

Editorial

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Challenges to the digital dreams

With the world converging into an online platform for almost every conceivable task, it is becoming increasingly impossible to stay off the grid for even a single day. Digital network has invaded the personal space to such an extent that almost every aspect of our social life- be it relating to work, commerce, education, leisure or health have increasingly been depending on it, the most significant feature of the digital revolution being the convenience and transparency it afforded. The government of India, as a significant part of its plan to revolutionise and revamp the country and make it a truly digital nation by offering a plethora of e-governance services across sectors using mobility, cloud, analytics etc have envisaged a mission which, if implemented systematically and efficiently, will pave the way for an improved and efficient administration and transparent governance.

But there still is many a slip between the cup and the lip, and the most glaring example would be a quick search for any updated and relevant government related information in the state. While the vision which will propel our country into its next phase of growth can be applauded and appreciated, it is imperative that various concerns of which there are quite a few are addressed and analysed to make the mission attain its objective. The Digital India programme with the expenditure doubled to rupees 3,073 crore for the next fiscal year against rupees 1,425.63 crore in 2017-18 has been welcomed by the industry and is expected to make significant changes for the better. The operating model and management on the supply side of the proposed transformation requires thoughtful and meticulous planning and phased implementation with continuous feedback to ensure that the impact is as radical and far reaching as envisaged. For that to happen, the digital infrastructure is required to be put in place, of which the telecom infrastructure will form the base on top of which software, apps etc of IT infrastructure is required. More importantly, the contents of these websites, apps, softwares etc needs to be relevant to the needs and requirements of the citizens and address their real time requirements- an issue that is proving to be the biggest hurdle that the government and its resources have yet to effectively tackle, and also the capacity of the infrastructure to cater to the digital demand of the citizens of the country.

The biggest challenge to the whole mission still remains that of the change management as the government as an established system of administration has been working in its own particular and well-oiled manner with its in-built sub-systems of considerations, unofficial deals and other forms of inducements to work the chain. The mentality and outlook of these employees and other human resources needs to be changed to be able to attune to the changing work environment and the challenges it brings. The removal of avenues for unofficial personal gains might deter a number of these employees to embrace the change or adapt themselves to the new work culture.

Every departmental heads must be handed the onus of inducing a sense of excitement and positive challenge to the changes that must be made for the grand mission to succeed. Reorientation workshops, seminars and departmental debates with experienced resource persons can motivate the human workforce in no small measure. At the end of the day, it is the human factor that will determine whether the digital dream will be realized or otherwise. Machines and gadgets are as effective and efficient as the persons operating them. Human effort, or the lack of it will be the ultimate decider on the grand dream the country is still dreaming.

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Contd. from yesterday

But I keep putting together new troupes though the members constantly change. I have a dancer today, tomorrow he is growing potatoes for some Bangali zamindar in Bardhaman. So I have to replace him with some other dancer. Two days later the original dancer returns. So I have to replace the substitute. This is how my troupes work nowadays. But it brings us some money. And when we are hosted in towns we are usually fed good food. So we perform.

Our music, our dance, our songs are sacred to us Santhals. But hunger and poverty has driven us to sell what is sacred to us. When my boys perform at a Diku wedding, I am so foolish, I expect everyone to pay attention. Which Diku pays attention to our music? Even at those high-profile functions, most Diku just wait for our performance to end. Yet, be it an athletic meet, some inauguration or any function organized by someone high and mighty - in the name of Adivasi culture and Jharkhandi culture, it is necessary to make Adivasi dance. Even Bihari and Bangali and Odia people say that Jharkhand is theirs. They call their culture and music and dance superior to those of us Adivasi. Why don't they get their women to sing and dance in open grounds in the name of Jharkhandi culture? For everyone benefit in job in education in whatever the Diku are quick to call Jharkhand their own - let the Adivasi go to hell. But when it comes to displaying Jharkhandi culture, the onus of singing and dancing is upon the Adivasi alone.

So how did I land up in front of the President, you ask. Some three months ago an official letter came to my house in Matiajore; a thick white envelope bearing the emblem of the government of Jharkhad. The paper on which the letter was typed in Hindi was equally thick and crisp. In fewer than five sentences I was told that the government of Jharkhand sought the pleasure of my musical performance at some event the identity and venue of which would be told to me later and that I should gather a troupe for a fifteen-twenty minute performance, and that all participants would be well paid. The letter was signed by some high-ranking IAS officer in Ranchi.

