

House-Building, A Community Effort

Swati & Michael, Juna Mozda, May 1997

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Juna Mozda

Dear Friends,

Hello.

It is nearly a year and a half since you last heard from us. The usual chores, building a new house and learning/acquiring skills as we went along kept us from writing. Illnesses in the family outside commitments have contributed too.

Along with deeper involvement in local issues awareness creation and mobilising people on issues of environment overexploitation of natural resources and the whole gamut of problems arising from the new economic-industrial policies ask for greater commitment.

We are sharing our observations and experiences here. However this is only a brief description. We would be happy to share more detailed experiences with friends who are interested in tribal culture and life-style. Do let us know.

Hope all of you are fine. We would like to hear from you as well.

In solidarity,



House

You may know that we lived in a small rented house for over five years. A larger space would help the various developing activities. We spent the better part of three months trying to get a place for it. We chose a piece of land in consultation with the village people and set about fulfilling the legal formalities.

In spite of the village people's wish and support, help from influential friends and high government officers, things did not move at the local level. We learned first hand that even small officials/clerks can sabotage decisions made by higher officials.

Working with one's own hands to construct one's own house may be an alien experience to those of us with urban roots. Here it is a matter of community participation just as marriage and death where 'each one for all and all for one' works.

We would like to describe a bit the way people build houses here. Wooden pillars, whole and split bamboo and roof tiles are the only materials used. The

person whose house is being built, chooses the teak pillars and a group of men sets out to cut and work the wood and then bring it home. The same procedure is followed to split and bring the bamboo. The house-owner provides food and drink to all who come to help. This has usually to be done at night to avoid bullying from forest department staff. Money plays little or no role as far as building a house is concerned. For raising the structure of the house around 30-40 people gather. All of them are given food and drink in the evening. When more houses are being built, turns are set when all gather at previously appointed date.

We had decided to use as less wood as possible to save some trees. So we ended up using a combination of steel and wood in the structure of our house and decided to make bamboo walls. This apart, we stuck to the local design and practices.

How can a house built with one's sweat and labour, with local materials have a notional money value? Throughout the process people have gone out of

their way to help us. Knowing us well, people made an exception by helping us though we did not provide any liquor. Ordinary as it may sound, it would be unthinkable here.

Reporting that we have a new larger house is not the purpose here. The whole experience that touched us to the very core, taught us not only skills but many other things and enriched us beyond description is what we'd like to share.

Sumitra, a young woman who has worked with us for 5 years refused to go for forest department work at a high wage because she said 'her house was coming up'.

Knowing that we would need a lot of help, on one occasion 40 people turned up to build the roof. All of them worked late into the night without any sense of having obliged.

Having this larger house will help in managing activities like dal processing, children's activity, dispensing of medicine etc.

Though we do not ever hold any ceremonies, to respect people's sentiment we felt impelled to have a house warming ceremony. Breaking from custom the ceremony consisted of planting 52 trees and a local elder blessing the stove before the first meal was cooked in this house.

House building is an activity where a large group of people work in a coordinated way without any single individual steering or superintending. Each individual has a very clear understanding of what they should be doing without being prompted.

Also, as we've written before, money is not at all important, except for roof tiles. This is also due to the fact that for most of the building materials, people depend on the forest.

These activities are very important in increasing the cohesiveness of the society.

The whole experience has deepened our understanding about life and its priorities, about manual labour, about all that is good in human nature. A house is not something to be possessed but

shared. It comes about when people not give their labour but something of themselves. How can an individual/family own it?

Watershed Management

In our last report, we have written about the beginning of building bunds and managing a watershed. Last year, due to our house-building and other reasons, we did not work on bund-making. Since people seek seasonal employment every year, employment generation is a very important issue here, and people would obviously try to choose that which offers maximum returns for minimum work. And all the government agencies providing employment do it in such a way that not much work needs to be done still a lot of money is doled out, even some NGOs have begun working like this. What happens then is, since there are others giving money/food for half a days work or sometimes no work, why should they work with us?

Two instances are worth citing. In a meeting some farmers said, others do not supervise much, check quality or care for how much work is done, why do you? Giving examples they said that last year we put only one line of stones on old bunds and then these were counted as new bunds. At another time, when we were trying to decide what would be the right amount of grain for a cubic metre of stone work, a young woman said that at one place, twenty-two people worked on a bund for five days which could actually have been finished in a day and a half! We can definitely not match such charity.

This year however, we had more planning and preparation than last and had a series of meetings with people, explaining our stand and trying to decide the right amount of grain. Now there is a split. Some farmers are willing to construct bunds for the existing returns by way of grains while others want more grain for the same job.

All this has delayed work on watershed as a whole. However, those farmers who are prepared, will make bunds

this year. Some bunds have already begun and we will see how much work can be done.

Last year we were offered a government project to do watershed management. But the government method is to set targets first and then achieving them. In this, the local situations, changes, dynamics are ignored. Also they wanted us to take a very large project or none, so we did not take it up.

