

## 1. My Background

My family (and all other families in Prabal-Machi) belong to the Thakar sub-caste which is classified as a Scheduled Tribe by the Indian Government. We are also called adivasis, which means “aboriginal.” The Thakar are generally located in the areas around the Sahaydri mountain range. We depend upon the forest for our sustenance. Our economy is also dependent upon selling materials (e.g., honey, medicines, fruits, meat, and other animal products) we gather from the forests. We generally have very less interaction with people from cities, as we live in inaccessible places where many government welfare schemes rarely penetrate. The difficult of access also makes it difficult for urban people to come into contact with us except rarely. Due to this limited contact with outsiders we have largely preserved our culture, language and traditions intact.

## 2. My Education

Due to the social conditions of our community, we are largely isolated from the outside world, and we don't realize the importance of a good education. There are very few schools near our villages, and even in the schools nearby, the schools have only grades I-IV, and to study the higher grades, we often have to travel to far off places. Thus parents don't urge their children to persevere in studies and are not much bothered if their children drop out in the middle.

As far as my case is concerned, I can say that the fact that I have been able to reach such a level of education is not by design but rather due to a series of happy accidents and sheer serendipity.

My parents did not have much awareness of which school around our area was providing quality education. So my run of good luck started when my mother's cousin happened to mention to her that he was planning to enroll his son (my cousin) in a certain school in Lonavala, around 50 km away from my village. (But first one has to travel 5km from my village to get transport i.e., hitching a lift from a truck since we can't afford a bus or train ticket, and then travel 5km from Lonavala proper to reach the school where I was to study).

You might wonder, why travel so far away for schooling. The main reason was not that schools were not available nearer to us, but rather that the people of my community had very poor awareness of the facilities that were available closer to us. I was to discover later that there was a school very close to my village, but since we did not know this, I had to study for seven years (Grade, or as it is called in India, Standard I to Standard VII).

This school offered free tuition, accommodation (boarding) and food for adivasi students like me. So it happened that my brother, my cousin and I were sent to this school for seven years. This “ashram” type boarding school being very far away, my parents could visit only once in two months or so. Thus I had to learn to be independent and take care of myself, wash my clothes, etc. from around the age of five. But in our communities, there is no adolescence as such, and children almost always abruptly graduate into the responsibilities of adulthood during their early teens. It is not uncommon to find 10 or 12 year old girls capable of handling all cooking chores at home and boys of the same age able to perform hunting and gathering activities in the forests to support their families.

During our studies in this school, the three of us were typically the toppers in the class. I remember that my brother used to perform well in mathematics and I used to get help from him

often. Now, when I look back, it seems surprising that I managed to stay in school at all, since my parents originally considered me too young to be attending the same class as my cousin and my brother but enrolled me along with them just because they “wanted to see what I would be able to accomplish if I were put in school.”

That Ashram school did not have grades beyond the Seventh. Once we reached the VII grade, we were all perplexed about what to do next. At this point another co-incidence happened. I don't recall now who it was, but someone made a chance remark to my parents that there was a school for our community near our village attached to the Post Office.

When I visited this school with my parents to enquire about admission, we discovered that this school was just 10 km away from my village! As I mentioned before, we were really unaware of the facilities around us, and information only came to us by chance words dropped in casual conversations. Another piece of good luck was awaiting me in this school: This was the first year they were starting grades above the Seventh. Thus I, along with my cousin and brother were enrolled in this school.

While we three were more or less equal in studies so far, now home was nearer to us. This school was also a boarding-school, and its proximity to our home village led to my brother going home very frequently. It must be mentioned at this point that my brother is well built and hefty, whereas I am of a smaller build. Our teachers would scold us and even beat us if we went home too often. This made me afraid of them and so I chose to stay in school on holidays and weekends. But my brother who did not fear our teachers started visiting home more often. Thus it happened that I spent more time with my studies whereas my brother gradually felt less and less interest in studies. Finally there came a point when my brother declared that he didn't have interest in continuing with his studies, and my parents, not realizing the importance of a complete education, raised no objection to this statement of his, the result of which was that he dropped out after the VIII grade. My cousin and I continued with our studies and when we reached the Grade X, I stood 5<sup>th</sup> in the class and my cousin was in the 9<sup>th</sup> position.

Since this school did not have grades beyond Grade X, we now faced another quandary. But this time, we at least knew of the existence of another school where I could continue with Grades XI and XII. This is because the exam centre for my Grade X Final State Board Exams was in another school which had grades up to the Grade XII. Since I had gone to this school to write my exams, I knew where I could continue my studies. The only problem now was that this school was not a boarding-school, and was in a different locality than the school where I had studied up to Grade X. The locality of this new school was also more urban than that of the previous school which was more or less a small village. It would be easier to reach this new school by public transport from the base-village. The only problem for me now was to find a place to stay. At this point I encountered another piece of good fortune. An acquaintance of my father unexpectedly offered me a place to stay in his house. I received many kindnesses from them. Not only did they offer me a place to stay, but they also provided me with meals at their table, and even did my laundry for the next two years. In short they treated me just like their own son. It was been a long time since my father last had seen this acquaintance, but I recall him saying to my father, “Your son is our son. Don't worry. You sent him for studies here. We'll take care of his accommodation and food,” and he was true to his word. For the next two years, I had the luxury of being able to completely occupy my mind with my studies, as this family took care of all my other needs. I can never forget what they did for me, and am in regular contact with them even

