

Old trees, young learners: a walk through the forests on 'fire' in Ranchi

27th shodhyatra, May 28 - June 3 2011, Silli to Hundru, Ranchi, Part - I

We try to harness, honour and horizontally link the local wisdom and creative spirit in *shodhyatras* undertaken every summer and winter. There are two *shodhyatras*, which generally begin every time, one within each *yatri*, whose end we do not know, and another is the external one, of which the end date is known. The *shodhyatras* are guided by community spirit of solidarity, sharing of costs and living frugally so that we experience some of the difficulties that local communities have been living with for ages. Voluntary suffering (if there is some at all) is intentional so that we remain humble and open to learn from within, each other, nature and common people we meet during our walk.

The actual *shodhyatra* began on May 27th, when we reached Ranchi. There were three young innovators who impressed us with their amazing creativity. Mohammad Sajid Ansari, a student of class seven, had seen his mother, Rubaiah Khatoon cleaning rice everyday. Generally, some rice gets broken while beating paddy in the manual husker and some impurities also get mixed. Most of us have observed similar sight at our home. But, majority of us have learned to live with problems unsolved indefinitely. This is a crime, which our generation has committed almost uniformly in the context of numerous problems faced by poor rural women. Sajid was different. He did not live with the problem unsolved. He innovated an electrical machine, which separated full grains and broken grains along with other impurities etc., in just about Rs 2000! He was awarded by our former President, Dr A P J Abdul Kalam at the IGNITE children award function for creativity and innovation.

Nowhere in the country, have we come across a small desktop machine for the purpose. His father, Kalim Ansari is a tailor and provides his services door to door through a mobile sewing machine



mounted on a cart. Unfortunately, during the removal of encroachments in the Ranchi city, their house was demolished and they had to move to village Pirra, in Ratu block of Ranchi.

We also met two sisters, Garima, class 12 and Hina, class 9, who had fitted a battery operated fan on the top of a pen. Given the erratic power supply, the fan would certainly comfort the writer. Next day, May 28th, we stayed at Kisan Bhavan, Silli and had a round of introductions. Participants from Uttarakhand, Haryana, Delhi, West Bengal, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, etc., shared their expectations from the *shodhyatra*. There were participants from UK and US, both students and faculty who wanted to explore the genius at grassroots. This *shodhyatra*



was organized with the support of regional Honey Bee Network collaborator, Social Upliftment Trust, led by Rajeev Ranjan Pandey and members of the Literacy Mission.

On the way to the next village, we met some labourers who enquired about the purpose of our walk. After some discussions, we gave a copy of Hindi version of Honey Bee newsletter, *Soojh Boojh* to each one of them. They returned all the copies except one saying that we should use them to give it to others. The frugality was in action. They planned to share the same copy with others.

While going to Hajaam, not many fields were seen to have access to water. Even the drinking water well had a low water table. While most wells had counterpoise arrangement for lifting water with a long pole tied with weight, some had a cycle rim used as a pulley with weight on one end of the rope and the bucket on the other. A small improvement, but useful still.

Nurturing the new born

In Hajaam, we met several midwives who had been practicing child delivery for many years. One of them, Tula Devi was extremely articulate and assertive. She cited many examples where the practices of the modern doctors, according to her, were not in the interest of the new born or the mother. She mentioned particularly three aspects of child delivery where her suggestions

were at variance from the practice in modern hospitals: (a) the umbilical cord should be cut after about ten minutes when it stops pulsating and the new born is at peace. It avoids a shock, (b) the delivery should be done in a darker environment rather than a well-lit one because moving from the dark womb to a bright-lit room can shock and sometimes, as she said, infuse fear in the mind of the child and affect eye sight as well and (c) the most convenient position for a pregnant mother is squatting or a reclining position instead of lying down as is the prevalent practice. She stressed that because of the delivery in a lit room, many urban kids have spectacles from their childhood. Tula



devi also advised about when to bathe the mother and diet to be followed; she was much against the conventional local practice of not feeding the mother for two days, and not feeding milk to the child within two hours of delivery on the first day.