What does a hungry man need? Food. What does a poor man need? Money. So, here I was, needing both. And recognition, too. We artists are greedy people. We are hungry for acceptance some acknowledgement some remembrance. So, without thinking, I sent back a reply the very next day saying that yes, I would be happy to perform. I was so happy, I went to the big post office in Pakur, more than twenty kilometers away all by myself to register that letter. I went in a Vikram, packed with many other Santhals like me all going to Pakur. Nearly all of us travelers were blackened by the dust from the Koyla Road. Yet I was so happy that I did not notice it at all.

Around the time that I was preparing for our performance, selecting young men and women for my troupe digging up old songs from memory. I was faced with a strange situation.

I told you that Mugli, my daughter, is married into a family in the Godda district, didn't I? Well, she began calling me regularly on my mobile phone. I couldn't understand the situation clearly at first but it seemed to me that it had something to do with their land. Her husband was a farmer- they are a family of farmers - as are all the Santhal families in that village. There are more villages nearby,

The Adivasi will not dance

By- Hansda Sowendra Shekhar

populated by Santhals, Paharias and low-caste Hindus.

What had happened was that the district administration had asked the inhabitants of all the villages to vacate their land- their village, farms, everything. Eleven villages! Can you imagine? The first question everyone asked was; what will the sarkar do with so much land?

Initially, I thought they were all rumours. And I thought, how can anyone force Santhals to vacate their land in the Santhal Pargana? Didn't we have the Tenancy Act to protect us?

Still, when the rumours started floating, I went to Godda. We all marched to the block office in a huge group. The officers there assured us that they were all just rumours. The lands were safe. The villages were safe.

Still, when the rumours started floating, I went to Godda. We all marched to the block office in a huge group. The officers there assured us that they were all just rumours. The lands were safe. The village were safe.

Yet, later, police were sent to the villages. They came with written orders from the district administration. The villages would have to be vacated to make room for a thermal power plant.

The villagers refused outright. Santhals, low-caste Hundus, Paharias, everyone began fighting for their land. The district administration fought back. The agitators were all beaten up and thrown into police lock-ups. I called my daughter and her small children to Matiajore after her husband was jailed. Mugli arrived, her children and in-laws in tow. It was stranger a village which annually empties itself every few months was suddenly providing shelter to immigrants.

How would I manage to provide for all these people who were dependent on me now? How could the members of my troupe feed all those who had come to seek refuge in their houses? We needed money. And our current - mysterious - assignment was our only hope. Despite our troubles, we kept practicing.

In the meantime, some people arrive to help the villagers facing displacement in Godda. They wrote letters to the government, to people in Ranchi and Dilli. They even wrote letters to the businessman who was planning to build that thermal power plant in Godda. We heard that he was a very rich and very shrewd man. He was also a MP. We also heard that he liked polo- some game played with horses- and that his horses were far better off than all the Santhals of the whole of the Santhal Pargana.

News about the displacements taking place in Godda begun to come in newspapers and the TV after a few days. All of us tried to concentrate on our practice buy how could we sing and dance with such a storm looming ahead? In between, I received phone calls from several officers in Ranchi and Dumka and Pakur. They asked me to keep working for the show. They never forgot to remind me that his show was of the utmost importance, that we were going to perform before some very important people. Some officers from Dumka and Pakur even came to Matiajore to see if we were really practicing or not. When they saw that we were really working hard, they were happy. They smiled and encouraged us, they talked to us very sweetly. So sweetly that we all wondered if they could really not see how troubled we were feeling. Many times, I felt like asking them: 'How can all of you be so indifferent? How can you expect us to sing and dance when our families are being uprooted from their villages?' At other times, I felt like asking! 'Which VIP is

coming? The President of India? The President of America? You are making us Santhals dance in Pakur, and you are displacing Santhals from their villages in Godda? Isn't your VIP going to see that? Doesn't your VIP see all that? But I stayed silent.

Reality started dawning on us three weeks before the date of our performance. First a floating rumours which were gradually confirmed by newspaper reports.

The reality was that the businessman was certainly going to set up a thermal power plant in Godda. That plant would run on coal from the mines in Pakur and Sahebganj. If needed, coal would be brought from other places. That businessman, in fact, needed electricity for the iron and steel plants he was planning to set up in Jharkhand. The plant was to be set up for his own selfish needs; but if he were to be believed, the whole of Jharkhand would receive electricity from his plant. Whole towns would be lit up non-stop, factories would never stop working for lack of power. There would be development and jobs and happiness all over. And, finally news also reached us that the foundation stone of the plant would be laid by the President of India. We would be performing for him.

