

# From Computers to Bullock Carts

## A Woman's Tryst with Rural Poverty

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Asha Kachru

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*Most Non-Government Organisation (NGO) reports on rural development work tend to present a rosy, romanticised picture of the role of NGO activists and their involvement with the rural poor because these reports are largely written keeping in mind the funding agencies. If failures and mistakes are honestly acknowledged, funding is likely to stop. In August 1992, Asha Kachru moved to the outskirts of Ranjole village in Medak District, Andhra Pradesh. This article is a compilation of a series of letters she wrote to **Manushi** in the last year; so it covers a substantial period of time. This is her version of what rural reality is like; to get a more complete picture of the situation, the accounts of many other people would have to have been collected. Her article is more in the nature of sharing her problems and frustrations in trying to understand the complexities of rural poverty rather than an assertion that she knows all the answers. An important reason she is able to honestly acknowledge her failures is that she is working primarily with her own money, along with some contributions from personal friends and well-wishers, and does not, therefore, need to embellish or exaggerate her achievements. The account does highlight how different reality at the ground level can be from some of the simplistic assumptions of most "rural development" programmes.*

I came to Ranjole because I was fed up with urban environmental and human pollution and was interested in living and working in a rural area. My coming here is a personal attempt to work towards creating an environment of peace, autonomy and self-sufficiency in a rural community.

I gave up my high tech profession as a computer scientist and got interested in indigenous appropriate technologies. Organic farming, various types of assistance to local families in need, and practical schemes for family sustenance became my immediate tasks. I initially bought five-and-a-half acres of red soil land, in August of 1992, upon which I began building two rooms for myself. I was growing only one crop per year until 1994 when I was approached by a local woman who desperately needed money for her dying husband's operation, and I decided to lease six

acres of black soil land from her for Rs 2,000 plus 25 percent of the produce. In a year's time, she offered to extend the lease for an additional five years for Rs 4,000, which I agreed to.

In November 1995, I bought another seven acres because I believe agricultural work is the most viable employment alternative for villagers. After having purchased buffalos and bulls, the farm is slowly becoming self-reliant with manuring, ploughing and transport of agricultural goods being done by my hired workers.

My first major agricultural investment of Rs 45,000 went into digging a deep well with cement rings to ensure that the walls of the well didn't collapse and further decrease the water level. But by 1995, due to constant water depletion, I eventually found it necessary to spend Rs 70,000 on a 328 foot deep bore-well. The well

only provided a maximum of three yards of water, which just wasn't sufficient for the irrigation demands of the 200 tree guava orchard as well as the remaining crops. With the bore-well, I am now able to produce two yearly crops on the five-and-a-half acres of red soil land.

In addition to *jauwari* and cereals, I am now able to grow small amounts of a traditional variety of sugarcane, as well as three-fourths of an acre of ginger, one-half of an acre of wheat, and one-eighth of an acre of cattle fodder on this land. The remaining land is currently being tilled to sow more cereals, ginger, sugarcane or potatoes as soon as I get the right seeds. I am growing these cash crops on a small scale because I need to compensate for the costs of the bore-well and the cement rings for the well, and because the *jauwari* and cereals are being grown for my own use.

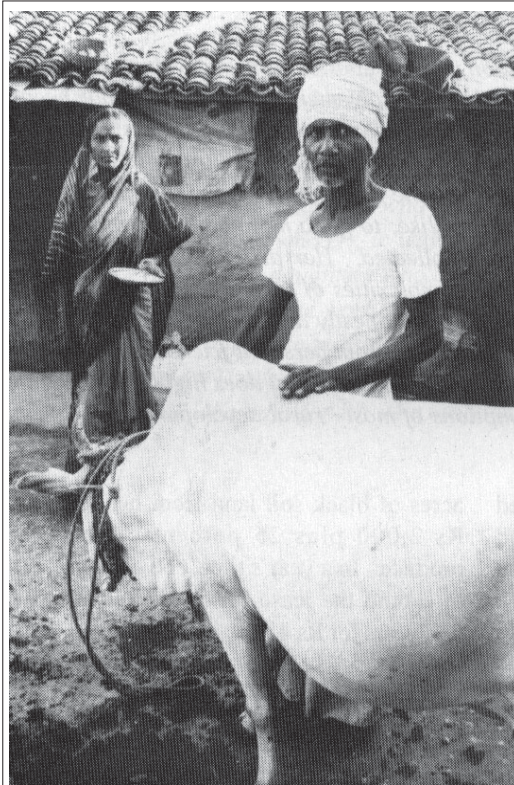
I had three families involved in full-time work on my farm. Suresh, Shanti, and their two children live inside my boundary wall with me. The other families live jointly in a tin-roofed mud house in the village that they built with an advance I gave them against their salary. Twenty-year-old Neeraj, his wife Prem and their daughter live in this house along with another couple — Papu, Seema and their two children.

