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Professor Teaches Change in His Indian Village

By AMY WALDMAN

MIRDHA, India - Along fields so green they seemed to vibrate with color, Jagadish Shukla walked toward his childhood home.

There, a room specially built for his visits waited, as did a generator rented so fans could cool him in the Indian heat - his family's modest effort to provide the comforts of his Bethesda, Md., home in this rural village.

Professor Shukla, 59, has lived for 32 years in the United States and is now its citizen. He is a professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., and a climatologist who directs the Center for Ocean-Land-Atmosphere Studies in Calverton, Md.

But he has never relinquished his past or forgotten his home. Every year since leaving India, he has returned to this village of 1,500 people, where he grew up and where his family still lives.

Photograph by Amy Waldman/The New York Times

Jagadish Shukla, left, stopped to talk to a villager during a walk through Mirdha, India, where he grew up and where his family lives. Professor Shukla resides in the United States but invests time and money in the village.

Like many "nonresident Indians," or "N.R.I.'s," he has used his relative wealth earned in America to pay for the education of his siblings' children here, their marriages, their home improvements, their mother's funeral and, in lean times, their food - "95 percent" of the family's needs, said his older brother, Mahendra Pratap Shukla.

But in recent years he has taken his commitment a step further, setting aside 10 percent of his income for more ambitious projects that are testing the limits of change in a place where the clock is still set by the sun and cows wander down muddy lanes past men in the long loincloths known as lungi.

Bill Clinton once suggested that if every nonresident Indian adopted an Indian village, it could transform the country. Professor Shukla's own experience shows the truth and fallacy of that statement.

His efforts have bettered the lives of individuals here. Yet he still seeks an answer to the question, long pondered by Indians at home and abroad, of how to bring the country's hundreds of thousands of villages, even his own, into the 21st century.

"That's the real challenge," Professor Shukla said during a two-day visit home. "What will it take to transform the other India?"

Mirdha is set in the eastern reaches of India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, a region with a reputation for poverty and backwardness.

With power for at most eight hours a day, the village plunges into blackness at night. Water comes only through inconstant hand pumps. Most residents still make their living farming, but as generations divide the land into smaller pieces, the livings are ever more meager.

Most residents relieve themselves in open fields, the women only after dark. The primary school is a decrepit two-room structure with no desks or chairs, and 70 percent of the children drop out before junior high, said the village leader.

With $50,000 of his own money and $50,000 given by others, Professor Shukla has built a community college, rare in any Indian village. He has also started an after-hours program for children not enrolled in primary school and opened a small medical dispensary. His younger brother, Shri Ram Shukla, oversees the projects.

But while Professor Shukla fantasizes about a giant network of N.R.I.'s like him replicating tested ideas in a constellation of villages, he concedes that, ultimately, they cannot substitute for government.

After only six months, for example, the medical dispensary has been overrun and is dispensing double the amount of free medicine budgeted. Professor Shukla frets that it will soon be unsustainable.

"Everything is beginning," he said. "In some ways we are groping."

Professor Shukla has also encountered an entrenched village culture. While villagers speak positively, and sometimes glowingly, of his investment, no one wants to part with the land needed for one of his pet projects - laying paths in place of muddy patches caused by poor drainage.

His new drive for 100 percent literacy has raised questions, half-joking but half-serious, about who

will labor in the homes and fields.

Nor is everyone convinced he can really bring change. "Everyone said, `O.K., O.K., O.K.,' but I can tell you it's simply not possible in the village," Vishva Nath Shukla, 70, said one evening of Professor Shukla's plans.

One retired teacher, Baban Singh, 70, said nothing ever changed in the village because no one would cooperate. If someone takes initiative, he said, "Everyone thinks: `What is his agenda? How is he trying to make money?' "

Even Professor Shukla provokes such suspicions, said Mr. Singh: "People do talk - Why is he spending the money? Where is he getting it? What are his interests?"

In part what Professor Shukla wants to do - through the committees he has formed, the meetings he has held and especially the college he has already built - is change the notion that change is not possible.

Because he is now as much outsider as insider, the danger is that even his help affirms that change cannot come from within. "He's very well-respected, people listen to him," said Arjun Sharma, a laborer. "With him it might be possible. Without him, it's not."

