

# Form in the Tribals of Bastar—Contextualizing Our Understanding

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*Several assumptions about the 'backwardness' of rural and tribal communities have to be discarded if engagement with these communities is to be meaningful and one that honours many of their traditions and customs; in the process of development and modernization, no community must lose its richness of culture, lifestyle and values*

We were going to become post-graduates, with an MA in Social Work, in a few months and our campus recruitment and placement week was approaching. The Career Guidance and Placement Cell had circulated the schedule of the organizations that were coming for campus recruitment. It was a Sunday; we were lazily discussing our career prospects in the corridor of our hostel. We had different ideas about careers; there were some who were very clear about the organizations they wanted to join, a few who wanted to study further, some who wanted to work in a particular region ("I want to get placed wherever my boyfriend gets placed!") and some others who wanted good money! There were others, like me, who were not sure what they wanted. I had done some field work in the area of disability, palliative care, waste management, women's empowerment, health, adoption and community development. I was sure I didn't want to take up research or academics. I did not enjoy working in institutional settings either. It seemed my options were to work with the community, that is, community based work. The next questions were, "Where? Urban slums, rural areas or tribal areas?"

Our placement brochure hardly had four or five community based organizations. I was confused as to how to go about choosing. Meanwhile, something my room-mate Raisa had said gave me an idea. During her rural practicum assignment, a development professional had told her, "If each of you could keep aside a minimum of three years of your career life for rural India, you will be making a fair contribution." I looked for NGOs that worked in rural areas and found 'Search', 'Gadchiroli', 'Samaj Pragati Sahayog' and so on. PRADAN also happened to be one of the organizations I had shortlisted.

I took up a rural placement in PRADAN and was placed in Bastar, Chhattisgarh. I knew very little about Bastar. All I had heard from people was that it was 'the den of Maoists', it had a good mix of 'tribal heritage', 'it was known for its metal work', 'it was remote' and that 'there were many human rights issues associated with it'.

I reached Bastar. I did not see any of that, at least not at first. What I noticed was the biodiversity, the flora, fauna and the beautiful landscapes, the isolated village hamlets and the innocent, enthusiastic villagers. Something about this community resembled my past. The women's traditional hairstyle and traditional necklace resembled the hairstyles and accessories of the *antarjanams* (Brahmin women) of Kerala. Such similarities helped me feel connected to this new place!

### THE EXCHANGE OF SURPRISES

During the initial days of my apprenticeship period (which is known as the 'learning by doing' phase) in PRADAN, I lived with the communities of Bastar during my 'Village Stay' and 'Village Study'. The 'Village Stay' is an opportunity for PRADAN freshers to get a first-hand experience of rural living and 'Village Study' is an assignment in which the apprentice stays in a village and does a detailed study of it, with special focus on any one or two aspects. In my initial days of living with the community, we had many surprises for each other. They thought that the precautionary items I carried such as medicines, wet wipes, roll-on deodorant, Swiss knife and thermos flask were very fancy. They couldn't understand why I would carry medicines without being ill and why I would need something like a Swiss knife or a thermos flask; I found it difficult to explain why because I myself was unsure as to why I had carried all that!

I lived in Tulsi's house in Kotwarpara hamlet of Theeratgarh for the Village Stay. She had never heard of air conditioning; she couldn't believe that the temperature of a room could be modified with an electronic system. Neither could the villagers understand that people suffering from some diseases had to restrict their sugar and salt intake. These were very funny facts to the villagers. Once, Tulsi and her

friend Gita asked me, "*Didi*, is it true that in the cities there are diseases that restrict one from eating sugar or salt?" I was amazed at their question.

There were surprises awaiting me too. I could relate to their life and lifestyle because of some of the childhood stories that I had heard. Much of my childhood was spent with my great grandparents and grand parents who would fondly narrate mythological and folk stories to me, especially that of Krishna. I was also trained in dance from a very early age—Krishna grazing cattle in the forest, a hunter using a bow and arrow, the *gopikas* carrying pots of water and so on were part of what I had learned in dance. But neither the stories nor the dances prepared me for how difficult and hard these activities were in real life. During my stay in the village, I saw all these being performed in actuality. For me, witnessing these was 'a fantasy being realized'.

My constant interaction with the people here led me to learn, unlearn and relearn many things in life. My experiences with them have made me critically reflect on the assumptions I held about rural and tribal communities. I have now started understanding things through direct interaction and experience; this helps me in developing perspectives about the community and myself, especially in the context of work. For instance, when conducting a livelihoods-based survey, Somaru *dada* told me that he had given four *poylis* (a measure of volume) of rice to five women for six days of work and that he purchased things from the bazaar in exchange for rice. I was totally confused by his measurements and wanted him to quantify these in terms of money. I thought, 'How ignorant is this man! He doesn't even know how to give details in a manner that can be understood!' I had him convert everything into financial terms so that I could finally appraise his economic status. Later, I realized that I was

the one who had a conceptual limitation. I could understand the value in economic terms only whereas Somaru could conceptualize the value in terms of money, food, labour, time, season or demand. He could convert his measures from one to the other and make sense of them, which I couldn't. Education trains us in a particular way and we fail to adapt to any other way, however logical or practical it may be. Similarly, I have wondered how a *sirha's* (traditional healer) spiritual performance leads to the physical well-being of the people and how such undernourished women are able to do such physically exerting work, which I am unable to do. Many a time, I have wondered how much science is being challenged by these villagers. I find my own perspective about things changing.

Today, I am able to understand and reason about the prevalence of child labour and child marriage. We insist on sending children to school, to ultimately prepare them for a life and career; similarly, in the community's context, they prefer to engage them in work because their nature of work requires early engagement and, of course, for various other socio-economic reasons. A girl who doesn't start practising to carry water pots by 10 years of age may not be able to perform efficiently as a home-maker. They need to get into marriage and family life at a very early age because the life-span of the people in this community is much less than ours in the urban areas. The elderly in these communities are people ranging from 50 to 60 years. If we take a look at the voter id card of the oldest looking people, we might be surprised to find that they are just 54 or 57!

My experiences here have taught me how important it is to contextualize my understanding. Many a time, we—the urban educated class—try to influence and change the rural and tribal people with the notion

that we are the developed lot and we need to develop them to reach our standards. We seldom think that we have so much to learn from them. During our primary education, we learn concepts such food chains and the water cycle; despite that, we often break these links for our convenience. This essentially means that we are incapable of applying our learnings into practice. We insulate our land with concrete, insulate organic waste in plastics and end up living a highly expensive and fashionable organic life in an inorganic way! On the other hand, the rural and the tribal communities have no such concepts fed to them through classroom lessons; yet, they value and apply all these concepts in their lifestyles. The most striking of such features is their symbiotic relationship with nature, whether with plants, animals, land resources or water resources.

I do have some concerns about the community with which I am engaging. I am afraid that in the process of development and modernization, the community will lose its richness of culture, lifestyle and values. In our team meetings, we often have never-ending debates as to how organic/inorganic our interventions in the community are. I feel very good about the fact that such discussions happen in our team. However, who will monitor the dangerous influences on the community such as that of religious groups, which take them away from their root culture in the name of identity? How does the idea of development or modernization favour the tribals? My personal dilemma is: 'Will I have a role in all these? If so, what will it be? How long will it take me to work on it?' And finally, 'How long will I be able to perceive this role?'

My thoughts do not end here; neither do my concerns or dilemmas. I wish to continue my journey, coming up with newer learning, dilemmas, concerns and solutions, to keep my life and work more and more exciting!