When I first moved here Neeraj agreed to handle security since the women were otherwise too scared to stay in such an isolated area. However, he asked for a year's salary in advance, saying that he needed it for his marriage. My attempts to dissuade him from entering into this kind of bondage fell on deaf ears. A sort of bonded relationship indeed started, and has continued ever since. Neeraj and Suresh are employed by me on a yearly basis for Rs 6,000 to 7,000, and the two of them handle most of the irrigation, ploughing, cattle maintenance, grazing, and preparing manure.

Though this amount seems low, it is more than they would be able to get elsewhere. The going yearly rate per person (usually a man) in this area is Rs 4,000-5,000. In addition to their wages, I give them all kinds of loans for their personal requirements, which are many (i.e., newborn child's *jhula* ceremony which is considered a must, clothes for marriages, medical emergencies). They also take vegetables from the farm for daily use. Their firewood needs are also taken care of, as there are plenty of fallen trees and kindling on my land that they are free to collect.

Shanti, Prem and Seema use my well water for washing clothes, which

is convenient for them since there is no tap water in the village, and water is not always available the year round. The members of these three families also eat fruits (guavas, mangoes, berries, custard apples) as and when they are available on the farm as well as cashew nuts and fresh honey. I try to involve them in work for all these



Farmers in Andhra

Sue Darlow

extra facilities that they get, but more often than not, they avoid doing it.

Papu assists me in handling the communication with labourers and shop owners for materials that we require. He and his wife, Seema, are my closest companions, and it is only with their help that I have been able to make it through some hard times. It was Papu who found me unconscious after I fell from a mulberry tree and broke my pelvic bone. He took me to the neighbouring town and looked after me for some

time, which I am very grateful for as there are no specialists nearby. Seema looks after the household and the maintenance and preservation of seeds for the agricultural work. I've often enjoyed fresh *jauwari ki roti* and chili-tomato chutney made from our own produce in their home. I really appreciate their simple style of living, with minimal consumption of resources like water, space, energy, etc. It is a challenge to the urban, resource-intensive lifestyle.

Besides the three families, I give farm work to five to ten villagers, mostly women, daily. In the beginning when I was constructing the farm, I employed about 50 villagers, investing about Rs 4-5 lakh into the rural economy. Women earn Rs 12-20 and men Rs 30-60 per day. The labourers talk in terms of *mard ka kam* (man's work) as heavy, physical and skilled work and women's work as easy, light and unskilled, although spending six hours a day in a squatting position required for weeding is hardly light work. A female labourer can get Rs 15 per day (at the most) for this kind of work.

## A Risky Affair

Agricultural work is a very risky affair; the weather plays a big role. Though my *jauwari* on black soil has come out well this year, the heavy winds a few days back spoiled it all. It all fell to the earth. I had to organise labourers for a quick harvest. Similarly, last year, due to heavy and untimely rains, most of the crops were ruined. My neighbour lost his entire five-acre ginger plantation, and I am fortunate that I didn't lose my entire crop. I have planted about 800 kg of ginger and expect satisfactory returns.

The land owners and agricultural workers in this area are having a very hard time trying to survive on agriculture alone. Many landlords are selling off their land to 'Andhraites' (as rich people from Hyderabad or eastern Andhra Pradesh are locally known) who are buying large pieces of land (100-200 acres) and planting American cotton on it, or using it for some other commercial purposes (i.e., pharmaceutical factories, poultry farms, cash crops like grapes, etc.) Most of the young men of the locality are looking for jobs in nearby towns and cities in order to earn the cash required to sustain themselves and their families. Hence it is hard to find labour for agricultural work.

It is not low wages and high prices alone which make agriculture unsustainable these days, but has more to do with the careless way our government treats the agricultural sector. Problems include the irregular and low supply of electricity by the state electricity board, the bad condition of the roads and transport system, and the non-availability of appropriate *desi* seeds. Credit for expanding irrigation (such as cheap loans for purchase of well-motors or construction of water sheds) are practically non-existent for the small farmers. The agricultural tools are not standardised and are of poor quality, resulting in multiple costs.

Big farmers in the area come from a strongly patriarchal and feudal background. There is a long tradition of keeping bonded labourers, which is referred to as *jeetam* in this area. Most of these landowners' wives work in the family household and are not allowed to venture out, although sometimes they also work in the fields. These farmers are mostly uneducated but they take full advantage of the benefits they can derive from their upper caste status. For ages, big

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landlords have been referred to as *pedda manush*, meaning big people, as historically they have provided the poor with food and help in emergency situations. Some of them are still much more helpful to the poor than the government. Caste divisions, however, are unfortunately strongly reinforced by the lower caste communities, who have an extensive caste hierarchy of their own, including hundreds of sub-castes.

