

# THE BEST TWO YEARS OF MY LIFE!

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Cherishing memories of initiating the *Tasar* Project and remembering the people instrumental in the promotion of *tasar* as a livelihood among the poor tribals and other villagers of Godda takes us back almost three decades...

**T**he nearly two years I spent in Godda on the *Tasar* Project during 1989–90 were definitely the very best years of my life; they are, till date, certainly the most memorable. And that is why I took it upon myself to write this immediately after I received Narendra's email. The first draft took not more than two hours which means it is all still very fresh in my mind even after all these years. And I had so much to share as is evident from how long this story has turned out to be! Those years changed my view of the world, helped me gain confidence in myself, and brought me in touch with so many wonderful people—*Jha ji* and family, the team, and the tribal people. So this is a personal memoir about these beautiful people rather than a description of the project itself.

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## My background

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I would like to start with how I got there in the first place and the contextual lens I carried with me. I started out life as a typical middle class, urban, big city boy (from Mumbai) but became fascinated with rural India when I went to Xavier's College and I participated in rural camps through the Social Service League. In that sense, it was the turning point in my life. I chose IRMA over a regular MBA, and then joined PRADAN at Barabanki.

Being in my first job, I was a bit lost during those years; but the weavers in Behta and the flayers at Haddiganj accepted me with open arms and without judgement. They were beautiful people. I still remember all the many wonderful conversations over *beedis* and *chai* in the Haddiganj office and the pride with which they had banned any drunken member from entering it. I took satisfaction in introducing 'frame looms' in Behta, and personally designing the tannery in Haddiganj. They proudly showed it to me when I returned from Godda to take my things (after I had decided to stay on in Godda). As life progressed, however, I found that the work

being done on the ground was too little compared to the flow of funds and I actually became a bit disillusioned with rural development.

## Getting to Godda

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Deep asked me to move to Godda for six months to gain more exposure and when I reached there, I fell in love with the place and decided to stay on. I was impressed by the massive outcomes Jha *ji* had created in such a short time. We were already working in 70 villages and had planted nearly seven lakh trees in just three years (the exact facts may be a little hazy since it has been a very long time now). The enthusiasm, passion, and motivation of the villagers touched me immediately. Here is something that stood out for me then, and has stayed with me over the years—the power of social transformation.

Jha *ji* had been running awareness camps since the inception of the project, in which tea and snacks would be served to encourage participation. In the third year, Shreeprasad Choudhary and others of Andhrisot village, early adopters of the programme, insisted that they would conduct and sponsor

the event in their area. They were Yadavs from the upper caste, and they cooked and served a full meal in their homes (at their cost) for nearly 150 people, which included the Santhals (tribals) who are otherwise ostracized and forced to live on the fringes of the village. The Yadavs cooking and serving a meal to Santhals in their home was a pretty powerful transformation. I was transformed too.

## The Jha Family

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I will forever be indebted to Jha *ji*, for reinstating my belief in development with the right combination of know-how, drive, contextual familiarity, passion and conviction. I am also grateful to *Bhabhiji* who supported him and us, always smiling, as we went about zealously pursuing our dreams of doing some social good, and for feeding us healthy meals, occasionally, so we would not become malnourished. But I am especially thankful to both of them for teaching me the power of compassion as I tried to recover from a personal storm.

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carried malice. We would be friends through it and after it also and I am grateful, in hindsight, that he treated me as one; and with such respect. One particular argument was around whether we should give the decentralized grainage to the Yadavs or the tribals. I favoured the latter 'putting the last first', and Jha ji preferred the former because he thought that this would ensure a higher probability of success and, therefore, benefit everyone in the long-term. I wasn't convinced then but I yielded to Jha ji; in hindsight, though, I believe he was right.

I also remember playing carom in the evenings with his sons Rohit and Mohit on the first floor of their house (the office was on the ground floor), adorable little boys just 13 and 10 then. And I also remember Jha ji's moral dilemma about whether he was compromising their future in the pursuit of his passion. I also coached basketball at their school, and the school won the boys and girls events, in spite, of the competition being very robust. The Father at the school offered me an envelope with cash, which I refused; he then sent me pant and shirt material. I doubt I ever got them stitched, but the memory of it all is pleasant.

Trying to shoot arrows from a Santhali bow and arrow set, on the grounds next to the office is another memory. I practised every evening; I remember I would keep hurting my finger, and never quite mastered the sport. Jha ji remains till today, a friend, philosopher, and guide. I am still in touch with him and Bhabhiji off and on, and they continue to shower affection upon me. Although I must say that as I have got older and busier with my life, I have not been in contact much. It is unfortunate that time makes us take meaningful relationships for granted. But I spoke to them today (because I was writing this article) and I hope to visit them again soon. Bhabhiji was her usual exuberant and caring self.