Wary of cultivating overdependence even within his own family, Professor Shukla has never financed luxury living, although he does dole out cash gifts when he leaves. The house got an indoor toilet only recently and still has no sink or shower.

To encourage villagers' self-sufficiency, he gave them a sermon on the "tipping point," trying to explain that maintaining a certain standard of cleanliness would encourage people to keep an area clean.

Like one-fourth of the villagers, Professor Shukla is a Brahmin, and his notions of uplift are characteristic of the caste of the elite. His father, a teacher who was then the only educated man in the village, started its primary school.

As a result, Mr. Singh, the retired teacher, reminded Professor Shukla that the village had already made some progress.

"There was a time when anyone who received a letter would go to your house and ask your father to read the letter," Mr. Singh said. "Now there are plenty of people who can read and write."

Professor Shukla, who with his silver hair and pressed shirts looks as much Boston Brahmin as Indian one, is particularly proud of the high standards of the school he has opened himself, Gandhi Degree College, where admissions are by merit.

Professor Shukla's subversive goal is to teach Gandhian principles - honesty, perseverance, selflessness - in a country where they are increasingly unfashionable. He insisted on a no-cheating policy, although cheating is rampant in many area colleges. At first the policy deterred some students, but now it draws them. The college is at capacity with 500 students, 70 percent of them women.

Professor Shukla holds two doctorates, including one from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and has broken scientific ground by demonstrating that predictability exists within chaos in climate.

But in the village, he said, a scientific mind is "not a help." His brothers often remind him of the chaos of life - emotion, culture and other unscientific variables.

His reflexive description is that nothing has changed in the village, but a morning walk during this visit made him rethink that.

He saw new businesses attaching like barnacles along an expanding road system. He saw new homes, often built with the earnings of relatives who, like him, had migrated, if only to other states.

He learned that village Dalits, or untouchables as they were once known, no longer bother with making leather from dead cows, an occupation to which caste once consigned them, because there were now more profitable ways to make a living.

The need to know how things really work so he can better invest his money has convinced him that he should start spending 10 percent of his time in Mirdha each year. He concedes that it will be a challenge.

"After five days I'm looking for a comfortable hotel," he said of his limited tolerance for personal suffering. "What a man Gandhi was."

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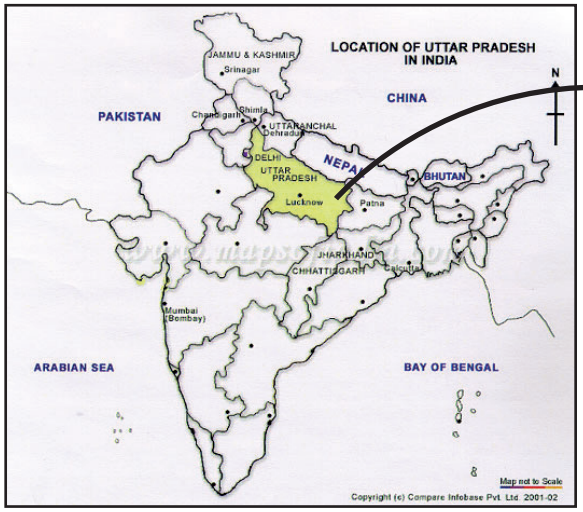

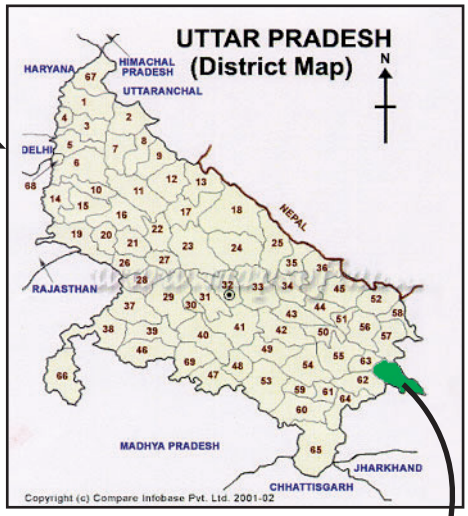

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