### **Pitfalls of Small Loans**

Most voluntary agencies give a loan to a poor family and that is it. They are not confronted with the daily problems of the recipients of the loan. But since mine is a personal effort, I could not close my eyes and make

believe that once I granted a loan to someone, there would be no other problems. Because I am living alongside the rural poor, I come to know about their day-to-day problems and can understand why most of the loans and other items given to them through government schemes do not really solve their problems. Lately I have come to realise that the poor need to be provided with some surplus above subsistence so that they can live independently. The loans that they get and the wages that they earn are simply too low to take care of any emergencies.

My decisions on who to grant loans to is need-based, and mostly sustenance-oriented. In some cases I have granted loans against the wages of some of my employees, but I have found out that once a loan is given, it is extremely difficult to get it paid back in work or money, mostly due to the above reasons.

Papu and Seema initially agreed to work for me, provided I gave them an advance of Rs 9,000 which they used primarily to build a section on to their mud house. These extra rooms



**Asha celebrating Diwali with Papu, Seema and their children**



were constructed with the intention of renting them to students of a nearby polytechnic. The couple's plan, however, never worked because the students needed water facilities, a bathroom, etc. Some of Papu and Seema's relatives moved in as soon as the rooms were completed and are still there. They get their water daily from a landlord's well nearby. The loan I gave them was used up within three months, after which I have been constantly giving them additional loans for one thing or the other. Besides cereals, clothes, medicine, watches, a cassette recorder, and gold earrings (an item greatly desired by rural women) I have given them money to clear their mortgages, get their cycle back, and paid for their daughter's *sari pehenna* (maturing ceremony). I feel it is hypocritical to expect the poor to be totally austere when we ourselves are not so.

Since both Papu and Seema are involved in work at my site, I felt obligated to provide for their sustenance, as well as handle their children's educational problems. I put their two children into a government school (after trying a local private school which was too costly for them and me). But the government school has insufficient staff and the children are learning nothing but how to sit still. Materials for playing and developing creativity are not available. Teachers are not prepared to change their style. They are only interested in getting secure government jobs. I try to do different things with the children — play, sing, do exercises, and dance as well as teach them a bit of reading and some general knowledge. Rural children are very interested in learning. Unfortunately, their 15-year-old son has dropped out of school because transportation costs too much and bus passes only cover a certain area. He is now driving one

of the auto rickshaws that I bought for him and wants to stick to that.

### **Income Generation: Unviable**

It was on the suggestion of Papu that I first bought a buffalo for his family, thinking that they could earn money this way. The first one was pregnant and we were told that she would produce seven litres of milk per day. It was a slight exaggeration — she first took another three months to give birth to a calf, and all that time she gave no milk at all. Later she gave a maximum of three to four litres a

like the idea of keeping the buffalo at her place, since they didn't have a courtyard and thefts are commonplace at night. So this buffalo, along with another one which I bought for my own milk requirements, ended up at my house. I've had to take care of them, but they do provide me with milk and manure. The cost of buying the two buffalos (Rs 8,000) has been covered in the past one year and nine months because if I had to buy milk in the village, I would be getting impure milk for Rs 8-10 per litre. The government dairy shop in the village buys milk from us (and other villagers)



**Women harvesting corn in an Andhra village**

*Sue Darlow*

day, which mixed with some water could be sold in the market at the most for six rupees per litre. Fodder was both difficult to get and costly, and that, along with paying someone to graze her came to Rs 15 to 20 daily. Seema was not interested in undertaking the additional work of removing *gobar* (manure), milking her and providing fodder. She didn't

for Rs 5.30 at the most (for pure full cream milk) and sells it for Rs 12-18 per litre in the cities. I have sold milk for some time now and made approximately Rs 2,000. The fodder and caretaking costs are balanced out by the consideration that I would have to spend a substantial amount of time and petrol to get to and from the village to buy milk.

After the buffalo scheme fell apart, Papu asked me to buy him an auto-rickshaw, which we estimated would earn him Rs 50-100 per day. I

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calculated that his daily earnings would easily cover the loan as well as provide a small amount of income for his family. Since a new auto-rickshaw costs Rs 50,000, we instead bought two old ones for a total of approximately Rs 30,000. The idea, then, was that the first one would provide sustenance for Papu's family, and leasing out the second one would pay back the loan. But both rickshaws needed so many repairs and spare parts that the returns we expected were not forthcoming. On the contrary, I've ended up giving him further loans for their maintenance.

villagers are mostly illiterate, so they have to go to intermediaries to get any official documents prepared. These intermediaries are themselves semi-literate, but they know very well how to take advantage of the villagers' illiteracy by charging them huge sums to get anything done. I didn't want to encourage this racket and hence had to get everything done myself. This meant driving 50 kilometers in my petrol jeep to the next town, Sangareddy, where the regional Road Tax Office (RTO) is located. The office is full of touts and bureaucrats who are out to make the process as

Currently, one of the auto-rickshaws is being put to good use by Papu and Seema's oldest boy. I've donated it to them with the mutual understanding that, as a partial compensation, they will work at my farm. But it is a struggle getting any work done by them to pay off the rickshaw. They only want to work for cash. The other auto-rickshaw is still damaged and lying unused.