Along with the watershed work, people have been asking for help in digging wells and irrigation work. We are exploring possibilities in this direction as well.

Health Work

Dispensing medicines for common ailments has been carried out since we started living in Mozda. There is some consciousness about taking medicines now but that does not mean that health consciousness, prevention, nutrition etc can be talked about.

We have been trying to find ways of running a regular dispensary with a doctor. Now, in coordination with an NGO we have organised to have a doctor once a month in Mozda. This will help us properly diagnose some illnesses and to deal better with certain epidemics.

Training local health workers is also on our mind, but they then expect a paid job, which we feel cannot be sustained for long. However we are still exploring this possibility and are trying to find how can this be done.

What we would like to share is that people here have a totally different attitude to life and health (from what a middle class mind comprehends) Even a serious illness for people here is just another thing. It is not only neglect or ignorance that is the underlying cause. There is an amazing equanimity about everything. Then there are smaller reasons like being completely at sea, being completely lost if one visited a large hospital, the way people are treated there, the tremendous queues at public hospitals etc. People would rather remain in their secure environs.

We are most conscious of our limitations here. Health is one of our concerns. Other preoccupations keep us from undertaking health education and more intensive curative services.

Processing pigeon peas

We had a preliminary meeting with women who had processed pigeon peas before to ask whether they would like to do it this year as well. The response was positive and we went ahead and bought 2.3 tons of pigeon peas. The women also advised us about the quality of the peas we should buy so that processing is not too much of an effort. Eighteen women hand-processed the peas to make dal. We have formalised the women's group a bit.

We bought only organically grown peas and a friend marketed over half of this dal as organic produce. Hand-processing is always more expensive than machines, but since dal was marketed as organic produce, overall this would be viable. If we can get a wider market for this organic produce, we would be able to make more dal. Could you also help us in marketing it?

Pigeon peas grown here are without irrigation and are of traditional variety. So they taste very good, however nearly 14 to 18 per cent are partially rotten. Because of this there is a lot of extra labour involved in cleaning. Also getting the dal clean enough for the urban market is quite difficult, but they managed to do it.

Processing of pigeon peas is not just an economic and employment generating activity. We intend to do educational and other activities along with it. During one of the talks while processing the peas, Bharu, an enthusiastic mother of four children asked, "Couldn't we go traveling after we finished processing peas?" This was a new idea and we discussed it for two days and decided that we would go to Vadodara and Pavagadh (a pilgrimage destination). We rented two cars (jeeps) to travel. Some of the men also wanted to come for the trip but we explained that only those involved in the

processing of peas were going, and not even Michael was going!

We had two preparation meetings to describe the places we were going to visit and what they should expect. Most of the women had not traveled beyond 15 km of their village. To take them to a city and visiting so many different places was not an easy task.

The women were so enthusiastic, they often behaved literally like children and had a lot of fun. In Vadodara we visited a women's organisation, learnt about their activities and had a discussion with the women there. The women from Mozda asked a lot of questions as well. Apart from that we also visited a zoo, a museum, a planetarium, temples, a children's hobby centre, swimming pool, a supermarket, used an elevator, visited a large dairy and saw milk-processing, an airport (saw planes landing and taking off), gardens, visited an organisation encouraging natural farming, did a bit of shopping — all in a day and half! Half a day we spent at Pavagadh.

After coming back, some of the reactions in their own words were:

"Oh we don't know how it all happened but we've seen so much that we are not sure if much is left to see in this life."

"We've seen and learnt so much that now even death won't dare come near us!"

"We've visited such places and seen so much that even our parents and grandparents haven't."

"Nobody for generations has traveled as much as we have."

"It was a perfect trip — we got a good place to sleep, there was always water and food, we can not complain about a single thing."

Friends in Baroda made a lot of effort to make the trip comfortable and enjoyable.

And now the women are already talking of going on another trip!

After coming back, they were discussing about the women's organisation and Swati asked what could we do. They said we could start saving some money monthly. And we've begun!

We feel that quite a bit of improvement is needed in the process we use to make dal. With this in mind we've visited a mechanised dal-making mill. We are exploring partial mechanisation of the processes so that the drudgery in cleaning etc. is reduced. To see how different processes effect the quality and output, We are making dal in two small lots by two new processes to see whether we get better results.

We also think that in the urban society we are used to consuming dal which has certain qualities which may not always be good from nutritional point of view. A lot of effort needs to be made to remove the outer cover of dal, but all can be removed only if a polisher is used. Polisher also removes a thin surface of dal itself, which is not good nutritionally and is a wastage of resources anyway. Without polisher about 10 % cover is left, this in fact can be a verification of quality.

We are also discussing whether mechanising the process will reduce employment and the women are giving mixed reactions about it. On one hand they feel they would like very much that drudgery would be reduced, but when asked what if it would reduce the number of women needed to process, they do not give an answer.

We will explore hand operated machines as far as possible so that employment is not reduced.