### The Godda Team

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The team I met there truly inspired me by its commitment, and indulged my ignorance. I was a novice and knew nothing about Bihar or *tasar* or afforestation or the tribal people. They taught me all that they knew, without holding back and, on hindsight, must have been pretty tolerant of the arrogance I must have carried about my IRMA degree.

Hazari ji was undoubtedly the stalwart amongst them all and everyone respected him. He refused to ride a motorcycle, and the stories were that he would walk 10 or 15 km each day (or was he on cycle, I don't remember now). But what still stays with me is his indulgent, maybe it was satirical, brusque manner of always speaking with a hint of a smile at the corners of his lips. He would not mince words, and he would not waste any either. But he got the job done like no one else could. He could rally the villagers together in vast numbers, especially the women. I wonder, till today, what his magic was, but as I have grown older and perhaps wiser, I believe it was just his plain downright honesty and simplicity; and his energy to do tremendous work that people found inspiring.

Ravi ji was in another league altogether. Sporting his French beard and tobacco-stained teeth, he was the guru to everyone else. Unlike Hazari ji, who was busy with getting the job done and was, therefore, less approachable, Ravi ji was patient and nurturing. He sacrificed his family time and gave completely of himself to the job for what, I learned, was a paltry (even in those days) Rs 700 or 800 a month. I earned Rs 1,675

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or something near-about and did not have any family to support. I remember countless rides with him on his blue Rajdoot, which he was so proud of and took such good care of; and the day we killed a chicken that was crossing the street and had to deal with the villagers (I think we paid Rs 50 for it).

Awadhesh appeared to be very hostile in his mannerisms but he had a very tender heart. I realized later that it was just his way of speaking that was rough and not his words. I remember eating *dahi chooda* at his house on innumerable occasions, that thick *dahi* that they would make at home from the milk from their cows.

Prabhakar and I started the Kothidinda Cluster together and, when I visited the project many years later, he took me there with great pride. I must say I feel proud of it too. Babulal Marandi of Baunsi village had been insisting we set up the project in his *sasural*. One day, it was pouring, and the *tasar* eggs had started hatching in the grainage. I asked Prabhakar if we should take the DFLs there. He agreed, and we loaded the Arjuna branches into the back of the jeep, took the DFL bags and set off for Baunsi. We picked up Babulal on the way. His

*sasural* was very far in the interior and he lost the way (he knew the way by foot, of course). We took a local villager in, but he, too, got lost. We picked up a third one, who finally took us to the village. It was deep in the interiors!

We created a stunning impact when we reached the village because many, many eggs had hatched by then and the back of the jeep was crawling with worms. The people had never seen so many worms together before! The rest, as they say, is history, but it is still a matter of personal pride for me. In fact, when I revisited the village after many years, the *pradhan* reminded me of how my mother had taken a photograph under 'that Papaya tree'. I had forgotten I had taken my parents there, (it was so many years ago) and I was surprised that they not only remembered me but also my parents' visit.

I didn't interact much with Ramakant *ji* in those days; he had joined later; I remember him for his bottled glasses and the shy (or sly) smile. Richard Marandi, convent-educated and always ready to put in the effort, was a quiet and hard worker. Devender lived in his own world (and also at the office at nights to watch over it), but on occasion, for no reason that anyone could understand, he

would 'lose it', although he would regain control very quickly after that. Arun Mandal was a dreamer and a philosopher, who took me home one day to his house high up in the hills; they specially fed me duck and I felt honoured! He told me about his philosophy of '+/-/0', which means that everything will even out in the end, and we will go back to where we started.

Abdul Latif joined us later and became a part of the family very quickly because of his ready smile and his willingness to take us wherever we pointed to, at any time of day or night. He was so tiny of frame that he looked ahead through the steering wheel of the jeep (that might be a little bit of an exaggeration, though). His most difficult challenge was to take us up a 7 km hill, which was very steep and completely muddy, to Cheo village; he took us up and brought us down safely.

Of course, last but not the least; there is Narendra, the 'Mahila Mandal man' who took over from Mallika after she left. I don't have many memories of Mallika though; I think she left soon after I joined there. Narendra joined us from IRMA, and his most endearing trait was his humility (that is perhaps why he got along with the women so well). And

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he wrote and received many letters every single day! We lived together in the same house, went to the movies (a man was stabbed in the theatre on one such occasion!), and made *khichdi* every evening with whatever vegetable we found that day in the market. We prepared a different version every day because we randomly added spoonfuls of spices each time.

He played the *ghatam* on an inverted *matka* to liven up the evenings. But I'm sure he wouldn't have forgotten the time he confidently made banana chips at home with special bananas bought from the market and lots and lots of *ghee*. We couldn't eat them in the end, but I remember them (and him) fondly. Satya and Nijjar joined just before I left and I remember the latter's unfailing enthusiasm. Satya was very new in those days and roamed around in a daze.

