

Championing the cause of responsible agriculture

Ashis Mondal

Action for Social Advancement

“I am excited to grow responsible crops. Just like the growing market for organic produce and the reasonably vibrant fair trade market for craft products, there can be a good market for responsible crops. Conscientious consumers would not mind paying a little more for their *urad dal* for instance, if they knew that it was grown in an environment-friendly manner, without deploying child labour and with a minimum of chemical inputs.” Ashis Mondal’s words exuded enthusiasm.

“The good thing is that the premium paid by consumers will cover costs incurred in spreading the idea of Responsible Crop Initiative (RCI). But to engage myself fully in RCI, I need a person to run ASA,” said Ashis, referring to the organisation he founded, and concluding his interaction with me. We were back in their modern office in Bhopal, after a rather gruelling journey in Bundelkhand’s back of beyond. Having known him for over two decades, I was musing, as we chatted about the journey of his career.

Having set up Action for Social Advancement (ASA) in the neglected Panchmahal district (now bifurcated as Dahod and Godhra districts) of Gujarat in 1996, Ashis initially focused on promoting community-managed sustainable land and water resources development practices. Following this line of work and including allied activities towards this end, ASA has improved irrigation management through participatory irrigation management (PIM), created water harvesting structures and built check dams among others. The responsible crop initiative that Ashis is passionate about, is one of ASA’s latest programmes, and reaches out to over a lakh of farmers.

Accidental social worker

Ashis was born in a humble family and was the youngest of three children. His father was a blue-collar worker in the Durgapur Steel Plant (DSP) in West Bengal and an active trade union member. Ashis studied in the Bangla medium school run by DSP; after matriculation, he studied in Christian College in Bankura, considered among the best in the region.

“I owe my entire education to my brother, who went into business very early. Had he not supported my stay in hostel and my education at Bankura or later at Xavier Institute of Social Service (XISS), it would have been a different path,” said Ashis. During his college

days, he met Sangeeta, also from Durgapur. “My whole plan at that point was to get a good job and marry Sangeeta,” recollected Ashis.

Ashis joined XISS in Ranchi, as his brother's friend who had done a course in social service there had got a good job. His first job in 1989 was with a Delhi-based NGO to implement a project in the Bengali refugee colony in East Delhi for Plan International, a global NGO. He then moved to Thapar Hydro Consult to work in a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) project in Madhya Pradesh (MP). Eventually the public sector undertaking Krishak Bharati Cooperative Ltd (KRIBHCO) picked him and posted him as a community organiser in Jhabua district of MP. A salary of about Rs 8,000 allowed him to marry Sangeeta in 1992.

Jayanthi. G and Serene Philip, his colleagues in KRIBHCO, and a British intern thought that the condition of the tribal people with whom they were working was quite desperate. They felt that KRIBHCO's community work was desultory and were clueless to make any dent in it. Jayanthi is an alumna of Indian Institute of Forest Management and Serene, from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) later took a different career path.

The group organised the community in a remote village to put together a temporary structure and persuade the Dayanand Ashram nearby to start a school there. They undertook a forestry nursery of 50,000 saplings; they did it so well that it was adjudged the best nursery in the district. These and similar initiatives indicating their deep commitment earned the group a lot of good will.

ASA takes root

KRIBHCO sent Ashis to East Anglia University, Norwich for a four-month training and exposure programme. On return he was promoted, and his salary was hiked to Rs 12,000 per month. By then he and his friends had made up their mind to seriously work for the development of the tribal people in the region.

Though he had a family – that now included a daughter– to support and no reserves to fall back on, Ashis decided to take the plunge and established Action for Social Advancement (ASA) at Dahod, in 1996. He got a consulting assignment through a friend working in Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE), an international relief organisation, but that could not substitute for a secure, well-paying job in a public sector undertaking.

Ashis and Jayanthi made a plan and pact between themselves: Jayanthi would continue working with KRIBHCO and support Ashis's family in Dahod where they were neighbours. "My boss saw through the ploy, thought we would draw on the company's resources and contacts for our purpose and put a stop to it by transferring Jayanthi to a rural location. That plunged us into a crisis," recalled Ashis. Eventually Jayanthi also quit her job.