to this day, and they treat me as a part of their family. As a result of this excellent ambience, by the time I finished the final grade of my school (Grade XII) I was second in my class. Many were surprised, I remember, that that "adivasi boy from the mountains" had come second. Many people congratulated my father, and this was one of the happiest days of my life. Though he didn't understand fully the importance of education, my father was pleased that people were appreciating my achievement. In passing, I must mention that my cousin, who had been with me until Grade X, could not continue his studies further, since he was not lucky like I was, in the matter of finding accommodation. Had he been able to find a place to stay, he too might have been able to complete his education. As it was, I became the only person from my village and family to have completed all the grades of school.

Now that I had completed my schooling, I was confused as to what to do next. There was no one to guide me, and I could not turn to my parents for advice. Here my life was once again given a direction by a chance comment. A tailor in the village of my father's friend, to whom I had gone to get something stitched suggested that I enroll for a Diploma in Education (D.Ed), which would qualify me to be a schoolteacher in Primary (Elementary) School. When I went to the Panvel Taluk to fill up the application form for D.Ed., I learnt that this course would take six years! Other people who had come to fill up this form mentioned having also applied to a Computer Course. This seemed more attractive to me, as it was just a one-year course. Also, this Computer Course was offered free of cost for adivasi students. After enquiry about further studies, I learnt that I could register for a Bachelor's degree during the industrial training phase of the computer course at the end of the course. So I decided to drop the idea of pursuing the D.Ed and joined up for the computer course. While I was doing my industrial training as a computer apprentice, I got admission into a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) programme in Hindi Literature. During this course, I availed the free food and boarding facilities provided by the government for adivasi students. When I joined the B.A. course, I was once again able to take advantage of free hostel and food for adivasi students provided by the government.

After completing my B.A., I was thinking of joining a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) course. At this point, a politician met me and offered me a job. I think this was because he wanted to portray himself as someone who helped adivasis thus garnering votes for himself. This job was in the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Section of a company called the Valuable Group of Companies. I was to work in the Panvel Branch of this company. When deciding whether to take up the job, I spoke to the Reporting Officer of the concerned department, telling him that I was taking up a job and dropping my idea of doing B.Ed. He assured me that I had a good future in this job, and also said that my salary would be raised from Rs. 5000 to Rs. 15000 in six months. On receiving this assurance, my parents arranged a marriage for me. My little brother and little sister had already got married. My married had been delayed so far as I was busy with studies. With the hope of an increased salary in the near future, I got married.

However, it so happened that there was no proper co-operation from the villagers nearby for the social work carried out by our CSR department and so the company decided to close down the CSR section after six months. Everyone else in the department was terminated. My reporting officer, out of his kindness to me, knowing that I didn't have sufficient knowledge and ability to find a new job immediately offered to let me stay in the company, but at the same

salary. Since I had family responsibilities by now, I felt that I had to look for a higher paying job, and started looking through the employment columns of newspapers.

By now, with my new computer knowledge, I had newly joined FaceBook and was forming connections with other adivasis online. One such online contact, whom I have never met face-to-face, on learning that I was on the lookout for a job, suggested that I apply for a position at India's primary government-run R&D laboratory cluster, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). I applied for the post of "Computer Operator and Programming Assistant" and had to appear for an exam in basic computer and typing skills, which was followed by an interview. I cleared the interview and was appointed in the quota of jobs reserved for adivasis (a type of affirmative action policy followed by the Indian Government).

I was posted at the Central Electronics Engineering Research Institute (CEERI), a laboratory of CSIR at Chennai in Tamil Nadu. Even though this was very far away (more than 1300 km) and there would be language problems. (Hindi is spoken very sparingly in Tamil Nadu, where the main language spoken is Tamil. One could manage with a reasonable knowledge of English my English was very poor at this point.) Still, as I had no other employment opportunities, I decided to take this job and joined CEERI Chennai, where I have been working for the past one and a half years. (I complete two years in April 2014.) My wife and I welcomed our son into the world in October 2012, just as I was settling into my new job. My wife and child later joined me in Chennai, but we decided after a few months that it would be much better to bring up our son in our village for some time at least, so that he could grow up in the company of all our relatives. So my wife and son went back to our village a few months ago. During my stay in Chennai, I have been trying to improve my English.

This is the story of my education and employment until now. Since I have had extraordinarily good luck at several turning points of my life, I am, until now, the only graduate and government employee from my village.

### **3. My plans for activities in my village.**

I felt a responsibility to repay my family and village for the support they have given me which helped me reach where I am now.