Before entering Tetla, lots of *Salaya* (*Boswellia serrata* Roxb. ex Colebr.) trees were lined along the border of the fields. The wood of these trees is harvested every year as a good quality fuel wood. Thus we noticed that the branches were heavily pruned. The inner layer of the bark is used to cure kidney trouble. Generally these trees are planted on the border of poorer soils since they affect the yield of the crops adversely. On the other end of the village, there was a small ritual ground where *Vishvakarma* is worshiped by local communities. In most of the fields, which had access to water (there were very few), modern varieties of tomato, gourds, cucumber, etc., were grown. In Tetla, one could observe on the road side, only a few local varieties of tomato, chilli and some other leafy vegetables. The *shodhyatris*



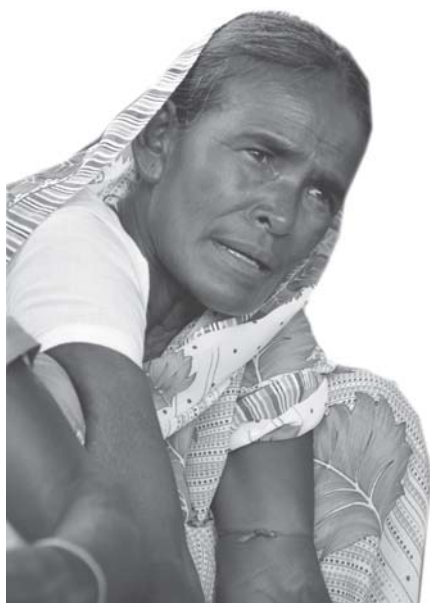
stayed at the house of Deenanath Koiri. He was one of the most reputed bone setters of the region. In many cases, where institutional doctors had not been of great help, Deenanath would help the matters even without an X-ray, he could sense the problem and suggest a solution. His approach to healing was quite at variance from the modern orthopaedic doctors. He showed us a wooden bookshelf made by his father in 1963. The engraving on the wooden panel first had the name of the teacher from whom he had learnt the art and then his name.

The *shodhyatris* witnessed the process of preparing medicine, primarily done by his wife and the bandaging by him on some of the patients. Before leaving, he was asked as to why he did not transfer his skills to any of his four sons. He, of course, regretted that all of them had moved to Ranchi though one of his grandsons seemed quite keen to learn. But he is too young, hardly ten years of age. He said, "I was not sure that my younger

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"If you really want to pray, then pray that I should get at least one disciple before I die who will carry forward this healing tradition selflessly."

tried to make money out of it." This response shocked the *shodhyatris*. Before we were leaving, he said, "If you really want to pray, then pray that I should get at least one disciple before I die who will carry forward this healing tradition selflessly." The ethics of knowledge transfer, concern for public good and objectivity in judging the suitability of his



own ward could not have been communicated to us better.

After taking lunch at Kolma, *shodhyatris* met extraordinary children at the High School at Domendih. We conducted a quiz - "redesign the match stick" (we

Though they were denied water themselves, they never denied it to their neighbours.

normally throw it away after lighting). Since it is made of wood, which is quite scarce, the

challenge was to find a way of extending the life of each stick. Within a minute or two, we could get similar answers as were given by the students at IIMA or in China, USA and Malaysia where such an exercise was done earlier. Once the children were convinced that they could become inventors themselves, they were asked to imagine products or services which had either never been delivered or required considerable improvement. A large number of ideas came out, few of which were awarded on the spot.

The *shodhyatris* spent the night at the primary school at Rahe. On the evening



Students from Domendih High School

of May 30th everybody was spiritually charged with the sounds of a local *pooja* in the air. We met Sunil Prajapati who had made several innovative devices including a Rs. 100 candle filter, a chilli sprayer for self-protection by girls, and a substitute for *gutka* (tobacco containing powder), which doubles up as a mouth freshener as well. He was supported for selling ten such filters so that he could assess the market and further support for scaling up this enterprise could be envisaged.

While starting for Soso village, *shodhyatris* saw an interesting arrangement of carrying four pitchers on the sides of a central pitcher. After walking about ten kilometers, just outside Soso, we came across the first well being dug on the roadside. Five labourers had been hired to dig the well under MNREGA. Most of these labourers had small farms in the neighbourhood. We asked one of them, Dev Chahatar Mahato, as to why would he not dig the well on his own farm. Several reasons followed. There was a need for employment, not enough resources to pay the other labourers and nobody had ever thought about digging a well by themselves. Then, a story, which the *shodhyatris* had experienced during the Karnataka *shodhyatra* in 2004, was narrated. Chand Hussain was a farm labourer in Hariharpura. About ten years ago, his daughter had gone to fetch water from a neighbour's well. For some reason, neighbour did not like it and scolded the girl. When she came back crying, her parents were very upset. That day, Chand Hussain and his wife Ayesha Bibi resolved to dig a well on their half

acre plot. Every day when Chand Hussain would come back from work, he and his wife would work to dig the well from 6 pm till midnight. They had no rig or any major tool. With the help of spade, hammer and a pick axe, they dug about 38 ft but soon after came across a hard rock. They could not afford dynamite, so they continued to break the stone. Even after 70 feet, there was no water in sight. They went to a priest, offered some prayers and finally after struggling for an year, found success. Though they were denied water themselves, they never denied it to their neighbours. They were felicitated in a Hindu temple.

