

EARLY INTERVENTIONS IN TASAR: Down Memory Lane/ Dumbledore's Memories



MY TIME IN PRADAN (1986–91) is linked to the early years of PRADAN's intervention in *tasar*. The eastern regions of India—Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and, at that time, the not-yet-created Jharkhand—that PRADAN was working were the field areas where I was very deeply involved. We first began exploring *tasar* as an intervention to help tribal populations of the Chota-Nagpur plateau increase their options of livelihood.

After some initial explorations, some of us (Deep, Vijay, Ravi, on behalf of the Ford Foundation, and me) took this grand trip in a tempo traveller across the whole region. We visited all the important locations where

tasar played a role, starting from Ranchi and eventually reaching Gaya, after travelling through Chaibasa, Bhagalpur, Deogarh and other smaller destinations. We also met Mithilesh Jha, who was then working with the Central *Tasar* Research Institute, under the Central Silk Board, in Ranchi.

Thirty years ago, a tempo traveller was definitely not the right vehicle to take such a trip in, through the region, and I remember every day we would plan for a six-hour travel time but it would always extend to ten. Our youth, all the lively discussions about 'rural development' and the motivation of creating new vistas for PRADAN carried us through. The report that we generated after our trip was that PRADAN should start a development project by directly intervening in the *tasar* sector in the region (circa 1987).

The next six-to-nine months were spent in all the standard preliminary work that goes into project preparation—PRADAN style.

The next six-to-nine months were spent in all the standard preliminary work that goes into project preparation—PRADAN style. First, we had to convince the team; at that time, the total number of people in PRADAN was around 50. We then convinced Mithilesh to leave his job with the government and lead the project, which he did after giving it some thought. On the basis of need and remoteness, Deogarh district was chosen as the location for the project. After several field trips and strategy discussions in the back of the jeep, it was decided to go in for interventions that would help the tribals—to promote *tasar* cultivation on the plantations on the wastelands owned by them. At that time, *tasar* was only grown wild and collected by the tribals directly from the forest when the cocoons were ready. It was decided that no intervention would be made in the weaving-spinning area because that was urban-based in Bhagalpur.

An extended team was chosen to build the project; Uday (Kagal), who worked with me in Barabanki, volunteered to join the team. A local team was also created. I am sure both Mithilesh and Uday will also be writing about their experiences. My role involved visiting the project every month.

Being based in Lucknow, I still remember the standardized itinerary of the Amristar-Howrah Mail from Lucknow to Jasidih, followed by an interesting minibus ride (where the decision was whether to go standing neck bent inside the bus or sit on the roof at my own risk) to the project office because no project jeep had been procured.

Like any other project in its early stages, there were challenges galore. The first and the biggest challenge, of course, was to convince the local tribal community that developing systematic plantations for *tasar* cultivation was worth it, especially because the returns were not going to be immediate and would only be visible after three years. There was also the widespread belief among the tribals that the *tasar* worm would only grow in the wild. Moreover, there was no clarity among the team members about how the communities were meant to be mobilized. One of the innovations we came up with at that time (which is now standard practice) was to identify and recruit local cadres at the village level to work with us. Several trips for the local community were also organized to expose them to government *tasar* plantations and how these were being managed.

Over the next three years, while the plantations took root, the primary investment was on how to prepare the community to take up the entire activity in a more systematic manner. For both us and our younger colleagues, the experience of organizing communities was new. Many of the earlier batches of development apprentices were frustrated that, in spite of their efforts, the community was not ready to get organized even though what was being suggested to them was for their own benefit.

However, we now know that, in community-based development work, the initial investments of time are high and the greater the investment made in organizing the communities and in building leadership amongst them, the stronger the roots of the project and the more beneficial it is for work in the future.

I am proud that the seeds that we sowed in the early years have emerged as one of the key large-scale integrated interventions of PRADAN over the years. Persisting with an idea, over a long period of time, stretching over several years, has always been the strength of PRADAN.

Biswajit Sen is a development professional based in Jaipur, Rajasthan