

Life in a Maria Village

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Kaleidoscopic images, which typify life in a village in Bastar, bring forth the flavour, warmth, simplicity and aspirations of the Marias.

PROLOGUE

It was love at first sight—the pristine beauty silhouetted by the mighty Kanger Park, the undulating terrain and the stone tiled mud houses—I was hooked! I was in a Maria village. These impressions of time spent in the Kukripani hamlet of Darbha block of Bastar district are forever etched in my mind. The hamlet is situated about 35 km from the headquarters and far away from the din and bustle and complexities of our lives. On an idyllic Sunday, I had set off on one of my regular explorative expeditions in and around Bastar when I stumbled upon this hamlet and subsequently decided to do a part of my Village Stay and Study here.

THE FIRST DAY ALWAYS THE HARDEST

My first day in Kukripani was hectic. I went around the hamlet, familiarizing myself with the unknown faces while searching for a chord to build a rapport (which is not so easy). Finally, I called it a day and threw myself on the makeshift bed in Sannu Poreyami, my benevolent host's, house. I do not know why he asked me to stay at his house in the first place; my Koya Mata (the Maria dialect) vocabulary was limited to "*Nawa peder Pradyut*" (My name is Pradyut) and "*Nawa lona Assam ta mende*" (My home is in Assam); even my Halbi, the lingua franca of Bastar, was pathetic.

I recall my first Village Stay six years ago in Khunti, Jharkhand. I had stayed over at a village called Chukru. It was tough and my mind was in a tizzy with a dozen existentialist questions: What I am doing? Why? Is this my cup of tea? Today, after so many years of working in the field, I am facing the same problems but with a small difference. The experience of the last six years has instilled confidence in me and I have a pragmatic attitude to new hardships. However, some questions still haunt me: What is the way ahead of this quagmire called poverty? What are my approach and strategy? How am I going to continue to nurture my attachment to working at the grass roots level without neglecting the responsibilities mandated by my new role as a leader

of an upcoming team? The answers are not forthcoming, yet striving to get them is the only solution.

PAIKA, THE OUTSIDER

My initial attempt was to form Self Help Groups (SHGs) in Kukripani. I had to have all my wits about me. I used a mix of Halbi, Koya Mata and Hindi to reach out to the people. As part of the initial efforts, about 38 families have been organised into SHGs, or as we locally call them the *Swa Sahayta Samuhs*. It was not easy sailing. People were sceptical. Someone remarked, "The *paika* (outsider/city person) is playing smart. He is going to dupe us." Their earlier experiences, in which the many groups formed under SGSY were either non-starters or the personal fiefdom of the *sachiv* (*panchayat* Secretary) and the three office bearers, made the villagers wary. I desperately needed a few confidantes in the hamlet. Luckily, there were two precocious youths, Sukhran Baghel and Santuram Korram, who were mischievous but remarkably smart. They helped me not only with my Koya Mata but also in building the much needed rapport. With their support, I managed to convince the village women, the *didis* (*nanno* in Gondi), to form two groups.

That day was a day of jubilation for me. Two SHGs—Gangadei Mata (12 members) and Jalnin Mata (16 members)—were born and I was the proud father. Each group had only one member, who could barely write; yet again, Sukhran and Santu were the saviours—they became the *lekhpals*—the official writers for the groups.

According to the Marias, a Gond tribe, "Heaven is a big endless forest with lots and lots of mahua trees, and Hell is a big forest devoid of mahua trees."

"Dada, have food with us today," Sukri *nanno* invited me with all the sisterly affection. I was startled. The transition from *paika* to *dada* is overwhelming. How soon relationships can be established with a little empathy and trust, and how soothing and serene

is the company of these wonderful unassuming people!

