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# 'Context': A Case for Common Sense

Reflections on constructing a wetland system  
in rural Rajasthan, India

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## **Declaration**

I, Lukas van der Horst, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Signature .....

Date .....



To following your gut feeling



*Frankly, it seemed then, and seems now, that the justification for fieldwork, as for all academic endeavour, lies not in one's contribution to the collectivity but rather in some selfish development. Like monastic life, academic research is really all about the perfection of one's own soul. This may well serve some wider purpose but is not to be judged on those grounds alone. This view will doubtless not sit well either with conservative academics or those who see themselves as a revolutionary force. Both are afflicted by a dreadful piety, a preening self-importance that refuses to believe the world is not hanging on their every word.*

Nigel Barley<sup>1</sup>

*...every system is a standing temptation to take symbols too seriously, to pay more attention to words than to the realities for which the words are supposed to stand.*

Aldous Huxley<sup>2</sup>

*Words are finite organs of the infinite mind. They cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop, and impoverish it.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson<sup>3</sup>

## ABSTRACT

I spent several months with an organisation in rural Rajasthan, India addressing the topic of sanitation, which resulted in the construction of a wetland system. These are reflections on the process. Throughout this process it became clear that the challenge with sanitation lies not in its technical side, but its human side. The challenge lies with people; both with 'the other' and with yourself. Instead relying on any method, theory or previous knowledge, I make a case for using common sense and open-mindedness in doing research, as an aid to see each situation anew in its proper context.



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## NOTE o n N A M E S

Neither before nor after any of the conversations or interactions I had with people did I explicitly ask for their consent to include their names. For this reason I only use first names, and in some cases the names of the people working directly for the organisation I worked for are changed or omitted. For the same reason the name of the organisation is omitted, as well as any specific reference to its whereabouts. I also omitted the *-ji* which is otherwise custom to add to names when respectfully addressing an older person or someone of status.

## THANK YOU

**Ingrid** – for your advice and bearing with me

**Founder of the NGO** – for giving me a *carte blanche*, and to seem to trust me with it

**Tarun** – for being part of the whole process, providing a mirror, giving inputs, helping me understand the indianness about everything and translating the jokes people made about me and I about them

**Shweta & Lauren** – for being around and providing a break from the mess food

**Mukesh & Man Bahadur** – for being around and helping out

**Ramdev, Guman, Kartar, Mamta, Kali & the sweet old lady** – for building the things I wanted them to build without too much complaining

**Rafiq** – for his patience and advice

**Raju** – for teaching me the nuances of Indian promises and time indications, and that without teeth you can still smile beautifully

**Bhanwar the mason** – for making me realise there is no end to learning patience

**Raju the cook** – for his infinite supply of chai and letting me regard the kitchen food stock as my own

**Ramlal** – for the delicious *bajra roti* breakfasts

**Bhanwar the gardener** – in perfecting the skill of doing as little as possible while still giving the impression of doing something, and for his mannerisms that never failed to make us laugh

**Ramdev the gardener** – for always smiling and only speaking *Marwari* to me, even though I understood not a single word

**Khanna** – for being the living proof that old age and deafness can be very charming indeed

**Bansi** – for providing *barfi* and *namkeen* which kept my workers work, and satisfy my own sugar cravings.

**The hill** – for providing a place to reflect, a view to every sunrise and sunset, and a peek into the art of open defecation

## P R E F A C E

This writing is not academic; certainly not in a positivist sense, neither largely, I feel, in a constructivist sense. I am not concerned with the testing of a hypothesis, its verification or the replication its results. Nor am I concerned with the collection of data and its abstraction through the extraction of concepts, their juxtaposition and eventual fitting into or even concocting some framework or theory. Instead this writing is more of an essay, a reflection on a self-contained experience and the lessons learnt. This is part of the reason there is little discussion of existing literature – what I am concerned with is not ‘who said what when and why’, how other’s ideas relate to my experience or how different theories can explain my ‘findings’ in different ways. What I am concerned with is rather the opposite; how common sense – that is, direct perception through selflessness and openness of mind – help in seeing things *for yourself*. Well, in fact *not* for yourself, *yourself*, but for those whom you are supposed to assist. How common sense through direct perception help in understanding not as a social scientist, an anthropologist, an ecologist, an engineer, etc. but help in understanding *as is*. The whole point of this writing is to leave all the discussion, all the opinions, the perspectives, the methodologies, the theories behind and reflect on what happens when this happens, based on my experience working ‘in the field’ on sanitation. So again, my intention with this writing is not to see where all this fits in the existing ‘body of knowledge’, or whether or not there is overlap with certain schools of thought. The point is in fact to put into question the relevance of this so-called existing ‘knowledge’, the plethora of methods and theories, in relation to anyone’s singular experience.

Admittedly, conveying this particular message in words is nothing less than hypocritical, as these words are only its shadow, not its substance. But foregoing the docking of this writing somewhere in the safe harbour that is the scientific ‘body of knowledge’ and foregoing the engagement in arguments with nay-sayers or the tagging along with yay-sayers in the academic community is testing my luck already. In an environment where the written word is the predominant way of communication, a necessary compromise will have to be made. Opting to say nothing at all as an ultimate testament to using common sense and direct perception effectively means conveying no message at all.