When the labourer heard this story, he could not restrain himself any further. He decided that he will also dig a well without waiting for Government support. There were many problems still to overcome. The plot was jointly owned by four brothers. Except him, everybody worked outside. Their consent would be necessary. But he was willing to take the chance. He promised to let us know, as and when he would make some progress.





When the *shodhyatris* were leaving, he mentioned that nobody had ever kindled this faith in him. Transition from a defiant 'cannot do' to 'can do' reinforced the faith of *shodhyatris* in their mission.

At Soso, two outstanding herbal healers were honoured for sharing their knowledge. One of them, Rameshwar Ahir, was upset that the certificate we gave did not authorize him to practice his healing services. It took some time to explain that without validation, we could not even mention that his claims were valid. Even after validation, only the


bodies authorized for the purpose could do so. In the recent past, IGNOU (Indira Gandhi National Open University) had taken steps to issue what they called as certificate of Prior Learning. Quality Council of India was taken on Board by IGNOU for developing certification standards. The incident brought into sharp focus the tension underlying our task of recognizing the herbal healers and other traditional knowledge holders for their contribution towards conservation of knowledge and resources without making any tangible difference in their life in the immediate



future. The validation process, important as it is, takes long and there are no institutional arrangements to create a collegium of outstanding traditional knowledge experts to validate their claims empirically. Hopefully, IGNOU will take some steps in that regard.

Shodhyatris moved for Jonha Fall via Kherbeda for night stay, where a very interesting cultural interaction followed with local farmers and the catering staff at the facility. None of the staff received any salary though they were allowed to charge for the services they offered to the tourists. It was an entrepreneurial arrangement, which ensured good service but not necessarily the best maintenance. There was a musical performance in which local farmers narrated religious stories interspersed with stories of their own life. It was a unique style that was both entertaining and informative. Three of the workers at Jonha fall viz., Birendarnath Mahato, Haridasnath Mahato and Surjan Lohra

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shared various strategies to deal with wildlife and also understand their behavior. While fighting a bear, the advice was that one should try to save his face and not let the bear spit on oneself, as the bear generally attacks the face and specifically the eyes. One should dive under to escape the attack. In the maize season, elephants normally attack the crop. There is a tradition of worshipping elephants around June 15. They also look at the misty ring around the moon. Thinner the ring, longer it may take for rain to set in. The sounds of different birds indicates various changes in the weather. *Koth paka*, normally was heard at the onset of jack fruit season until the maturity of the fruits. Likewise, they had associated the sounds of different birds with the onset, duration of the rain or its cessation. 

Curious kids, radical activists, indolent systems

27th Shodhyatra, May 28 to June 3, 2011, Silli to Hundru, Ranchi, Part - II

When tribal children are so creative and imaginative, why should not we attempt better responsiveness for fast learners? We met many curious kids but also saw lot of examples of indifferent administration. It is very surprising that despite all the claims about paying attention to violence prone regions, we do not find much difference in the character of bureaucracy. The rich biodiversity doesn't spur any attempt to add value locally and build a value chain around them. After all, does our task end with raising issues? It is likely that NIF will take some of the distinctive practices for fast track validation and share the results of those trials back with the communities soon. We will lose any right to critique the state of affairs locally, unless we create better benchmarks of accountability, let us see....



Village elections after 32 years and still no delegation of powers

The next morning, the *shodhyatris* walked through the forest and along a railway track to reach Jidda village, situated on a small hillock. Krishna Munda, the sarpanch (village headman), was very upset that many of the families below poverty line (BPL) were enumerated as above poverty line (APL). The panchayat elections were held after 32 years in Jharkhand. The local leadership largely comprised youth and women. They had aspirations to deliver but it seemed that the bureaucracy was not yet willing to let them do so. Initially, several village headmen had met informally and decided not to send any forms that did not meet the local judgment of the *gram sabha*. But when other headmen got coerced, he had no choice but to fall in line. The survey of BPL families, done by the administrative staff before the election, was not reported accurately. This is an issue, which is causing lot of discomfort at many levels in a large number of panchayats. The lack of delegation of 29 different functions to the village panchayat



so far was also a bone of contention. Without responsibility, it would be difficult to fix accountability. He was very clear that the forms he had sent were under coercion and did not reflect a just position.

