

# Becoming a 'Ho': Remembering and Working Through

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Entering the Ho community, making sense of this fast-disappearing world, working with the villagers, exploring his own is a young, educated, Delhi-bred man, whose experiences foster a multiplicity of engagements and enduring relationships in the community

## **A Sense of Beginning: Experience with the Self**

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**O**n my morning walk every day, I stroll through a number of tracks formed by the villagers who walk through the fields and the forest. Soon, walking on these tracks became a fascinating exercise. I wondered what the spaces meant. It was clear that the tracks in the fields were a result of constant traversing over the paths and thus their meaning and significance derived from the culture or custom of walking for a purpose. A concrete road, on the other hand, takes its meaning from the need to be travelled upon. Its purpose is defined, even before it comes into existence.

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## My inspiration and motivation to work in the village began and persisted because, perhaps for the first time, I found so much love, unconditional and free of any demands or expectations

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This story will unravel my journey around two years back as part of the Action Research Project<sup>i</sup> conducted with the Ho tribe (Turibasa village in the Kolhan region of West Singhum district) of South Jharkhand, India. The project, and my engagement with the Turibasa community and the village, evolved in three phases, comprising three village-immersion exercises (of two months, two months and five months, respectively), where I stayed in the village, leading to a multiplicity of engagements and relationships.

The writing largely covers the journey taken by both, the people of Turibasa and myself, over a period of time. It is the story of a Delhi-bred, young, educated man entering the Ho community, trying to make sense of their world, working with them and building relationships. I was surprised when I was considered part of the community and referred to as 'Ho', more so in context of the suffix attached to it—*adivasi*.

I wonder whether I really belonged to the community, whether I needed to do something in particular to be a part of them and, most significantly, what did it really mean to be a Ho *adivasi* (and this was the beginning of

everything that happened in the next two years and shaped me into becoming all that I am today). Their everyday lives, their *adivasi*-ness, and the mundane world they lived in and the cultural practices the community followed—all became part of the documentation, and eventually led to the making of a film by the community. This article is an attempt to take the reader along with me in the process that unraveled, in the journey that was taken and the world that was created.

This paper is created on the basis of the learning that evolved during the immersion and the project that was undertaken, helping us understand and question the ways in which the *adivasi* way of life is becoming lost, is remembered and, most important, how it is being lived currently. The last section will reflect upon what the future holds and what we, as practitioners, can do to work with the community, to learn and unlearn, and to understand where the community is coming from and going to.

During my entire stay, I lived in the house of a 17-year-old boy (the head of the family), Gunaram Deogham, and his mother, his wife and his four-month-old daughter). He lived in a small self-

constructed house in the village; he offered me a space, not only in his house but eventually, also in his life. Slowly and steadily, as we began to get to know each other, there developed a deep bond between us and it didn't take us much time to become friends. I do not even remember when I began calling him *bhai* (brother).

My inspiration and motivation to work in the village began and persisted because, perhaps for the first time, I found so much love, unconditional and free of any demands or expectations. I am not certain whether it was our loneliness and some kind of void in both our lives, that connected us both; it certainly gave me an opportunity to experience a beautiful relationship that I share with a beautiful person. He was 15 years old when he was forcibly married because his father had died.

He told me, on the second day of our interaction, while he was taking me to the fields, "*Jab se akele hue hain, dar bohot lagta hai, kaafi dar, pata nahin kab kya ho jaaye. Acchha hai aap aa gaye* (Ever since I have been alone, I am scared. I don't know when, what will happen. I am happy that you came)." I found many of my own insecurities reflected in his words as I heard Gunaram speak.

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I recalled my own sense of being in that space at that age and how it had affected me at the time. The empathetic connection shifted and flitted between my position as a detached rational researcher and as an elder brother who wanted to be there with him and help him through his confusion and his fears.

In the village, participating in the everyday acts of living, eating together, going to the fields and being with the people for most of the day, one starts becoming part of the social ('solar') system of the family. Like any other system, it has its orbits and it has its core. My struggle was about how to become a part of this orbit. Acceptance, in this way, would signal a sense of the 'other'—one who is part (yet apart) from the common; there is closeness in this relationship and, however, at the same time a difference and separation. When Basmati *didi* tells me, "*Ab toh aap yahan ke hi ho gaye ho...*(Now you belong here...)," I struggle with the dichotomies of my own self and how I accept it and whether I belong.

*Amma* (mother) tells a bunch of kids merrily chatting with me and pointing at my mobile phone, in her local language, "*Bas itni hi baat karo* (Stop,

talk this much only)." This angered me and at times like these, I was almost tempted to confront her and maybe even have a small argument, just to vent my frustration with what was so obviously happening around me—being snubbed and told to not interact with exhaustingly annoying. Yet it was not important enough for me to communicate about this to *amma* in private. However, even though language itself is a private affair, eye movements, body language, not so much and they say more than one intends to. From where I sit, I can only hear low, distant voices. I am part of their personal everyday lives and yet not part of the orbit. Only in retrospect do I find meaning in this. This made me probe the question of what it means to be part of a community and to understand what it is that we mean when we use the word *adivasi*.

