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|  |  🞂**THE BIRTH OF GRAM VIKAS TRUST*****The story of its founder*** |
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|  | *“The Birth of Gram Vikas Trust” is a short biography on Mr. Ramesh Kasondra, the founder of Gram Vikas Trust. The biography highlights the hardships, from an early age, that Ramesh had to undergo to excel and to provide a better life to his family. The biography also attempts to acknowledge the altruistic support of various people, who helped Ramesh and who motivated him to reach out to the needy.*  |
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THE BIRTH OF GRAM VIKAS TRUST

The story of its founder

 “I am blessed!! I am blessed because I was given, when I had absolutely nothing, the basics in life and was educated to utilize the basics to become who I am today. I will never forget the samaritans, who not only provided me with the basics but also taught me that a part of being human is to help others. After all humanity runs this world!!” *– Mr. Ramesh Kasondra, Founder- Gram Vikas Trust*

**The early struggle**

Ramesh was born, on the 7th of December 1963, into a farmer family in a small village, Motibanugar, in Gujarat, a drought prone region. Even though Ramesh’s father owned the agriculture land, but the poor irrigation facilities meant that the produce was not always sufficient to meet the needs of the family. Whatever resources were available, Ramesh always had to share them with his four other siblings. Sharing inculcated a sense of togetherness and giving within the siblings.

To meet the needs, not met through the agriculture produce, of the family, Ramesh’s father had to regularly borrow money from the village money lenders. Land being the prime asset, the money lenders always sought a part of the land, as collateral.

When Ramesh was four years old, his father expired. This pushed the family into further economic hardships, as Ramesh’s father was the sole earning member of his family. Unable to repay any money to the village lender led to the lender confiscating the land that belonged to Ramesh’s family.

*“There were times, when I and my siblings would eat only once a day. We ate a single chapatti (Indian bread) with water.”*

Ramesh’s mother had no choice but to work as a daily wage laborer to feed the family and ensure that the basic education of her children does not stop. To lend a much needed helping hand to their mother, Ramesh’s elder brothers had no choice but to work as daily laborers. This met the food requirement at home, but the struggle to study further, attain means of education, and proper clothing continued.

With a determination to overcome the hardships, Ramesh immersed himself into studies, excelling in all subjects. Ramesh continued to study until the 7th standard (7th year of education, as per the Indian schooling system) on borrowed books. His dedication paid off and the school helped Ramesh procure new study material for the 8th year of schooling.

However, the pressure to support his family, an ageing mother, and generate ample money for the marriage of his sisters, led to Ramesh discontinuing his education. At this juncture, Ramesh received help from one of the respected village elders, Mr. Monabhai (addressed as “mama” by Ramesh), who was the foremost social worker in the village. Mr. Monabhai was instrumental in not only motivating Ramesh to study further to better the situation of his family, but also influenced Ramesh’s family to allow Ramesh to continue with his studies.

Mr. Monabhai used his personal savings to pay for Ramesh’s 8th standard fees. In addition, Mr. Monabhai paid for the study material and uniform. Thus, Ramesh, with the timely help of Mr. Monabhai, was able to further his mid-level education.

*“I will never forget the selfless support mama extended to me. He was the one who instigated the want in me to become someone in this world”*

With a realization that the only option to continue studies was to get monetary support from the school, Ramesh put in all his efforts to excel. He stood first among all his classmates in the 8th, 9th, and the 10th standard. This enabled him to get monetary help from the village and school council to continue his studies into the subsequent year. Ramesh passed his 10thstandard exam, in 1980, with 78%.

**The second phase of struggle**

With the completion of the mandatory years\*\* of school education, Ramesh set out to realize his dream of earning an engineering diploma. However, the journey was, yet again, rough. The pressure to take up a small job to support the family was immense.

Realizing the potential that Ramesh had, the principal of the village school, Mr. Bhagvanji G. Kanani, and Mr. Monabhai approached Mr. Mavajibhai, an influential community leader. Mr. Mavajibhai was gracious enough to pledge financial support towards the payment of the 1st year of engineering tuition fees. With the support of Mr. Mavajibhai, Mr. Kanani helped Ramesh in procuring Diploma in Civil Engineering seat at the Tolani Polytechnic College at Adipur, Gujarat.