I didn’t go ‘out in the field’ to find any answers to any questions formulated ‘here’, and afterwards ruminated on and dissected ‘here’, figuring out what it all means. Nor did I go ‘out in the field’ with a supposed open mind, yet still intent on collecting a set of ‘data’ to be analysed and distilled into an abstracted theory, enabling myself to ‘say something’ about the fieldwork.<sup>1</sup> There simply was a situation ‘there’, on the ground, which needed to be figured out - infrastructure wise and what-do-people-think-and-feel-wise. This had to be translated into something tangible, there and then. In that sense it didn't matter at all whether I categorised, labelled or organised things in accordance with a theory or method; not before, not during and not after the fieldwork. It was more a matter of *whether* the situation was understood and put into action relevant to the needs of those affected, rather than what could or can be *said* about *what* was seen.

So in many ways it was a singular experience, which is precisely what this part is meant to illustrate. As the title suggest, it is to provide a context to what some researchers might otherwise single out and leave bare as purely academic ‘text’. That is, things supposedly directly relevant only to a hypothesis. Which is odd, because by ignoring, minimising or assuming the context, you ignore, minimise or assume something that is a very real part of the whole, and the very real effect it has on the shaping of any findings.

Things ranging from the rudimental, such as ‘who is financing this research’, and ‘what is on their agenda’, or ‘whether the pre-formulated idea of the research makes sense in the context of where the ‘data’ is meant to be collected’, to the obvious and seemingly trivial, such as ‘are the clothes I am wearing today going to affect the answers I will get to my questions’. And more, such as whether the proposed categories reflect the on-the-ground reality. Whether the researcher understands the local context and way of thinking to be able to ask sensible questions and put the answers in a sensible context. How research questions are phrased. How interview questions are phrased. How those questions will be interpreted by the interviewees. How those questions and their answers are translated. How those answers are then interpreted. Which people are interviewed – what their social status is, which interests they represent, whether they have an interest in providing certain answers, and whether the researcher is aware of all of this. What the underlying power structures are of the group the individual interviewee is part of. Whether the researcher is aware of the influence his or her own personality and appearance has on everything he or she does, and whether the researcher chooses to ignore this. What clothes the researcher wears. Which social customs the researcher is aware of. Which respect the interviewee pays to the researcher. Whether the interviewee takes the researcher seriously – and vice versa –, or is at all interested in providing accurate answers to the questions, or perhaps has a completely different conception of ‘accurate answers’. Whether the interviewee is in a hurry to get somewhere.

This list goes on. The point is that all these factors cause any findings to be singular, partial or non-replicable at best, and, if to be canonised, meaningless, ethically dubious or even harmful at worst. So even though ‘personal’ can be a dirty word in much of academia, it is undeniably inherent. With varying degrees present in every stage of the entire process, bias is an integral part of any study, of any work. From the formulation of the problem statement, research question and interview questions – their sensibility which depends entirely on the ability to understand the context appropriately and the agenda they are catering to –, to the implementation of the research, the interpretation of the data, and finally the conclusions distilled from the interpretation.

All these stages are pervaded by factors unlikely to be given their due. Especially in the social sciences and humanities, and especially when dealing with people directly, gently put, it is naïve to think that simply because one is in the role of a researcher, your social behaviour and personality plays only a minor, negligible role. The entire process is coloured by the researcher’s personality, prior knowledge – whether conscious or subconscious –, social behaviour and mood.

But all this is nothing new. Surely part of this writing could be neatly fitted under one or another header of constructivism, and a published and peer-reviewed academic could be found to substantiate my claims. In any reader touching on general constructivist epistemology these questions are posed and discussed with more rigor and eloquence than here. How so? Perhaps because it is the authors’ personal convictions, that what their gut-feeling tells them is true. So on they go with their rational mind, creating a web of logic to support their convictions. And this is precisely what I want to touch upon. Because there is still something missing, namely *ego*, the self. Or rather, what I feel remains present is ego.

This I want to stress most of all – ego. What I simply mean by (the presence of) ego in this particular context is the inability to put not only your knowledge aside – be it positivist or constructivist of any shade of grey –, but to put your whole *self* aside and take in reality indiscriminately, regardless of your constitution. To be truly selfless.

Because knowingly or unknowingly, there are two things any human carries with, wherever he or she goes – this also goes for the researcher going on fieldwork. That is,

## PREFACE

prior knowledge and, feeding it, their ego. And by prior knowledge I do not only mean the things you've learnt throughout your formal education. I mean all that which is your memory, that which shapes you and the way you take in reality – the prior knowledge that is your door of perception. And knowingly and – though far more often than not, and if at all, unlikely to be accounted for – unknowingly, those two are expressed through the researcher's behaviour, his interaction, her phrasing of questions, his interpreting of answers, her drawing of conclusions and his giving of advice; his constitution, her ego. They are expressed through the ability to have an indiscriminating and open mind, the ability to truly understand and want to understand the other, and through the ability to be critical and reflective of himself or herself in relation to the fieldwork and the other people he or she is dealing with.

Not only may it be difficult or most inconvenient to recognise and acknowledge the influence of your prior knowledge and, most notably, your ego, it seems to be shunned by the academic structure. This human dimension – and the many forms it assumes – brings into question the objective validity of any findings, of any conclusion drawn. In turn it questions not the actual research or fieldwork per se, but certainly its ulterior motives.

That is why this 'Context', to try and illustrate that there is a human dimension to doing research or fieldwork – not only on the part of 'subjects', but also on the part of the researcher – which all too often seems ignored, minimised or deliberately hidden. That, and to see how using common sense can do justice to this human dimension.