The next section is about understanding this cultural setting and what makes the Ho community a community.

### **Leanings from the Mundane Everydayness of Culture**

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My second immersion started with a rather strong dilemma—an ethical and a research one. On the

one side, I was confused about whether I would like to stick to the story of Gunaram and use just that one 'individual' narrative that I had carried from my first immersion or whether I should move beyond the convenient space and explore other layers to the story that needs to be brought out in similarly nuanced ways. After all, the problematic was still the same—the question of what is the *adivasi*. But the nature of the problematic, that is, why it was a 'problem' for me and, 'how' it needs to be made sense of was for me the critical purpose of this immersion. Even before starting the immersion, I had made a decision to discuss with Gunaram what he thought was the purpose of my being there and what, in his view, I was thinking about with regard to the project. Not just that, I had to attempt these conversations with others as well, rather than only with Gunaram, so that it could lead to perspectives and narratives beyond just one lens.

In an everyday practice, when the identity of being a Ho is superseded by the identity of being an *adivasi*, when festivals become *adivasi* festivals, when language becomes *adivasi* language, when culture becomes *adivasi* culture, where do the memory and the understanding

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of being a Ho lie? A clear demarcation between the two is impossible and the boundaries remain fuzzy. As Sardar Degogham remarked, “*Ab hum (adi) vasi nahin rahe, hum toh (nava) vasi ho gaye hain* (We are not Adivasi anymore, we have become ‘new’ dwellers now).”

The purpose of their festivals has changed. How can a *parab* (a quarterly festival in the Ho community), which celebrates rain and good harvest, held in the monsoon, be celebrated now when for years there has been no rain and the monsoon season has undergone a transformation?

What is this ‘culture’ of impossibility? Sardar Bhai remarks that meanings have changed and purposes have changed too; yet these festivals hold importance. It is the same when *Amma* comes back home quietly after the rituals and doesn’t dance and celebrate like everyone else and Gunaram says, “*Amma* hasn’t danced after my father’s death. It’s a loss that *Amma* lives with every day.” I perceive through these conversations a certain sense of nostalgia, a longing for who they were and an attempt to retain

who they are, in order not to forget their identity.

Our stories help us have an identity. Because we do not just tell stories, we live them too. We rely on philosophy to find meaning in our everyday practices, which in turn shape our perspectives. To be mindful of what we think, say and do; to be reflexive of the potential, consequences and the learning of behavioural practices renders the world not problematic in itself, but situated in its being, in its knowledge and in its spirit.

So far, my practice of ethics has been within role demarcations: student, employee, researcher; action research as a method was, in the recent past, the means with which I was trying to make sense of self-ethics and knowledge production. Perhaps the road to ethics is the road of the ethic; because that is what we will need to understand...a world of living, growing, sustaining and coming together of community and what it means to be a practitioner working in a village with a group of people.

The next part of the article, consequently, talks about where

I place myself in this shift from a researcher to an action researcher.

### **Understanding the *Adivasi*: Learning and Unlearning**

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Gunaram asks me to be part of the dinner at the Bodamonji festival, “Everyone is going to be there.” I see it as an opportunity to meet everyone. However, the people who actually had dinner that night were from his family/ title, and the collective ‘everyone’ took on a different meaning altogether. Is it only from my own vantage point that I was looking at everyone or is there ever an everyone? I wonder what I mean by social and does how I view a certain sociality become as important as the social setting itself. The world of Gunaram does not operate on my code of understanding, but from his own.

Sitting in a *gram sabha* meeting (I randomly just happened upon the meeting 15 minutes after it had started, not having known that there was a meeting in the first place), which I could only try to make sense of because of the language, there came a point where Sardar Bhai (an old active member of the *tola*—hamlet—

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In my combined stay of ten months (spread across three immersions) interspersed with spending time away from the Turibasa, I have come to understand that many of these stories—be it Gunaram’s, Sardar Bhai’s, Sukhmati Amma’s, Lalita didi’s or mine—are about ‘loss’

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and also a Ward Member) asked a bunch of people (men and women and an especially large group of kids), “*Kya swastika lagaana ya gaay ki pooja karna hi Hindu dharma hota hai?* (Does using a swastika sign or offering prayers to a cow alone make you a follower of the Hindu religion?)” and “*Agar ka, kha, ga, gha... hi padayenge toh Ho bhasha kab padayenge, Ho bhasha toh khatam ho jaayegi* (If we only learn the Hindi alphabet, when are we ever going to learn the Ho language? The Ho language will become extinct soon).”

