

My ECO-JOURNEY

31st January 2012



Monsoon evening 2001...

With several questions in my mind, I am riding my bicycle towards Aksharnandan school on Bhandarkar road...

A Classroom in the school was dimly lighted... so was my heart...

Coming from a small town Chalisgaon, I was little nervous but curious. Gole Sir started with environmental economics & I was just amazed at his perspective to look at life ! Somewhere deep in my heart I realised that am going to gain something very unusual from this old man which I had never thought of. In drizzling rains very gaily, I rode my bicycle back to hostel. Next day I got up early, got my first PMT bus in time, got in and out of the office before all others...I was so excited...just to take my next lesson from Gole Sir... It took me quite a while to get in tune with his thought line and then learn...

I was working in an e-publishing company @ Koregaon park just to make myself survive in Pune. Salary would pay for the rent, mess + a T-shirt from some *tapri* shop. I was happy with the salary but not with the work that I used to do at that company. 8 hours in the company used to be very depressing for me just doing proofing of e-books... but didn't have courage to leave this job and try to get another. It was quite a hard-earned job... that reminds me of one of the fantastic coincidences in my life...

I came to Pune in 1999 to improve my acquaintance with drama as I wanted to appear for NSD - National School Drama interview. I was carrying just enough money to sustain myself in Pune for 2/3 months so agenda was also getting a job. 2 months passed by but there was no job. So to curtail frustration I got myself engaged in one performance of poetry reading to be performed in the memory of Late Smt Padma Gole ! Finally, the day of performance came; I had two hundred rupees in my pocket just to take the ticket back to Chalisgaon. After this performance, Mr and Mrs Gole (That time I had no idea what they could be to me!!) handed over an envelope to each of us, with one thousand rupees ! It was just a nice gesture for other performers, but for me it was one more month in Pune... And with that money I could extend my stay and I got the job !!

So...it was difficult to fire it. At that time, I was not really sure what to do in life. So was literally dragging myself. Then all of a sudden, I found this ray of hope in this course... After two years of gap after double graduation, for the first time, I was doing something which was really making me happy. Everyday there used to be a small session at my hostel about this new perspective to look at life. All my dear friends used to enjoy my excited talk. Besides a depressing job, that was the best period in my life. Had friends from various states, various religions, caring for each other, sharing every single bit of experience that all of us were having in the new city. It was more than a family for us. I was finding myself lucky to earn enough to be here. I might have thought to continue this way of life forever but that time I did not know what I don't know...

With this background, I was listening to Gole Sir.. getting amazed everyday with his comments and views on day-to-day life. Even today to remember one incident... It was inaugural day of Dinanath Mangeshkar hospital. Everybody in the city was feeling very proud of Lata Mangeshkar who made this happen. But Sir had very different opinion about it... He said more n more hospitals in a city is a very negative sign.. that means your health is deteriorating very fast and nobody seems to take effort on mitigating the cause that makes us ill. We need to avoid people to get admitted in the hospital and make them healthy. I thought that, it is not that one would not want to do such things but it is just that we don't know this way to look out; we are not trained to do so. But oppositely we follow all conventional, technology-based solutions which might cure problem temporarily but we never try to erect systems which would not create problems... Such a basic and simple thought but we are never cautious enough to look at life in such a simple way... All of a sudden, I felt like some corner in my brain is getting enlightened...

The other week the other old man came in the picture. With his lecture on evolution of earth, we just fell in love with him, earth, plants, atmosphere, everything in nature... it was beloved Mahajan Sir. Ohh.. the way he taught us botany, various facts about plants and most importantly its significance in life, in restoration work, it was just enlightening. This was very different than the botany I learnt back in my college. Every time after his lecture I used to tell myself, in life I should be able to teach like him...