IN SEARCH OF EL DORADO

Everything was hunky dory till that fateful day when I found Santu missing from his home. His mother Mangaldei and father Baman were despairing and desolate. I got to know he had fled to Bhadrachalam in Andhra Pradesh in search of greener pastures. Maybe to work in stone quarries, brick kilns, marble factories and other umpteen such clandestine enterprises where the work environment is inhuman (where the labour is forced to work for 14 hours at a stretch in the most rigorous of conditions) and payments are meagre (many manage just enough to get back to the villages virtually penniless). This is the story of so many Santus because forced migration to places such as Vishakhapatnam, Kirandul (the iron ore mines), Hyderabad, Raipur, Nizamabad and even as far as Chennai and Goa is pretty common among the men, post the kharif season, to ensure round-the-year food sufficiency. The agents of different industries, mines and factories lure the villagers with dreams of easy money. The families left behind are a distressed lot.

One such *nanno* is Faguni whose husband Raju has been away for work to Hyderabad for the last eight months. She has neither heard nor has she received any money from him. She fend for herself and her two

children, aged 5 and 2, by wage earning, collecting Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) and relying on Antyodaya Yojna for 35 kg rice at Re 1 per kg. The Employment Guarantee Act is in shambles. Migration, indebtedness (there is a *Haat* Bank where one can avail of loans in the *haats* from mobile moneylenders at exorbitant rates, sometimes as high as 120–140%), land mortgage and liquor selling are at an all-time high. Most of the loans availed of from the groups are for buying *Iru* (mahua) for making liquor. When I tried to encourage the members to take loans for productive purposes, they countered me saying, “Where is the other option? There are no irrigation facilities with all these wretched fallow lands and many of our men folk migrating to other areas. What are we supposed to do, *dada*?” I was taken aback; so much for my moralistic attitude. Maybe the search for El Dorado should go on.

A BOTTLE OF KAL, A GLASS OF PEJ AND LOTS OF LOVE

The *bedde* (priest/exorcist) is chanting some words in Koya Mata. Lakhu’s young child has fallen ill. So Lakhu and his wife, Mase, have arranged for a *Katla*—an exorcism of the ghosts that have gone into their child. They have arranged all the things ordered by the *bedde*—bow and arrow, black cock, pork meat, *landa* (rice beer), jaggery, puffed rice and, of course, *kal* (mahua drink). All my implorations to take the child to a doctor had failed. Lakhu said, “You know, *dada*, Lakhma *bedde* has strong powers. My son will definitely get cured. After all, we have been relying on Lakhma *bedde* for so long.” He then offered me a bottle of *kal*, which I had to drink from a *doppa* (a cup made from *sal* leaves) or else the spirits would get angry. Thus, my tryst with faith and superstition continues.

“*Dada*, you seem to be hungry. Why don’t you have *pej* with us?” Sukri *nanno* asked one hot afternoon. I was indeed hungry and welcomed the offer. I also wanted to taste *pej* or *java* of which I had heard a lot. *Pej* is a delicacy, a syrupy product made of boiled rice, millet and maize. It is an instantaneous energizer. Most families in Bastar have *pej* for lunch. She also gave me rice and *basta* (bamboo shoot). I will always remember the lunch, served with so much of love, in this modest house. The other *nannos* had come to see how a city person had food with them. The love and affection that I saw in their eyes bowled me over. Often when I visit the village, the *nannos* offer me food. Initially, I was reluctant, lest it became a habit; I do realize, however, that it is purely out of concern and love that they offered me food. So now I accept the offers gleefully. Life is not that complex after all. Life is indeed beautiful.

A DAY IN JHIMO’S LIFE

Jhimo is a perennially moody *nanno* of Jalnin Mata SHG and is its only literate member. She is a mother of three daughters and an infant son. Her average day begins with getting up as early as 4.30 in the morning. After her morning ablutions, she fetches water from a place one kilometre away. She then prepares *pej* and cooks rice for the family. She goes to the nearby *rann* (about 4 km away) to fetch firewood and collect NTFPs, which fortunately is in plenty, with a lot to pick such as tendu, sal seeds, sal leaves, *kosa* and *aam chur*. In between, she rears the cattle too. On most days, she works as labour on the road being constructed under PMGSY and earns Rs 100 wage per day. On Saturday, she goes to nearby Neganar *haat* to buy essentials such as oil and salt, and sells mahua, which she prepares twice a week and which fetches her Rs 20 per bottle. In the evening, she has to bring water again and cook food. I wondered

how she finds the time and energy for all these activities, with her tiny toddler clinging on to her. Life has taught her to be resilient.

