the village itself. Thus, it addressed the issues of the traditional barter system and could also play an important role in the localization of market-based exchanges and retain the positives of barter in terms of the development of social cohesion and strengthening of the rural economy (Córdoba et al., 2021).

We devised a systematic approach to calculate the livelihood points for rural production and services. LPs can be calculated using multiple inputs such as the cost of raw material, time invested in producing the product, minimum wages of that region/state, producer's skill level, opportunity costs of resources used, and profit margin desired by the producer. These LPs were allocated a stored using the Android-based application developed by Drishtee to facilitate the exchanges.

As the modified barter system required access to the Android application, which is not generally accessible to the masses in the rural area, we decided to facilitate barter using an intermediary – a local woman entrepreneur called “Drishtee Mitra” (or Mitra). Mitra is a woman entrepreneur from the village who is acting as a change agent for the community and plays a vital role in making the rural economy less dependent on urban markets and enhancing its self-sufficiency. Below, we mention the key ideas of the modified barter system and the role of “Drishtee Mitra.” Below are the steps involved in the barter-based transaction using the Android-based mobile application:

- I. A producer registers his “haves” and “wants” in a system with the help of Drishtee Mitra functioning in that region.
- II. Producers buy some LPs from Drishtee Mitra against the Gold standard products defined, which will be required to facilitate any barter transaction.
- III. While registering products, the producer must explain all the input expenses along with the time taken to produce and calculates its cost of production.
- IV. The Barter platform will match the haves and wants along with their COPs and initiate the deal, which will be facilitated by Drishtee Mitra.
- V. Drishtee Mitra will inform both producers about this match and take their consent and lock the transaction in the system.
- VI. Both producers leave their product at Drishtee Mitra's place, and their product is exchanged, and Mitra gets the facilitation fee in LP, which is credited in his mobile wallet.

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<sup>1</sup>Digital social innovation (Escobedo et al., 2021; Hota et al., 2021; Pandey et al., 2021; Parth et al., 2021; Parthiban et al., 2020a, b, 2021; Pillai et al., 2021a, b; Qiu et al., 2021; Qureshi et al., 2021a, b, c, d, 2022b; Zainuddin et al., 2022) are designed to take into account local resources, practices and social norms (Qureshi et al., 2016, 2017, 2018a, b; Riaz & Qureshi, 2017; Sutter et al., 2023), and most often are structure to overcome various marginalization (Bhardwaj et al., 2021; Maurer & Qureshi, 2021; Qureshi et al., 2020, 2022a) or environmental issues (Bansal et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2022)

### 3.4 Role of Diverse Actors in the Ecosystem

The barter-based transactions within the local rural economy assume the salient role of several actors at the ecosystem level, including producers, consumers, barter facilitators, skill development facilitators, logistic providers, and knowledge providers. Below, the key actors and their roles in the ecosystem are outlined:

*Mitra*, a women entrepreneur from the village, is a change agent. Her role is to register *producers and service providers* in the mobile application and allocate LP to them based on the calculated value of the product or services. The producers and service providers could be anyone from the village willing to engage in barter transactions and participate in the ecosystem. Further, Drishtee Mitra's role is to facilitate the barter transaction. They are also responsible to identify the logistic partner (called "*Dhavak*" from the local community) and help "*Gram Sahyogi*" (village associate) identify the possible skill learning centers in the villages, where the Drishtee team can arrange skill development training as per the demand of the local women and characteristics of the locality. Further, "*Gram Sahyogi*" with the help of Drishtee Mitra mobilizes local rural women with entrepreneurial orientation to attend training and subsequently form MEG (Micro Enterprise Groups). The members of the MEG are called *Vaibhavis*. Drishtee Mitra and Gram Sahyogi work together to help connect the registered producers with MEGs for the required raw material and facilitate the transaction. Further, Drishtee Mitra also provides necessary support to Gram Sahyogi in the formation of a village-level governance committee (called "*Swavlamban Samiti*"), which plays an advisory role to the different actors in the ecosystem.

