

Swimming with the fish

I was sitting amidst a bunch of 7-8 unknown women in a small house, in village called 'Nagari'.

Each one was talking with other very loudly. We shared same mother tongue, Marathi. Yet the accent was so different that I could hardly understand. I could only get that the conversation was going on about me.

"Why am I here??" was the background thought bugging me. Sitting there I was recalling Nayna's words.

The same morning *Nayna* (Dr. Abhay Bang) had opened the first session of Nirman 2.3 Camp with the sentence now familiar to us; *"What you get from outside is training but what happens inside is learning"*. With this sentence our Nirman Journey had started. Nirman is a series of 4 camps, an initiative by Dr. Abhay & Rani Bang to sensitize youth to social problems and to encourage them for action. This camp was the third of the series.

In first camp we learned about ourselves, our body. Second camp introduced us to various societal problems like energy, alcoholism, terrorism, rationing; by people who actually worked on them.

And now this was the third one. It was now time to experience what we had learned. All of us had assembled at SEARCH, Gadchiroli from different parts of Maharashtra. After *Nayna's* session we would leave for our village experience. Each one of us was allotted one village. We were to spend 4 days there. One house was identified in each village and those people were informed about our arrival. We would contact the Community Health Workers or '*Arogyadoot*' of SEARCH after reaching the village and they would drop us to the concerned house where we would stay for next 4 days.

"You are going to village to learn about it, by living with it.", *Nayna* continued. *"You will see entire universe in that small village."*

Even if I am able to understand one person on this earth, I will understand entire mankind. That person is none other than me.

See how 60% population of India lives. Be a part of their lives for 4 days and yet be a silent observer. See what happens outside you and also watch what happens in the world inside you."

I was recalling all this as I was not able to become a part of the conversation going on around me.

Where do I start? How do I break the ice?? *"I am grotesque at communicating with strangers."* I said to myself, irritated.

Wife of *Arogyadoot* of SEARCH whom I had contacted after reaching the village had come to drop me here. This was the place where I was going to stay for next 4 days. I had taken bus from Gadchiroli to Nagpur and got down at about 10 km from Gadchiroli, at Village named Mozri. From there this village, *Nagari*, was 3 km which I had walked down. When I reached, it was about 2 in afternoon. I found out

Arogyadoot's House. He welcomed me, offered me tea. Then his wife came to drop me at the house chosen for me.

When we entered the house, it was empty. I and the wife of the *Arogyadoot* sat in verandah. The lady of the house, *Kaki*, had gone to their farm. She would return only in the evening. After 5 minutes her two daughters appeared on the scene. The younger one, *Peeru*, was about 18-20 years old. The elder one, of age 22-23, was mentally challenged. To my surprise, her name was *Nirasha*. In Marathi, *Nirasha* means disappointment, no hopes! Later I learned that when *Kaki* was pregnant with *Nirasha*, she was expecting a boy. And since a girl was born, everyone was disappointed. Hence the name *Nirasha*.

After some time curious faces started popping up at the door. I had seen these faces staring at me when I was walking down the village.

Within first half an hour my first round of interrogation was over. Where do I come from? What was my name? Why did I come here? What was my cast? How much had I studied? Etc. etc. etc.

Endless stream of questions started fading gradually. Now that they were busy talking amongst them, I busied myself in observing the house.

It was about 400 Sq Ft, with 3 rooms. It was plastered with mud and had Mangalore tiled roof which leaked when it rained. Light and ventilation was a major problem. The open verandah had a *chullah*. The house had toilet and bathrooms, but they didn't have doors. The water closet of toilet was closed with Mangalore tiles. Later I saw that no one in house ever used that. Next to verandah, there was a cattle shed. They had one buffalo, two calves, two goats and lots of hens and chickens. Other than two electric bulbs, there was no gadget which ran on electricity. I had learned concept of 'minimalism' in Architecture, now I was seeing it.

Time was refusing to move ahead. I had nothing with me to kill time. No book, no tv, no internet, no mobile phone. We had to leave all the valuables at SEARCH. We had left with money just enough to go and come back.

Unknowingly I started comparing my and their lifestyles. I was a typical middle class girl from a metro city, and this was a typical house from village. Soon I realized, there could not be any comparison.

You can't compare apples and oranges.

Our problems were...well...Pune didn't have enough of water supply. These people didn't have water connection. They had to get drinking water from a well which was around half kilometer from their place. Pune had too much of traffic. These people didn't have vehicles. We were worried about the three hours of loadshedding, here there was no power for 10-12 hours at a stretch. We were worried about our placements, package. These people were worried because the rains were delayed and the crop was dying.

We were living on two different planes....world apart.

Had it not been for this camp, I would never have had a chance to see this kind of living.

