

You Belong to This Village Now

Swati & Michael, Juna Mozda, June 1992

15th June, 1992

Juna Mozda

Dear Friends,

This is our second report at the end of about a year in Mozda. We have written about some of the experiences but also left out some like the commotion created by barking deers at night, or the sizes of cobras around our house.

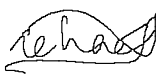
Swati was not in Mozda for over three months and some of our neighbours made a lot of effort to keep Michael well-fed while others suggested he should remarry!

When I (Swati) was in Australia I longed for the simple and peaceful life of Mozda. I felt that I would choose life in Mozda against the materialistic way anytime as I did not enjoy the material comforts so much and I could see the beauty of simplicity. I want to give the credit for this understanding to the people of Mozda.

We would like to remind that just over half the people to receive the report have responded but still we are sending the report this time. Would those who have not responded please tell us whether they still want to receive the reports?

Wishing a good monsoon everywhere,

yours,

S. J. Desai 

It is three in the morning of 18th March.

There are over 250 men, women and children gathered. They have gathered rice straw on the cowdung which was gathered since the last 15 days and then they put incense sticks and finally light the heap—and behold, it is as if about thirty GOSANAS have attacked the site. They run circles around the holi (fire) dancing vigorously (it is a religious custom) and then all the men and women gathered there start dancing, circling the holi, singing traditional songs.

Holi is the biggest festival in this area. Holi, for the Vasavas is not a festival just for a day. People have been dancing every night for the last fortnight. On the next day, children get together, go to each house singing songs, and people from each house give them jaggery, coconut and other sweets. And then come the girls doing the same. They make special songs for each household. At our door they sung "Michael kept sleeping and his wife was stolen, give if

you want to or we'll strip away your pants". They collect money from everyone and in the evening buy some goodies to eat together.

After all this GOSANAS come with drums and bells on their hips dancing away in gay abandon. These Gosanas don't bathe, don't touch a woman, do not sleep on a bed and drink fresh water a week before holi but do drink a lot of home distilled liquor!

Just after we sent you the first report, Swati went to Australia for three months. The first thing Michael did after returning from Bombay was to convince a cancer patient (Biladiben) and her husband (Tetiabhai) from a nearby village to go to the cancer hospital in Ahmedabad. The questions in their minds were: (1) Will they take out all the blood from her body before the surgery? (2) If she dies in Ahmedabad, how will they come back? (3) What if the doctor asks for a lot of money? (4) How will they manage to reach this big hospital 300 km away, find the right department and doctor? When they received satisfactory

answers to all their questions they decided to go to this big hospital in Ahmedabad. It was quite an experience for Michael to travel with them to Ahmedabad. Tetiya had borrowed Rs. 250/- from his relatives, that was all the money he had for the next month or so. Everything was arranged in the hospital after we went there without spending any money. Now came another question: blood transfusion was required. With great difficulty I convinced Tetiya to give blood since there was a need to have more than one bottle. But he did not have enough blood to donate. So Michael and our friend Virji donated their blood. When I was returning back from Ahmedabad, Biladiben started crying saying who will take care of her now? Tetiyabhai said to me, fifty rupees in his hand, take this for your bus fare and to eat on the way. He only had Rs. 150/- with him for the next month and I had about Rs.3000/- ! I was touched by the courage he showed. We wonder how many of us can do this specially when we are in a place totally unknown to us.

Another emergency: Michael was reading something, one neighbour came and sitting beside him said in a very hesitant voice that maybe we shall have to go to Dediapada. After some talking I realised that his sister-in-law was delivering a baby and it was a breech baby. So the child was stuck at the neck and the mother was in great pain. Five experienced midwives of the village and a lady health worker tried their best but there was no relief. People thought I may be able do something. But what could I do? I was a bit angry that they did not inform me earlier. Then I immediately went to Dediapada to the community health center (CHC) to call the doctor, but the doctors refused to come. The chief doctor said that his duty was only in Dediapada town and not in other villages. His wife, a gynaecologist and a private practitioner refused to come as well. Finally we got an ambulance and took the patient to Dediapada where they could not do more than giving her some primary health care which was not much

of a help. So we had to take her to a hospital 65 km away. On the way to the hospital the baby came out and was dead.