*Vaibhavis* (members of the different MEGs) are the local women entrepreneurs who are willing to take risks and come forward to engage in various value chain activities, including production, packaging, and to some extent sales and marketing. These women are willing to invest in simple machines, which they can operate with their hands and process raw materials into finished products to make them more marketable. *Drishtee* helps these *Vaibhavis* by providing them with skill-based training, linking them with marketplaces, and providing functional knowledge like bookkeeping, capacity planning, etc.

While production and processing activities create livelihood opportunities, we realized that *Vaibhavis* always look to sourcing their raw materials or accessories locally. For example, if they set up a cheese-making unit, they would not only source their milk locally but also ensure that they find local and natural replacements for costly animal feed supplements. Similarly, their own garden is devoid of chemical fertilizer and mostly uses cow dung, vermicompost, etc. Therefore, it became evident to us that there is a huge potential for livelihood generation in villages by creating interdependence among the rural producers and consumers. As a social intermediary, we are only required to identify these interdependencies and ignite the spirit of "*Swavlamban*" (i.e., self-reliance) in rural women. The concept of "*Swavlamban*" was understood by us as interdependence among the villagers to achieve self-reliance. We believed that this "*Swavlamban*" could trigger

transformative changes in terms of the creation of livelihood opportunities and enhancing shared prosperity in the villages.

Further, Drishtee revisualized its role as an enabler of the rural ecosystem so that the “Swavlamban” could be attained by the rural communities without becoming heavily dependent on the urban markets for accessing goods that are not available in the local market (e.g., raw materials for detergent powders or other processed goods). As local rural production is quite fragmented, local MEGs may not get the benefits of economies of scale in purchases and incur huge costs in transportation. To respond to such threats, we established a rural distribution model to provide access to physical goods for the villagers in remote areas. Our divisional offices procure and maintain an inventory of such goods from nearby urban areas. The goods are then taken into remote villages of 1000–3000 people in delivery vans by our field agents on pre-mapped routes and supplied to rural retail points (RRPs). When aggregated, these RRP constitute a comprehensive rural retail infrastructure, and we currently have more than 13,000 active RRP in our network. Typically, the smaller population sizes of these remote villages and the transportation costs make this last-mile distribution cost prohibitive, and manufacturer supply chains do not reach well into these areas. However, at Drishtee, we are able to effectively aggregate the demand of villagers on one side and the product portfolios of numerous manufacturers on the other, providing the network scale necessary to make the model sustainable.

Overall, we believe that the “structured” barter system along with other ecosystem-level interventions in the rural economy will enable the self-reliance of the local community. We believe that this will lead to real “Swavlamban,” where local enterprises and livelihood opportunities will be developed without much dependence on external or urban markets.

### ***3.5 Organizing to Enable Village Self-Reliance (“Swavlamban”)***

I often thought that the hardest part of reaching a social goal is not the one identifying the right path but driving the organization to tread that path. In our case, managing a large social organization like Drishtee has been a challenge. After a few years since we changed our focus from urban to rural areas, we realized that while our dreams were about building and supporting rural communities, our approach was still like corporations. Our human resources, training methods, language, and tools were extremely corporatized. In the initial days, our focus was to develop expensive monitoring systems, but their implementation often came at the cost of opportunities to build trust. In the pursuit of monitoring and control, we lost opportunities to build trust with our stakeholders. As we realized the flaws in our organizing principles, we started changing our value system. We had the absolute resolve to develop an organization that espoused values similar to the ideal village community in terms of

trust, reciprocity, integrity, and self-sufficiency. We started experimenting with the idea of self-managed teams (SMTs) (Goodman et al., 1988; Napathorn, 2018). We organized Drishtee as a larger community of several geography-based SMTs. The common responsibilities of a team are divided among the team members who could take decisions independently keeping the broader organizational guiding principles in mind. Performance appraisal is conducted as a team. The role of top leaders, thus, has become enablers who work continuously to improve the effectiveness of the SMTs by profiling the team's skills and helping team members develop complementary skills (Gupta et al., 2011). We believe that this organizing model resonates well with our idea of developing self-reliant village communities.

