

## FREA and Mahua Magic

a g rao

It was a hot Summer. We were walking in the forest like area, for a couple of kilometers from Vidushak Kharkhana at Annapur. This was my second trip to Shahadol district. Even though I come from Anantapur(A P), a place known for its dryness, heat and love for left leaders like Tarimala Nagi Reddy (who became an extremist), the heat was too much.

The tribal person who was leading us said, "*Hum pahunch gaya*" (We have reached). There was a small hut in an elevated land. We went inside. The hut was made of bamboo reeds and grass. The unique thing about his house was that it had no item from outside (so called civilized) world except for a brass bowl. The mahua fruits, grains,... all were stored in a 'basket like sack' made of 9 inch wide mat woven with palm leaves.

Then came the surprise : an offer of a 'drink'. As the chief guest I was served first, the magic potion in the only 'brass bowl' the family possessed. The clear liquid reflecting sun rays piercing from the leaf shelter was nicely distilled Mahua liquor! I was hungry and was little worried of taking hard liquor on an empty stomach! But the affection with which the family gave the drink cleared all my doubts.

*All of a sudden the Mahua liquor became a heavenly drink (som ras)*

After I finished, the vessel had to be cleaned for the next person to drink! The fact that they possessed only one brass bowl made it

precious! This incident etched a deep impression on my consciousness.

*Such experiences change you forever!*

And here comes the role of 'FREA' : providing 'contexts and frame works' for each of us to **change!**

I made two or three trips to Vidushak Kharkhana! In one of the trips, I met professor G D Agarwal, a simple unassuming person. In that limited exposure I could not fathom his great strength! Then I Met Dunu, Imrana, made friends with Goti, Suda, and Arvind. 'What is Science?'- great long meetings took place. I could not make out the significance. Whole exercise looked little abstract and 'naive' to me at that time.

Precursor to 'Shahadol visit' was our trips to Bhoom and Osmanabad, the drought affected districts of Maharashtra, with FREA initiation.

Myself and other faculty members Uday Athavankar, B.S Jagadish, S S Talwar, all from Staff Hostel, visited these places to understand how 'Drought' has affected life of people. Sagar dhara, adventurist Avasare were active student participants. Dunu and Javed had briefed 'the drought situation' to the students and faculty group assembled in the open space behind Staff Hostel. We were part of the 'Action group' formed after the talks. Some more faculty members like Dr.Mohan of Metallurgy department and Dr.C.S.Rao of Civil engineering joined the group.

Our 'drought trip' brought some insights. Lack of development seemed to be bigger problem than 'Drought'.

IIT group took up three tasks.

- 'Sugrass' (fodder for Cattle) distribution
- Surveys for small bunds to retain water in the area
- Hiring a rig to drill bore wells.

Soon we got first lessons in 'Politics'! All the areas suggested for Survey for building the bunds would benefit only the lands of 'Sarpanch'(village head) who was hosting us.

Another interesting incident took place. Student group with great effort managed to arrange a 'rig' to be brought from Mumbai for drilling bore-wells. Permission was required from the District Collector (DC) to bring the 'rig' to the drought areas. When the students approached DC for his consent, he initially said, "I appreciate your efforts! But you are all students. I want a faculty member who can take the responsibility". Students came outside his office. We were all sitting nearby under a tree. Prof. B.S Jagadish(10 years senior to me) was among us. He had an unassuming personality. With unshaven face for 3days and a hiker's backpack he hardly looked like an IIT professor. He was ushered into DC's Office to the shock of DC. But soon DC recovered and changed his plate! He started saying, "You see, the 'drought is almost over'! Bringing of the 'rig' got delayed too much. It will take another week for it to arrive from Mumbai and start drilling the wells. By that time it is likely that rains will start. It will make a big 'News heading' with a 'photo' of 'Rig' and me ! *"Rig' comes limping from Mumbai but the Rains catch up faster!"* With this 'logic' he didn't allow the team to bring the 'Rig'.

As a follow up of drought efforts, Some students and faculty led by Prof.Mohan met the Director urging him to start a 'Rural

Development unit' of some kind. But Prof. Kelkar(Director) was in no hurry. He asked us more details, possible structure, similar centres in other Institutes,.. etc., Subsequently Prof.Mohan and few students met the director two or three times. Finally under the direction of prof.Kelkar CAT (Centre for Appropriate Technology) was formed after A.W.Date joined IITB as an assistant professor. During his Phd at Imperial college, UK, Anil Date was exposed to E.F Schumacher. It seems he had expressed his interest to work in 'Appropriate Technology', in his application for a faculty position at IITB.! Director assigned headship of CAT to prof. Date. In the initial years, work in CAT was in project mode. Prof. Date faced many difficulties. IIT frame work in engineering departments was not fully geared up for doing student projects in Rural Areas. CAT struggled for many years to get a foot hold at IITB. Eventually it got a new status as CITARA( Centre for Technology Applications for Rural Area). Credit goes to Prof. Anil Date for his perseverance to continue and initiate M.Tech and Phd programmes under CITARA.

At IDC, Myself, Uday Athavankar and MSG Rajan tried to do some rural projects with FREA co-ordination. Ullas Gore, Avinash Deshpande and Sameer Banerjee were interacting with us. As IDC students Avasare and Suhas Kakde took projects related to rural development.

Avinash introduced me to Philip Byrne at Waigaon, Wardha. We developed a stick making machine at IDC for Philip. We helped him to make some wooden toys and puzzles. Silk screening was introduced in Waigaon. We managed to procure an order from Akbar Ali stores for 500 Heart puzzle boxes to be given as 'Diwali gift' by the store! But Philip at Waigaon was in no position to

produce even 100 puzzle boxes! I started realizing the limitations of 'romantic rural development'.

