

Report of Kechla (Koraput) Project of Auro-Mira Service Society for 2004-05

The Koraput project is in its first year and it can be said to be in its infancy. We are actually working in a small village of Koraput district of Orissa. The village is Kechla. It is a new project not only for the society but also for every individual on the team. Though an inexperienced team, the lack of experience is more than compensated by the enthusiasm and the hard work of all the members, without exception.



We shifted to the village on 18th of July'04. The idea was to start a centre and community based on the teachings of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. We had not taken very much into consideration the local tribals while we were drawing up our plans. They seemed to be few in numbers and we knew that we would have to do something for them, little realising how much it would be. We then decided that we would first start living in the area, see how life is, see how the tribals live, make some type

of accommodation and then decide what all needs to be done.

It is therefore important that we first describe the area. Koraput is a beautiful district on the south-east of Orissa. It is bordering Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh. Earlier it was famous for droughts and starvation deaths. It still is one of the poorest areas of Orissa and comes within the KBK (Koraput-Bolangir-Kalahandi) area which is notorious for poverty and famine. Now a very large reservoir has been constructed there by the authorities. This is the Upper Kolab reservoir commissioned in the mid-80s. It is a very large body of water at an elevation of 3000 ft. It is said that the next war would be fought over water; we should think that Koraput would not be participating in it.





The hills are not very large but are beautiful. The only thing in short supply seems to be the trees on the landscape, however, if you go to the market there seems to be no dearth of trees as there are lots of people selling firewood. We are personally not against using firewood for cooking as it is a cleaner fuel than petroleum and is replenishable, unlike petroleum. One could also say that it is God given as it

is right on the surface, unlike petroleum which has been hidden away from us and like a naughty child we have taken it out knowing fully well that we were not allowed to use it. However, not planting any new trees and only cutting is having lot of adverse environmental effects on the region. There is massive soil erosion, pollution, climatic change and animals that have lost their homes and food stray into villages. There have even been two fatal bear attacks since we have been there.

There are bears, foxes, jackals, tiger (or some other big cat from the same family which none of our group has seen). The good side is that there are no crocodiles. The flip side is that there are alligators. There are various types of birds which either live there or are migratory. However, these are also much sought after by the tribals. They are caught by rudimentary nets, traps and even by pelting stones. The rats are also eaten. If a rat is spotted, it will be caught even if a patch of field has to be dug. It is sometimes funny to see ten or so men digging a field with great speed and gusto to catch the poor creatures. I suppose that when the food chain has been upset by the reduction of so many animals and depletion of forests, the tribals have taken it upon themselves to be the balancing factor. We never see any monkeys in the area and we don't want to ask where they are. Most of the tribals even eat beef, though they are Hindus.



Their method of prayer is very different. They pray at crossroads and the prayer is to keep away the devil and the ghosts. The language is a dialect of Oriya, though most Oriyas don't understand much. All of them can speak Oriya also.

The average income is very low as their means of livelihood are firewood, fishing (though the reservoir does not have much

fish) and a single crop of agriculture grown by unscientific means on un-irrigated land.

The Tribals have a large number of cows, sheep and goats which graze the whole area. No plant can grow anywhere without special protection. Also this herd represents wealth to the Tribal people. A goat can bring upto Rs 1400. They also have pigs, chicken and a few dogs. As far as food is concerned, all animals are “on their own”.

The tribals observe many festivals, each of which is claimed to be very important. Our group has been participating in the festivals and trying to understand their importance, as each of these festivals is quite scientific though it is performed in a ritual.



The area does not have electricity. A road which is 90 Km from Koraput is only open when it is absolutely dry and that too only for off road vehicles and small trucks. There are no vehicles plying on this road except for the rare visits of government officials or material for government funded projects. The normal mode of travel is walking from Koraput to Champaguda (3 Km) or Pondi (11 Km) and then by boat from Champaguda (10 Km or 2 ½ hours with five persons rowing) or from Pondi (3 Km or 45 min). There are two motor launches recently provided by the government which are used on Sundays when the villagers go to Koraput for purchasing provisions and selling their produce. On other days these launches are used for any government officials coming or the occasional tourists. The booking has to be done well in advance as there is no communication method.

The team: -

There are seven brave hearts there, each with different capacities and inclinations. They are all presently living in a single room. With such strong personalities, it is actually quite surprising how well they manage with each other except for occasional minor quarrels. A brief note on each of them in the order of their going to Kechla is being given. Though it does not do justice to their contribution, it is nevertheless given to give an idea of the group.

Michael Burt: - The first to venture in that area. He actually lived on a little boat on which he was cooking and sleeping for a whole month during June'04. Looking at the boat and considering that to be the rainy season, it is quite surprising as to how well he managed. He has this type of experience in abundance and has lived on the water for years, though on a bigger boat. He has also crossed the Atlantic all by himself on a sail boat. Being 61 years of age and having had a long break from this rugged lifestyle and



India being a much warmer country, it is laudable as to how well he has adapted. Though

a Carpenter by profession and inclination, he can do just about anything. Presently he is fully involved with plantation and reinventing things for use on the project. He is the one who keeps a check on the direction, speed and is the whistle blower. He usually lives in the open and constantly reminds everyone that it is the joy of doing and not the result which is more important. In short he is the helmsman.