But help came from Harnath Jagawat of NM Sadguru Water and Development Foundation, who took them under his wings. Jagawat not only supported Jayanthi with a salary that she would have drawn from KRIBHCO but also extended assistance to equip ASA's office. Jagawat helped by paying Jayanthi's salary for a year. Ashis is indeed very grateful to Jagawat and his wife Sharmishtha, fondly addressed by everyone as Sharmishthaben, the suffix *ben* denoting affection and respect. "When he kindly offered to pay Jayanthi's salary and help ASA get a motorbike, it was Sharmishthaben who said that ASA would need office equipment, for which we did not have the means. That is how we bought a computer. More important than the material help is the assuring back-up that meant a great deal to us then," said Ashis. ASA had hired three persons by then and Ashis is all praise for their dedication and hard work.

Ashis is also appreciative of Mr. Manoj Jhalani, who served as the collector of Jhabua district then. "One day the local police came looking for us and told us that the collector wished to visit the village where we had done water resources development work and that we must be there. We rushed to the village and met him. He was very appreciative and said that he wanted us to take up work on two micro-watersheds. When we completed the work, he gave us five more watersheds to work on. He was very supportive," recalled Ashis.

Shankar Narayanan, the programme officer of the Aga Khan Foundation met Ashis around this time. He was impressed by ASA's tidy operations and gave a grant of Rs 4.5 lakh. "That was the first grant for ASA. Seeing our work, Shankar caused a larger grant in a year," said Ashis. Shankar acted as a mentor and was of great support to the ASA team.

By 1999, ASA had made a niche for itself in the Jhabua district. During this period, Church for Auxiliary Social Action (CASA) a missionary organisation, gave ASA a lot of wheat under Food For Work scheme sponsored by the World Food Programme. ASA used the wheat to encourage villagers in the district to deepen or dig wells.

Enterprising endeavours

By 2002, ASA had established itself as a promising group of social workers in the remote Jhabua district. It had special competence in the field of land and water management.

"We did promote a large number of self-help groups (SHG) as well. We were perhaps among the few who levied an annual service fee from members for managing their SHG. I found

that the members valued the service so much that there was not much resistance to the nominal charge of Rs 50 per year for the management of their SHGs,” said Ashis.

Encouraged by field experts, ASA formulated a plan to revive an entire river basin, for Dohi and Panchhi, small rivers in the Jobat and Udaigarh administrative blocks of Jhabua district, now under Alirajpur after Jhabua was divided. They tried to get funding for the work. Funding for land and water development works was available from the government's watershed development programme as well as from donors. “As we know, administrative and hydrological boundaries do not always match. The perspectives of donors and of the government would not match and converging the funding sources was a challenge. However, we have consistently followed an approach of working on a whole basin than on desultory efforts. We use the same approach even now though we have really spread wide now,” Ashis told me.

Two developments occurred during this time. Through Dr John Witcomb and Dr Daljit Singh Virk, whom Ashis and Jayanthi knew from their KRIBHCO days, the University of Wales, UK, initiated the participatory varietal selection (PVS) programme for crop seeds. ASA took to the programme enthusiastically.

“We tested a large number of varieties of maize, paddy and wheat in our area. We learnt the technique fully and mastered the scientific process of PVS. We took several steps on this front and undertook multiplication of varieties selected by farmers. Access to reliable and appropriate seeds has always been a problem, particularly for small farmers. We thus hit upon a key area of work. We have been doing a sizeable business of selling truthfully labelled seeds (TLS),” said Ashis. TLS are seeds of the same standards as certified seeds, but without certification.

In 2001, Ashis had told me, “I am tired of running the organisation by repeatedly approaching donors. I am confident of mobilising state funds for land and water resources development. I would like to expand the seed business to a level where it can fully or at least partially meet the institutional cost of ASA.” However this did not come about for business as well as legal reasons. With experience and with the unedifying circumstances in microfinance industry, Ashis later changed his views about an NGO meeting its financial needs by running a business.