I had internet access at my old job at the company. (I also have internet access at my present job.) One day, when I was searching for "Prabalgad" online just to see what others on the net were saying about my place, I came across some posts by trekkers in some online forums and blogs, lamenting that there were no facilities to obtain board and lodging when they were at Prabalgad for trekking or sight-seeing. To fully explore all that Prabalgad had to offer, a typical tourist would require at least two days. However, until now, visitors have faced problems in finding food and lodging. Some visitors used to come for one day picnics or they would spend the night sleeping outdoors on the grass and eating whatever they could bring or manage to obtain. It was hard for ladies and families to stay here.

When I was reading this, the idea suddenly occurred to me that I could use my home to provide food and lodging services to such tourists. I discussed this idea with my parents and they agreed with my idea, since starting with almost no investment, we would be receiving a modest but steady income from tourists. After providing food and accommodation from my home for some time, we built a small toilet and bath-room for the convenience of the tourists. We also

built a canteen to serve food in. This was the beginning of the Prabalgad Hotel and Room Service.

Initially I was doing all this for the uplift of my family. But at the back of my mind, I always had the thought that I had to do something for the people of my village, since I knew very well how poor was their quality of life compared to the outside world, which I could clearly see, being now a part of this world.

The people of my village face many problems. The forest is shrinking due to deforestation and urbanization, and due to housing and township carried out by several developers. Further restrictions upon hunting and activities within the forest enforced by the government have largely limited the traditional income-generating activities that we adivasis have been engaged in for most of our past history. The lack of proper roads makes it difficult for government officers to come to our village. Also, when people, especially the elderly, fall ill, they have to be carried on makeshift stretchers made of wooden poles and blankets. Education facilities, as I have already mentioned, are severely limited. There is only one Primary school in our village, and the schoolteachers appointed to it by the government are often absent. (At present, the only other member of my village to have studied until Grade XII occasionally volunteers to help the school students. He is now studying for a degree after marriage.) People of my village sometimes die of snakebite since anti-venom is not available with us, and by the time people bitten by venomous insects are taken to the hospital it becomes too late for them. We also have problems with the supply of electricity and water. Though we have supply of electricity, we frequently get very low voltage. Also, though we get water, ladies have to carry it over long distances in pots on their heads, since there is no plumbing to individual houses. Unemployment is another large problem, and in the past, this led many people from my village to become brewers of illicit alcohol, though this problem has been now largely reduced due to government measures to curb the brewing of illicit alcohol. As if all this were not enough, certain unscrupulous politicians see us only as a vote bank, and promise much, deliver next to nothing, and try to swindle the money meant for welfare schemes for their private benefit. Thus many government schemes meant for the village remain unimplemented.

Many of my friends and well-wishers also urged me to give back to my village, since I had the advantages of education and awareness of the facilities available, which almost none in my village had. So I researched the various government welfare schemes for adivasis. I gradually came to the realization that the best way to uplift communities like my village was through grassroots organisations (Non-Governmental Organisations or NGOs) which would help ensure that the welfare schemes provided for the adivasis by the government actually reach them, and do not remain merely on paper as is often the case. I realized that for this, much financial support was needed. Since our village has been marked as an Eco-sensitive Zone by the Indian Government, only very limited activities are allowed there. I finally came to the conclusion that generating income through services to tourists would be the ideal way to provide a steady income and employment opportunities for the villagers, and this would help improve the standard of living of our village. To ensure that there is complete transparency, accountability, and maximum participation from other villagers, after discussion with the village, I have submitted an application to be allowed to start an NGO. This application was approved on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November 2013, and we are going ahead with this idea. I have prepared a report about the proposed plan of this NGO. I am sending you this report with this mail.

As I have already mentioned, when I came to Chennai, my English was very poor. I have improved it greatly by this time through regular practice. However, in order to prepare the text for the website and for the NGO activities document I have attached with this mail (and for this mini auto-biography) I requested the help of some of my colleagues and project students at CEERI.

The initial website for my family's food and lodging service was created by me using a free website building service called Jigsy.com which I discovered online. Before this, I was using a blog on Blogspot to convey the information about facilities available for tourists at my village. Realising that a template-based website like Jigsy would not look professional enough for the website I have in mind for the NGO we are setting up, I sought the help for a professional web-designer. Incidentally, this web-designer came to Prabalgaad one day as a tourist, and that's how I got to meet him. Out of the kindness of his heart, he has offered to do the web-designing for free. So I only have to pay for the domain name registration and hosting. I have already done this and the website is getting ready. I am confident that it will be completed soon. I shall definitely send you a link to the website once it is up and running.

Please look through the document I am sending you that outlines the proposed projects to be done under the NGO we are forming. Please look through it and let me know what you think. I would really appreciate your feedback.

If you do write something about my village, please do send me a copy of this article. My friends and I will be very happy to read it. Our village would be honoured by your article on it. We would also be able to reference your article in the next version of our NGO projects document and this would be of value when discussing with sincere well-wishers the development plans we have in mind for our village.

This brings me to the end of this very long document. I hope I have not bored you, and that I have been able to answer all your questions to your satisfaction. If I have gone into matters at great length, it is only because I wanted to give you a clear picture of the problems adivasis like me face, and it would be great if, through your writing, readers develop awareness of the problems we face.

-Nilesh (Bhau) Bhutambara

Chennai, December 11, 2013