Kaki came back in the evening. I introduced myself. They were a family of seven. Five daughters, *Kaka* and *Kaki*. *Kaka* stayed in nearby village. He was watchman with forest department. He came once or twice in two weeks. 3 of the elder daughters were married. *Kaki* and the younger daughter *Peeru* looked after the farm. They had 2 acres of land. Paddy was the main crop. They consumed whatever they produced. There was never a surplus to sell.

Kaki soon got busied in cooking. They had a stock of wood for a year. I was seeing cooking on *chullah* for the first time. In Environmental Planning we learned about the problem of indoor air pollution and now I was seeing *Kaki*, coughing because of smoke, her eyes red.

But apart from this problem and problem of light and ventilation in house, their lifestyle was the most Eco-Friendly. I had learned terms like Zero Waste House, Carbon Friendly House; I could actually see all that here. Typically waste produced in one activity would get used in some other activity. The food remains would be given to the buffalo, ashes of the *chullah* would be used to clean utensils, the house was built with local material, the cow dung would be used for surface preparation of the floor..... there were many such interesting loops...

They all would get up at 5.30, would go open air to defecate. Cooking was done by 8 o'clock in morning, one *subji* and rice. Then they would eat and go to farm at 9 o'clock. In morning they worked as labourer in someone else's farm. Being a woman, *Kaki* and *Peeru* got daily wage of Rs 30. Men got Rs 60. *Nirasha* never went on farm. She mostly did household work. The two of them would be back by 1 in afternoon. Then they would take bath, washed clothes then had lunch of same *subji* and rice. After lunch they went to their own farm. At this time, paddy field bunds were being constructed and *toor* was being sowed on the bunds. They would come back by 6. Cook and have diner. All went to sleep by 9.

Same routine every day.

I told *Kaki* that I wanted to try my hand on farming! She told me since in morning they worked as labourer in some other farm, its better I accompany them after lunch. I agreed.

After *Kaki* and *Peeru* left, only I and *Nirasha* were there. Once again I encountered the slow pace of time. "*I should have got some book!*" I cursed myself.

It was the first day of my stay and I was not able to set myself with this life yet. *Kaki* and all the other ladies seemed very confused about why exactly I was there.

They had immense curiosity about urban people. But they had very less exposure to the urban luxuries. They asked me questions like 'Do you also do farming in city? Do you have cows at your place? How big is Pune? Is it as big as Gadchiroli? Is it twice the size of Gadchiroli? You must be having water from taps, you must be cooking on LPG.....'

Seeing this life I thought I belonged to some other planet. All the malls, ATMs, multiplexes, glass towers of corporate....all seemed so irrelevant here!!

Why am I here??? I started thinking again. What am I going to do to change these people's lives? Will I ever be able to leave city and stay here forever?? Do I have any capabilities to survive here?? The thing is, I know that it is a game of 4 days. Will I be as much patient if I wasn't to return after 4 days?

Why should I allow myself to think that I am educated? I don't know farming, I don't know how to even light *chullah*, let go cooking on it, I don't know how to milk cow..... I was the most unfit to survive there.

In afternoon I joined them on farm. We sowed *toor*.

Two hours of work. My back started aching. I was drenched with sweat. But it was fun. One could see fields stretched for miles in all directions. Very beautiful!

In the evening I went with Peeru to fetch water.

She gave me a large *Handa* (utensil to store water) to fill. It was heavy. Since I was quite sure that I will drop it if I carried it on my head, I took it in my hands. By the time we reached the *chowk* near *Kaki's* house, I was dripping with water. The *Handa* was wet and it was slipping from my hands.

And.....at one point of time my hands could not take that weight anymore and the thing dropped..... almost 30-40 people in the *chowk* were watching. Within split second there was a roar of laughter. I was standing right in the middle not knowing how to react!! It was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. The very incident later became a huge entertainment package for everyone. Now I can laugh at it, but at that time...it was really tough!!

The next morning when people were coming to buy milk from *Kaki*, each and every person knew the water story. In village nothing is private. Everything is public.

Typically in afternoon ladies gathered at *Kaki's* place for chatting, gossiping. They were still not understanding the purpose of my visit. They were under impression that I had come there to do some survey. And the fact that I wasn't doing one was drawing objections.

Alas I tried to explain. I told them, "See, we people in cities get all the food from stores. We never get to know about the hard work that a farmer has to do to produce it. That is why SEARCH has sent us. To see how difficult the life of farmer is."

That's it. That worked like a key. The communication was unlocked, the ice broken.