# **'CONTEXT'**

**A case for common sense**





## PROLOGUE

At around 6:30 in the morning, from the top of the hill in the middle of the village you can see an orange shimmer climb up and slowly turn into a fiery sphere. You can also see the people of the village walking towards a field at the foot of the hill, carrying a bottle. They are not going there to have a drink and socialise – they are going to relieve themselves, out in the bushes.

These people, by the way, are all men and boys. Women you won't see doing this when it's daylight out. In fact, you don't see them doing it at all. They would almost have you believe the stories you're told when you're younger, involving roses or other flowers. No, the women get up early, well before sunrise, and have started their morning routine – collecting water, making fire, and preparing breakfast – before any man or boy fills up his bottle.

And the sun...

## INTRODUCTION

Before starting my 'fieldwork', and even for the most part during, it had not been my intention to write about this experience. It was by chance that I ended up spending 4 months working on sanitation at the an NGO in Rajasthan, and in doing so I didn't follow through with the topic I wrote my original proposal about. So this work really isn't much of a thesis, and I have no pretensions to call it as such – there is nothing in here which I intend to prove, nothing which I intend to label, categorise, or call true or false. Instead these are reflections on a process. Reflections in general not only on the human dimension of sanitation, but also on the process of doing research, and the process I went through. Reflections in particular on a process of trying to find out how people feel about sanitation, about their sanitation conditions, and trying to translate that into action, into construction of new sanitation infrastructure.

I came to the organisation in Rajasthan without a specific aim. Initially I was to spend 1,5 months there, which ended up being 4,5. I was told I would be assisting some people on a sanitation project for a short period of time, but I did not know the details. So I had no idea I would end up addressing the topic of sanitation to the staff on campus, let alone start the building a constructed wetland, among other treatment systems.

Because I had not anticipated anything before going, I did not do any research, and before and during the fieldwork I did not follow any method or guidelines. There was no hypothesis to be confirmed or falsified, no research question to be answered, no premeditated outline to follow. There was no single method to which I stuck to and no set theoretical framework I worked within. I never even thought about it, thinking I would still do my 'actual' fieldwork after this.

The first week I spent assisting two people who were asked to start a trial project constructing a dry-toilet. As most of the time was spent attempting to set up meetings and discussion groups not much work was actually done. Because the two only spent one week at the organisation, the rest of the first month I continued to work on this project. After this month I got an insight into the intricacies of the topic of sanitation. But that was just the tip of the iceberg. It also became clear that there were several problems with the existing sanitation infrastructure on campus. And so it was after a month, when I suggested something could be done that I was given a *carte blanche*, to do what I thought would work.

This is where the process started – with one deceptively simple question; how are we going to fix it, the existing infrastructure? How to solve this problem? But as I soon learnt, it wasn't the repairing or building that was the hard part, even though that was quite a challenge in its own right. No, the real trial was trying to find out why the existing system was in disrepair in the first place, and what people actually thought and wanted – how people perceived sanitation. And when this stone was lifted I realised; there is a very real human quality to the topic of sanitation, one not easily found in your textbooks. There are plenty of guidelines on how to build sanitation systems, but far fewer on how to figure out how people feel about sanitation in the first place. And this is where the process *really* started – not with technology or construction, but with people, and with common sense.

## COMMON SENSE through an OPEN MIND

*... formulas lead, inevitably, only to "blind thinking". Addiction to formulas is almost universal. Inevitably so; for "our system of upbringing is based upon what to think, not on how to think".*

Aldous Huxley & J. Krishnamurti<sup>1</sup>

*Empirical science is apt to cloud the sight, and, by the very knowledge of functions and processes, to bereave the student of the manly contemplation of the whole.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson<sup>2</sup>

It is deceiving to think in absolute terms and to work in absolute terms in the methods you use – to do things in a purely ‘academic’ way, as proscribed by whichever theoretical framework or methodology you favour, to try to be as unbiased as possible. Surely sticking to a single method or theory – whether before, during or after your fieldwork – has its advantages, not least because it provides guidance. But where it becomes deceiving is when you start to think you will be able to get the full picture of whatever it is you are observing or analysing through this one method. Perhaps that is not your aim, to get the full picture. But then that is all you will get; a partial rendition of the whole, its value dependent on the goal it is meant to serve. What is important of course is to be critical of your method. To understand and acknowledge its weaknesses, to acknowledge that you cannot possibly be unbiased. And that whichever method you employ, be it one or several, you will never be able to get the ‘complete’ picture – if such a thing exist at all – no matter how approximate you may think it is. The only thing you will find or think you will find is that which you are looking for – because the only thing you will do to come to know it is that which is proscribed by your method. And the only thing you will come to know is that which speaks the same language as your method, that which you can hang up in its framework. And often, the things you find are translated into your language, and bent and twisted to fit in your mode of thinking, your reality, your mind.

At least equally valuable as acknowledging those weaknesses, is to acknowledge the *strengths* of not employing them. That is, the strengths of *not* sticking to a single method or hypothesis, of not aiming to be wholly academic or scientific. The strengths of the confounding factors, of the human factors, and the positive light they might shed on your coming to an understanding. It is valuable to not only recognise the fact that you cannot be wholly unbiased, but also to see the benefit of not trying to be, the benefit of informality – indulge in it, account for it, and use it to your advantage.

