

4<sup>th</sup> April 2008

## **Unleashing the power of youth..**

On the Launch of Read Orissa Summer Campaign

They started to arrive in small groups at first and soon they were coming in bus loads. The tiny 4 acre campus of AID Orissa 6 kms from Paralakhemundi was filled up with way too many people – many more than it was ever designed to handle. We had 4 rooms and 2 half built halls and a tent for the meeting to accommodate about 300-400 youth from all over Orissa, who were to be dispatched to all corners of Gajapati district after a day and half of orientation on the summer learning campaign as part of the Read Orissa program. Already people were excitedly sharing stories of their travel. Many had managed not to board their trains. Some boarded with wrong tickets. Some got down at wrong stations. Some complained of the terrible rush in general compartments. The 40 kms bus ride from Palasa station in neighboring Srikakulum district of Andhra Pradesh to the district headquarters at Paralakhemundi is dotted by hills and dense forests and the occasional small village. The most daunting sight is that of a police station, which is fortified like an army barrack ready for war – thanks to the Naxal menace prevalent in the area. Suddenly if you are from coastal Orissa – you feel your heart pumping faster at the thought of the unknown lurking at every bend in the road.

Finally the time came for some 100 of us who were first to arrive to gather behind a make-shift campaign jeep on the morning of April 1<sup>st</sup> – the Foundation day of state of Orissa. It was on this day in 1936, the British had declared Orissa to be a separate state carved out of central, Bengal and Madras provinces. The Odiya language was recognized as an independent language and not a dialect of bengali. Much of this was thanks largely due to single handed effort of Maharaja Krushnachandra Gajapati Dev who was the king of the princely state of Paralakhemundi. It was he who had articulated the case for Orissa state at the London round table conferences at the risk of incurring the annoyance of national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi for diverting the focus from India's independence. Krushnachandra Gajapati later became the first Prime-Minister of separate Orissa state and is still remembered fondly for his pioneering role in not only formation of the state but also for ensuring that much of his estate remained in Orissa rather than outside of it. The Gajapati district is named after this illustrious son of the soil.

It was for the first time in my life that I had taken part – rather led a public procession. Soon the chants of 'Read Orissa – Build Orissa', 'Bande Utkala Janani', 'Read Orissa – Read India', 'Bande Mataram', 'Bharatmata ki Jai', 'Maharaja Krushnachandra Gajapati ki Jai' etc. were reverberating in the atmosphere. We started walking. Some one started singing 'Chalare pilae iskool jiba' – 'Come all children - let's go to school'. Soon we were out of the AID campus and on to the main road to nearby Raj Sitapur village. Onlookers gathered – curious and reading the placards. Many familiar faces joining in greeting – encouraging. Many of us were not good at slogans or singing in chorus – but by the time we had made our rounds – people were changing the leads, taking turn at the microphone and singing and chanting to their heart's content. The energy was infectious and was really some thing special.

After breakfast of simple *upma* and curry, we gathered for the inaugural session. The collector – the young and idealistic Mr. D. V. Swamy wanted to be with us, but had to be away in Ranchi for a training. But he had made all arrangements for district administration to support our campaign. We started with a rousing speech by Mr. Sudarsan Das – Advisor of Pratham Orissa and a former student leader. He exhorted all to take this opportunity and make a mark. He observed that it is for the first time that any non-government organisation had dared to dream of a campaign so vast in its scale and so full of potential for positive change. He made us feel that it was an historic occasion

and can usher far reaching change. Then the gathering was addressed by several dignitaries including the District Project Coordinator of SSA, who was a revelation in the support he expressed for our work and how he believed that only through such efforts the backwardness of the state in every field including education can be addressed. The District Welfare Officer pledged all necessary support to our volunteers in their work. Even the Superintendent of Police had sent an emissary on his behalf to apologies for his inability to attend and assured all of us that our security in the *naxal* affected district will be looked after with special care.

Soon we were in the middle of training and going through the newly designed Teaching Learning Material pack and sharing experience of our work in Read Orissa campaign so far and how to change gear for the summer camp mode. The energy and excitement was palpable. The discussions on the difficulties of working in remote tribal areas of Gajapati generated the most excitement. For example, Gajapati has three major languages – Oriya, Telugu and Saura - each completely different from the other. It was amazing to see how even within the same state, young men and women from different parts could feel amazed at such differences in language, culture, religion and other customs, yet willing to face the consequent challenges. At the end of it all, people were unanimous in their energetic support for the task ahead.

