

# A Day in Darbha

SHAILENDER SINGH

*Travelling from village to village in one day, enjoying the sunshine and the rain, mingling with the village folk, and sharing their joys and sorrows brings many questions about their lives to the surface*

It was a beautiful morning as I made my way to Kamanar village through splendid roads winding through fabulous trees bearing attractive red flowers. The rising sun and the early morning breeze energized me and I wanted my ride to last forever. Before I knew it, I had reached my destination and I wondered whether I had reached early because of the speed of my bike or because of the overwhelmingly beautiful panorama that had put me into a trance.

Still deep in thought, I heard Sumani *didi* greeting me, "*Johar, dada.*" I responded saying, "*Johar, didi.*" She invited me to her house where everyone had assembled to celebrate *Diyari* (a post-harvest festival). I parked my bike and followed her to her home, which had a thatched roof. As I entered, I saw *Gangadei, Boda, Dasmati, Gagri, Rambati, Jayati, Lakhman, Guneswar* and others, drinking *landa* (rice beer). I was greeted enthusiastically by everyone.

Sumani *didi* brought a *doni* (sal leaf bowl) to serve *landa* for me; I was hesitant at first to accept the drink but because she insisted with so much love and affection I have it, I decided not to resist.

After some time, *Boda didi* said apprehensively, "The government is planning to set up a CRPF camp in our village and we are not happy about it." Everybody nodded in affirmation. I tried to understand what their reservations were and why they did not want the security forces in their village. *Rambati* explained, "When a camp was set up in *Dornapal* earlier, there were many incidents of women being raped, molested and looted, and we fear that these things may possibly occur here as well." *Jayati* said, "If it were to happen, there is nothing we would be able to do. They have guns and can even kill us; going out in the early morning or late at night will become difficult for us." The villagers' concern made me fearful of what would happen if what they said were to come true.

In April 2010, 76 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel were killed by the PLGA (People Liberated Guerrilla Army) in Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh. The government had launched its operation 'Green Hunt' then. Subsequently, the CRPF, the Indian Tibet Border Force (ITBP), the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (COBRA) were asked to set up camps in the southern part of Chhattisgarh, to eliminate extremist groups. According to statistics, every time such camps have been set up, there has been some civil unrest and the villagers have suffered because of the conflict.

Mayaram, the *sarpanch's* husband from Kamanar *panchayat*, joined us and was happy to see me drinking *landa*. He said, "Payaka (Outsiders) don't have our drinks; I am happy to see you drinking with us. You seem to be one of us." He too expressed his apprehensions about the forces. "I am not at all happy that the CRPF is setting up a camp here. We have already sent in a written request to the block *tahsildar*, the block officers (Chief Executive Officer), the police and the collector, but no one is listening to us. They say that the government has given us so much and now it is time to co-operate with it. Whoever protests will face the consequences. At the same time, we are also getting threats from the Naxal *dada log* (people). If we allow the government to set up camp on our land, we will have to face the consequences." The villagers were in a very difficult situation. Either way, they were being threatened.

A short while later, I remembered that I had SHG meetings to attend in Dilmili village. I rode there through the Kanger reserve forest

*I thought about the other women I knew— Fhulo and Chani from Dhurwaras village, who had lost six and eight children, respectively, within a few days of delivery. It is shocking how high the infant mortality rate is.*

area—a beautiful teak forest, butterflies in the air, monkeys screeching from the roadside and rain that had begun to fall. I had not expected the rain; therefore, I was not carrying a raincoat. With the drinks that I had, and the rain falling on my spectacles, it was difficult to see the road. All through the beautiful drive, my mind was

on the discussion about the security forces. In the haze of the *landa*, the rain and the slippery muddy road and a preoccupied mind, I don't know how I fell. I got up, cleaned my muddy hands with rain water, found that I had some scratches that bled a little, but luckily I was not hurt much.

By the time I reached the Chepdapara hamlet, the rain had stopped and the afternoon sun was shining bright; my clothes were still drenched though. I reached the venue of the meeting but saw no one there. I checked in some of the houses nearby but found no one. I saw Ayati *didi*, who told me that everyone was at Mase *didi's* home because her 12-day-old child had died in the morning.

I went to Mase *didi's* home and found her sitting in a circle with the other women of the village. They made place for me to sit with them in the circle. I asked Mase *didi* what had happened. Though I had spoken to her in *halbi*, a dialect of the Bastar region, she replied in *koya-matha* (a dialect of the Gond tribe), which I barely understood. Mahangi *didi* translated for me and explained that her son had not been drinking milk since the day he was born and had died this morning. When I asked them whether they had been to the hospital, their response was, "Devi (Goddess) would have become angry; so we took him to the *vedde* (local healer) instead."

During the conversation, I learned that this was the third child that she had lost. I did not know how to express my grief to her. I thought about the other women I knew—Fhulo and Chani from Dhurwaras village, who had lost six and eight children, respectively, within a few days of delivery. It is shocking how high the infant mortality rate is.