### ***3.6 The Path Ahead: Imparting Skill and Knowledge to Make the Ecosystem Self-Sustainable***

Learning and experimentation have been some of the core values of Drishtee. We reflect on our experiences and learn from them to decide our future pathways. During recent reflections, we realized that Drishtee can build on its strength in training and skill development to improve the sustainability of the rural ecosystem. Further, we again drew inspiration from Gandhi's "*Nai Talim*" to reconceptualize our role as integrators of knowledge and work such that we can enable rural communities to sustain their livelihoods and become self-reliant.

#### **3.6.1 Drishtee's Model of Skill Building**

Skilling for livelihood is a continuous activity. A sustainable livelihood is ever-evolving. Drishtee is a national skill development corporation (NSDC) partner and has trained and skilled more than 10,000 youths in rural areas in various disciplines, such as information technology, farming, textile, construction, and other non-farming activities, over the last two decades. The maximum number of these trainees has paid a significant portion of their monthly income to acquire the necessary skills. Delivery of such training programs presently happens through Drishtee franchisee-owned centers. For most of the 22 years of its operations, Drishtee has scaled through a franchising model to impart skill and education. We have tried various micro business models ranging from E-Governance and health to banking at various levels of success or failure. However, one of the building blocks of Drishtee has been the training (skill) franchising model wherein a trained rural youth plays the franchisee's key role in offering training courses to the rural people on a revenue-sharing basis. Drishtee has now augmented its model by adding various training programs, approved by a national open standard, which aim at building rural livelihood skills. Several of these skills impart entrepreneurial capabilities to the rural youth. We constantly strive to integrate our training and skill development

model with the rural ecosystem to enhance its sustainability. In order to strengthen our presence and enable rural communities, we have again drawn inspiration from Gandhi's idea of "*Nai Talim*."

### 3.6.2 Implementing "*Nai Talim*"

*Nai Talim* is a method of integrated learning that combines knowledge and work first proposed by Mahatma Gandhi. In the Gandhian view, the primary aim of education is toward the development of "human personality," which includes mind, heart, body, and spirit. The purpose of education also includes helping individuals understand their own responsibilities toward society. Gandhi Ji formulated and propounded the scheme of *Nai Talim* (New Education) through his newspaper "*Harijan*" in 1937. The scheme was based on the philosophy of education, which he had developed through experiments conducted in South Africa and India (Sabarmati and Sevagram). The scheme was based on the idea of comprehensive personality development and was founded based on four key principles: (a) learning and education be imparted in the mother tongue, (b) learning to be linked with vocational work, (c) work be linked with useful vocational needs of the locality, and (d) work should be constructive, with utility for the society.

Drishtee has recently started implementing the key ideas of *Nai Talim* (Patil & Sinha, [this volume](#)) in its approach to develop capabilities in rural areas. We see this form of education as a tool for engaging and structuring the community. The first step is to initiate this innovative form of learning by providing value-added, vocational, and activity-based education for village kids. Such education can be provided within or outside school hours. In the second step, more focused, commercial training in the field of agriculture, agro-processing, construction, and textile can be provided to the village adults. During the training, the formation of groups can be encouraged for taking up production and can be structured in small producer groups. The resulting micro-enterprises can follow the Model Village Plan and provide a much-needed economic boost to the rural economy. Moreover, these smaller groups can federate to form a central Model Village Organization, which can look at larger community issues such as infrastructure growth, health, and education. The same federation can also become the center for governance and society in the longer run.

## 4 Conclusion

When Drishtee started as a social enterprise, we had little appreciation for how social entrepreneurship could be inspired by Gandhian thoughts. However, as we reflect on our journey of the last 20 years, we realize that our successes, failures, and learnings are deeply connected with the values and views of Gandhi. His teachings

on the necessities and prospects of sustainable rural life and livelihood are becoming more relatable day by day with our increasing attachment to the villages. “India lives in villages” was a phrase that he coined in an era wherein urbanization was just beginning in India. Its value can hardly be understood by a generation that has mostly lived in the cities. However, during COVID-19, when the media was replete with images and videos of economically challenged walking on highways with their limited belongings, there was a sudden realization of the relevance of this phrase. It reminded us that villages are still “home” for most of the migrants. Thus, our motivations to follow the paths suggested by Gandhi to improve the sustainability of rural lives have become stronger. We constantly strive to strengthen the rural ecosystem and make rural communities self-reliant.

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