Throughout the year both these teachers were sowing seeds in our minds that are growing forever ! Course was full of enthusiastic classes, field tours, guest lectures which kept on enriching my experience and knowledge to look at nature. Then it was Gole madam who used to explain abiotic factors and its linkages with biotic using nice diagrams. I am very thankful to these teachers who helped me frame my thoughts, vision and goal for life. I was eager to apply this knowledge somewhere... was kind of in hurry

to make it happen. But had no idea how am I going to do it. Me and Mrunal used to discuss it so many times that how it can be taken forward. Mrunal had completed the course two years before me so with her experience we decided to set up an ecological consultancy. Manasi also joined in. But since we were not sure of earning money immediately, I decided to do it part time...

Again, another coincidence was waiting for the better... My company fired almost 1500 employees.. Id no. 1331 was one of them ! I was very happy as I would be able to work for consultancy for full time. I could realize am not the same as I was 6 months before. With the New Year we formed consultancy named 'The ecological services'. Later we renamed it as 'oikos for ecological services'. So, the work was started on a small patch of an acre. We tried to develop habitats over there, did plantations, which gave positive results within a year. Meanwhile we also got a huge task in Varasgaon catchment. We had to survey 3000 acres in a year. So we developed a best schedule, to be on site for 4 days a week ! It was really a feast for all of us to spend four days a week in western ghats ! With recently learnt forest ecosystem, we could easily analyze the landscape but were facing little difficulty to design restoration techniques. So we took Gole Sir over there just to take advance course in practical implementation of restoration. Since labor was readily available, we could implement restoration techniques or other green activities, but then we realized that we still had to learn the costing, budgeting, estimations of quantities of materials, specifications etc. which is necessary for execution at large scale.

I was quite enjoying the work but was little shy against my urban partners. They could look at it as business very easily, but I took quite a while to understand it & also them...we would only speak about projects, business, money, work. With my hostels background, I always used to think that we need to be good friends to work together than just partners. For the first time in my life I was watching neutrality in individualism so closely.

Passion to work for nature and little experience in it got us few new projects, which were mostly of planning kind. We still were not much confident to execute any restoration work on our own, though we would design the restoration plan perfectly. But simultaneously our expertise to analyse nature, recognise its potential and understand its problems was increasing.

In 2005, Mrunal decided to set up a different consultancy for carbon trading. It was quite a big change for us... quite upsetting situation for me. Out of curiosity I searched for carbon credits and it really made me think a lot again... about this field, what I like about my work, my vision and ways to take it ahead or improve it... till date I was just engrossed in doing work the way it was coming to me. I was using my brain, not heart. Obviously, something was missing... So now I decided to go by my heart... And all inner values started peeping put which were suppressed against some strange fear...

I also tried to know the significance of our work once again. Is it really the right way to work for nature? Then I also critically looked at the problems happening around me at local as well as global scale. Of course there were many problems in each sector like education, health, environment, agriculture, energy, but with Gole Sir's lessons in the back of my mind, I could see mainly two problems i.e. increasing consumption and change in land use pattern. First problem was leading to all human related problems at personal and societal level and was also destroying more and more natural resources.

Though this problem was not new, its rate was increased incredibly within a short duration, especially in metros like Pune, Mumbai, Bangalore etc., may be due to sudden increase in buying power of an individual working for information technology and related fields. Those were the years when trend of call centers was getting established, which would give job to individuals with basic education and pay them high salary. I don't know if it is related or just coincidence but this has really set a trend to pay highest salaries even in other fields. Result of all this is increasing consumption of goods which cannot be called as our need and also increase in consumption of energies of various kinds. Source for both the entities was nature, so environmental problems also got highlighted. This could be because somebody was also getting highly paid to put up this problem so that another industry would rise to solve it ! I thought carbon trading could be one of them. Also, many other industries related to environment were getting established which mitigate problems with lot of expenditure of energy, and pollution, if not at local level but somewhere else. That year one new Eco bike was introduced. People were happy that pollution will be zero due to electrically charged vehicle, but nobody was really concerned about the pollution caused at source where electricity is generated, nobody was concerned about the pollution of the batteries once its life is over. Then how such solutions could be ecologically friendly? Consumption just increases.. Be it so called so called 'Eco-friendly' products or any other product... Everybody was craving for various goods...