Yes, I was shocked. All of us were. Shocked and sad, but also surprised and delighted. We couldn't believe our luck. We had performed before ministers, chief ministers and governors. But never before the President of the country!

Then we heard more news. People demonstrating and agitating against the forceful acquisition of land were being beaten up by the police, they were being thrown into lock-ups. Paramilitary forces, the CRPF, had been called in to control the situation. Four villages out of the eleven had already been razed to the ground by bulldozers to make room for the foundation-stone laying ceremony.

But the papers carried glowing reports, along with pictures, of the roads which were being repaired or rebuilt in Ranchi and Dumka. Breathlessly, they reported that the President would stay in Jharkhand for three days. He would spend day one in Ranchi. On day two, he would preside over a university convocation in Dumka. On day three, he would visit Godda, lay the foundation stone and fly out of Jharkhand.

We received official intimation of the event a week before it was to take place. One day before the event, we were taken to Godda by bus. The entire district, the district headquarters, was unrecognizable. A football ground had been converted into a massive heliport. There were hundreds of policemen and CRPF jawans. And everywhere we turned our heads all we could see was a sea of people. I knew they had come to see the helicopter. Tucked away in the papers had been reports that all protestors had been detained and were being held somewhere. Perhaps my son-in-law too was among them.

From where I stood the stage looked massive but still not big enough for all the people who had climbed upon it. Ministers from Dilli and Ranchi all dressed in their best neta clothes laughing and chatting among themselves. All very happy with the progress the development. The Santhal Pargana would now fly to the moon. The Santhal Pargana would now turn into Dilli and Bombay. The businessman was grinning widely. Patriotic songs in Hindi were playing from the loudspeakers placed at all corners

of the field. 'Bharat mahann,' someone was shouting from the stage, trying to rouse the audience his voice amplified by numerous loudspeakers. What mahaan? I wondered. Which great nation displaces thousands of its people from their homes and livelihoods to produce electricity for cities and factories? And jobs? What jobs? An Adivasi farmer's job is to farm. Which other job should he be made to do? Become a servant in some billionaire's factory built on land that used to belong to that very Adivasi just a week earlier?

Reporters with cameras swarmed all over the place. Three vans with huge disc antennae on their roofs were parked near the venue. I identified the logo of a popular TV channel painted on the sides of one of those vans. I wondered if any of its reporters had visited the place where the villagers were being detained by the police.

My troupe was waiting in an enclosure built specially for the performers at that event. All the women were wearing red blouses, blue lungis and green panchhi and huge colourful plastic flowers in their buns. They were carrying steel lotus with flowers and leaves put inside them. All the men were wearing red football jerseys and green kacha and had tied green gamchas around their heads. We all looked very good.

The helicopter arrived... thud thud thud thud The rotors swirled dust from the playing field. The crowd was excited and a slow roar began.

The President was accompanied by his security staff to the stage. He was a short, thoughtful man. All Bangali look learned and thoughtful. Why should this Bangali President be any different?

The festivities began. The man who had been shouting 'Bharat mahaan' announced how fortunate the land of Jharkhand was that the iconic billionaire had deemed it suitable to set up a thermal power plant here. He didn't mention how fortunate the billionaire was that he got to come to Jharkhand - a place rich with mineral deposits beneath its earth; a native population upon it; and a bunch of shrewd, greedy, thief leaders, officers and businessmen who ran the state and controlled its land people and resources.

The 'Bharat mahaan' man announced the welcome dance and my troupe was ushered into the open space before the stage. We entered with our tamak, tumdak, tiriyo and banam. The President seemed impressed. The businessman looked bored.

When we had taken our places before the stage, I took the mic in my hand and bowed to the President. Then I tapped the mic to check if it was working and began in Hindi as good Hindi as I could muster at the height of my emotions. Actually, it was a miracle that I did not weep and choke up.

'Johar, Rashtrapati-babu. We are very proud and happy that you have come to our Santhal Pargana and we are also very proud that we have been asked to sing and dance before you and welcome you to our place. We will sing and dance before you but tell us, do we have a reason to sing and dance? Do we have a reason to be happy? You will now start building the power plant, but this plant will be the end of us all the end of all the Adivasi. These men sitting beside you have told you that this power plant will change our fortunes, but these same men have forced us out of our homes and village. We have nowhere to go, nowhere to grow our crops. How can this power plant be good for us? And how can we Adivasis dance and be happy? Unless we are given back our homes and land we will not sing and dance. We Adivasis will not dance. The Adivasi will not.'

(Concluded)