

Only the Food We Eat Is Ours

Swati & Michael, Juna Mozda, February 1994

5 February 1994

Juna Mozda

Dear Friend,


Namaskar!

It is again after nine months that we are able to send our fourth newsletter instead of the intended six months. Please accept our apologies. We have had to be away from here so often and each time it takes time to catch up with the backlog of things to do. That there is a lot more to learn here and it is only possible if we can spend more time in Mozda is a recurrent feeling.

The news everyday brings more and more tales of western economic aggression. Nation after nation slips into the same vicious spin as monopoly is promoted in the garb of free competition. Who knows where this will lead to....!

Hope we can strengthen each other in our struggles.

yours,

S. J. Desai 

It is around six o'clock in the evening. Our hamlet is very quiet. An old man, Mandaviya, from Mozda but from a different hamlet has come Rajli's (his daughter) house. I went to see him. Rajli's two children are eating green pigeon peas, the rotten peas thrown by them are eaten by chickens, a calf is eating the rest of the organic 'waste'. After we talked for some time, I told Mandaviya that our house owner does not allow us to make the house bigger because he feels that he will grow less food! Mandaviya said, "How foolish of him! I don't know how to convince them. I am also trying to tell my brothers, have we made any efforts to get our land? It was tilled and given to us by our parents. Are we going to take with us this house, food, water, land? Only the food we eat is ours, nothing else."

To Make Bunds

We spent much of our time in summer in mobilizing people to make bunds on their farms. We began with collecting information/material on making bunds and basic soil conservation techniques, and then discussing those with the people. During our talks we felt that people were keen to participate. We wanted to help people make certain bunds permanent so that they would not break every

monsoon and to improve some of the bunds a bit. Then we also started measuring the bunds we wanted to make permanent. We measured about 30 such bunds and then discussed the improvements with a few experienced friends. But ultimately the farmers did not have time to work on the bunds. When we talked to the villages about the reasons why they could not spare time, they said, as there was good crop of pigeon peas last year, they wanted to finish many pending things they had been wanting to. So about sixteen houses in the village were repaired and reconstructed and six marriages took place in the village. To finish these things, pigeon peas provided the main cash income. For every marriage, they danced for seven evenings. May be another unspoken reason was that they did not want to work with labour not being paid for. We were going to make arrangements for raw material and skilled workers (like cement and masons), but no pay as the bunds were on their own farms.

Health Activities

An eye-camp was organized by SEWA-Rural (an NGO working on health issues) in Mozda. Usually patients with other ailments also came to these camps. We call those patients who can not or

will not go to hospitals for diagnosis. Diarrhoea and malaria spread in epidemic proportions in monsoon. Scabies is a common illness in children all the year round. Usually we are able to treat these diseases.

An elderly neighbour had an attack of paralysis. This was our first experience with paralysis. We arranged for his treatment in Dediapada and are now helping him exercise.

Another leprosy patient treated by us is a shepherd. His wife has left him. This has had a significant psychological effect on him and he was not taking medicines regularly. That was the reason we intervened and have been keeping regular contact with him and tried to help in other ways as well.

Activities with Children

We have brought a few new games which would help develop intellectual abilities among children. We have spent some time in teaching these.

In monsoon, games on playground stop because farming starts and all playgrounds turn into fields. So in monsoon children play in our house. This time, as soon as crops were harvested, children themselves started playing and then called us. They are very enthusiastic about these games. Right now about 40 children (above 9 years) and 15 younger ones form a more or less stable group. This year we have men and women of our hamlet also telling stories to the children so that the children get to hear them from their own culture too in addition to the ones we tell every night.

Village Industries

We were planning to make dal from pigeon peas this year as we did last year. People had been asking whether or not we would buy pigeon peas this year even as sowing operations were on. We said, all of us together would decide. Farmers said they would not sell outside if we bought it. We called a meeting of the women who were involved in the dal project last year to discuss whether they would like to make dal this year too. We

also suggested that they take more responsibility this year. Last year it was the first year for them and they were learning. Now they were experienced and we planned to give them peas and take back the final product 'dal' with all the processing done by them. They would also have the chance to teach other women if women from other villages would like to make dal.

We were advised against buying pigeon peas this year because when the crop was flowering a cloudy sky led to heavy worm infestation. The dal output from such a crop would be very low. The women also said that making dal would be much more labourious this year than last due to the additional cleaning involved.

After a long process of thinking together, mutual sharing, the group of women decided not to undertake the dal project this year. Some women were prepared to work for lower wages to make up for the bad quality peas and even take additional responsibility. Some had other priorities like building a new house, caring for the little ones. While some would be willing to work if others did. Looking at this and other such instances what stands out is that people here like to take community decisions.

However, to see how much loss we would make, we will process about 150 kgs. This would give us some understanding of the cycle of profit-loss if we take this village industry as long term project.