## Organic Farming

Agriculture is what the villagers know best and can deal with on their own. The only other option that they have is to find work in neighbouring towns as coolies in construction or other types of unskilled labour. I believe that farming preserves a person's self-respect, as well as providing the benefits of food grains, fruits and vegetables for personal consumption and a non-polluted work environment.

Recently, I have put a lot of energy into organic farming and we have begun preparing our own organic manure. On our land, production at the moment is rather low. The villagers see the richer landlords using urea and pesticides, and so they keep saying that if I used the same inputs the returns would be better, but I haven't agreed to switch.

The farmers using chemical fertilisers do seem to be better off, but the ecological damage is also obvious. I hope that after the soil on our farm recovers from the damage chemicals have done to it over the years, I can prove to the villagers that leaving nature to itself will ultimately pay off.

With my organic jaggery that I prepared out of a traditional variety sown on my land, I have encountered additional problems. I thought of selling it for Rs 15 per kilogram to urban dwellers because I can assure



**Digging a pit for organic manure in the author's village**

For the second auto-rickshaw, a driver had to be located. Various attempts to hire drivers proved futile. They would either bring back the auto-rickshaw damaged and ask for money for repairs, or else they would say that everything they earned had been spent on fuel and small repairs. Rarely did any of them pay me back any money.

In addition, the burden of getting the related paperwork done, including the registration certificate, road tax, insurance, permit, and fitness test certificate fell on my shoulders. The

lengthy and complicated as they can, in order to induce you to resort to a bribe. Since I refused to pay any bribes, I had to waste many days there.

I had an unbelievably frustrating experience with the last driver in trying to get him to pay me my share and return the rickshaw in its original condition. Though I got a police inspector to help me, nothing was accomplished. Then, on top of all this, the young man recently met with an accident driving someone else's auto-rickshaw and is now dead.

consumers that it is genuine organic jaggery containing no chemicals whatsoever. I got orders for 250 kilograms from two women who have a natural food shop and a health centre in Bombay. They refused to take it because they were misled by a male acquaintance who told them the transport costs would be too high and the jaggery wouldn't sell as it is too dark in colour. I told them that it is black because there are no chemicals added to alter its colour. Colour racism seems to exist even for foodstuffs. I started feeling a bit unsure anyway about supporting the urban elite who can buy the organic stuff at higher rates. Meanwhile I've dispensed some at the local markets for around Rs 4-10 per kilogram and some to the shop/centre at Rs 15 per kilogram. The organic farmers and organic food buyers need to organise themselves so that the market is ensured.

Though some farmers in the village have appreciated my organic methods of farming, I can't expect that they will follow my methods immediately. They have to live from the land and they need the cash *now*. How can they wait for the organic farming methods to prove themselves if the Green Revolution technologies have increased yields (even though it has been at the cost of ecological damage) so much over the years? Only if more of us do organic farming can it be proven that it makes sense in the long run. Organic farming is not only farming but an entire world-view — a lifestyle in which health, food, and nutrition are important, not just cash and consumerism.

### **The Last Instalment**

Though life is hard here and the poverty is extreme, the villagers' simple, self-sufficient lifestyle, their basic need-based approach, and their

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humane attitudes provide a number of positive reasons for me to continue here. I believe that we urban dwellers have created the most ecological damage, exploiting both people and raw materials of the agricultural sector. Therefore it is *we* who have to undo our actions, change our lifestyles, move towards rural areas, or at least change our policies so that living in non-urban areas becomes feasible. Instead of voluntary agencies getting more and more power and money, it is each one of us city dwellers who needs to take action for change. It is my earnest belief that this is the need of the hour in a developing country like India.

Unfortunately, personal setbacks on the farm continue. Two of my three workers with families have left. One of my male workers disappeared without returning the whole sum that he initially took from me and I'm now dealing with the police in trying to track him down. My other worker tried to exploit the situation, so I fired him on my own.

I have found two new families who have taken the place of the others, and things look fine so far. My most recent income generation idea seems to be working out well. I've given my third and most loyal worker (and his family) a big loan to purchase a pick-up van. The loan is against his salary for the next two to three years. The transport of both people and agricultural produce fetches good daily returns to cover the loan instalments and should easily compensate his salary in two years. □

*Asha Kachru taught mathematics and computer science in Delhi and Bonn, Germany. She is now doing organic farming and teaching rural children.*



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