Yet most importantly, recognize that whatever it is you find by staying within your framework is not the *right*, the true, or the useful, and whatever it is you find by stepping outside of it is the *wrong*, the false or the useless – *and vice-versa*. The things you find within and outside do not oppose each other. Rather, they are two sides of the same coin. No, not even that, because this analogy still implies duality. The things you find within and outside are two unfixed points on a revolving sphere, which at times will seem to oppose, other times seem to align. They are of that same liquid reality you would otherwise be so tempted to try and funnel through one method or framework. Both are valuable in their own right. Not only do they complement one another in forming the full picture, they are equal parts.

What I object to is not the formulation of an idea or hypothesis, and testing its validity in accordance with the data you gather and interpret. Such pragmatism is an essential part of what it means to be human, to survive as a rational human being in this world. What I object to in academia, is the abstraction of the findings into words, concepts and other such categories, along the lines of formulas, followed by the canonisation of these abstractions, and the substitution of truth in reality and experience with truth in words.

What I object to is a dualism inherent in the scientific method, indeed a dualism inherent in many or most languages – a mode of thinking and inquiring from which *logically* follows the assumption that what is true can be observed, and that when one thing is true, an opposite exists which is false. That, and the rigorous categorisation and association process that goes along with it – the lines along which the whole is chopped up, divided and subdivided and divided once more. Until of course another hypothesis proves the order ‘wrong’, and the entire process of organising starts again.

I do not mean to be nihilistic, saying that there is no such thing as truth. What I mean is that truth is not the opposite of falsehood – it is nowhere to be found on a scale between true and false. That duality exists only in the mind. And for every perceived benefit it provides in clarifying reality, it obscures reality equally much. Truth simply *is*, singular and plural at once. So I merely intend to say that to aim for understanding reality fully, it is not a matter of using one, or two, or ten different methods or disciplines or frameworks or lenses, however you wish to call them, and whether you find they overlap or not. What I am saying is that by virtue of dividing the whole picture, you exclude.

This seems to be something innately human, the tendency to make categories, to distil an abstracted essence of meaning out of anything – whether a tree or someone’s opinion – so everything may have its relation and relative meaning expressed through what it is *like* or what it is not. In many ways of course, not least in everyday life, this is a most useful skill, but when used overzealously – as is more often than not the case in academia – it tends to obscure rather than clarify the full picture. It prevents the user from leaving unabstracted that which he or she sees or experiences. It prevents the user from coming to a genuine understanding of what is. Instead it causes the user not to see and experience things as what they *are*, but as what they are *like*. And where in academia this human trait is indulged in with too much zeal, we risk questioning this way of making sense of reality, we risk taking conceptions and abstractions with a grain of salt. We risk proclaiming with an air of pious self-righteousness that we are able to make sense of absolute reality without transfiguring it through the act of abstraction, translation and juxtaposition.

On these grounds I also object to presently fashionable multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity. In essence, multi-disciplinarity simply recognizes that there are different ways of looking at something or everything – different categories through which something or everything can be expressed, one being as valid as the other. This is nothing new. And, as the very term suggests, even inter-disciplinarity doesn’t do away with categories. It simply adds a feature to multi-disciplinarity in that it concedes that categories overlap.

Yet however benevolent in striving for closer proximity to supposed all-encompassing, ‘absolute’ reality, neither does away with attempting to see this reality through one or another filter, the *external imposition* of a categorisation process that runs in the background perpetually. Both maintain, be it pluralistically, the same process of thinking and inquiring – its pluralism only being a collection of different answers found through the same method, only with different variables. Between themselves, epistemologically they differ slightly, yet ontologically they remain the same. Both remain fixed in the same dualistic paradigm. The same assumption is held of there being a right and a wrong answer, the same dualistic mode of thinking. Their way of beholding reality remains unchanged.

It is like trying to draw a circle with straight lines. The more straight lines you draw, the more your drawing starts to look like a circle – but of course it never is one. Though the more it starts to *look* like a circle, the closer we think we get to the truth. What we then fail to realise is that it doesn’t take more lines to draw a circle, to come closer to the truth. Instead, we fool ourselves, thinking that our methods provide accurate portrayals when in fact their basic principles are flawed. What we really need to do is to try and make one fluid, indiscriminate motion. Of course the circle will never

be perfect, and always be different. This will always remain a sore in the eye of the scientist, who is ever-looking for ideal forms and constant laws. Because something that is always different cannot be reproduced. But that's fine, because just how our circles will never be perfect and always different every time we draw and observe them, neither is reality, neither is truth. It just is what it is. So to get the full picture, we need to change our method, our mode of thinking and inquiring. This starts by changing our conception of reality as divisible into clear-cut, absolute categories. This is not an easy task, and indeed it seems to imply sudden existential suicide for the devout academic. So perhaps we should start with a simple example, that of fieldwork.

It seems this term is used to denote the difference between theory and practice – the difference between a sterile, comfortable office and getting your hands dirty. This implies the existence of two different worlds; that of the researcher – the world of ideas and ideals – and that of the field – the world of raw, unmitigated reality. It is of no surprise then, that what is found in the field is different from what is previously or afterwards concocted in the office. Knowing this, what is surprising is the apparent determination and stubbornness with which the researcher moulds the findings from the field into either a pre-decided framework of preference, or one decided upon or even created after based on the interpretation of the data – a preference which has its origins in... the researcher's personality perhaps, her personal preferences, gut feeling? There seems to be little questioning of this process of 'objective rational' dissection; little self-reflection on the part of the academic, how his person influences a this process, his trade.