All for a sweet pain in the legs



Most villages had a *sarna* (sacred grove), *bhasna* (cremation ground), *hargadhi* (for various rituals) and *jahar* (for prayers and animals sacrifice). The ladies shared their rich repertoire of the local vegetables

with the *shodhyatris*. Among the wide variety of vegetable was *susni* (*Marselia minuta* L.). *Susni* was notable for making people slightly sleepy and also introducing what the local ladies said, 'a kind of sweet pain in the legs'!

They also cooked the tender leaves of bamboo and a vegetable called as *phutkal* (*Oxalis corniculata* Linn.). In addition, *saroti/gundri* (*Alternanthera sessilis*) was also cooked. The raw fruits of *dambu* were also consumed. Valsa Munda shared a recipe for controlling jaundice and loose motions. The barks of seven trees were soaked in oil for three days and the filtrate was given in the early morning to keep people healthy for rest of the year. These trees were *hurra* (*Terminalia chebula* Retz.), *baheda* (*Terminalia bellirica* (Gaertn.) Roxb), *neem* (*Azadirachta indica* A Juss), *mango* (*Mangifera indica* L.), *karanj* (*Pongamia pinnata* (L) Pierre), *jamun* (*Syzygium cumini*), *dhela* (*Alangium salvifolium*), and *chironji* (*Buchanania lanzan*).



Tying rakhi to save trees

After Jiddu, we stopped at Hedlabeda and interacted with the local community. Mahadev Mahato from Hazaribag shared his experience of conserving forest and enlivening the environment of school at several meetings. In his school, he had planted a large number of trees and flowering plants to improve the environment for the children. We pleaded with the local communities and school teachers at every stop to plant flowers, make the school environment better and try to put inspiring slogans (as witnessed in abundance during Anantnag *shodhyatra* in J&K) on the walls. He had persuaded local communities in hundreds of villages in several districts to allocate at least ten percent of the forest for conservation. He would announce a particular date in consultation with the locals when

everybody would gather in the designated forest, perform a small pooja and then tie a rakhi (a small red ribbon) to each tree. They would then make a commitment to protect that tree forever. They will meet every year on that date at that place to commemorate the event. The process has become very popular and can go a long way in conserving some parts of forest as sacred forest everywhere.

Reflections and creative children

In the night, a meeting of *shodhyatris* took place where everybody reflected on their learning so far and how their inner *yatra* was progressing. Next morning, the *shodhyatris* engaged the students into some creative thinking. Some of the interesting ideas mentioned by children were: (1) Why couldn't the plastic waste be melted and used for layering on the road (Rajesh Kumar Mahato was not aware

that a Professor in Madurai and an entrepreneur in Bangalore had actually established experimentally that mixing ten per cent plastic waste in bitumen could save cost and improve the quality and life of road. He was on the edge) (2) Neha Kumari felt that a machine to cut vegetables was necessary while (3) Soni Kachchap thought about a masala grinding machine (4) Manjay Prajapati and Manoj Rajwar suggested a remote control mechanical plough for the field. These were kids from 9th to 11th class coming from rural areas, mostly tribal with limited exposure. But their imagination knew no constraints. Such a remarkable diversity of ideas convinced everybody of the enormous potential that exists among the kids. One girl made an extremely sensitive point, which touched the heart of every *shodhyatri*. She mentioned that her father would fight with her mother under the influence of alcohol and thus it became very difficult for her to study. She wanted a common room, to be created in the village, where such children can study and also bring their younger siblings along. This idea could really solve a major problem of dropout and poor performance of tribal kids. Later, the students also shared the recipes they had made of various local plants and a compendium of local plants and their uses. There was enormous interest among children and it is hoped that many more ideas will follow for the IGNITE competition.

From extremism to human right protection

During the *shodhyatra* we met, among others, a former member of the Maoist Coordination Committee (MCC) who had gone from CPI (M) to CPI (ML) to MCC in search for radical answers to the problems of social inequity and continued injustice. He had volunteered to help in *shodhyatra*. He also shared his knowledge about herbal healing. During the days when they indulged in violent struggles, they needed quick fix solutions for healing wounds and cuts. *Tridax procumbens* L (Sherfu) leaves apparently healed the cut very fast and stopped bleeding almost instantaneously. He had joined the mainstream without compromising with his commitment to a non-violent but just social order. There is a need





to expand such space for more and more activists to lobby on behalf of the poor so that they get their due. We have to accept that in the absence of such activists, the bureaucracy steeped as it is in the history of exploitation, will not let justice be done. Even among the bureaucracy those who do wish justice to be done will find such activists very helpful and supportive of the cause of fair and just public order. There can be no better way of finding peaceful alternatives for the current violent struggle going on in the region.

