



Sauntering into the Poetry of Innovation: Odisha 39th Shodhyatra Thursday, May 11, 2017

A kurta without a stitch, a rat catcher which can trap dozens of rats with ease in a single cage, a portable pump at home which pumps water from a distant well and a child's view of a smart city/village were part of numerous innovations we came across in this knowledge rich, economically poor region. yet again substantiated the thought for us. The Yatra unearthed the tradition of preservation and creation followed by the local people.

Scorching heat, temperature ranging from 45-49 degree Celsius, did not deter the *shodhyatris* from pursuing the 39th walk in Barpali, District Bargarh, Odisha in search of local innovations. But sharing must precede the search. The posters of more than 50 prior innovations, a few prototypes and open source databases of the Honey Bee Network compiled by SRISTI and NIF were also carried along. Never before did it happen that

we would find some new idea, innovation or practice every day. Volunteer students of VSS University of Technology (Formerly UCE), Burla led by a very enthusiastic new member of Honey Bee Network, Bodhisattwa Sanghapriya had done a lot of prior work in the preceding month to prepare for yatris to learn and share the prior knowledge, practices and creative ways of solving local problems. Barpali to Narsingnath, a journey of 120km in six days,



Well preserved: Ancient palm leaf manuscript

covering 30 villages was full of paradoxes. Fallen big old trees dotted part of the recently widened road but yatriis also came across patches where shady trees on both sides reminded us that an engineer of highway department here decided not to cut trees. Road thus was slightly narrow here, but the heart of that overseer seemed big. This was the second Shodhyatra in Odisha after 2006. Did we ever find so many ancient palm-leaf manuscripts in villages inscribed with traditional herbal, philosophical and spiritual knowledge? When did we find impromptu poetry recitation by local bards during roadside stopovers in the villages, some even summarising the shodhyatra's purpose itself?

The palm leaf manuscript showed that this region had a long tradition of recording their knowledge. The creative



Kurta without a stitch: Karna Mehr with his wife

excellence displayed by the local weaver community was truly inspiring. Karna Mehr, a local weaver and his wife had woven a seamless Kurta. Imagine wearing a top without being tailored! It was one of a kind. And, as an add-on, exhausted by the consistent usage of kosa, he innovated kosa decorative wall-hangings. He was conferred with the Rashtrapati Award for this. He further experimented with kosa by weaving a handkerchief with the famous scene of Gandhiji's Dandi march. Chukmani Mehr had woven poems of Shri. Gangadhar Meher, a legendary poet of this region on to a saree. It took him 14 months to craft the exclusive saree and he has been an honoured recipient of the Rashtrapati Award twice. Also, the saree with entire Hunuman Chalisa, woven by Bhikhari Mehr was another notable contribution. A total number of 21 weavers and craft persons were reported to have won the Rashtrapati Award. We wonder whether there is any other town or district having so many recipients of The President Award for craft and handlooms.

Also, nine people were reported to have won the Sant Kabir Award. The land was truly dedicated to creative people. The inventions were quite eye-catching. For example, the idea of a portable hand pump that was developed by Sadhu Charan Patel of village Salepale; Similarly, Jumnikanata Dash village Sargibaha, a local mechanic designed a diesel engine operated welding machine with 24 HP engine, consuming half the fuel and generating double the light. Prafulla Kumar Mehr developed manual spinning and yarn winding machines which were later automated by Ram Prasad Meher of Bandhapali village. They sensed that the mothers couldn't devote enough time to their kids due to the time consuming activity of winding yarn around a spool. They automated winding machines that lessened the duration and also the labour required. To celebrate such inventions, the Yatra started with an inaugural exhibition. Various innovations that were previously recognized and were believed to be useful for Bargarh region, were exhibited. Also, innovations that were documented during the previous Yatra in Odisha, were shown. Innovation Booklets printed in local languages based on Honey Bee Database were distributed. In addition to that, innovators from nearby villages were invited to exhibit their inventions. They were honoured for sharing their contributions with society.