“Seed multiplication – obtaining a much larger volume of seeds with the same original property – through PVS has remained a core activity of ASA. “PVS and multiplying seeds by obtaining Foundation Seeds that are progeny of Breeder Seeds (and at times even Breeder Seeds that are of a strain developed at research institutes and are the purest form of seeds) from legitimate sources and sale of certified seeds – certified by an agency designated by the government – has become a main line of business. In fact that provides us the key strength for making our farmer producer companies strong and vibrant,” declared Ashis.

Facilitating farmer producer companies

In 2003, the Madhya Pradesh government invited ASA to mobilise the community for organising participatory irrigation management (PIM) of a major, a medium and a minor scheme each. On successful completion, the government requested ASA to take up PIM in the command area of a major irrigation project in Vidisha. Ashis saw great potential for work, given the willingness of the state government to collaborate with them. So they converted their liaison office in Bhopal into a full-fledged office and moved in 2004. Their office in Bori of Jhabua district continued to function and look after the work in that district. Then they closed their Bori office in 2005 and combined it with their block office in Jobat. They moved out of Gujarat in 2007 as they sensed greater need and opportunity in Madhya Pradesh.

Ashis actively participated in the implementation of District Poverty Elimination Programme and later in the National Rural Livelihoods Programme. The former saw ASA setting up a number of Farmer Producers Companies (FPC) under the Companies Act. Their first and perhaps the most successful FPC was in Agar district, formerly part of Rajgarh district. These companies initially did business of farm inputs but later focused on the seed business. They did PVS in soya, wheat and pulses and produced certified seeds.

Over the last decade, ASA has improved its systems of operations to minimise rejects and ensure tighter control over businesses of FPC. As of 2016, ASA had formed a federation of 51 FPCs called Madhya Bharat Consortium of Farmer Producer Companies Limited, doing seed business under their Madhya Bharat brand. FPCs set up by ASA and other promoting organisations in MP are associated as members of the federation. Cumulatively they do business for Rs 180 crore including about Rs 160 crore worth of business in procurement of pulses for the Small Farmers' Agribusiness Consortium, a unit of the Government of India for creating a buffer stock of pulses.

Foray into microfinance

As noted earlier, Ashis and Jayanthi had formed and managed SHGs on a service charge basis in Bori area in the early days of ASA. As they expanded to other districts, NGO-microfinance institution (NGO-mFI) linkage became possible due to initiatives of Friends of Women's World Banking (FWWB), Ahmedabad, Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI), Lucknow and National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), Mumbai.

ASA started this exercise, borrowing funds from FWWB, HDFC and SBI and on-lending them to women through the SHGs, for their microenterprise activities. The business had reached a sizeable volume of about Rs 9 crore in terms of a total outstanding portfolio by 2008. However the microfinance world went through a crisis following the developments connected with microfinance in Andhra Pradesh in 2008. A large number of microfinance institutions suffered a setback. "We thought that the risk was too high and we decided to wind down and close our NGO-mFI initiatives," said Ashis. Wherever SHG-bank linkage had been established, they continued. Subsequently ASA recovered almost all the outstanding dues and closed down that business in 2010, incurring a small loss of about Rs 3 lakh in unrecoverable loans.

Stepping into other states

Although the canal restoration and PIM works executed by ASA were appreciated, in 2010 the government decided that they did not need any help to mobilise communities for PIM. "Working with a state government is quite tricky. Often the equation with the government depends on the officers in charge of the department," said Ashis.

According to Ashis, one officer took a keen interest in evolving a business through FPCs. Another invited them to work with the state on land and water development using Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) funds and support from Tata Trusts. "However, such excessive dependence on individuals did not augur well for ASA, if we were to confine our work to one state. So we started working in other states as well," revealed Ashis.

ASA has been chosen as cluster facilitation team in several blocks of Chhattisgarh and in Jharkhand. "We have established teams there. We could not make much headway in Bihar for MGNREGA work. But as of now we are working in MP, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Bihar," said Ashis.