Their attitude changed drastically. All the traces of disapproval because I was an urbanite dissolved. They started sharing their problems. *Kaki* said, she wanted Peeru to get married to a person from service sector. "*I have been working hard all my life. But I don't want Peeru to have a life like me. I want her to have a comfortable life.*" But person from service sector meant more dowry. What's more, if your girl had dark complexion, the dowry amount would increase!! I asked *Kaki*, how did they manage to get 3 girls married? They must have paid sizable amount of dowry. "*We borrowed from our relatives, friends...*" *Kaki* told, "*....and we are still paying back. Till we clear previous debts, we can't get Peeru married.*" "*And what about Nirasha?*" I asked. "*She will stay at our place, what can we do? After us one*

of the daughters will have to take care of her." I was surprised about the maturity with which this issue was handled. They had accepted her so naturally, without any noise.

Since there was no man in house, ladies of all ages would often drop in for while. Since Peeru and I were of similar age, I could see life of women and girls in village very closely. They seemed quite insecure. You will never see a girl roaming alone in that village. They would always go in group. *Kaki* never encouraged me to step out of the house alone. It was one of those few times when I am aware that I am a 'Girl'.

Story of all the girls of Peeru's age was more or less similar. They would learn till 10th, at the most 12th. Then join their parents in farming and soon would get married. I really doubt of what use that education is for them.

But they didn't seem to have any complaints. They had accepted that this is what their life was about. And it would never change. For all of them, the fact that I had come all the way from Pune to Gadchiroli for camp, was hard to believe. I tried explaining about my graduation in Architecture and Post Graduation in Environmental Planning, but they were worried that I am 25 and still not married!!

In next two days I went to many ladies staying nearby. Now they were more or less knowing me. Everywhere it was a warm welcome. I was going with *Kaki* on her farm everyday.

Slowly I could match their pace of life, yet when 4 days were over, I was eager to return to SEARCH, to my friends. Each one had different experience. People had bunch of things to share.

After the prayer, the laughter & the talk started. Hosts of some Nirmanees made them work like anything, some of them got marriage proposals, some were mistaken as naxalites, two were attacked by wild boar... the list was endless!! An hour was passed with roars of laughter. Slowly the paradoxes of life which were witnessed by all of us started surfacing. Alcohol, tobacco were chronic problems. People had seen children of age 3 eating tobacco. Castism was not only present but dominant in all the villages. Committing yourself to one person, the very basis of institution of marriage was nonexistent. It was a shock to hear some of the facts narrated by people. In many places ill effects of urbanization have reached even before urbanization. Is it the Indian Culture that we are so proud of?? Everyone was asking. The romantic concepts about Indian villages were completely broken. Everyone had seen the reality and now it was difficult to run away from it! Everyone was equally clueless about his or her role in changing that picture.

The next day we had a session for sharing the experiences. After listening to them I felt what I had seen was enough to put together only one or two pieces of a huge jig-saw puzzle! Even if we combine all the experiences, that would give only a glimpse of that huge picture.

After that session we were to pen down the questions that arose in our minds. My first impression after coming back was that I had understood village to some extent. When I heard experiences of rest of the people, I understood what I saw was not enough. I could see a complex web of problems. Where do I fit in this web?? What is my role?? Where to start?? Is it really possible to isolate one problem and solve

it?? Will I be able to leave my present lifestyle and go to villages for working? Will I want to go in the first place?? And my basic question was 'In 4 days how much of village have I really understood?'

The problems of villages were not just one or two issues, they were deep rooted. I think the real problem was, those people didn't have a vision for their life. I am not talking about vision of money or material gains. A good life is about living it a good way. Once they have this vision, they know what to achieve rest are just tools. Then it won't be a fragmented approach to solve problems one by one. First their thinking should change. In this context I think *swadhyay* has a very fundamental answer. It helps you change your vision about your life. This sets a momentum, and then you yourself find ways and means to achieve better life. But that vision is the key.

This is what our group suggested in the manifesto of Ideal Village which we prepared the next day, the Ideal Village is the one where everyone has such a vision about his or her life and about the village.

We also did a role play on "*Na aane ke bahane*", list of all our excuses for not working on the problems. We had to face the fact that what we call reasons are in fact excuses!!

Today I am back to my own life and I can't help but compare. Today whatever life I have, what my contribution to it? Frankly- Nil. I was fortunate enough to born in a good house, to get good education, to get ability to think, to choose between right and wrong. Today if I am in the category of 'Haves', it is my duty to help people in category of 'Have nots'. We always ask 'Why not me?', but how often do we ask 'Why me?'

But in today's life we just don't have time to take a brief pause, and think about it. I was saying that the village people didn't have vision for life. Do we, city people have?? Or our vision has started to mean only money... consumption??? Are we selling our sensibilities, sensitivities? Are we really worthy of the resources that we consume? Do we have right to take things for granted???

I don't have answers at this moment. But I plan to keep looking for them. And even if I am able to change my lifestyle by 1%, I would say I proved myself worthy of that visit.

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