The other problem in the decade was change in land use pattern. How natural and rural areas could be saved from the hit of globalisation. Against ever increasing establishment and growth of industry, demand for mining, mega projects like power plants were changing the natural landscapes to a great extent. Now farmers, for whom agriculture was never a profit-making business, also started selling off their lands to urban people, developers. That would get them handsome money which would get spent on the same stuff due to lack of education and vision for future. Actually, even if education is there, right application of education is never taught. So be it rural or urban, every person craves for short term comfort more than a long-term need. And having comforts is unending so also the production of goods imparting comforts. How can we stop this ever increasing production against limited resources and energy ?

Looking at these problems, I thought how can I best deal with these problems or try to dilute it ? Looking at my likings, experience, capacity, I decided to work to minimise impact of change in land use pattern... YES...restoration of degraded lands & integration of ecologically apt techniques and ecologically apt management in various projects could be one of the appropriate solutions, which we had already started. It is just that I wanted to re confirm it. Of course there is need to change education system, policies, laws etc. to see a better future. ... I decided wherever possible I would love to take this subject ahead at all these levels... And I just thought that I would enjoy it and would be satisfied if I put my best to it. Now I could just see a very clear path for my business or work I should say.. business, in conventional sense, is too hard word for this.

I shared all my suppressed thoughts with Manasi. We started with new understanding of each other and with the same old perspective. Got new projects... Very few of those were pure restoration projects, most of them were integration of restoration in conventional projects. We thought, such integration would also change psyche of people to look at nature in positive way, which ultimately might be

expressed in less consumption of resources, less expenditure of limited storages of energy and wise use of unlimited storages of energy. But when it used to come to execution of restoration, since this was new kind of work, no contractor or engineer would know about it. So, we had to develop specifications on our own. We started physically trying out certain work at site, so we could estimate the duration, required man power etc. due to which today we can help people easily with specifications for execution of restoration techniques along with its budgeting. Manasi's engineering background was of great help. Today we also have a small team for execution for such kind of work.

In 2008 I happened to be a member of Pune tree authority and I got to see bureaucracy and politics little closely. There are 15 ruling corporators and 15 nominated members. Tree act says that member should be an expert. But it is not mentioned what kind of expert, with which degree, how much experience etc. So maximum members are just tree lovers who are not able to analyse / judge the situation scientifically and rationally. There is a competition in between corporators of various parties, so, many times, if one would propose to save a tree other one would just oppose. There is no rational judgment ... Me and Tasneem, (the other member of PTA and also society student) used to wonder at it, how such an important authority can function like this. Everybody knows that corruption is everywhere but I had never imagined that it would be also at a small scale and that of a tree. We had to spend five years over there so there was no point in going against them, as they were 28 and we were 2 ! So we decided to work in friendly way, we developed a rapport with few of them. And I realized, they are getting paid very minimally, as compared to the private sector. So obviously to enjoy the market goods and facilities, that much money is not enough. Negative things start happening many times very easily if you have power in hand. If they are paid enough, and also if they are educated rightly, to survive happily, they might work in a better way. But how much is enough ? Big question... What I think is government should have very well-designed policies (most of the times those are good) along with systems to implement it precisely. For better future of nation, government needs to work with ecological experts to come up with ideal land use plan for town, state, nation. Local economy based on consumption of local resources should be encouraged. At least day to day needs should be satisfied through local resources and local energy. Thanks to Gole Sir for making us realize about the problems and its ecological solutions...

But how to achieve it practically ? What is the process for this change ? Am sure, many of Gole Sirs students have changed themselves individually but how to apply it on this ever increasing population, without going much against nature ? How to reach out ... ?