The responsible crop initiative

According to Ashis, ASA took agriculture very seriously from day one and built scientific backing for its agricultural extension work. About 40% of the staff in ASA have agricultural qualification. "Having staff with agricultural qualification and working with institutions such as Indian Council of Agricultural Research & Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (ICAR and CGIAR respectively) on a continuous basis are the reasons for our deeper understanding of agriculture," he said.

"We developed a protocol for our agri-extension programme, through which we could educate the farmers about new scientific developments. We realised that by a systematic

approach we could monitor the process and outputs in farms. We were able to even measure the cost of our extension activity per farmer,” said Ashis.

Sustainable sourcing of raw materials for agriculture started around 2002 in Europe. As per the Amazon Soya Moratorium of 2006, companies agreed not to buy soya grown in the Brazilian Amazon to curb cutting of forests for soya bean cultivation. Europe, at that point was solely dependent on Brazil and other South American countries for soya bean to be used in cattle feed.

Consumers started demanding food, cloth and everything with low carbon footprint. Public pressure made companies declare their sustainable sourcing strategies and publish annual sustainability reports. Knowing that the world cannot become organic, the middle path known as responsible production system with gradual decrease of agro-chemicals, deforestation and social discrimination (no child labour, bonded labour, equal wages, etc.) was reached. An institutional mechanism, called Round Table, was established wherein producers, traders, industries and consumer bodies agreed to source agricultural commodities responsibly and to have a mechanism to verify the same. Top NGOs such as WWF, Solidaridad, Green Peace and industries like Unilever, Nestle and Rabobank played a significant role in this. In 2006, Round Table for soya bean was formed in Brazil. By then the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) for wood & wood products, Round Table for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), besides for coffee and cacao had become quite prominent.

ASA got into responsible production of soya bean in 2009 through Solidaridad. Given the prominence of soya bean in MP and the operational districts of ASA in particular, it was natural for ASA to get involved. Responsible Soya Association (RSA) is a global body comprising of soya producers, soya industry and soya consumers in South America, US and England. RSA was concerned about unsustainable practices in use of water and plant protection chemicals.

Under the leadership of Ashis and his colleagues Yogesh, Sunil and Hariballabh, ASA took to the programme enthusiastically. “Farmers had to be made aware that excessive use of chemicals was ruinous to their farms in the long run besides being more expensive. We prepared manuals for responsible crop production, trained farmers and created systems to monitor the actual methods of cultivation. We collaborated actively with Round Table for Responsible Soya (RTRS) and agreed for a third party verification method. Finally the responsible soya bean produced would receive the certificate, fetching a premium from RTRS,” narrated Ashis. The FPCs managed this work in addition to the seed multiplication business.

Around 2011, the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) – an international NGO that promotes better standards and sustainability in cotton farming – approached ASA for participating in the BCI work in Madhya Pradesh. This involved introduction of sustainable methods of cotton cultivation, training farmers, verifying and validating that they had followed the prescribed methods and then marketing the cotton for a premium over other cotton.

Ashis was keen to spread the concept of responsible crop production to other commonly grown and consumed crops such as wheat, legumes, pulses and other cereals. “We need to create awareness among consumers too. If consumers know what they are buying has been produced with minimum negative impact on the environment and without deploying child labour, I am sure they would not mind paying more. The additional amount paid by the consumer would take care of all the costs, including the cost of certification, and the business would be self-sustained,” Ashis told me.

“As part of our work we promote agriculture extension to enhance productivity. Many call it sustainable agriculture. But barring a few, no one implements the work with a proper scientific backing. They tend to believe that farmers’ practice is the best and simply encourage it. Boasting about homemade bio-pesticides (concoction of cow urine, some leaves and other materials) has become the latest trend,” he added.

In 2009, Ashis had become a member of the global executive body of RTRS. With exposure came the understanding of global agri-commodities scenario. “RTRS and BCI are crop-specific. It does not consider the Indian context, where smallholders grow multiple crops. Crop rotation is also a regular feature in India. Considering such practical aspects and also realising the potential of standards for responsible agriculture, in 2012 ASA developed its own standards called Responsible Crop Initiative (RCI), applicable for all crops, focussing on farms rather than on specific crops,” informed Ashis.

