

# She's Our Daughter Too

Swati & Michael, Juna Mozda, December 1991

28th December 1991

Juna Mozda

Dear Friends,

Here are some news and experiences from Juna Mozda which we plan to send every six months. There are also many sweet and sour stories we would like to share with you: the beauty of green hilly forest, singing of the birds, anxiety of finding strange insects or snakes (including cobras) and the innocent simple life woven by fine strong strands of love between the nature and people. It is difficult to put all this in words, so you have to come and experience it yourself.

This being the first report after going to Mozda, we have tried to include as many friends as possible. However, we could send the reports to come only to those who would let us know of their interest. This is, first of all in due respect to the trees being cut for the papers used and ....., secondly, to reduce the strain on our finances.

With warm greetings from a cold Mozda (now) for Christmas (belated) and for the coming new year.

yours,

S. J. Deesai 

About twenty-five adults and fifteen teenagers (all males) are sitting on a verandah in a haphazard manner and an animated discussion is going on. The subject: when and how should we celebrate Diwali—one of the two most important festivals in the region. An elder suggests that there be no dancing this year as there have been two deaths in a single family and the family cannot join in the rejoicing and the whole village show at least a token participation in their grief. The younger generation was saying that they would like to dance. But the elders could convince the younger ones and they agreed that there would be no dancing! All this is accomplished when an important man of the village—whose presence is almost necessary—is not present as he has gone to attend the funeral of a relative. So informal and self-disciplined is the society of these tribals even while making important decisions for the whole village.

Juna Mozda is 95 km from the nearest city and railway station (Ankleshwar). The block headquarters is Dediapada which is the nearest place where we can get doctors or many other goods used in our day-to-day lives. It is 15 km from Juna Mozda. The people in this region

belong to a schedule tribe and are called VASAVAS. They cultivate maize, rice, pigeon peas and other localised varieties like Kodri, Bunti, Moriyo etc. In winter months they also grow some vegetables by the riverside. Their diet is supplemented by roots, tubers and fruits of the forest and fish from the nearby river. During festivals they eat chicken or meat, but not as regular diet. They get oil from seeds of a leguminous tree. However, most of their meals are without any oil or spices. The only thing they buy from outside is salt— but this is changing now. Their main activity apart from farming is collection of minor forest produce and selling their labour, both activities give them cash income. They also raise a certain amount of livestock for cash. They graze their livestock on forest land and store some fodder for cows, buffaloes and bullocks.

There is no hierarchy within a village but it is present only in the family. After marriage a young family builds a house for themselves—till then they live with the man's parents. Usually all brothers (also cousins) live close to each other. This makes a cluster of houses or a HAMLET. A village has many such scattered clusters. The society like all other "primi-

tive" societies is still oral and it is difficult for them to deal with offices or banks etc. The people are in general satisfied easily and would rather rest than toiling to buy some luxuries. They rarely travel beyond Dediapada, the block headquarters. Shops in Dediapada belong predominantly to non-tribals who keep goods of very poor quality and still charge exorbitant rates for everything they sell. But the people however are quite self-reliant for their basic needs. As an example: not a single nail or anything else is bought to build a whole house!! They use everything from the surrounding forest.

Our first months together in Juna Mozda were used to make a home out of the house. The house (24 ft. x 18 ft.) is rented. We had to make all the facilities inside the house by ourselves and we tried to use local material as far as possible. The daily chores take up nearly six hours a day and if there is no electricity (which was the case for most of the time for the first months) the hours after dark are also 'unproductive'. But we also began taking part in the daily life of the people around us. The house owner decided that the roof structure needed repairing before monsoon and this was done through community effort and the only expense was buying ten kilos of rice. About thirty people came to help. They all got a meal and some liquor in exchange for their help. This was also the time for an informal meeting and sharing news and ideas. We learn that this is how any job here is done that needs more hands than there are in a family.

The children here, like all children everywhere, are very curious and we have become quite good friends. Some weeks back we were asked by the children to play with them and teach them new games. We have now begun playing with them so that we think it will lead to other games and activities in the future. We began with about twenty children of 10 to 15 years of age and within a week we had nearly fifty children of 10 to 20 years of age. We have also been planning to design a game for the chil-

dren to sit and play which would also teach them to apply the geography of the area to a map, hence teach them to read a map and increase their analytical powers and give an incentive to learn reading and counting. We also stitch (repair) the children's clothes for any work they do for us. We want to encourage the existing barter system.