I became intrigued by her after a rather poignant incident. She came for one of the group meetings in a slightly intoxicated state. The other members severely castigated her and threatened to expel her. Even her husband forbade her from attending any more meetings. I spoke with her. She broke down completely and started sobbing saying that she is an orphan and her husband keeps on mistreating her; out of frustration, she had started drinking. She then took the drastic step of leaving her family (including her infant son) for her maternal home. Finally, I asked the SHG members to apologize to her and admonish the husband. Only then did she relent. I realized that

the poor too have feelings (often, they are stoic). They also cry when hurt.

THE DREAM MERCHANTS

Mahadev Mandavi is a street-smart young Maria, with dreams and aspirations that are uncommon for tribals. He enrolled in a chain business recently. He travels to nearby villages and convinces people to join him because the more people he can enrol, the more will be his incentive. Once he has 27 pairs of customers, he will earn Rs 10-12 thousand a month. Fuelled by this prospect, he sells his dreams to other gullible youths. Such chain businesses and pyramid schemes are a rage nowadays in Bastar, with hundreds of young boys and girls enrolling in them lured by hopes of easy money, which more often than not are belied; most of these ventures are either fraud or not as remunerative as projected. Many such investment schemes have

duped many poor families into depositing money with promises of making it double or treble in a year. With no sustainable livelihood means, these phoney companies thrive in Bastar.

THE WINDS OF CHANGE

"Dada, we want to make the labour payments tomorrow. Please write a letter to the SBI, Tokapal." Sukri, Fagni and Jhimo *nanno* called me one morning. My heart filled with pride and exhilaration. The wheels of change are clearly in motion. These shy *nannos* are now responsible members of the Project Execution Committee (PEC) to implement and monitor INRM activities in the village, including land levelling, horticulture and plantation, 5%, WHTs, etc. The PEC, or *Bahele Samiti*, formed exclusively with members of the two SHGs, is responsible for sanctioning of an activity, withdrawal of money, making labour payments and also monitoring the implementing quality in a transparent manner. Payments are now made at 15 days' interval, something unheard of in NREGA. Hidma, a wage earner, told me during once such payment day, "Dada, this system is so simple but so effective. Can you also make the *panchayat* people adopt this?" I tried to explain to him about grass roots democracy, whose *panchayat* it is and that the SHG members had rights and duties to clean the system. His incredulous look told me that I have still a long way to go to ensure this.

When my colleague Shashikant and I decided to organize a Gram Sabha Resource Management Plan, GSRMP (the name itself is a misnomer because there is no *gram sabha* per se, just a facade manipulated by government representatives), we encountered scepticism and disbelief. Many believed it was a

loan trap or a motive to take away their land (all the land grabbing incidents by various steel companies, particularly in the nearby Lohandigura added fuel to this belief). Most important, nobody was willing to accept our rather utopian idea that women could handle the programme. We were, in fact, branded as 'Dada log' or naxalites, out to spread our propaganda. Undeterred, we carried on, and our persistence bore fruit. The *nannos* are a confident lot now and they are learning the nuances of earth work, muster rolls and other technicalities. Sukri and Lalita are, in fact, going to nearby villages and even their maternal homes to propagate the virtues of joining SHGs. Paslo, Maddo, Lachandei and Aasmati are taking up new crops and

techniques such as maize, SRI and tomato for the kharif season. They are now confident about starting something new such as kusumi lac and vermi-compost.

EPILOGUE

I cling to these small acts of hope, which are actually "a giant step for 'womankind' (the *nannos*)". Amidst mayhem and gory violence, the real protagonists—the people—are taking centre stage. For a development practitioner, there is no other way but to go to the community because that is where the real learning ground is. Bastar will continue to intrigue and mesmerize me with its vibrancy, mysticism and yearning to break free from the set stereotypes of tribal life.

*"I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge,
That myth is more potent than history.
I believe that dreams are more powerful than facts,
That hope always triumphs over experience.
That laughter is the only cure for grief.
And I believe that love is stronger than death."*

Robert Fulghum