In my combined stay of ten months (spread across three immersions) interspersed with spending time away from the Turibasa, I have come to understand that many of these stories—be it Gunaram’s, Sardar Bhai’s, Sukhmati Amma’s, Lalita didi’s or mine—are about ‘loss’.

For Sardar Bhai, it is this impossibility of giving meaning to his life-world (maybe), a life-world that defines who he is, a ‘Ho’, a part of a community. In this Kolhan region of Jharkhand, the community has had certain practices and systems in place for a very long time; these are now becoming lost. It has been his life work to protect these traditions from ‘outside’ (missionaries as

per Sardar) influences. For Sardar, the life-world of a community hinges on its meaning and its practices, with language being one of the most critical.

He looks at the new trends, such as learning Hindi or the lack of monsoon or the kids going out of the villages to work and study, as a cultural loss because now “no one plays the flute or the *nagara* (a big drum-like local instrument).” This, perhaps, makes him a Ho who makes sense of the world by what the world used to be, and longs for his life in the future to be what he is used to.

This raises an important question. Is it only when one acknowledges that there is no longer a genuine way of proceeding like we used to might there arise new genuine ways of living like we used to? This is a personal question. A very personal problem! Where does the ‘common’ lie and what is the dialogue that happens between individual stories and common histories? How do we come together in our stories?

The project was ‘On being or becoming an *Adivasi*’, a project about nostalgia, about longing, about well-being, about recreating the old, the forgotten and the not-so-forgotten, there,

and yet not there. And through this project, I acknowledge that I am looking for my own being in the common and how much of an ‘individual’ I am. This is the question I deal with as I write this and this is a question I am sure all of us ask of ourselves every once in a while. I hope the answer lies in our practices, in future possibilities and in some hope—hope on which I want to end this article, because I believe, among other things, that hope is the best thing to have because it creates a possibility, a possibility that I would like to conclude this on.

### **Opening up Possibilities: How Do We Take This Forward?**

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The film that we made then becomes a medium to understand the relationship of the community with creativity, wherein, Ho, in the very process of making the film (in the mere act of deciding what will be shown in the film, what will be shot, which practice is important, what will be edited, the music to capture, the sounds to include) becomes ‘Ho’—which then argues for Development as Creativity. It’s not going to be easy; however, maybe the time has come to ‘complicate’ our understanding of (*Adi*)*vasis* (MPhil research

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collaborations with PRADAN, being one of them). It is, in this context, important for practising researchers of the development world to be able to collaborate and work with institutions and organizations (both state and non-state) such as PRADAN. It is important to be able to open up possibilities for such community engagements, to ask questions, to create collaborations so that the future of adivasis can be imagined and worked towards.

Like the communities we engage with, this project of collective creative imagination cannot be realized alone (certainly not individually). Because I like to believe that in order to cultivate an intensive collective community inside would need a collective 'imagined' community outside, one where all of us practitioners, in all our multiplicities come together to create something new and, in the process, all of us 'become' something new too. It is going to be difficult, but it is definitely possible.

So, when Gunaram or Santoshi didi asks, "Kuch galat laga toh hata sakte hain na...(If something is

wrong in the film, we can edit it and delete it, right)?" it says something of the very modality of the memory we are working on, one that is visual and oral and yet differential enough to erase or construct. When, in Turibasa, people decide to record the funeral of a child in the hamlet because a funeral is a 'celebration' for them, the remembering takes a new turn. During the ceremony, Lakha *bhai* goes to mourn in different shacks, where families from various villages have arrived. Meanwhile, we follow him making a film of villagers cooking, eating, drinking and dancing. When the visitors from other villages ask Lakha what is happening, she responds, "Turibasa ka film bana rahe hain, tumhe bhi dikhaayenge...(We are making a film on Turibasa, we will show it to you)." This does something. This makes all of us (Lakha, Gunaram, Santoshi, Basmati and myself) try harder at making a new story, a new history, a new memory.

Through the whole process of five months, we talked about the story we wanted to tell, the videos and the images we wanted

to shoot, how we wanted to edit the film and how we wanted to show it to everyone in the village. We created a narrative (and a process) about making a present, one that is decided by the people themselves in their stories, in their loss and in their happiness. I wonder what the process of making of this film might have to suggest to the ways of doing practice, ways of doing research, ways of building the language of film. The making of the film involves the methods of meeting the aesthetic creative spaces, represents the spaces of transformation, and explores the spaces of self, for critical political education in innovative ways in the context of the community.

As Bergson rightly remarked, "The idea of the future, pregnant with infinity of possibilities, is thus more fruitful than the future itself, and this is why we find more charm in hope than in possession, in dreams than in reality." (Bergson, 1896).

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