We intend to integrate ourselves in the local society as much as possible. We plan to: (1) live with them and adopt their life-style as far as possible for us, (2) participate in their daily work to go through the drudgeries and hardships they go through. Only then we would be able to understand why they seek certain solutions to their problems and then we could also participate in the development process they seek. (3) To broaden our vision in finding the problems faced by the people we would also study the socioeconomic structure of the society as a whole as well as the political intervention into it. To earn our bread, we make greeting cards and our friends sell them for us. We also stitch and paint clothes to sell. We have also received a handloom-donated by a wellwisher, but to install the loom, it would take up a lot of space so we were hoping that the house-owner would extend the house a little. But the house still remains unextended so we have begun installing the loom inside the home. The loom would occupy about a quarter of the space.

The ideas we want to introduce into the society here would ideally be done by living according to them. So (a) we use a solar cooker, (b) we are trying to make certain facilities in and around the house to reduce drudgery and waste of energy. (c) We also try to keep our home as clean as possible. We hope that the people will learn from these things. We have found that they have begun noticing most of the differences. But after all this we also want to be available for the people whenever they need our help. This message, it seems has reached many people and they come from nearly ten surrounding villages. They come for: (i)

medicines, (ii) for land disputes, (iii) disputes with the forest department (it is a major landholder of the region), (iv) corruption problems, (v) repairing mechanical instruments. We find that, because the tribals cannot read and write, almost everyone coming from the civilised world tries to take advantage of this disability. But the people still trust these sahibs. But somehow they believe that they can trust us and come to us with whatever difficulty they have with the outside world. We cannot always help them, as we are learning too—but we try.

During the summer of 1991, 205 heads of cattle died due to lack of proper veterinary services though there should be a livestock inspector appointed by the government. It seems no veterinary officer wants to live in such a backward place! We did get a veterinary officer once during the summer months due to our efforts but it proved insufficient.

There is also another matter that has come to our knowledge. The village that we have chosen to live in, is included in a sanctuary. But the local villagers are not yet informed about it hence when we asked them they said that this village was not included. In some villages, the sanctuary officials have barred the cattle from entering forest area that was traditionally used for grazing cattle. However there is no official proclamation yet and it would be interesting for us to see people's response. Certain parts of this sanctuary are under the catchment area treatment as a part of the Narmada valley development project. We would like to study the issue and provide information to people if and when they want. Also we would like that the people protest against any injustice but we would certainly not impose upon them.

One field we could not help intervening was the health service. People from five surrounding villages come to us with illnesses like malaria, diarrhoea, infections, flue and so on. The tribals do depend a lot on herbal medicines found in the forest but they have no medicines for chronic illnesses and emergencies. So we help them in special cases and we

could help cure a child of five years from chronic infection of ear, which would have led to meningitis or cancer. It took a lot of persuasion and patience to convince the parents to get the child operated. It was easier for them when an E.N.T. specialist decided to operate the child without taking any charges. This has given positive results and now the people have much more trust in such issues. In such cases we get all help from two voluntary organisations working on health issues.

We think that actually there should be a full-time doctor here. We also think that the traditional knowledge of herbal medicines should be conserved as well as enhanced.

We have also been studying where tools using appropriate technology could be introduced in the farm or in the house. We are thinking of introducing Bio-gas plants. This year's rice harvest was not full and so people are putting in a lot of effort in planting winter crops of vegetables and pulses. We intend to help them by acquiring an improved hand-pump for small scale irrigation. Two farmers from our village have approved the pump after seeing it and would begin using it when we get it. It might also be possible to install a self operating pump called a hydraulic ram. We may also introduce certain soil and water conserving techniques to increase their farm productivity.

We have found that the people have certain exceptional qualities like honesty, generosity, trust and faith, love and these make them so beautiful. Before we noticed, they had taken us into their families. One of the neighbours told Swati's mother when she was leaving after ten days that she need not worry about her daughter now as Swati is their daughter too.

After this year's crop was harvested, people themselves came forward to give us this year's grain. It is a custom of this area that anyone who goes to the winnowing place they give you some grain as a gift. It is called tax, but we did not go as the harvest this year was not very good. Still people from our cluster came

forward to give two or three kilos of every crop! It is amazing how much love they can give and how generous they can become even when they have so little. We hope we become worthy of their love.

But there are also things which make us sad and disappointed when we learn about them. The level of hygiene is so

low that we often wonder how they survive. Our words of advise have gone unheeded in this matter. But they did stop drinking water from a contaminated well at our requests, though only after four months. So we shall keep trying.