ASA reached about 1.2 lakh farmers and by 2013 more than 85% farmers qualified for the RCI standards as per the external audit carried out by Control Union, a third party global certification agency for agricultural crops among other goods. “The robust IT platform we developed for this purpose helped us track the progress of each farmer. Performance of the farmers then became the yardstick for the performance-linked incentives / dis-incentives for our staff,” said Ashis.

ASA tried to replicate this extension model with vigour by engaging agri-entrepreneurs. A pilot programme was started in 2016 with five agri-entrepreneurs. “We realised that this model could help us develop large production zones as per market need. Now our focus is on creating such zones for long grain rice including basmati, cotton, maize, pulses and soya bean. RCI and organic crops would be grown in these zones.”

ASA has already created a base of 17,000 organic farmers for cotton and rice. “In a nutshell, we may be a little ahead of time in India, but have created crop production standards that have the potential to sell very well in the Indian market. We have created an extension protocol that can be replicated at ease, and large production zones from where quality produce can be sourced at competitive rates.”

Advisory council membership

Ashis’s high point in terms of public recognition came when the chairman of United Progressive Alliance (UPA) that was in power at the centre selected him as a member of the

National Advisory Council (NAC). As is known, the NAC comprises of a galaxy of individuals from the civil society who advise the government on issues of social welfare and economic development. Ashis's specific areas of work included evolving programmes for the Northeast and working on the agro-forestry sector.

Ashis said, "NAC has a unique way of functioning, very academic in my opinion. The members are free to pick any topic of their interest that would benefit the nation. The member presents a concept note to the NAC and convinces members to accept the topic for further research."

Once a topic is accepted, a working group is formed from within the members of the NAC and the member who initiated the topic becomes the convener of the working group. The working group gets about four months for secondary research, consultation with stakeholder groups like the ministry concerned, state governments and representatives from the private sector and NGOs. The working groups then report the progress in the monthly NAC meeting and present their recommendations. NAC then sends the recommendations that it adopted to the prime minister's office (PMO) for consideration. Ashis served as a member of NAC from June 2012 to May 2014.

"In my two years of association I led a working group each on farmer producer company, agro-forestry and revitalisation of the agriculture extension systems. I was also a member of the working group looking into the development issues of Northeast," recalled Ashis. Of the three working groups he led, the first two made a good impact. But the one on agriculture extension did not see the light of the day since it was towards the end of NAC and there was no time to follow up with the ministry for implementation.

"I am really happy that the FPC policy that my working group recommended became the national policy in 2013. With the help of Small Farmers Agribusiness Consortium (SFAC), it became quite popular. The FPC initiative has taken shape as a movement in India. It will go a long way in changing the agri-value chain," said Ashis.

His second work on agroforestry was also received well. Ashis's reasoning was that with 28 mha (million hectare) of free land and an annual public expenditure of Rs 3,000-4,000 crore on tree plantation under various schemes, the government needed a national policy. "Although I had limited knowledge on the subject I got great inputs from experts and institutions and presented a paper. Everyone including the private sector participants appreciated; there was a lot of encouragement for them to engage actively and create employment," Ashis told me. The crowning glory for Ashis was when his recommendations were adopted as the national policy and unveiled by the President of India in January 2014 in the World Congress of Agroforestry held in New Delhi.

Ashis's long experience of working in the field gives him an edge over others on the practical implication of the policy. "The NAC experience was extremely enriching for me to understand the dynamics of making and implementing public policies," said Ashis.

The organisation

Ashis is the executive director of ASA. The current board of ASA is chaired by Dr Yogesh Kumar, director of Samarthan Centre for Development Support, an organisation working on panchayat governance. ASA occupies an office in the Shahpura facility of National Centre for Human Settlements and Environment (NCHSE), an organisation set up by late MN Buch, an iconoclast. Besides Ashis, the management team includes regional managers, Jayanthi who takes care of the human resource (HR) department, H B Dwivedi handling land and water resources development and Yogesh handling FPCs.