We are also thinking of other village industries. It is easier to sustain an industry if we use some local product as raw material. A lot of Amla (a citrus fruit—*Emblica Officinalis*) grows here in forest, so we tried to process and make some product out of this on a very small scale. It tastes quite good. So next year we may try to produce that as well.

Campaign Against Transnational Corporations

We have written about the campaign against TNCs in the previous report. A

U.S. TNC called Cargill, Inc asked for 15,000 acres of land near Kandla port (on Satsaida island) to produce salt and to construct a jetty. The Kandla Port Trust (to which this land belonged) and Government of Gujarat were opposed to this project. However, the Central Government was keen on giving land and permission to Cargill and also sent its officers to oversee this.

Institute for Total Revolution and Gujarat Sarvodaya Mandal organized a cycle march from Kakrapar (atomic power plant) to Kandla to build public opinion against the proposed Cargill project. When this march reached Ahmedabad, there was a large meeting organized and it was decided that Sarvodaya groups will oppose Cargill's salt and jetty project. Cargill is a privately owned TNC and has no public reports, so it took quite a while for us to collect any information about it and we were helped a lot by many of our friends.

To create a mass base for our protest against Cargill and TNCs in general, it was very important to build awareness amongst people. To achieve this, we decided to organize a foot march from Sabarmati Ashram (Gandhi's Ashram in Ahmedabad) to Kandla (about 400 km). The young members of Sarvodaya Mandal were given responsibility to organize the details and make arrangements for the march. To begin with, we were a bit hesitant as (i) we did not have experience of such work, (ii) we were not prepared to leave the work in our villages. Then we had discussion amongst the young group and felt that we will have to become active if we did not want entities like Cargill in India. We can not be passive observers in the face of deteriorating situation.

We made a small exhibition of 25 charts to explain how TNCs like Cargill spread their tentacles across the globe. This was displayed at all the camps along the march. A memorandum was also submitted to every district administration in Gujarat.

Both of us joined the march. We learned a lot while working and from all

the activists who had come from various parts of the country for the march. Talking to people and learning about their problems was also part of our education. People were very interested to learn about TNCs when we correlated their workings with people's daily lives. All the arrangements for food were organized by villages mostly and children also took active part in various programs of the march. We were also able to organize women's meetings and some of them showed interest in joining the march. Other women said, "we can not come as we have too many responsibilities in the house but we are very happy that you are doing this for our country and we give our good wishes and blessings to you." All this was very encouraging for us.

Cargill declared on 14th October that it was not interested in the jetty and salt project anymore, so we ended the march on 15th. Looking at Cargill's working, obsession with secrecy and the world economic situation of last few years, we feel that the reasons it gave for withdrawing the salt/jetty project were not true and it did not want to draw anymore attention to itself. India is a very important market as well as a production centre for it and all the negative publicity in Indian mass media could hurt its corporate plans for India. Cargill already produces hybrid seeds in India and is considering entering the petroleum sector as well. So looking at long term effect and advantage, it may have withdrawn/postponed the project. We feel that there may still be many secret plants of Cargill hidden from the public and it would be a great help if some one could send us any information.

Other Activities (Life in Mozda)

When our villages were making/repairing their houses, we also tried to expand our house. But it seemed that the house-owner did not want to let us expand the house. When one of our neighbours came to know this, he said

that he will make a house for us on his land. We were very happy to have this offer.

Our contact with the surrounding villages is also increasing. We visit about 8-10 surrounding villages to see/treat serious patients, to go for weeding on someone's invitation, to see some traditional farm processes or to visit relatives of our neighbours. Now we know a few people in surrounding 15-20 villages and visiting them has become easier. They are quite surprised that we speak their language and talk with us a lot about their lives, difficulties and also invite us to live with them and offer to make a house for us!

This year it rained very much for a short period and there was a small flood in our river and some farms were flooded partly. Nearly every one's roof leaked and fields grew a lot of weeds. We and some of our guests also went to weed surrounding fields. According to the custom here, we used to get our dinner at the field in the evening. All day we would sing while weeding, and in the evening bathe, have dinner and come back home together. The forest is much more beautiful in the rains and passing through the forest is an enjoyable experience. We saw many new birds, trees, insects, butterflies, spiders etc and learnt about them from the people.

Like every year, we also spent time sowing vegetable seeds with children along borders of fields and ate vegetables from these during monsoon.

For the last six years like-minded friends of about our age in Gujarat meet every year and share experiences of their lives and work. We also discuss difficult problems/issues, if a friend is in difficulty, we also discuss how to share in their difficulties. It is very special to meet friends working like we are and with similar ideas and we all wait for this meet. This year the meeting was in Mozda and about 35 adults and 10 children came. We took over the primary school and stayed there. It was very cold and we had a good taste of it (end of Nov). One evening, the young people of Mozda performed

traditional dances and some guests joined in. Our neighbours had also helped us in preparing for the meeting and gave happily whatever we asked for. Their generosity when they have so little is touching.

