

DEEP JOSHI

GODDA TASAR PROJECT: Where All the Action Began!

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Looking back at the early days of exploring new avenues for sustainable livelihood options such as rearing *tasar* cocoons is an opportunity to relive the highs of the first breakthroughs and the lows of the time

LIKE MUCH OF WHAT PRADAN has done over the years to develop opportunities for rural livelihoods, its work in the *tasar* sub-sector is worthy of a book that I hope someone will write someday. So much has been done by so many people to develop the sub-sector as a livelihood source for poor people.

I recall cocoons used to sell for 16 to 20 paise, and 10 cocoons per DFL (eggs of one *titli*, or moth, as the rearers used to call it) was considered okay. Then Godda, where all the action began in January 1987, itself changed so much. *Dahi-chewda* was all one got for breakfast then, with some *pakor*as thrown in, if one

liked, at the crossing near Carmel School. There was no hotel to spend a night in and one had to literally wade through mud inside the *khapda*-clad *dhaba* to get a *daal-bhaat-chokha* lunch, with people rinsing their mouths just a few feet away.

Godda, today, has a three-star hotel! There were ups and downs, dead-ends, serendipity, brilliant breakthroughs and all manner of drama—the hallmarks of a PRADAN initiative—for example, Godda was not even on our radar screen when it all began. As with poultry, the work in *tasar* also grew out of the Teams for Rural Industries and Artisan Development (TRIAD)—Vijay Mahajan’s idea to get PRADAN to promote rural enterprises as a means of

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rural livelihoods. No one can beat Vijay at coining acronyms!

We were looking around for sub-sectors besides the three we had already chosen for Kesla. During my years at the Ford Foundation, I had managed the forestry programme for a while and had had some exposure to *tasar*, as had my colleague Viji Srinivasan—such a remarkable woman she was—who had supported work on *tasar* spinning as a source of livelihood for women. So I suggested that we take up *tasar*. As was the practice, we began with a study of the sub-sector before deciding whether to take up *tasar* as part of the TRIAD initiative. Biswajit Sen anchored the study with Vijay, Rakesh Kaushik, Sankar Datta, Mithilesh Jha and me chipping in.

We sub-contracted the marketing part to a Kolkata-based market research firm. Mithilesh, who eventually anchored the programme, had not yet joined PRADAN. Vijay, Sankar and I had met him when he responded to PRADAN's advertisement to recruit early-mid-career professionals to head new PRADAN teams—yes, PRADAN seriously explored getting senior people from the 'market' long before the HR systems were put in place. Mithilesh was keen to leave his job as a Senior Scientist

at the Central Silk Board (CSB) to take up grass-roots work, and was particular about working in *tasar*. We did not have anything that suited to his interest, and we parted with the understanding that we would call upon him if and when we could match his interests.

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The received wisdom in the sericulture establishment then was that 'lack of feeding material' (Terminalia trees) was the main constraint that the sector faced. And that is what we too concluded! There was, at least on paper, an elaborate set-up of the CSB and the state sericulture departments to supply free DFLs to rearers. So, the focus of the *tasar* project was on raising plantations of Terminalia Arjuna.

Another received wisdom was that you had to have at least 25 ha blocks of plantations. We knew individual farmers would not have 25 ha of land to raise the Arjuna plantations and decided to source government wastelands for plantations. The initial goal was to get about 100 ha. So the '*tasar* model' we settled on was to lease 25 ha blocks of Arjuna plantations on government wastelands to farmers to rear *tasar* cocoons and support them with inputs and marketing. Because PRADAN was already working in Kesla, we decided to locate the project in the same area. We invited Mithilesh to join us by taking a sabbatical from CSB and set up office in Betul, next door to Kesla, where we were told there was plenty of government wasteland. The state government was willing to lease out the wasteland if we could locate a suitable patch with the help of the district administration. Meanwhile, the wasteland we had been eyeing got assigned for the rehabilitation of people displaced from the Narmada Sagar project and we were back to square one! Having come this far, having dislocated Mithilesh, we were not going to drop the idea...*kuchh karengay!*

About that time, during the Makar Sankranti festival in January 1987 to be precise, Mithilesh went home

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to visit his parents in Bhagalpur. In a casual conversation, he explained to his father what he was trying to do and how we were stuck as we could not find enough wasteland. His father said, “But there are miles upon miles of wasteland next door in Godda and Dumka.” Mithilesh phoned me and told me excitedly about his discovery! And Godda became the new site of the *tasar* project. Barring Mithilesh, none of us had heard of the place!

Mithilesh shifted his office to Godda, recruited a team of field workers (the concept of CSP/CRP had not yet been born) and began building local networks—*Mamuji*, a local Good Samaritan and Madhavanji (Anand Shankar Madhavan), a widely respected Gandhian, who had come all the way from Travancore Cochin in 1945 to set up an educational institution near Bounsi called Mandar Vidyapeeth, turned out to be particularly valuable contacts. With the help of *Mamuji*, Mithilesh and the team went to villages in Godda to identify the wasteland, talk with the farmers and ask them if they would be willing to take up plantation.