Then suddenly at around 4 PM dark clouds appeared in the sky and soon the whole camp was buffeted by strong winds and searing rain. There was chaos everywhere. The welcome gate went flying. The tent started leaking water. People taking cover where ever they could and power was out. In a matter of half an hour nature had given us an opportunity to experience the difficulties lying ahead hands-on. With back-up generators pressed to service, protective walls of mud and trench to divert water constructed around the tent, our discussions continued unabated. How to protect ourselves from Malaria and Sunburns among other issues. What to do with the children who are out of school? How to reach 1000+ schools with only 300 odd workers? There were numerous issues to sort out.. by the time dinner was ready, all were exhausted from sheer mental fatigue.. But before long it was 'Taare Zamin Per' – time. Darshil and Amir Khan entertained and enthralled us with the generator still making it hard to hear the dialogs. But, people watched with rapt attention. Every Child is Special was now a part of Pratham Orissa vocabulary.

Morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> April and chaos had re-surfaced. Power was still out. Our existing 3-phase pump not working, water was now being pumped from a near-by canal for bathing. We canceled the morning procession and delayed the early morning yoga session. Soon things settled down. It was an hands-on lesson in crisis management. It was a vivid illustration of cooperation under pressure when you are united for a noble cause. Soon order returned and 300 of us were doing *pranayam* and *surya namaskar* with Swamy Nigamananda Saraswati of Chinmay Mission and learning how to keep ourselves fit through the camp and also teach the children some breathing exercise and *asanas*. Next was a session on science activities with out any fancy tools or aids but rather with commonly available bits and pieces in villages. Jeevan from Srujanika enthralled all of us with his brilliant stories and even more brilliant displays of simple science tricks that led to heated debates. Why does a piece of paper gets lifted upward when you blow on top of it? How is that linked to the flying of aeroplanes. How come one can make water stop flowing through a piece of cloth covering a metal jug? How come we see a hole in the hand when watching it along side a paper cylinder covering one eye? How to make paper folding with old news papers a fun activity for children. In a parallel session Madhuri and Sarojini were conducting their session on English. People were chanting and playing with lot of zest. The excitement of knowing that you already know a lot of the language was quite visible and discussions about how this will be incorporated in the 2 week pilot camp could be heard long after the session was over.

Soon it was lunch time and time to send people on their way. The planning itself was an exercise of considerable effort. As people's names were called and the *panchayat* was announced every one clapped to encourage them as they were presented with their share of TLM in a low cost recycled cement bag. People were divided in to block-wise teams. Some took to buses, others had to be sent in modified Commanders (jeeps fitted with various provisions for hanging on to them) that are the only means of reaching many parts of the district.

As the chaos of organizing the teams and getting them in to the right vehicles, following up on their progress and safe arrival at destination continued for another 24 hours, I was left wondering about the possibilities unfolding in front of my eyes that I had not fully comprehended until now. Here is a situation where we are looking at a primary education system which is in dire need of help. There are thousands of young men and women who can be mobilized at a fraction of the costs associated with massive government programs such as SSA. These young people hungry for an opportunity can be trained in simple methods and made to achieve results that would be impossible through formal systems in place. Having proven this again and again, why are we unable to institutionalize the arrangement? Is it true that we actually don't want to fix the system? May be we are too scared of a future where 'Every Child in School and earning School'. May be the possibility of that happening in foreseeable future is too discomfoting for those of us who benefit from the status quo!

These are important questions that makes me sit up in the middle of night and wonder in desperation. Then I think of the hundreds of eager young faces who have come together in our campaign – ready to leave behind all comforts and for a token support willing to go where ever we send them and do what ever it is that we ask of them only to make every child learn and build a better future for himself or herself and for the community in the process and I feel hopeful and go back to sleep.. to dream of that future where there will be no child with out the benefit of basic education. I await with rapt anticipation the return of our foot soldiers on 14th April and hear many more exciting stories and share in their hour of glory.

*Dhanada Mishra*