

Craft Episode 1- Jarmundi-Jharkhand

a g rao

Ek hafta chinta nahi tha! (For one week there was no worry)

The train stopped with a jerk! I was little restless not knowing when exactly we would reach our station in the middle of night! We had 3 berths and I volunteered to take the upper berth! Viji, the oldest in our team and Skye, Lady from West, occupied the berths below! I asked somebody,

‘Konsa station hai?’(which station is this?) He said ‘Jasidi’! My goodness! This is the station where we had to get down! I quickly rolled up my things and jumped down Viji and Skye were having good sleep! I woke them up! The train only stops there for 5 minutes! It was not an easy task to get out as the compartment was somehow crowded! With all the ‘maneuvering’ we finally got out with a sigh of relief!

One has to admire Viji at 60+, who has been travelling in Bihar on these trains, carrying loads of cash, often alone! Being with Viji in Jarmundi was a lifetime privilege! When we visited villages all the women surrounded and hugged her! She was ‘god sent hope’ for them!

The trip had many surprises for me!

For the first time in my life I saw a woman being called a ‘witch’! She looked scared! All the ‘witch-ness’ I could see in her was that she had a squint eye!The tribal law in Jharkhand allows villagers to stone and kill a witch! I couldn’t believe it! I had only heard of such things as stories! It never occurred to me that I would be facing it in reality! ‘Oh God! This is my Country!’, I thought! The inmates of the women’s hostel at Jarmundi, run by ADITHI were protecting the so called ‘Witch’!

Tribal law also allows men to marry as many wives as they can! Many of the ‘first wives’ in their 40s are thrown out of the house after the husband gets a new, younger wife! ADITHI the NGO started by Viji and her husband initiated and set up the women’s Hostel to take care of such women!

That was my first trip. I was allowed to stay in the ‘Women’s Hostel as a special guest! It was a unique experience! They had to convert an unoccupied kitchen in to a bathroom for my sake as I refused (to volunteer) to take bath in open near the well (which is a local practice!) in the middle of the Campus!

I visited couple of villages, some of them accompanied by Viji and Skye Morrison. Most of the villagers were landless and poor! Skye Morrison and Viji have worked out a ‘miracle’ in one of the villages. When we visited we found all the women busy with their applique work! Slowly I came to know that some of them were earning as much as 1000 rupees in a month, working

from home. This changed the social equations! Dr.Skye Morrison with her designer's eye started choosing and buying the 'applique works' for the Canadian Market. She worked out a fixed rate of 30paise per square inch for the sheets women stich. ADITHI bought the sheets and supplied to Dr. Morrison. Profits in the transactions go to ADITHI.

Women becoming 'earning members' and getting money into their hands has forced the men to give due respect to the women in the village! Skye also conducted workshops for these women workers to enable them to translate their stories into better visual compositions! The 'art content' with local tribal expressions readily found a 'place' in Western modern houses, with Skye Morrison's efforts! When craft becomes an 'Art form' with unique narratives, it has a better chance of 'surviving' in the Contemporary markets!



The story of bamboo in the village depicted in 'applique work'

*Similar challenge stared at us in bamboo craft! Daily used baskets had no unique stories to tell!
I will dwell on this issue later!*

Before that we need to look at the complex problems ingrained in bamboo craft!

Villagers of Bihar and Jharkhand have very few job works! Men tend to become lazy and take to drinking. Bamboo workers especially had difficult time to earn their livelihood! At the end of one week workshop, the worry lines on the forehead of Sheheri Devi, vanished and it was very touching when she said

'Ek hafta to Chinta nahi tha!'(For one week there was no worry).

She has been struggling to run the house, lack of grains, oil to cook, kerosene for the stove,..... all these problems she had to handle herself, getting little help from her drunkard husband! On one of the work shop days, in the middle of a session, her husband came completely drunk embarrassing her and her son who were participating in the workshop! Viji cleverly steered him into a corner where he slept off for the rest of the day!