The concept itself underwent changes in the face of ground realities—from compact blocks of 25 ha leased public land, we came

down to 5 ha of ‘contiguous plots’ owned by several farmers. It turned out that the notion of 25 ha (or even 5 ha) was arbitrary. An area large enough for *tasar* scientists to monitor and support was enough. All that really mattered was that there should be a sufficient number of trees close by for a rearer to keep watch on the worms and move the worms around as the leaves become exhausted in one patch or cluster of trees!

In the course of our interactions with the villagers, we realized that the idea of a *tasar* plantation was alien to them; however, because of *Mamuji*, we still had their cooperation. In fact, in one Santhal village, the farmers who had agreed to take up plantations did a U-turn when their relatives from another village came over for some festivities and convinced them that this was a “clever scheme to take away their land!”

We realized that we needed to set up a small demo plot to show the villagers what it would be like, but we had no land to do so. That is when Madhavanji came to our rescue. He leased us some land (I vividly remember wading through the ramshackle, sweaty, jam-packed *tehsildar*’s court in Bounsi to sign the lease, and Madhavanji hugging me afterwards as a *samdhi*

‘because we had entered into a relationship’). With the little bit of money left from the funds we had received for the *tasar* study, we set up a demo plantation in August 1987. I wonder if the plantation is still around and is being used for rearing. Maybe there’s a Mall there now!

While the preparations for raising the plantations were going on, Mithilesh discovered, in the course of his travel to villages in Godda, Dumka and Banka districts, that there were already huge groves of Asan trees in the forests near the villages. Locally called *Pahi*, these traditional *tasar* rearing groves were hardly being used for rearing because DFLs were not available and the people had given up rearing because of persistent crop failure due to diseases. So, we decided to also get into rearing right away without waiting for plantations to mature.

The fundraising for *tasar* is a story in itself with its own twists and turns. We mobilized a grant from ICCO for plantations on 100 ha and for setting up a grainage with a capacity of 25,000 DFLs to service the plantations. As ‘enterprise people’, we had our own ideas about financing...farmers should borrow money to raise plantations and buy DFLs; enterprises, after all,

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had to survive in the market place! Accordingly, we decided that we would extend loans to farmers to raise plantations (seedlings were to be given free) out of the grant, to be repaid once rearing began!

Surprisingly, people came forward; Mithilesh convinced the farmers to take as little loan as necessary to minimize their repayment burden and contribute their own labour to dig pits. The contribution of labour had not been budgeted in the grant; we ended up covering a much larger area and a one-year project went on for three years, causing some tension with ICCO. This was resolved when their team (Fons van der Velden and Indrani Sigamani) visited the project and were bowled over by the scale and quality of work on the ground and the kind of people we were working with. Whereas the idea of loans for plantations was soon forgotten, the notion that people had to contribute labour remained as long as the plantations were being raised with grants.

To support rearing in the *Pahis*, a 'centralized grainage' was set up in Godda in a rented, *khapda* covered house. I am sure Tom will forever remember the audit headaches that the grainage caused us in accounting for cocoons bought for the grainage—we bought

whole cocoons for (then) at 25 paise each, some got eaten by rats (how do we know the storekeeper did not quietly sell them, our auditor Nagarajan *sahib* would ask); some are rendered useless due to 'premature emergence' (try explaining that to a Chartered Accountant!) and have to be sold as *faunki* cocoons (then) at 10 paise each (how should the loss be accounted for?); some eventually get converted into DFLs and produce more *faunki* cocoons, and then you buy more *faunki* cocoons because you are also running a spinning enterprise; the truth is the totals of *faunki* cocoons never tallied!

What a nightmare it was in the absence of the fancy Accounting Software PRADAN subsequently developed! Anyway, DFLs were produced and given to rearers on credit—produce cocoons from the DFLs and give us back five cocoons for every DFL from your harvest! It did not work fully: some faithfully paid back the cocoons, others (the 'wilful defaulters' as bankers would call them) said the crop had failed. But the idea took root: rearers would buy DFLs just as farmers buy seeds rather than getting them free from the sericulture department; this establishes the accountability of the DFL supplier and the seriousness of the rearer.

The centralized grainage created its own logistical challenges. How do you send DFLs to far-flung villages? As we were discussing the logistics, an idea emerged, "Why not set up smaller grainages in or near the villages where the rearers live?" It transpired that making DFLs is not quite rocket science: anyone, who can use a 10x optical microscope to spot a pretty conspicuous pattern if the sample comes from a diseased moth and maintain a degree of hygiene, can make DFLs.

Much of the work, even in CSB establishments, is done by labourers hired on daily wages. And the idea of a 'grainage entrepreneur' was born! Private Arjuna plantations, the idea of selling DFLs and the grainage entrepreneur, I think, are the seeds of transformation in the sector. These were huge breakthroughs, invented in the first couple of years of the programme, without much *show-sha!* All the later breakthroughs—and there have been many and I hope someone will write about these—would not have been possible without these first breakthroughs.

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