I left the Chepdapara hamlet and made my way to the Burkunkonta hamlet of Dilmili village, thinking that the women of Darbha look old for their age. This may be because of poor nutrition or because they get married too early. Their food comprises mostly rice, which gives them the starch to do their daily work but not much other nutrition. As a development professional, it may not be enough if I only cared about the livelihood aspects of their lives. There are various issues related to pre- and post-natal health that need to be addressed. There is need to focus on developing community understanding on the nutritional aspects of food and to link these with the agricultural choices the villagers make. The Foundation for Revitalizing Local Health Tradition (FRLHT) is working in this area; it may be a good idea to work on local health traditions. FRLHT is a Bangalore-based organization that has been validating various medicinal plant herbs and supporting the  *vaidya*  (local healer) through the health development organization. Building a local health system may yield better results than designing or building a system that the people are unable to relate to.

The road to the Burkunkonta hamlet was almost non-existent. Fortunately, I reached without mishap. I found the hamlet practically

*There is no labour work available in the village. I looked around at the dry and rocky land that did not have much soil depth to it. There wasn't even drinking water available close by, the nearest source being three kilometres away.*

deserted and wondered where everyone was. Because I was late by about two hours, I thought the people must have left from the meeting place. I searched their houses and found most of them locked. I was about to give up when I met Hidama *dada*.

I asked him where everyone was and he explained that they

had gone to Andhra Pradesh to work because there was no way to earn money in the village after the agricultural season is over. There is no labour work available in the village. I looked around at the dry and rocky land that did not have much soil depth to it. There wasn't even drinking water available close by, the nearest source being three kilometres away. I asked Hidama why he hadn't gone. He thought for a while and then explained, "I have been there before. The working conditions are very tough with 12-hour long work days. Working in quarries, saw mills and cement factories is not very good for health. I have seen some people dying. I decided to stay here and sell the tamarind fruit that I have and thus meet my daily needs."

I asked him whether he had heard of how in Dodrepal village they are working under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). MGNREGA is a government scheme whereby a family from the village panchayat can ask for a minimum hundred days of work and the  *panchayat*  has to provide it to them or it has to provide allowances instead. He said he was not sure what it was; he had heard that some women had applied for some planned work in the  *gram sabha*  and had got some projects sanctioned and the  *panchayat*  was implementing these and the SHGs were monitoring them. I then asked him whether he would be willing to



Women participating in an SHG meeting, taking decisions for themselves and working towards meeting their aspirations.

make a similar plan for his village. He said that he would be and we agreed to draw up plans as soon as the villagers were back.

I thought about how much there was to do with the villagers and if we could create awareness about MGNREGA, we could help stop this forced migration. This was only the beginning of my work here; my reach was low at present; hopefully, it would grow as time passed.

I reached Aayatu para of Dilmili village as the sun was setting behind the mountains. I stayed there for a while to enjoy the view. The Lal Pungar group had already assembled for the meeting when I entered the village. They sat in a circle and began the proceedings with a song in *koya-matha*. It was a touching song about the difficulties faced by an individual, and inviting the villagers to work in groups for mutual learning and achieving common goals. The song ended and everyone was blessed with a red *pungar* flower, to be put behind their ear.

I was given the cash book to record the cash transactions made during the evening meeting. The meeting began with marking the attendance, amidst much giggling and laughing because it was still a new process for them. The villagers knew how to count up to 20. So they counted their money and made bundles of 20; they often forgot or made mistakes, and had to begin all over again. Finally, they consolidated the cash and closed the box and gave the key to Balmati and the box to Sukari.

They then shared with me that they had started receiving the widow and old age pension for which they had submitted the form to the *gram sabha*. It was a dream come true, they said. They also, like the women of Dodrepal, wanted to plan their land development through MGNREGA and submit a proposal to the *gram sabha*. It would help them get daily work, which was not available in their village. I explained to them that if every family from the hamlet and even the nearby hamlets were to form a SHG, it would become easy for the

*panchayat* to process the application. They agreed to work on organizing themselves and form SHGs and make the plans for their hamlets. It was overwhelming to see the village women beginning to take decisions for themselves and work towards meeting their aspirations.

It was already dark by the time I left for Tokapal, our office and my room. In just one day, I had travelled across Darbha, and seen its beautiful landscape in its full glory from sunrise to sunset, through sunshine to rain. I had seen and heard and felt so much, it seemed much longer than just a day.

At the end of the day, my mind was seething with questions. What was democracy and whom did it favour? Where was the security from the extremists or even from the government security forces for the people, if the people were so afraid of both? What can we do to help infants survive? How could we stop the migration in search of work and help people find livelihoods in their own villages? I was physically exhausted but mentally charged up with all the possibilities of what I could contribute through my role in the development framework. My last thought at night was, 'I have so many roads to travel before I sleep.'