I did not give much importance to 'Certificates' in general! When I did not bother to collect a grade certificate at MIT(Cambridge) for a course on 'Metaphors in Learning and Design', people there were shocked including prof. Jeanne Bamberger! The secretary for the 'Centre for Advanced studies' to which I was attached, repeated half a dozen times about it when she got drunk in the semester end party at MIT.

However over a period, I have realized that 'certificates we give', could have some value to village craft-persons, just as an 'Identity card' when they approach any Governmentt. organization! So when it was proposed to print a certificate for the workshop I readily agreed to bear the costs! Sanjay, a coordinator for the workshop at ADITHI, brought sample certificates one in colour costing Rs.50/ and another in black and white costing Rs.10/, I felt certificate in black- and- white would serve the purpose! We had not budgeted cost for the certificates in the project!

But Viji got very upset! She argued that the craft-persons should be given same importance as IIT students! She said they could frame it and hang in their houses! I pointed out that there was no wall in their poorly built huts! It is better to spend money on lamination to protect it from dampness/water. Then I suggested that we should find out how keen they are in getting a certificate in colour! Will they be ready to chip in a couple of rupees for it! Sanjay took the task of finding out!

Then came the surprise!

'Craftsmen were not keen on getting any certificate'! They were scared! Some of them had taken some small loans from a local Government body! They thought they would be identified and caught if they have a document with their names! Finally we allayed such fears and we gave 'black and white' certificates after laminating them!

Viji was keen on bringing an art element through colour and individual expression of the local craft person! I was as much interested! But how do we do it? We had no clue! Viji in my presence told the craft persons to choose colour of their liking for the multi-purpose basket they were making! A day went by! A day after, Gangamma our craft instructor came to me saying- 'Sir which colour we should dye? All these craft persons are asking me to choose the colours!'

That is when I realized that craft-persons also need some inputs akin to what we give to design and art students to exercise their Creativity and Choice! Wishful thinking is not enough! We need to go deeper into the issue of thinking on how one develops one's thinking! For generations craft-persons have been making traditional designs. We know very little of the 'processes of innovation' in the origin of new craft objects! Even (coloured) baskets for 'Chat Puja' were not coloured by craft persons! They were painted later by a shop keeper or his/her agent.

We did work on this problem further! We went around looking for an opportunity! We found brilliant colour threads and Malas (necklaces) in the local Mela(traditional festive market) which was going on at the time! We substituted 'Cane which was not available locally, with colour threads for rim binding. We tried to incorporate glass beads which were used for 'mala"! But we found out that all the transparent beads were made of plastic! So we settled for wooden beads which we could get in the local market! We could colour them by dyeing as well!

Viji with held a MA degree in English literature and had a flare for journalism was very good at coming up with new names/slogans! She gave a name to the exhibition at the end of workshop-

On Way to Toronto!

And we decorated the path with colourful multi-purpose baskets!

Two women from ADITHI hostel were selected for participation in an international tribal meet/workshop at Toronto (Canada). This was an UNESCO initiative conceived by Dr.Skye Morrison! Viji was to take the girls to Toronto! Viji was also well known in Delhi! She personally knew the state Governor due to her earlier acquaintance with him in an UNESCO committee! She invited the Governor for the event and he agreed to come! This gave a boost to the event!

I postponed my flight back to Mumbai from Patna, as the Governor was only free a day after the workshop! However the DC(District Magistrate) got little upset! He had not given much importance to Viji's work there! He did not come to bamboo craft workshop as well in spite of several calls by Viji! He was forced to visit ADITHI campus with a great irritation to check the road condition prior to the Governor's visit! To the DC's dismay Governor cancelled the trip at the last minute due to heavy rains in Patna which make helicopter takeoff and landing risky! The

workshop got the benefit of wide coverage by the press which arrived to report the Governor's visit!



See <http://www.aqrao.in/images/BambooCraft/JamundiLatest-min.pdf> for workshop report with pictures.