Prafulla: - The strongman of the group. He has an endless amount of energy and strength. He is ever willing to work. He is always in high spirits and gets the work done. He leads a very disciplined life. He has been lifting large rocks, carrying 100 or 50 Kg bags, has carried 17 shelves of a steel rack on his head for a Km. He takes a lot of responsibility and initiative. After helping with our small construction, he has now taken onto himself to grow vegetables and make a nursery for trees. His skill of computer hardware and repair is presently not being utilised.



Banamali: - He is a tireless worker. He has training and experience in carpentry and was involved with Michael in the boat building project. He is very daring and adventurous. He did not know any rowing and he took a new boat on its maiden ride all the way from Champaguda to Kechla. He had to row for four hours to cover the distance. One of the oar locks broke within the first half hour and made the whole thing even more risky. There is usually no one in the whole area and you normally don't pass by any other boats and there are people around the shore only where you start from. He has reached Kechla from all possible directions. He is also ever willing to join the tribals in their festivals or embark on any expedition at any time. He has picked up rowing very well and also takes care of the motor launch.

Durjyodhan: -The public relations person. He is sympathetic and well meaning. Ever willing to try out new things or give people a chance. He is very daring to the extent of being foolhardy at times. He has an organised approach to work. He has a varied experience and is a jack-of-all-trades. He is the philanthropist of the group.



Hare Krishna: -The sadhak of the group. The activities are hectic and there is a lot of work being done in which he actively participates. At the same time one can feel that his sadhana continues. He is an ever willing learner who never says no to any task.



Harendra: -The intellectual of the group. He is a silent worker whose contribution one has to really observe to realise as he just does his bit very unobtrusively. Having done his teacher training from Mirambika he gained teaching experience in Mirambika and then in Auroville. His capacity is really under utilised. He has been observing the villagers and making a rapport with the children. At the same time he is helping in all the other activities. It would be much easier to teach children if our understanding of the area is there.

Sudam: -A very strong and untiring worker. Though a professional photographer by training and experience, he can do just about anything required by the project. He is very good natured and straightforward. A musician, he can play all the traditional drums of the tribals and can pick up any tune spontaneously.



Some of the activities undertaken during the year: -



In September'04 we distributed clothes, blankets, utensils and other items of day to day use to the villagers. The total number of recipients was 311. The goods comprised some new and some used items. They were very gracefully accepted.

First-aid and basic medication has been provided to the villagers of Kechla and the surrounding villages. On an average three persons per day come for medicines. Once in a while the person is sent to the Koraput hospital or even assisted to reach it. Treatment of a child for snake bite, a village woman for a wound from an axe and a villager for typhoid are some of the cases funded by us though the treatment was done in the hospital.

A tin shed was made by our group from scratch though they had no experience in something like this. The sense of achievement was immense even though it was a minor thing for professionals.

Our effort to get water by a deep boring has not come to much. It would not be possible till a road is constructed which can carry a big truck.



We are presently using a solar lantern and a solar phone charger. We would have to do more by way of using solar in the coming year. Our experience is increasing and we should be able to do much more and probably the right things in the coming year.



In October 2004 a group of ten tribals visited Delhi and Nainital to attend a national integration camp. This was the first time anyone from that area had ever ventured out of Orissa from this village. The experience was very fruitful and they got an exposure to another world.



The boat project was a major achievement as it was done completely without external manpower. We have made one 20ft boat which we call Long John and two little boats which we call Gypsy and Gypsy girl. We are now independent and have freedom, though we still use the village boats and launch extensively.

A small building is being started for living on the land. This is the biggest time consuming project which keeps the group busy.



A nursery for trees has been made. The fencing has been done in a primitive method with thorns, etc but is very effective to keep away goats and cows. Besides planting trees on our own land, we hope to plant some trees on the hills and also give some to the villagers for their own use.

Visitors and Guests are a rarity. There are always people who want to come and visit us, but we have been dissuading them as we are all very busy and don't have proper cooking arrangements or living accommodation. No one can just reach there and give us a surprise. This is true for locals of Koraput town also. We have to make arrangements for their coming and going back, besides food and stay. Even a cup of tea or a raw potato is not available locally.





Even then there have been many visitors during the day. They include many devotees and members of Sri Aurobindo Pathchakra, Koraput and other well wishers. A value education camp for students was conducted in Sri Aurobindo Integral Education Centre, Koraput in December. Fifty students and twenty teachers participating in the camp spent a full day going round Kechla and seeing things for themselves. Sujata and Sujay from Pondicherry stayed for a couple of nights in Kechla in end November. Kari Bohr from Switzerland also stayed for a couple of nights during February. The group was very apprehensive as to how they would adjust to the hardships, but they took it really well and it did not seem as if they were guests.



A patch of vegetable garden has started. This is very useful as it is a start and we would spread the whole process in the area. We will also get some fresh organically grown vegetables of our own. We have also been visiting various plantations to get an idea. There still seems to be a long way to go.



We should have a schedule for next year. However, seeing how the planning on paper and the ground realities vary, one is tempted to just spend one more year in low gear, observing and doing as and when things come. Tree planting is one of the items one would in any case like to concentrate upon. It would be a big achievement if we could do something about soil erosion from our land during the coming year.

Some of the proposed activities for the coming year are as follows: -

1. To build a team of people who will each bring their individual skills and expertise for the benefit of the group; people who are full of hope, enthusiasm and dedication who share common goals and are willing to work for a better world.

2. To work the land in a variety of projects both as an education and as income producing.

3. To teach and explore environmental awareness programs and protection for the benefit of future generations.

4. To become a positive force in working with solutions to rural poverty.

5. To run teacher training workshops on Integral Education and give support to teachers in surrounding schools.