Jatinderiya had developed a lie detecting machine. Sadhu Patel Inspired by his father's wooden petromax lamp had developed a hand pump that could pump water from a well located far. As we moved further, the innovative skills only kept diversifying to other fields. The villagers celebrated the poems of the legendary Odhia poet, Shri



Empathy turns weaver into innovator: Multi-purpose spinning and yarn winding machine

Gangadhar Meher. To keep this poetic legacy alive, Bhawani Prasad Padhan, a school teacher (Kansinghka village) initiated a culture of sharing a poem, daily. The selected 'poem of the day' was written on the school-board and also shared on a WhatsApp group. This had a wider influence across villages as they too started following this practice. The expedition was furthered by the innovative teaching techniques adopted by Shri Shekhar Rout and Shri Mahulpali. Mahulpali was a master of inventions. He had developed a solar sprayer for crops. He also had modified an ordinary bed into an automatic flexible bed for the convenience of his physically challenged father in law.

Innovative teachers

Shri Radha Kanta Gartia, Block education officer, transferred four times in three years, was determined to inspire teachers to do their best to educate children in government schools. Eleven school teachers were motivated to hold classes during vacations. These teachers



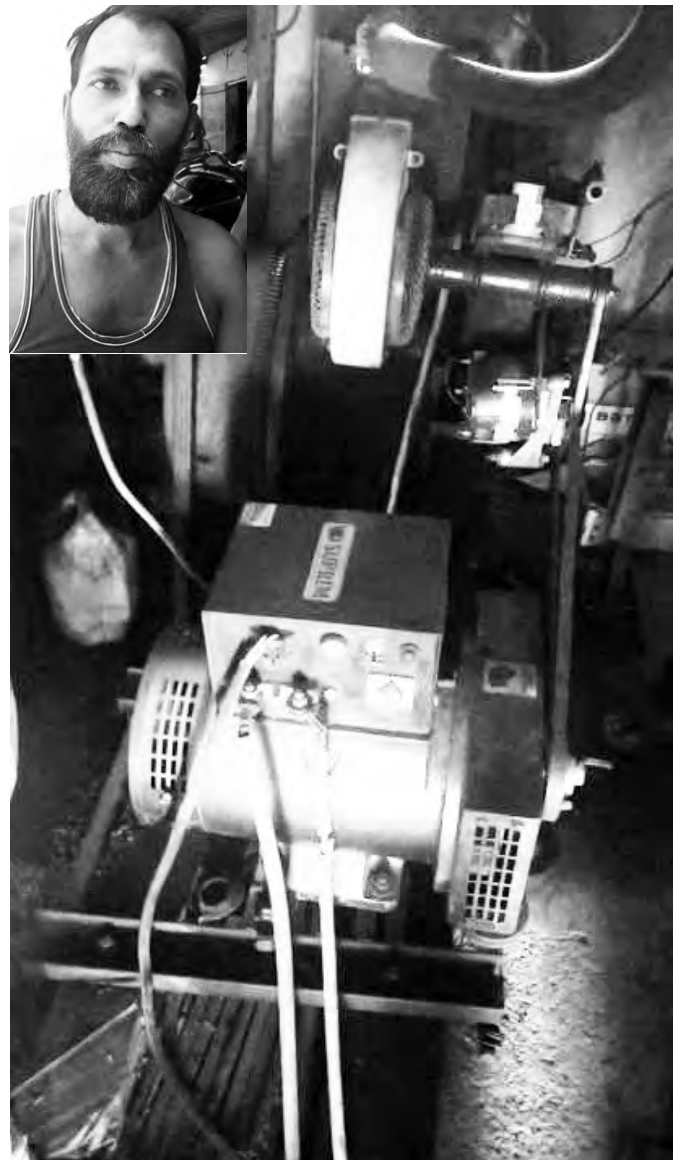
Traditional weaving yarn

did not avail of summer vacation but decided to stay in the village and teach children to prepare better for next year classes. The Yatris had the privilege of honouring

five such teachers in a village function by embracing them and lauding their selfless service.

Children's ideas

The Yatris saw a home-made air conditioner made from a bucket of cool water and a ventilator fan. Arpan Kumar Sahoo shared a card board model of a smart city with rain-water harvesting facility and waste water recycling units. The idea intrigued the thought: "If smart cities, then why not smart villages!" after all, what would be a better way of developing our rural regions. Other students too had some 'out of the box' ideas like Vivekanand wanted an alarm-installed toilet system in the school, that would ring if somebody didn't flush after using the



Diesel engine operated welding machine: Jannikanth



Thought of a Smart Village: Arpan Kumar Sahoo

toilet. Rinku designed a model of portable bore well machine. Similarly, Pinky and Himakanti, who were quite emotional about their mother working hard, conceived of a utensil cleaning device to lessen the burden of their mother. Vishnu wanted shoes enabled with a torch for convenience in walking in the dark. Pramod thought of a fan powered by cell phone.