Admission at the polytechnic college meant that Ramesh would have to leave his village and reside at a place near the college premises. Unfortunately, with all the help that Ramesh received, it was not possible to afford a room in the college hostel. During his early college days, Ramesh spent the nights on the pedestrian walkways.

*\*\*:In India, a student can apply for a diploma course after 10 years of schooling and for a degree course after 12 years of schooling*

*“Surviving each night on a pedestrian walkway was not easy. Every time I felt dejected, I thought of all the messiahs in my life: mama, Mr. Mavajibhai, Mr. Kanani, and my mother. Everytime I thought of them, I had a renewed vigor to succeed.”*

On the insistence of Mr. Kanani, Ramesh agreed to move to Anjar, a rural village 10 kilometers from the college, to stay with the relative of Mr. principal for a period of 6 months. Through his hard work, Ramesh passed the first semester exams with distinction. During one of the college functions, Ramesh approached the principal of the college, Mr. J.K. Baga, with a request to allow Ramesh to move into the hostel at no additional cost. Mr. Baga understood that the long commute, between the college and Anjar, of 10 kilometers is an unnecessary burden on Ramesh. As per the arrangements made by the college principal, Ramesh moved into a room that he shared with four other students.

While Ramesh continued to excel in his studies, he made every effort to pay, by himself, as much part of his tuition fees as he could. To pay the fees by himself, Ramesh started out by tutoring juniors at his college. Eventually, through this activity, Ramesh was able to fund his college tuition fees by himself. This effort allowed Ramesh to utilize minimum funds from Mr. Mavajibhai towards his food and other incidental expenses.

In the year 1984, Ramesh graduated from the college with a distinction and a Diploma in Civil Engineering.

*“I was very happy the day I received the diploma certificate in hand. I went to mama, Mr. Mavajibhai, and Mr. Kanani to thank them for all their support without which I would not be a literate.”*

**The motivation to give back to the society**

After graduation, while Ramesh sought full-time employment with established firms, Ramesh came to realize what his childhood friends had missed. His friends, who were as talented as Ramesh, worked at very low wages. Unfortunately, they did not or could not seek the help of society leaders for assistance.

Soon, Ramesh began discussing the problems with social leaders, such as Mr. Monabhai. The social leaders involved Ramesh in discussions regarding the hygiene problems, suppression of the women folk, children education, and support for livelihood.

*“Though I was desperate to start my career as a civil engineer, my association with the social leaders and with the realization of how lucky I was to get support from the society, my resolve to give something back to the needy grew stronger day by day. I came to realize that giving something back to the needy, voluntarily, is being bigger than oneself.”*

While waiting to hear from firms on potential interview or job offer, Ramesh involved himself in conducting classes at the primary level. He was also involved in educating the women folk on the importance of hygiene and on the rights of women in the society.

Ramesh devised his first pilot project on improving the agricultural practices in his and neighboring villages.

*Ramesh at irrigation*

*reservoir*

This project helped Ramesh plan and successfully execute his first full fledged NGO project on lift irrigation system in 1987.

**Improving the family economic situation**

Ramesh received a job offer in the year 1985 from a well known international NGO, Aga Khan Rural Support Program, Veraval, Gujarat. Ramesh was appointed as the site supervisor. At that time Ramesh’s per month salary was INR\* 500/-, an amount Ramesh’s family had not seen for a long time.

While the news of Ramesh’s job was a joyous moment, but the realization that Ramesh would not be able to join his work site without the first month salary was heartbreaking. Ramesh’s family tried their best to support Ramesh, but with still no substantial financial means Ramesh’s family, against their wish, backed out. During this time, Ramesh did odd jobs at repair workshops and at construction sites to earn some money.

It was at this juncture that Mr. Kanjibhai, a shopkeeper in the village, came to the rescue. Mr. Kanjibhai gave INR 250/- to Ramesh for food and for renting a shared accommodation at his work site.

Now with renewed energy Ramesh started his work. The way Ramesh applied his civil engineering knowledge to his daily professional work, was highly appreciated by not only the managers but also by his colleagues. Moved by the efforts Ramesh had put in to reach the position he was at, his colleagues offered him free accommodation at the work site. Such a gesture allowed Ramesh to save a large portion of his earnings and send the same home to his family.