When we come to witness such incidents we get to understand the attitude of the outsiders living in this area towards the tribals and so we get an insight in to the anger, distrust, fear the tribals have for them. And it also makes us angry at people like the doctors in Dediapada. We plan to have a programme for further training for the midwives.

Our observation so far says that the women and children are the most exploited here (as in other places). At the same time they also have unique freedom and that is the reason they have strength, self-confidence and happiness. In spite of amount of work they put in, they do not have an important say in the major decisions. The children are often as busy as their parents. Household chores, looking after the young ones, fishing, collecting various things from forest and looking after the livestock are the activities they are involved in. They are so innovative in their games, dramas that we tirelessly enjoy watching, listening to them. Give them anything- and that will be their toy and here starts a new game! We also enjoy playing with them in the evenings. We had started some more activities like drawing, storytelling etc. but as they are busy, it is not regular. We do feel that if we give more input in children, they will become better citizens of tomorrow.

Since the monsoon was poor, people could have one crop only and so they worked very hard to grow vegetables at the banks of the river, and it was successful. With the idea of introducing new vegetables to supplement their diet we gave seeds of cabbage, pumpkins, different types of beans, ladies' fingers and other vegetables. All the vegetables grew quite well and people also gave us vegetables for free. Also a lot of people went out of this area to work as sugarcane cutters to supplement their farm incomes. There is a missionary organisation in this area which employed the peo-

ple for land-levelling. They received food-grains and edible oil as their pay which helped a lot of people to supplement their food needs.

There is a village called Devmogra 10 km from our village and is of religious importance for the tribals of this area. The Goddess there is called Devmogra. The most popular festival of this takes place in the first week of March every year. The tribals from Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh come here for the 'Darshan' and to offer prayers to the Goddess. For darshan often there are queues several kilometres long and people wait patiently and faithfully through day and night for their turn.

After waiting for a long time and asking many people for help we managed to extend our house a bit. People did not take any money for erecting the structure. The walls here are woven out of bamboo and we could not make them so we asked them to do it. Nothing happened for many days and then all of a sudden three men appeared with a lot of bamboo and began weaving the walls. They worked from early morning to late evening for three days and the walls and the roof were ready. When we told them we would pay them as much as they say, they would not name the amount. When we paid them the minimum wage they said they did not want to take so much money because now 'you belong to the village now'. In fact they did not want to take any money at all. So they returned some of the money. And we could see that they regretted taking any money at all. We all have to learn a lot from them indeed!

Since our programmes are according to the calendar and the clock, there are times when we are not able to meet the needs of the friends here as they have a very different time frame. Our ignorance about legal matters, people's rights and medicine prevents us from helping the people in some of their problems. However, now that we can understand and speak their language quite a bit, they have opened up more and share their problems and ideas more freely.

I also spent some time designing and fabricating a small trailer for our motorcycle. We plan to use it to bring heavy and large luggage from Dediapada to Mozda.

There is a dilemma we are facing and we would like to share it with you. There are some families in our village which are very hard-working. They are trying very hard to get some irrigation facilities in their farms. Several times we are tempted to help them but we feel that this will not just be irrigation but the introduction of a new technology which brings in some dependence. There may be exploitation of land, excess income and we wonder whether all the good qualities that the people have now will remain or not. Will they also become part of the selfish, materialistic world around?

A TRIP TO AUSTRALIA

Swati.

This was an invitation from Quakers of Australia, to go there for three months through Donald Groom fellowship and visit various institutions working for social change. I reached Canberra in the first week of January when 200 Quakers from all over the country had gathered there. I got to know many of them and their work as well. They are involved in various activities like permaculture in Vietnam, peacekeeping in Cambodia and propagation of love and brotherhood between the aborigines and white people.

Since sixty thousand years the aborigines of Australia have been sustaining the environment of the continent. But in last two hundred years the newcomers have cut down two thirds of its forest, hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland is now saline, rivers are being polluted, a large hole in the ozone layer has appeared over the continent which causes skin cancer in half the population. Though the population is very little the economic situation worsens every day and as a result of recession, a tenth of the population is unemployed. Most of the things come from Europe and even

a raw material like wool goes to the U.K. to get processed. I visited some organisations working on these problems and it was interesting to know that they also believe that Gandhi's philosophy is the way to save the planet.

