

They Warned Him Against Entering This Village, He Went Ahead To Revive It

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"Are you insane? Who takes a gap year during their Masters? Don't waste your degree like this!" These were some of the responses last year, when I decided to take a break from my college education and take up something quite offbeat and little heard of – the chance to work with a tribal community. But let me tell you,



the decision to do this wasn't a random one.

Years of toiling in the academic field, I was just sick of only writing, talking, debating, and discussing about the issues concerning the education system and development sector at large. In the academic world, we are used to writing term papers, text book and essay reviews, doing class analysis and other kinds of things that sound fancy but do not yield immediate ground results. I was searching for alternatives. Since I was extremely interested in working with a tribal community and intensively exploring tribal languages and culture, immediately after finishing my third semester I joined the SBI Youth for India fellowship. The university too was supportive of my endeavour. Once in, as a part of the fellowship, I was working in Suaba village in Odisha. During my long walks by the countryside, one thing that always intrigued me was a particular mountain that was up ahead of the village. Out of curiosity, one day, while out for my usual cup of morning chai, I asked Basanti Didi, what there was on the mountain up ahead. She told me that there's a village where no one goes. She warned me not to go there, and in case I do, then not to eat or drink anything there, for I would fall sick. Even more curious now, I couldn't resist the temptation to do exactly the opposite – a childhood habit of doing what I was told not to! That minute itself I decided to go and explore, and a local 17 year old boy decided to accompany me on this walk, more out of concern than anything else!



It was an 8 km hike up the hill, nestled in the Eastern Ghats – one that shredded all my delusions about how fit I was! Once at the village, I was stunned to find that here there was neither road nor electricity. In spite of the Right to Education Act, the only school in the village was literally falling apart and had not been functioning for 4 years! As we headed back, a couple of community members met us on the way and giggled and said something in Saura, the tribal language. I looked at my friend for an explanation and he said that they were laughing at how I ran away from the village and was not able to stay for even an hour. This laughter still echoes in my head. I gradually understood the extent of hopelessness that has grown in the tribal communities, which only elicits laughter at the desperate nature of their situation. To state just a few of the problems that plagued the village – the nearest Public Health Centre from Suaba was 8 km downhill – in Koinpur; the nearest hospital was in Rayagada block, around 45 km away! What would happen to a pregnant woman in case of complications during delivery? Will a woman trek 8 km downhill in that condition? I came to know that there had been cases where people had lost their lives because of lack of such menial

infrastructure that we always take for granted in well-connected places. Troubled by all this, on our walk back, I began to vigorously preach to my young friend about doing something to change this situation. This was when it struck me – why wasn't I myself doing something about it? It took me 10 whole days to get things sorted out and overcome my fear of a daily 16 km walk to commit to changing things. Today I'm glad that I made that commitment. I began by teaching the children at the village every alternate day and this went on for two months. Then, to figure out a more sustainable model, we collectively tried to navigate through the bureaucratic hurdles: 1. To get the school started again with a fixed teacher: The school is up and running now in a community hall. We are currently fighting to fix the school's infrastructure.

2. To electrify the village: For this, we have already raised more than Rs 3 lakhs. We are looking for more support. The project should showcase the power of collective efforts.

3. To get an all-weather road sanctioned: This will help decrease the drudgery of walking. The District Collector has given written guidelines to the BDO for road planning. We are regularly following up on this. Today, it brings me immense satisfaction to think that a little effort from my side along with the hard work of everyone collectively, has put Suaba village on the path towards holistic development.



Suaba village All this while, I have observed several fundamental problems in the approaches that have been used for bringing about development in tribal communities. These have shattered their dignity and made these self-sustained communities handicapped in the long run. Also, our inaction and proneness to preach (like mine in my initial days) are major hurdles. People from non-tribal communities usually have a lot of biases regarding tribal communities, especially when the question of “mainstreaming” them comes up. But truly, the indigenous knowledge I have confronted by working with them is enormous and something I sincerely believe should be brought to the forefront. Personally, this whole experience also taught me to be humble and critique one's own work. I followed my heart by taking 2 gap semesters from the University to join the SBI Youth for India fellowship, which gives one an opportunity to work at the grassroots level while following one's dreams and provides support for the same. Such a prospect is hard to come by – and I am glad that it came my way. Contact

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