In positivist qualitative methods, before starting fieldwork a certain view is determined and categories are decided upon. At least, that is what ought to happen. As Nigel Barley remarks, "most research starts off with a vague apprehension of interest in a certain area of study and rare indeed is the man who knows what his thesis is about before he has written it."<sup>3</sup> The main reason for this most likely is that what is found in the field does not fit these pre-established categories. More of them need to be made, some need to be merged, and others need to be subdivided. Perhaps the hypothesis will require rephrasing, or perhaps the whole thing just doesn't make sense any longer. Or, in the worst case, findings are twisted and interpreted to fit the categories, conveniently ignored altogether or simply made up (which is really not that different from twisting and interpreting them to fit your framework). We might think that it were simply the categories that were not very well pre-conceived, or even that the subjects are not giving the right answers.

Adherents of a constructivist qualitative methodology may claim to circumvent these pitfalls. But what happens instead? True, perhaps no pre-established categories are used in collecting and making sense of the 'raw data' as it pours in. But the process of abstraction remains nonetheless; patterns are 'uncovered', concepts are invented and juxtaposed and categories are established, be it *after* 'sufficient' and 'representative' data has been collected.<sup>6</sup>

These of course are crude descriptions of elaborate processes, but the essence is straightforward. In both ways of attempting to make sense of reality 'in the field' the abstractions from the data, conceptualised through the researcher, are considered valid substitutes for the *actual* things and experiences they are supposed to represent. The actual process of categorisation – affected among other things by the ulterior motives, abilities, preferences or personality of the researcher – remains unchallenged; the process of zooming in on things, boxing them, then zooming out again and thinking that all the boxes put together create a full and clear picture.

So, we spend our time and energy trying to abstract, accurately name and then categorise what is heard or experienced. This is then fit to match, and so the framework, the formula becomes truth, and the experiences and findings mere extensions. This way we run the risk of making the words, symbols, concepts or

categories “more real than the realities to which they [refer]”.<sup>4</sup> This is perhaps not so obvious when you are ‘out in the field collecting data’, but this is exactly the right time to become aware of it and take action, because once back ‘in office’, the field exists only on paper and in the mind, translated into the researcher’s own language. So the researcher should resist the urge to categorise, collect things in his own image, and instead take things for what they are – not for what he would like them to be, whether consciously or subconsciously.

But how to go about this? Does this mean the researcher should not translate, categorise or conclude at all? Surely this would make the job of the researcher impossible. No, simply put, on the one hand he should resist and limit the urge to categorise and reference the reality he entered. On the other hand, he should accept that any findings are singular and permeated by his or her idiosyncrasies. In other words, instead of entering the field, reality, ready to subtract and translate it into abstractions, we should try to take things as they are, with no apparent agenda. And afterwards, whatever the researcher decides to say about his findings, or what she found things to be *like*, should be recognised as what it is; a mere reflection, an arbitrary snapshot, anything but full-fledged truth. Or, in yet other words – we should simply use some common sense.

So, using a bit of common sense would be a good first step towards naming and understanding things as they are. Perhaps this doesn’t fare well with most academics, especially if what matters most is finding certain results, or getting published, or “the perfection of one’s own soul”.<sup>5</sup> But if fieldwork is meant to be beneficial to those whose lives have been entered, it might be well worth considering. That said, common sense alone in naming and understanding is not enough. In the act of dealing with the other, of listening and talking, of behaving and interacting – even dressing – a little bit of common sense surely can do miracles in trying to get the full picture, in *seeing* what is, rather than merely *knowing*.

The difficulty with common sense, openness of mind and selflessness, is that it is not something that can be learned during a course, or picked up from a book. There is no recipe for it. No set of steps you ought to follow to get the desired result. It is something that comes from within, nourished and nurtured by that which is outside. But if you manage to open your eyes and your mind, and keep them open, you will pick it up along the way. And with your eyes and mind open, you should be all set to go and ‘do fieldwork’.

## HOW TO DRESS WELL

So here you are, all ready to go and do fieldwork, to test your hypothesis on the ground, to collect data. But as the initial excitement to test your neat proposal gradually subsides, the practicalities of being out in the field might begin to dawn. Mundane questions arise, such as ‘what are you going to wear?’ Because when in your home country there are debates over whether the police should wear black leather, whether postmen should be allowed to wear shorts, whether you should wear a tie on your first interview, or whether casual Friday is on or not, you can be sure that the clothes you wear out in the field are going to make a difference in the way you are perceived. And that, in turn, will determine the way they will behave towards you, and talk to you. And after all, you only get one try at a first impression. So, what are you going to wear? What was I going to wear?

It wasn’t the first time for me to go to Rajasthan, so I had an idea of what the climate would be like, and what the people would wear – or so I thought. This time around, however, I wouldn’t be travelling around. I would be staying in one place, living with the same people for a longer period of time. This would be in a village in rural Rajasthan. Granted, I would be staying on the campus of organisation, where I figured people are used to having visitors. And because of the organisation’s ideology, I figured the people working and living at campus would be more ‘open-minded’ than your ‘average’ villager. But still, where the urban West and urban India are not quite the same, urban India and rural India are not quite the same either. And even though I grew up in a small village myself, so I had an idea of what the dynamics might be, this Rajasthani village would be a different ballgame for sure. So, the question remained; what was I going to wear?

