

From Chakai to Norwich: An exploratory journey

-Shuvajit Chakraborty

The journey, taking off for a new land

I was in Delhi in October 2019, attending the launch event of the Global Research Translation Award (GRTA) which is now called [CHIRAG](#). A collaboration between University of East Anglia, Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences, Gram Vaani and PRADAN, the event kick started a project on sustainable food systems. After the event, I felt a cold chill running down my spine. I realised I was nervous. Nervous, about my exchange visit to University of East Anglia, UK. Though interacting with participants from diverse fields at the launch was inspiring, I had started to feel anxious about my communication skills. I became conscious of my challenge to translate my thoughts and perspectives into English and considered this as a hindrance for the upcoming visit.

The temperature in Delhi had dropped to 15C on that day. Yet when I reached Nivedita's house after the launch event, I was soaked in sweat. Nivedita reassured me of her confidence in me which helped me relax. In a few hours we were to start our journey for Norwich and I gave way for another episode of nervousness before actually taking off for a foreign country for the first time.

It was 8:55 in the morning when we landed at the Norwich airport. A mix of chill in the wind along with the warmth of a gloomy sun welcomed us at the Norwich airport. It seemed that all my nervousness went away with nature's welcoming. The first-time experience of change in time zone excited me. Now I was 5:30 hrs behind the Indian Standard Time (IST). It is one thing to read about time zones, and another to experience it.



Picture: Somewhere near Norwich Cathedral, UK

Experiencing work in a new light

Back in India, amidst regular engagement with the community, it was difficult to find time for reflection or critical thinking. However, there in Norwich I learnt to critically analyse the work I do. And from this I started to draw energy for the rest of the visit.

Working with Nivedita as a mentor helped me stay rejuvenated. I did not feel overburdened or alone in this new land. Her constant reassurance helped me overcome my anxieties and kept my spirit high. I often felt overwhelmed with the work but her encouragement helped me see the positive side of things. It was my first time of working under such close mentorship. I valued it and considered it a big opportunity to learn.

The warmth from the people at UEA, especially Professor Nitya Rao also energised me. She is a fabulous host. She worked with us, spent leisure time, and guided us in our reflection of the work. Having had the chance to attend a session of hers, I could draw connects between theories and the work we do in the field. As I started to practice reflective thinking I noticed

the link between contextual practices and theoretical concepts. I learnt that when I implement projects, I only take an instrumental view but when I get a chance to reflect, I take a critical view (*Cultivating Development: David Mosse*).



In the picture: Nivedita and me sitting with Professor Nitya Rao in the University of East Anglia (UEA) conducting the pre-analysis of the data collected from the field for the TIGR2ESS project

During a workshop on data analysis at UEA, I learnt how to design a research and how to articulate research questions from the data gathered. I also identified specific questions for strengthening research design and further methodologies. I realised by exchange of theories and grassroots knowledge the practice too can be strengthened.

Exploring new avenues

Professor Rao introduced us to many early-career and established researchers at the university. Matt, a doctoral student was one of them. He shared his ongoing work related to non-certified seeds (counter feed seeds) of Grass-pea (*Lathyrus sativus*). Grass-pea has been banned in India since 1961 because of its high neurotoxicity content. However, it is a good climate resilient pulse. We also got opportunity to visit John Innes Centre in Norwich where we met Dr Abhimanyu Sarkar and Dr Anne Edwards who have been working on Grass pea

and have decreased the neurotoxicity of it through research. Research suggests that this new variety (grass pea) has the potential of becoming a good source of protein diet. This helped us connect the dots. A variety like this can compensate for the low protein intake in the Indian rural context. The work with grass pea provided a possibility as a climate resilient pulse. This turned out as an exciting avenue for us to explore. In addition to this, we met researchers working on/in the field of Digital Farmer Producer Organisations (FPO); and on the release of micronutrients from pearl millet (Harvest +); around bioavailability of nutrients from millets. All these domains I thought were super useful to me and to PRADAN's context in Chakai where we are working with the recipes for betterment of nutrition. We had discussions around the possibility to study local processes of cooking and their impact on the bio availability of micro nutrients.

Another series of fruitful and motivating discussions were with Professor Bhaskar Vira, also the lead of the Flagship Project 1 of [TIGR₂ESS](#). With him we explored various possibilities to enhance our work on uncultivated seasonal food and opportunities for doctoral students and volunteers from Cambridge university to assist with our research. The most exciting experience I had in the visit was meeting Dr Christine Cornea of the School for Media and Film Studies and her team. Back in Chakai, we had made some short videos and photo-voices with our youth (Lahanti) club. Not only did Dr Cornea appreciate our work but also showed interest in visiting India for a detailed participatory photo and videography workshop in Chakai ([hyperlink](#)). A renowned creative writer of Norwich, Dr Jean McNeal also helped us to understand more about organising writes-shops of young men and women to articulate their own traditional knowledge in a participatory way.



In the picture: Nivedita and me with Professor Bhaskar Vira, Head of Geography Department, Cambridge University and also a Lead Investigator in the [TIGR2ESS](#) project

The visit ended but not the learning

The exchange visit not only helped me to critically analyse research work but also helped me build linkages with the global developmental world. Being a practitioner, I work at grassroots and articulate the contextual knowledge from there, but through the visit I got an opportunity to share the contextual knowledge with renowned universities of the world. The sense of acknowledgement and appreciation I received from there made me think in an innovative way. It is through my visit that I realized that the academic world is also keen in investing in development practice through a research objective. These opportunities need to be tapped.