Myself and prof. Jagdish went to Varanasi after our visit to Vidushak kharkhana. There was a request for design help from sari weavers at Varanasi. We reached by noon, stayed in Vikas bhai's place. He was out of Station. But we were taken care of by others in the house. We were to visit the sari weavers in the next morning. But there was big commotion in the morning as news came that Vikas bhai is coming. There was elaborate preparation to receive Vikas bhai at the airport. The jeep got engaged for that. We were requested to take a 'rickshaw' to reach the sari weavers.

We met Vikas bhai in the evening when we returned after meeting the sari weavers. Vikas bhai had a commanding personality. I had heard many stories of him including how a long distance Bus with all the passengers was made to wait in the middle of a journey for Vikas bhai as he got down and went for a 'shit'! He was very warm and we had a good chat.

I got more and more involved with FREA and got included as member of Trustees as there was shortage of numbers. Being a 'Trustee' was educative. Hours and hours of arguments used to on. I remained a silent spectator. *It was not my cup of Tea!* I lost touch with FREA after I left for USA, on a UNESCO fellowship for 9months in 1980!

FREA orientation greatly helped me later when I got into Bamboo Craft. In 1993, I took initiative to organize a National Seminar cum Workshop in Bamboo craft called 'Jagruti' with participation of 15 designers, 15 craft-persons and 30 students. 3 Craft-persons from Sangli, who attended the workshop were very appreciative of the

event as they saw 'slides projected on a big screen' for first time in their life'. Then they asked whether we could give them some orders for their 'bamboo products'. Then the realities dawned on me. With my initiative couple of IDC alumni who had formed a new consultancy unit at Pune designed an 'office tray' in bamboo, developed simple moulds to make the new design and placed order for 100 pieces to Sangli craft persons. We started discovering new problems. All the rejected trays were sold by craft-persons at low price in the local market! We started realizing the issues of 'craft' were complex. I had yet another experience. I suggested to my perfume manufacturers for whom I had started a design office, to use bamboo baskets as gift packages for perfume bottles sold in USA. Mr. Sheth, one of the owners stationed at USA, asked me whether I can supply 2 million baskets! The company was filling up 150 perfume bottles per minute in their factory at US. Such was the possible demand in western Market! I was not even sure of any craft group capable of supplying ten thousand baskets in time! I got a good 'lecture' from Mr. Seth on how we are 'not organized' in India! This seeded a 'troubling question' deep inside.

*Is this 'romantic engagement with bamboo craft' in the comfort zone of IITB ?*

I started reviewing again and again: my personal life, professional goals, economic development at the grass roots with FREA experience in the backdrop, spiritual escapes...!. Few years of Introspection led to a concrete action. In 1997, I took sabbatical leave from IITB and went to North East. Got associated with an NGO called AVARD NE. Ritu Varuni , a member of AWARD NE was working in Bamboo craft and had invited me to work with them in

ASSAM. A month stay in Jorhat and Majuli brought back the memories of FREA days at Annupur. We organized a wonderful bamboo workshop at Jorhat in April 1997 for North East craft-persons. I was seriously considering an option of leaving IIT and getting into bamboo work in Assam.

But Alas! There was a disaster. In May- June of '97, soon after I returned to Mumbai , Sanjay Ghosh, leader of AWARD NE, got kidnapped by ULFA. On Ulfa's demand, AWARD NE closed down its operations with a hope of getting him released! But all that went in drain. Sanjay Ghosh was killed by Ulfa. It was a painful experience for me as I had stayed with his family for a month and became close to them.

However my NE trip brought a well-funded 'UNDP' project to develop tools for Bamboo craft. I met Mr.R.K.Mathur, Development commissioner of Textile Ministry, during his visit to BCDI(Bamboo Cane Development Institute) at Agartala. He got impressed with my motivation to work in Bamboo Craft. He suggested that I should take up a Tool development project in bamboo craft. He was not only persistent with his offer but also dismissed all my apprehensions like shortage of studio space, when he visited IDC. Thus the UNDP project brought a 'Bambu Studio' at IDC. Being first of its kind, it got international attention. I got the opportunity to travel all over the country and conduct 50 bamboo craft workshops in remote rural areas along with my craft trainers. Technology assistance and newly designed products were part of the training package!

I also developed close links with NGOs working in bamboo craft like URUVU at Wayanad (Kerala), Sampoorna Bamboo Kendra at Melghat(Maharashtra), and Sahaj at Dahod(Gujarath).

Bamboo work also took me to Naxal affected places in Maharashtra. We are working on 'one year diploma in bamboo craft' after 12<sup>th</sup> class to be started at Gondwana University, Gadchiroli, Maharashtra.

I also got closely associated with CDI(Craft Development Institute) at Srinagar in formulating a postgraduate entrepreneurship programme in Crafts!

A course which I run at IDC-School of Design, called 'Craft, Creativity and Post Modernism' tries to link craft-persons in villages and IDC students (often heading to USA). My ongoing website [www.agrao.in](http://www.agrao.in) elucidates some of my bamboo work and other wider interests in Design and Education . My FREA connection continued in different ways. I have been in touch with Dunu and keep assisting 'to link facilitators at IITB' with his work.

Do see my *News letter10: Homage to GD* which also has an article by Dunu on prof. G.D. Agarwal!

I am grateful to FREA for the orientation and continuous support I got, in doing meaningful work in my life!

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