This is a delicate matter. Rajasthan, the desert state, is hot, very hot, with temperatures going up to 50 degrees in summer. And when Rajasthani’s stop wearing a scarf, it means trouble for the white person. This way, for health reasons, going around in jeans is not really an option. There are many other options of course, but where they win in comfort, they lose in enabling you to be taken seriously – especially in the rural areas. Of course you want to be judged on your content, not your appearance. But this is simply not how things work, not when you’re new, not when you’re an outsider, not when you don’t speak the local language – especially in the rural areas. So going around in high-tech travelling gear is not really an option either. And those comfortable-looking Indian clothes you find in tourist shops in cities are truly not worn by Indians themselves. Flip-flops, shorts and a wife-beater or even a t-shirt are you can forget about as well – not only will it be an uphill battle to gain any credibility, you won’t even make it through your first day as it is the surest way to get scorched by the Rajasthani sun. And locals don’t do sunscreen.

So what options are left? Going local all the way? This is tricky, because it tends to make you stand out as much as the other options. In fact, it is probably even weirder. In urban areas people usually wear Western-styled clothes, be it with a distinct Indian touch that is deceptively hard to put your finger on. But in the rural areas this doesn’t hold. True, the younger generations anywhere usually dress similarly. But when I arrived at the organisation what I saw was most men wearing turbans, long, white *kurta*’s, and no pyjama pants but *dhoti*, a long, white thin cloth tied around the hips and legs, almost looking like pants if it wasn’t for the thick bun of left-over cloth sticking out at the back – not unlike a duck’s butt. And no sneakers but local-made thick leather slipper-like shoes, called *Rajasthani juti* (though on later travels, people from different states I met on the train were keen to claim them theirs). That would be too much. The truth is that no matter what I would wear, I will still be tall and white, being an outsider and looking the part. So really, what options are left? In the end I decided for a

compromise. I still wore my long-sleeve checked shirt, to protect me from the sun, and because a *kurta* seemed too big a leap, as did the *dhoti*. My shorts I put aside after day 1. Instead I got some white pyjama pants made from *khadi*, the locally spun linen – very comfortable and cooling indeed.

They proved to be a pain to keep clean though. Indeed, it is a common misconception that in India anything goes, that it is ok to wear dirty or even ripped clothes. Where at home you might be able to pass it off as fashionable, in India most people will simply be confused or annoyed. After all, you obviously have money if you managed to travel to India, so why should you dress in dirty or ragged clothes, as do poor people? There was a reason I never had any white clothes when I grew up, and now I knew why. They're not easy to keep clean, especially when bucket-washed. Still, I couldn't be bothered to go for the impeccable look. So I exchanged the 'fashionable' argument for the 'working man' one. That seemed to do the trick. During the day I looked – and probably smelt – anything but representable. So to balance things out – and to maintain my own sanity – I religiously bucket-showered twice a day, before and after work, and I kept a set of clean non-working clothes for after work. This helped a lot in establishing an image of cleanliness.

In the end I did end up getting a *kurta*, but it always felt a bit funny to wear it. The '*dhoti*' still intrigued me, so I was very keen on getting one and learning how to tie it. I only got one after 3 months though, at which time the people on campus seemed to be most amused. Some of them proclaimed that now I was a real Rajasthani man. Sadly I ripped them that same day. And that compliment would not have been given, had it not been for the gradual blending in, and certainly not had it not been for the shoes I wore.

#### *Rajasthani Juti*

There is a proverb in Dutch that goes '*de kleren maken de man*', which literally translates to 'the clothes make the man'. What it comes down to simply is that what you wear is what you represent. As a child I never gave it much thought. But in coming to Rajasthan I was forced to.

In the first weeks the shoes I brought from home suffered under the manual labour. But my feet did too, as these thin-soled shoes constantly got punctured by the long thorns growing on the branches of shrub that the people use for firewood. The branches are lopped, and then left on the ground to dry for some days. And somehow every single day one of these thorns on one of these branches would find their way through my shoe, into my foot. So it was decided; I needed a local solution.

For two weeks I observed. Men of status – that is, dressed in impeccable white, clean-shaven every day, and wearing their turban neat and tight – wore fancy, thin, black-leather *juti*. The older masons would wear the same ones, but a cheaper version with a rubber sole, which also seemed to wear out much faster. The younger masons or labourers would wear sneakers, to match their t-shirts and pants. And few men, mostly old or poorer-looking, or the farmers who took their cattle out to the grazing grounds every day, they wore very thick leather, sturdy looking *juti* that seemed to be indestructible. After those two weeks of observing it was decided; those are just what I need, something that will last – why doesn't everyone wear them?

And so it happened that I got my first pair of Rajasthani *juti*. The biggest pair, yet still on the tight side. And soon I also got an answer to my question, but not a verbal answer. The amount of blisters I got the next morning, just from walking to the building site, did all the talking. Much to the amusement of the masons. But it was all right, because they seemed as amused as they seemed impressed. Trying not to show my contentment with their approval of my new shoes – while trying to ignore the pain caused by my blistered feet – I realised my mistake. Between bouts of laughter, I was kindly informed that I should oil my shoes before wearing them, and leave them to stand for some time, so they may form after my feet. The walk back I did barefoot. And



of course, when back, and when more people found out that the white guy was wearing farmer's *juti*, I got wildly varying advice on how to break in the shoes.