Near Lismore I visited Rainforest Action Group. Their main objective is to provide information about degradation of environment anywhere in the world. They also support various environmental movements financially, by sending volunteers and information and lobbying through media. In Melbourne I met a very inspiring group called Nonviolence Collective. These people train themselves to apply principles of nonviolence. In the north of Malaysia there is a rainforest in Sarawak region where Penang tribals live. These forests are being cut at double the rate of Amazon rainforests by Mitsubishi and other corporations. Volunteers of Nonviolence Collective risk their lives to prevent ships loaded with Sarawak timber from entering the Melbourne harbour. They also educate the masses with songs and streetplays, spreading the message of boycotting rainforest timber. They have been able to convince two construction unions not to use this timber. I had in-depth discussions with these friends about our work in Mozda and values of life. All of us felt inspired by the discussion. Robert Burrowes is one of the main inspirations for this group. He has been a war-tax resister for eight years. The government has declared him bankrupt and is prosecuting him. Recently we were informed that the judge said that Robert has broken the law and convicted him of contempt of court but still was not punishable as his actions were motivated by a sense of moral obligation. We feel this is a step ahead in the direction of peace.

I was very fortunate to visit Institute of Permaculture where I met Bill Mollison who gave the idea of permaculture. He was very busy but got interested in what I was doing in Mozda. He told me about his experiment and showed his five acre farm explaining all the details. I was fascinated by the love

and care he has for the soil and plants. Humbly he offered help in what I was doing. I had a feeling of meeting a saint. Bill has designed systems for producing vegetables in a city flat as well as how to run a thousand acre farm on the principles of permaculture. Though people from all over the world come to him for his advice he prefers working in the third world.

In Nimbin, near Lismore I visited Rainbow Power Company. They have designed and marketed various devices like rechargeable torch, irons run on butane gas, solar water pump, windmills, solar panels etc. The remarkable thing about them is that the factory itself utilises renewable sources of energy. I noticed that in Australia people are ready to sacrifice material comforts when compared to Europe or U.S. It is quite common to recycle or use old things.

I met people working in the organisation Community Aid Abroad (CAA) in all the cities I visited. Their main work is to raise funds from Australia and send them to the various third world countries for developmental work. I noticed that CAA has a deep understanding and they make a great effort in selecting the projects so that it will support the local communities in various countries.

I had the opportunity to meet and stay with a lot of Quaker families all over the country. All the friends tried their best to make my stay worthwhile. To my surprise they took great interest in the work that we are doing and offered help. They also tried hard to show their country and its characteristics. I feel privileged to have known many beautiful people.

Some disappointment was to come: this country belonged to the aborigines but since the people from Europe and other countries came they took away everything from the aborigines, including their land and the right to live. There is not a single full-blood aborigine left in Tasmania today. It is the only successful genocide, they say. There were a lot of other massacres too and apartheid was the policy. They were thrown in the outbacks where it was not possible to

live. They became "citizens" of their motherland as late as 1967. Some of the land where their ancestors lived and places of religious importance still do not belong to them. And even in a "First world" country like Australia, basic necessities are not available to some of them. It is very difficult for them to survive the competition in a society some of which is still racist. I was sad to note that even in this democratic and affluent nation aborigines have to fight for their rights and often there is injustice. I stayed in one of their communities for a week. They are stuck in a difficult state and their limitations are also responsible for it. Some white people have gone to live in these communities where they work very hard for the upliftment of aborigines.

Australia is a vast country. Rainforest and desert exist on the same conti-

nent and I could visit both. There are a lot of wild animals which are only found here. Most of them are nocturnal. It was fun seeing kangaroos, koalas, wombats, tiny mice, giant lizards and colourful birds. Eucalyptus is a native tree here. I enjoyed walking in forests full of big beautiful eucalyptus trees. It is indeed a beautiful country.

The different contacts I could make at thirty meetings with students, social workers and other interested people will be useful in future for our work. I realised that some people do think globally but when they meet face to face with someone from the third world they get a push to think in-depth and to reflect on the inequalities and to bring changes. I think this is the contribution of such programmes.

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