### The Santhals

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Most importantly, however, I remember the tribal people I met there who changed my life, for the better. The Santhals are beautiful people, who lived a simple life, what we might even call childlike. It made me question, then, what

we 'development workers' were there to do—were we there to improve their lives or were we sucking them into ours? I have still not resolved that one and it is the topic of a book I am working on (a long and arduous venture) now after all these years '*Origins: A Satire on Human Civilization*'.

Its basic premise is borrowed from the starting line in the movie 'The Gods Must Be Crazy': "Uncivilized man adapts to his environment; civilized man adapts his environment to himself." I have modified that slightly as the core premise of my book: "Spiritual woman adapted to her environment; man changed his to suit himself when he found God." I still continue to be inspired by the Santhals. Incidentally, I also published a book called '*Philanthropy Sucks! It Only Perpetuates Dependencies*', which questions grants as the basis for sustainable development. I continue to be disturbed by such questions.

I have only just finished writing a book about the corporate sector, '*Dare to Care: One Possible Future for Corporations (and the World)*'. Its basic idea is that White Man once dominated the world through conquests and colonization

and now corporations impose consumerism and fuel a plethora of wants in their pursuit of profit. This premise is very much related to my 'development dilemma' of whether we were doing any good (for them) or only drawing them in (for us). I owe much of all this verbosity to the Santhals I met in Godda. They made me question the very basis of how we lead our lives, very often without considered thought.

We had given the nursery to a certain Yadav in Dhobarna village one year, but he was negligent and didn't take it up seriously. The next year we gave it to Kayyum Sheikh. He did a good job and also planted his land with it, but Yadav didn't like that and started grazing his cattle on the nursery in the early mornings. Kayyum caught him at it one day; while he was taking the animals to the *adgadda* (the cattle pound); he was intercepted by the Yadav clan and assaulted with *lathis*. When Kayyum went to file an FIR, he was asked to pay Rs 500 to do so! But the important thing is he didn't fight back but came to us.

Nand Kishore Yadav of Kothidinda stands out (the Yadav in my argument with Jha *ji* on assigning the grainage) with his

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bushy beard and professional air, who took up the challenge of setting up the decentralized grainage.

But my favourite memory is of Pran Baski near Angwali, a wizened and wrinkled old man of indeterminable age, who set out every morning with his rabbit traps, with whom I could not exchange a single word but communicated marvelously in sign language nevertheless. His wife berated me venomously one day, in a language I did not understand, for apparently, conning them (we had given him 50 DFLs and expected 80 cocoons which they were unable or unwilling to return to us), but Pran Baski promptly followed me up the hill asking for more. I used to have a picture of him (had written about him in one of my articles in *Newsreach*) but unfortunately don't have it anymore. A very cute old man!

### **My Departure**

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Sadly, it was time for me to go. My reasons, in hindsight, are unclear. I know it had a little bit to do with looking after my parents, who were by then alone (both my sisters had got married and had left home), but I do

not think it was only that. I was confused about life in general and my life in particular, and mostly I think with the question that had arisen in my mind, after my engagement with the Santhals. It continues to haunt me and even now I cannot say whether I made the right decision. I moved into the 'big, bad, corporate world,' shuttled between the two for a long time but this big question still disturbs me: is all progress development?

But as I prepared to leave, I promised Jha ji that I would help fulfill his dream. The grainage had been a huge success, but we were not able to produce as many DFLs as was the demand. Jha ji knew that the only way forward was to decentralize this. I think Vijay too had a hand in this thinking though, and/or Deep, but I know it was Jha ji's dream to realize it. I promised Jha ji that I would set up the first three pilots in our three project areas.

We organized a training camp; I think it was for ten days and nearly 15 people attended. We set up the pilots. What was incredible about the idea was that we were teaching tribal people to use microscopes and produce DFLs. This programme became a huge success; if I remember correctly,

there were 230 such when I visited the project much later (more than 40 just in Kothidinda, my pet Cluster, which Prabhakar pointed out proudly). I like to keep that in mind as my little contribution in giving back something to what I had gained so much from.

But I end with some regret. In a later visit, I found that most of these wonderful people who had given so much to the Project and from whom I had learned so much had moved on, not all out of choice. I felt sad to see that the people who created the Project did not remain to see it grow. The reasons are unclear but the outcome is still the same. I guess that is life.

At the end, I must also say a big thank you to Vijay and Deep especially (although I know others, too, such as Achintya and Vasi, were involved but I had little interaction with them) for conceiving PRADAN and the Godda Project from which I received so much. Those two years remain the best two years of my life.

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