In the end the cook gave me some vegetable oil, which did the trick. After some days of letting them stand and tending my blisters, I decided it was time. In the weeks to follow the shoes started shaping after my feet. And as they shaped, the blisters gradually disappeared. But what I slowly came to realise was that I acquired something far more valuable than just sturdy, thorn-proof working shoes. The *juti* seemed to have rocketed my status, and proved to be real icebreakers (even though that term doesn't bear much meaning in the wider context of Rajasthan).

It was indeed curious to see what reactions a simple pair of shoes could cause. I suppose the reason why is because most people knew the quality of these shoes, and patience and perseverance it takes to break them in. So now I had given them something to relate to, and to joke about. I was pleasantly surprised when some men at the organisation who hadn't uttered a single word to me until then would suddenly inquire after the state of my feet. Others would actually greet me, be it the faintest nod, after weeks of pretending I wasn't there. Not bad, I thought. Now, where I couldn't do the talking – which was in most cases, as my Hindi remained limited mostly to the most crucial terms, that is, food and construction-related words such as hammer, shovel, sand and cement, and of course *inchi tape* – my shoes would do the talking. Indeed, they seemed to live a life of their own. More than once a complete stranger would come up to me, pointing at my shoes and tapping his friend on the shoulder. The cement delivery guys, guys hoisting 50kg bags all day, were visibly impressed.

Wherever I went, the shoes gave me instant street-cred, though only as long as I remained in the countryside. Here I suppose the term street-cred doesn't really apply, since there are few streets. Dirt-road-cred might be a better term. In urban areas the magic wore off instantly though. There was one instant, when I went to a nearby city, that a man beckoned me and condescendingly enquired after my wearing poor man's shoes. But why poor man's shoes? Because they last a very long time. After 4 months of intense use, when I returned to my local cobbler in the nearest town to get new rubber under the soles, there was another man with the same *juti*, almost completely worn out. My shoes looked brand new compared to his. So I knew, they must have been at least 2 or 3 years old. And the only reason for a man to wear the same shoes each day for 3 years is because he has little money to spend on another pair. So here, in an urbanised area, the "tough shoes-tough man" judgement lost its meaning entirely, and with it changed the way I was judged.

That was a useful reminder, of that although certain clothes may make a fine impression on some, they make a lousy one on others. The judgement changes with the context. Yet even if I stayed in the countryside where my shoes worked their magic, they alone couldn't cut it.

## HOW TO BEHAVE WELL

Although this could make an excellent airy-fairy topic, even a bit of a joke, endlessly debatable, here I prefer straightforward pragmatism over anything. The point is not to ‘become part of the community’, or to be accepted to the community totally or partially – whether that is at all possible is not what matters. Besides, a ‘community’ exists only in people’s minds, and on paper. A community *is* because of the people in it. So your position in the community can simply be defined by your relationship to the people in it. That way the goal shouldn’t be to become part of anything. Being part of anything is only the *result* of getting along with the people in the community. *That* should be the goal, to get along with the people.

But not just to get along. Because the point is that you want people to talk to you, and to listen to you, to see you as a real person – but more on that later. And in order to be listened to, you must give the others as few reasons as possible not to just stare at you. So rather than considering being judged by your appearance as a hurdle, you should use it to your advantage, identify the benefits of it, and dress well.

Though if you know you will be judged on your appearance foremost, especially at the start, you’ll have to try and be judged on different grounds – for instance through your behaviour and your actions. Show the people you work with things that they know, they can relate to. Give them reasons to relate to you. Adjust yourself to their customs, but don’t pretend to go all the way. Just adjust in an appropriate, natural way. Use some common sense. Where modesty and humbleness is appreciated, be modest and humble. Where cheekiness and bold actions serve to connect, be cheeky and bold. Just don’t overdo it. Don’t force yourself on anyone. Rather wait for the other’s curiosity to materialise. After all, you’re the stranger, the newcomer. So adapt yourself, but don’t lose yourself.

And above all, don’t take yourself too seriously. The smell of self-importance is almost universally unpleasant. People won’t be happy to surround you for long. And if they do, before long they will probably want things from you. And it should be of no surprise that the same people will find out what it is you’re looking for, and shape anything accordingly. Where self-importance repels, self-determination often instils respect. But there is a fine line between self-determination and obstinacy. And so when self-determination is good, self-mockery might even be better. That, and the ability to take anything with a grain of salt – or two. Humour is a great way of connecting to people. After all, most people like to laugh. And from there it seems to follow that most people don’t mind being around people who make them laugh. In turn, this will help them open up to you. At the same time, you don’t want to be considered a joker. If this is the first impression you paint, gaining any credibility after is an uphill battle. So really, what you need most of all is patience. Patience to read the other and in opening up yourself, and patience for the other to read you and open up him or herself. Don’t judge too quickly, and don’t give the other to judge you too quickly. Patience. And when in India you cannot be too patient – but again, more on this later.

When it comes to behaving, there is no real guideline to follow. It would be nice to be able to say, “just be yourself”, but what does that really mean? You “yourself” have been shaped in very different society, with different norms, values and rules, etc. It shouldn’t be surprising then, that when you take “yourself” out of that context, put “yourself” in a new one which on the surface happens to be quite different, that to keep on being “yourself” doesn’t always work out.