With 150 of ASA's own staff and that of the FPCs, the total manpower is about 350. Jayanthi explained that in her view it was the sheer passion of Ashis that led to such spectacular growth of ASA. "He is passionate about the work and also very meticulous. He never allows anything to remain pending for action at his end," she said. At ASA, each day begins with a meeting of the senior management personnel for about 15 minutes. This ensures a constant communication between key members of the team.

ASA has a well laid out HR function. The minimum salary for a staff is around Rs 12,000. Professional interns join at a salary of around Rs 25,000 per month and upon confirmation when they become executives, their salary is around Rs 30,000 per month. Ashis at his gross C2C (cost to company) package of about Rs 16.20 lakh a year is the highest paid employee of ASA.

Review of works and capacity building of staff are regular features. There are clear protocols in place, evolved in consultation with the staff. ASA trains newcomers in the protocols. "Each of our schemes is implemented with substantial degree of consultation and involvement of communities. For instance, a stop dam would not be done if the community does not contribute its share and the people whose lands are likely to be affected do not sign a no objection certificate and the local panchayat authorises tell us to go ahead," revealed Ashis.

It appeared that community involvement and mobilisation had taken a second place due to the prominence of seed business and the RCI thrust. Yogesh said that this had often been a subject of internal discussions. While there was scope to intensify activities in villages where the FPCs were working, the strong community linkage in all the programmes could not be denied.

ASA has acquired land in a gated community in Bhopal and a new office building measuring 9000 sft is under construction. "ASA does undertake some consulting work regularly. Income from this and some savings, etc. are being ploughed into the construction. I am very proud that this will be a green building," said Ashis, when we visited the site.

The family man

Ashis expressed deep appreciation for the help he received in his student days from his brother, Ashimkumar Mondal who has settled in Durgapur. “My brother managed a transport business for years. A few years back he met with an accident and had severe physical infirmities. Later when he wanted to start working again, his children who are now well placed advised him to relax.” Ashis’s father, who used to spend time with his sons passed away in 2016.

Ashis has two children. His daughter has recently started working with a multi-national management consulting firm. His son is completing schooling. According to Ashis, Sangeeta has been a major source of strength and support, managing the family within the budget that his salary permitted. Now the family stays in their own flat in Trilanga area of Bhopal and Ashis is quite satisfied that he is about to settle the housing loan he had taken.

Looking back

Ashis said that he took after his mother. “Like her I am short-tempered. Like her I get committed to something and become passionate about it. Then I do not count time or effort till I get what I set out to do. And like her I am very fond of order and method. I must have everything in a properly arranged manner.” This explains why ASA has followed proper documentation and protocols right from the start. Their accounts are in order and the team is proud that they successfully stood the scrutiny of the most penetrating of audits.

Ashis’s systematic approach is all-encompassing. “I respond to all the correspondence as quickly as possible and finish everything before I go home at the end of the day. At times, I cannot sleep if I have left something unattended or incomplete and then I must do it before I can fall asleep,” he said.

Ashis credited his team for ASA’s growth and reaching out to over a lakh of households. “I am so glad that most of my senior colleagues have been with me for a long time though it is difficult to retain them within the salary that ASA can afford. I learnt a great deal from the Jagawats when they gave us so much support when we started. Without their help and timely support from people like Shankar, ASA would not be what it is today.”

Looking ahead

Ashis wants to focus on making RCI a market-led and market-based activity. “Let the people in cities learn why it is important to support small farmers who grow crops in a sustainable manner,” he said. He is confident that when properly educated about the importance of responsible crop production, consumers will be more than willing to pay a premium for RCI crops.

About Ashis Mondal

- Works with farmers on a wide range of issues including watershed development and participatory irrigation management in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bihar and Jharkhand
- Advocates responsible agriculture with minimal use of chemical inputs and without child labour
- Through participatory varietal selection in soya, wheat and pulses involving farmers, ASA makes truthfully labelled seeds (TLS) easily available to farmers
- The farmer producer company (FPC) policy that, Ashis as a member of National Advisory Council mooted, became a national policy
- ASA has formed a federation of more than 50 FPCs, benefitting numerous farmers

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