Bio-Diversity Competition among children elicited a very widespread interest. Children presented their knowledge about varieties of local plants and herbs.

In one of the villages, we experienced low women participation. When asked where the women were, we were told that most women move to states like Tamil Nadu for jobs as skilled weavers; whereas the men stay



Variety of local seeds and other herbs: Anita Sahoo

back and look after the household. Amongst the farmers, weeding was one area where maximum variations in the design of devices were found. Home-made herbal pesticides were also very common. Did you know diluted alcohol can help in yielding better quality crops? Yes, it does! And the local people followed it.

Kabir Chandra Sahu found an ingenious solution for stopping flower shedding in pumpkin and watermelon plants. A scented variety of Tulsi, with its refreshing aroma was another unique farmers' innovation. The fruit ripener by Gasi Ram Pradhan, the pulveriser, and leaf drier by Vibhuti Mund and the cotton seed separating machine



Sharing knowledge and information: Village meeting



Centenerian felicitated

by Pidhambar Pradhan were other creative inventions. We met a farmer who was popularly addressed as the 'lemon tree doctor'.

The story of Chakradhara Pradhan from Sambalpur was shared with the yatriis. He used stethoscope for sensing insect attack in the roots of trees. Queer ways emerge more easily when constraints for what cannot be done don't come in the way of trying things out. On our

way, we met a woman farmer Anita Sahoo who told us about Ahimsa club. It was reported that the club had conserved about 130 varieties of rice and millet and 80 vegetable crops. A number of paddy varieties were also spotted while walking through various villages. The 39th Shodhyatra can also be said as a platform, where the dots connected. Yes! That is what happened when we realized a common problem of the farmers. They weren't able to harvest groundnut due to lack of rains. Amrutbhai, a fellow yatri and also an innovator had long back designed a machine to extract groundnut from dry soil. The farmers got a chance to discuss their problem with Amrutbhai as he explained them the solution. The centenarians of the village were honoured.

The burden of heat was lessened a bit because the local village panchayats had set up drinking water facilities at several places on the way. In every village, women shared traditional food made of Ragi, Kodo Millets, parboiled Rice and Mahua flowers. They also participated enthusiastically in the recipe/food formulation competition, which was a delight. We got to experience some exceptional delicacies of the region. Several dishes were made of uncommon, uncultivated plants, which most of us might have not even heard of.



Yatris sauntering into the light of Innovation



A share of the local cuisine: Recipe competition

There were points where youth grumbled against some of the practices of the adults. The youngsters repeatedly expressed their concern about mahua flowers being used as source of liquor. Also, we were told how the weaver's community was adversely being affected due to the burgeoning demand for printed sarees. They said, "They sell sarees printed with double ikkat patterns at lower costs which have caused almost a breakdown of our market." As a solution, a young woman Sukanata Mehr, a local entrepreneur in collaboration with the IITs initiated a company to facilitate the sale. She was another Rashtrapati Award holder from the community. To prevent the falling business, Chukmani Mehr modified the usage of traditional double ikkat and Kosa; to prepare modern day clothing such as kosa dupattas, kosa ties, and handkerchiefs, double ikkat bedsheets, etc.

One of the most redeeming facts was the almost total absence of malnutrition among children. The communities breast fed infants up till 3-4 years. Many farmers also had vegetable garden which supplemented food for the family. The Shodhyatris also had the honour to meet the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Odisha, Shri Naveen Patnaik who showed strong interest in the highlights of the 39th Shodhyatra. Prof. Anil Gupta briefed him about the many activities initiated by the Honey Bee Network, SRISTI and NIF. The State Government showed keen interest in supporting the operationalization of the in-house development of innovation based start-ups. MSME

(Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises) department has joined hands with NIF to support the cause.

Why did we call them poor
 they had so many ideas to share
 Did it reflect on poverty of our imagination
 How else do we make sense
 every day encounter with innovation



**Shri Gangadhar Meher
 (1862-1924)**

Verily I'm a drop
 of the ocean of nectar.
 Shunning the ocean, I had risen up
 in the firmament, afar.
 Coming down now
 I've joined the ambrosial flow
 and towards the ocean
 ahead I'm in motion.
 If I evaporate therein
 on the way by the heat of sin,
 in the form of dew later on
 I'll descend below.
 With the nectarean immortal flow,
 I'll mingle in the ocean.

(translated by: Dr. Harekrishna Meher)
<https://www.poemhunter.com/i/ebooks>