On 13th December, there was a large gathering of tribals of this area for a rally in Dediapada. An organization called ARCH-Vahini had organized this rally to highlight exploitation of tribal and focus on a few other issues. About two thousand adivasis had gathered as ARCH-Vahini is active in many villages. A few activists from outside the area also came. At the end of the rally, a memorandum was submitted to the Deputy Collector. This was good display of people's organization and strength. The question this raises is that when people want something or want to solve a problem, they unite and fight, but will they equally be prepared to bring about change in their own lives?

A divorced woman from a neighbouring village was interested in learning spinning. So she came to our house for a month. With her we came to realize that we still have a communication gap with the people here and that they are quite slow in learning things like spinning.

Michael travelled to Bastar with a German group. Bastar (a district in Madhya Pradesh) is also a tribal district and it has a more rich and old culture than this area. In his talks with tribals there the similarities between this area and Bastar were very apparent and we have a lot to learn from them.

In writing about bunds, we have said that many marriages took place here. We also went to some of the weddings and tried to understand marriage customs here and learnt about quite a few of them.

Our general experience here is that though women have a special place and are respected here, many important decisions are taken without consulting them. But we saw that much importance is given to a woman's wish about her marriage and if a proper decision is not

reached, considerable efforts and time are spent in convincing the young woman. We also saw incidents where planned marriages were broken up because the woman disagreed and then the woman marrying a man of her own choice.

The Story of Sukli

We were returning from one of our trips. When we reached home, there were about 4-5 people sitting in the open space near the house. All of them greeted us but none of them was smiling. We did feel something was amiss but no one seemed prepared to talk about it. After about an hour we learnt that our neighbour Sukli (a woman of about 19 years) had run away from home.

Sukli's marriage was fixed about two months back and she was to be married in about a month. It was very interesting to see how they all discussed, decided and selected the groom (man). The man was also present and family members of both sides were also present. Nearly everyone talked about their expectations, wishes and objections. They also asked Sukli what she would like to say. She told about her expectations and then said "...and tell him that I am prepared to marry him only if he will refrain from marrying another woman." The man was then asked to reply to this and he agreed. Bigamy/polygamy are not uncommon here and this man's affair with Sukli's sister was known. But now it seemed that the issue was resolved and the marriage was fixed.

Now Sukli had run away. Nobody knew why. No one dared to inform Sukli's father. Somehow in the afternoon he learned about it. He became very angry. After consultation with many people, they guessed where she could have gone. Sukli's brother Chandu (who had seen her last) was sent to a village 15 km away (walking) called Mokhdi to bring her back. Chandu returned next day bringing the news that Sukli was in Mokhdi and has selected a man of that village to marry. It was as if lightening had struck. Nearly every relative of Sukli said some-

thing against her. The main objections to Sukli marrying in Mokhdi was how can she come to Mozda for all major celebrations and other important occasions from so far away? So her contact with her own village would be broken. Another objection to Mokhdi was that it was to be submerged in the Narmada dam (Sardar Sarovar Project) and the people there would be displaced and may be resettled far away. Would they be able to have a good house at the new place? And even if they do get a good house, what is the use if Sukli can not come to her mother's home for important occasions? Chandu was sent back to Mokhdi to bring Sukli back again. He returned next day and said Sukli will come to Mozda only if her parents agree to marry her to this man in Mokhdi.

Sukli's parents still did not like the idea. Chandu was sent to Mokhdi again to bring Sukli back. At last Sukli came back. She did not go to her own house first, she stayed with neighbours. The man Sukli had selected to marry (Magan) had also come. He also stayed with his relatives. Nobody would look the other person in the eye. Sukli ate dinner with us and stayed the night in our house. Next day Sukli's mother scolded, ranted, said bad words to Sukli for nearly 2 hours. Then there was a small fight and the Sukli went to her home. Sukli's elder brother also hit her.

Sukli later came to know that she was not going to be married in Mokhdi, but to any other man she selects from nearby villages. But she was sure about marrying Magan.

At about 2 p.m. we 'heard' that Sukli and Magan had run away! The tension in our hamlet could almost be touched like physical force. That night, Sukli's parents cried a lot. The father got drunk and fought with Magan's relative. Next day they all sat together and had a long talk and decided that if Sukli wants to go to Mokhdi and nowhere else they could not stop her. So they decided to marry her to Magan with traditional festivities. Sukli's mother went to Mokhdi with this message and invited Magan's

parents and relatives to fix the marriage and returned to Mozda with Sukli. When Magan and his parents and relatives came, they talked with Sukli's family for nearly eight hours deciding on the wedding, how much would be spent on the wedding, how the cost be shared and so on!

After the wedding we asked Sukli why she decided to break up the earlier marriage-decision. She said that she had learned that though the man had said that he would not marry again, he did

plan to marry second time and so she did not want to marry him anymore. Without realizing, we had become involved in the whole incident quite a bit, and learned a lot about the local psyche and customs and the feeling of a close-knit community and how integrated we are becoming with them.