*“It was a fantastic feeling to finally start supporting my family in an effort to elevate their standard of living. Initially for 6 years, I skipped one meal a day to save extra for my family. Physically this was tough, but it allowed me to save additional money for my family and for my next goal of helping the needy.”*

*\*: INR stands for Indian Rupees*

Ramesh successfully completed a number of rural development projects, which gave him valuable insight into the intricacies involved in implementing large scale rural development programs. One of the notable achievements of Ramesh at Aga Khan Rural Support Program was the successful completion of the cooperative irrigation scheme for farmers within 6 months instead of the planned two years.

*Ramesh at the site of construction of a bio gas plant near the Gir forest in Gujarat*



*Ramesh with prince Aga Khan, CEO of the Aga Khan Rural Support Program*

*“My hard work in my professional career allowed me to overcome project challenges efficiently. The management at Aga Khan Rural Support Program appreciated my work and I was promoted to the position of program organizer. I was also given a generous salary raise. Finally, I could support my family in totality and seriously begin to save money to support the education of at least a few children in my village.”*

Ramesh worked with the Aga Khan Rural Support Program for 14 years. These 14 years brought Ramesh closer to the problems, sometimes even greater than the ones he faced, in the tribal and rural areas in India and intensified his desire to support as many needy children as he could.

**Giving Back to the Society**

As Ramesh steadily progressed in his career at the Aga Khan Rural Support Program, he started to fund the education of poor children from whatever additional money he could save from his monthly salary. By 1989, Ramesh was able to save an amount equivalent to his one month salary for the education of needy children.

Along with few of his friends and colleagues, Ramesh started an annual donation event at his village school. At the event money was donated towards furthering the education of the village children. Until date, Ramesh has personally sponsored the education of 45 children.

In 1998, after 14 years of work at Aga Khan Rural Support Program, Ramesh joined the Aditya Birla Group, at Dahej, Gujarat, as Manager- PR and Liasion. As part of his corporate role, Ramesh regularly came in contact with workers working in salt production factories. He met with the children of laborers working in the salt product factory Ramesh was moved by the plight of the children of the factory workers and embarked on a mission to educate the workers on the importance of education for their children. Ramesh undertook various programs, along with village school teachers and the village council, to motivate the laborers to educate their children. Ramesh tried to kick start a scholarship program to provide education to the poor children, with Ramesh himself sponsoring the education of 3 children.

By the year 2000, Ramesh was able to enlist the some of his colleagues, village council members, local rural bank staff, and teachers as donors and volunteer teachers to educate children.

*“By the year 2000, I was living my dream of supporting the needy. Nothing can describe the satisfaction I received whenever I saw a poor child reading a book. Truly, helping others is a virtue.”*

**The birth of Gram Vikas Trust**

By early 2001, Ramesh and his friends were supporting the education of nearly 58 poor children.

In order to cover the education needs of a larger set of poor children in the rural and tribal regions of Gujarat, Ramesh decided to establish an NGO as a medium to reach out to the needy. With his corporate experience, Ramesh was able to meet all the necessary government requirements for establishing an NGO. This led to the establishment of Gram Vikas Trust (GVT).

Ramesh’s house was, initially, the makeshift office of Gram Vikas Trust. Ramesh enlisted the teachers from various villages, village council personnel, and his friends, as volunteers for Gram Vikas Trust. Ramesh put aside a part of his savings for the administration purposes of Gram Vikas Trust. Ramesh conducted a number of fund raising activities and, with the support of his corporate associates, he was able to generate a sum of INR 1,00,000/-, within six months of start of the NGO operations, for the education of the poor children.

Over the years, as Gram Vikas Trust received recognition from the local government and the support to its cause increased, Gram Vikas Trust has matured to handle a number of large scale simultaneous projects in the field of education, empowerment of women, health and hygiene, agriculture, and livelihood.

***“I grew up in poverty, and today my life is all about the poor again. I want them to live in dignity.”***



*With the members of Shreeniketan women empowerment organization*



*Inauguration of a primary school under the “Balwadi” project of GVT*

*Ramesh discussing, with a prominent community leader, health issues in the rural area of Bharuch at a rally*

*Giving scholarships, as part of the annual scholarship event organized by GVT, to village children*