Curiosity about internet on hills

On the way, *shodhyatris* met women who had to fetch water from about four km away and faced lot of difficulties in managing daily chores. There were also men who played cards on the roadside, as if indifferent to the travails of the women folk. The use of liquor was quite common and opposition to the same among women was also quite evident. This is a reform long overdue.

At Singhari, the *shodhyatris* stayed in a high school on the top of a small hill. The experience here was

remarkable in many respects. There was a student, Rahul Kumar Mahato, who had figured out which hill top had the best internet availability. After passing a competition, he was given a password for a website from where he could download questions in different subjects every day. He would submit the answer through mobile

phone and get the response. Such a desire to learn and get feedback is rarely found even in cities. Here is a tribal boy who has created rigorous benchmarks for his learning every day. His sister was equally keen to explore opportunities for learning. When various innovations were shown to the children and others in the village through a cell



phone based projector, there were many innovations that students wanted to implement or fabricate in their village.

Etwa Bedia was a social worker and was trying to pursue various activities for community development in this area. He lost his father when he was still very young and had to discontinue his studies. Thereafter, he devoted himself for local development. In 1979, he tried to form an organization and began with prohibition and some other social reform. He has taken up many activities in water conservation. The payment under NREGA has not been made for the last two and a half months. If the stone lining was not done, most of the wells would have sunk in and the walls would have collapsed. The entire labour would go waste. This was one of the most urgent concerns of the community.

Towards the end or a beginning?

Next day, the *shodhyatris* walked through the forest and the fallow fields towards Hundru. On this stretch, many fields were ready for sowing. Farmers in this region appeared to be a little more resourceful. The diversity in the forest was modest. On the way,

shodhyatris saw a patch of forest having been conserved by the community with no lopping or chopping. The climb through the forest on the way to Hundru Fall was tough for some of the *shodhyatris*. At Hundru, *shodhyatris* interacted with the school children and also met head swami of Ramkrishna Mission along with some senior officials of the government, state head of Mahila Samakhya and a few other local community members. The children were provoked to come out with new ideas though the response remained a bit subdued. All the *shodhyatris* started reflecting on their journey so far before departing for their homes. Some missed their train and thus got additional opportunity to see Ranchi and its neighbouring region. Some went back to one of the villages we had already visited to wait for the train next day. Some of us met the Chief Secretary along with the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Science and Technology and the Director of the State Council of Science and Technology. The discussions for over two hours were very meaningful and the feedback from the *shodhyatra* was treated with a lot of attention and respect. Hopefully some change will follow, may be not, time will tell.



Hand pump with tap attachment

A single handpump was not sufficient to cater to the needs of an entire school during the lunch break. A team of three comprising members of SSHE and others, came up with a solution to have taps arranged on a PVC pipe, which can be fitted onto the handpump. PVC pipes were light-weight, safe and handy. The ends of the pipes could be easily removed after the school hours. Baikunth Pandey (Expert, Pedagogy, JEPC) and Manish Wasuja (PO, UNICEF)

Hyacinth cutting device



Every year hyacinth grows wildly in the lakes and covers most of its surface, which even hampers the growth of the fish. Fishermen have to clear hyacinth under tough conditions like fear of snake bites, fungal infection etc.

Godasu Narasimha, from Muktapur village (a km away from Pochampally; famous for unique *ikkat* sarees and *Bhoodan* movement) has devised a

'hyacinth cutting device' which has helped reduce the drudgery of fishermen in his locality. Narasimha made this with his own efforts and funds, with the constant support of his wife, Lavanya.

In an year the total cost using the Hyacinth cutter is Rs 7000 against three lakhs manually. This method leads to better growth of the fish because of the good sunlight availability. This results in an increased income.

Narsimha has so far removed hyacinth in the Krishna canal and Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) lakes. In July 2011, GHMC placed an order to clean *Shatan*

Talab near famous Golkonda fort for Rs four lakhs. NABARD is supporting him to develop a hyacinth cutter based on a raft.

For more details on 'hyacinth cutting device', write to Brig P. Ganesham (ganeshpogula@hotmail.com)