For myself, I decided I was just going to do what I came to Rajasthan for – work on sanitation and whichever other task I was asked to do. That, and be patient. Of course I was polite, but I didn’t try to be friends with everyone all at once from day one. This was difficult anyhow, as I didn’t share a common verbal language with most people. Besides, I was also ‘the white guy’, or just another visitor, so I figured it would be an

uphill battle from the beginning. I knew it was going to take time and patience to find my place there, but a lot more to be *given* that place, if it was going to be given at all. Sooner or later though, someone's curiosity would materialise, I was sure. Even that of the old men hanging around the two *chai* shops on the main street all day, men with whom I had little or nothing to do. Patience.

And so it happened that after a couple of weeks an older man from whom I bought *barfi* and *namkeen* – Indian sweets and savoury snacks made of gram flour – started asking questions. Banshi, was his name. I went there almost daily, to take a little break from work and get some sweets to share. Sitting at his little store by the railway station all day, I wondered how he could make a living out of this. I learnt that he had been around for a while. His days of big business had gone with a change in the train schedule several years back. Now the train stopped only four times a day. Not only that, but the two *chai* shops, also selling sweets, on the main street opened up well after he was established, taking away his business. How sad, I thought. Until I learnt that in fact he owned one of the two *chai* shops, and that he was a well-respected man in the village. He simply preferred to spend his time taking it easy at his old little shop at the station instead. Not much seemed to happen there, which is perhaps why he became curious.

First he wanted to know how parents in my country raise their children – whether it is different from how children are raised here. I told him I wasn't the best judge, as I don't know how children are raised in India, and I have no experience myself. That seemed a fair answer. Later on he wanted to know which caste I was from. When he asked I wasn't sure what to answer. Not because I don't belong to any caste, but because here I had the golden chance to decide how he would perceive me in his own context. If I would answer by saying *Brahmin* (priests) or *Rajput* (the ruling/warrior class part of the *Kshatriya* warrior caste) – the two highest castes in Rajasthan – he would almost certainly treat me differently if I would answer with *Sudra* (commoner) or even *Dalit*, the lowest caste, also referred to as 'scheduled caste' or untouchable.

Then I thought how I could translate the economic class which I could consider myself to be from. But as I never considered myself to be part of any class at home, I let that thought pass too. Even though it would be naïve – to say the least – to think classes no longer exist where I come from, and that class in 'the West' and caste in India are two completely different things, in the end I simply replied saying there is no caste system. We are all the same caste. For Banshi this would be very hard to imagine, but perhaps because I was an outsider, exotic, he could get his head around it. I wondered. Still, I figured he would make up his own mind and box me.

And that is indeed what happened. When the word spread through the village that I, among others, had been working on toilets, digging out septic tanks, it seemed he had no choice. One day Tarun mentioned that Banshi found out about our work, and that he thought we are *dalits*. Of course he had no choice. After all, who else would work with toilets, with human scavenging? If we would go to his shop now he would not offer us water from his clay pot anymore. It was all a bit of a joke of course, but only because I was a foreigner. For those 'born' as *dalits*, life is no joke. I wondered though, if his attitude towards me had changed, whether he had switched his way of categorising me. In the end, admittedly, I didn't notice any difference. To test, I drank some water out of his clay pot. He didn't seem to object.

The men at the *chai* shops on the main street, however, kept their cool. This was where the authority of the village seemed to be concentrated, internal politics discussed. All women walking past, carrying firewood or taking out the cattle, would cover their faces, both from conservative households as well as more 'relaxed' ones. You could tell when they would come from a more conservative household, as the girls and women would nearly always adjust their headscarf so their faces would be covered in the presence of men who were not their relatives, to prevent direct eye-contact. But there would also be

women who didn't seem to care too much, like Mamta, one of the women who were on our team. Not only that, but she was cheeky and headstrong too, which often led to funny scenarios. Perhaps she could afford a more relaxed attitude because the work we did was not directly in the village. Indeed, I noticed that the moment they would come closer to the village, they would adjust themselves.

There was one funny instance, when right after work they were on their way back to the village. I was headed there too on a motorbike, of course to buy sweets. Although it was a bit of a gamble, I stopped and offered them a ride, see how they would react. I say a gamble, because although we worked together every day, there is a very clear line between men and women who are not relatives, one that should not be crossed. I could joke about Kali and Mamta, and they about me, and it would all be good. This was an activity we often indulged in. But despite this openness, by no means was physical interaction permissible, not a handshake, the padding of the shoulder, sitting against each other, a friendly hug etc. – the friendly kind of physical interaction. Even walking together, 'hanging out' seemed a no-go. So, I was curious whether they would accept a ride to town.

Mamta seemed the one keen on saving the effort to walk, and convinced Kali to come along. So with much laughter and some jostling they both sat down on the back of the bike sideways, leaving me crammed against the tank. It was all fun and jokes, until we reached the village limit. I figured they wouldn't let me take them straight into town, and this was confirmed. Mamta beckoned me to stop. The last bit they would walk, lest anyone see them. Both were married though, with families. Had they been unmarried, this would have been unthinkable, unless we were related.

A bit of a sidetracking this was, but the story serves to illustrate the fact that the social hub of the village, at least for established men, was a serious area. Women walking past, face covered, would uncover their faces and continue chatting as soon as they got around the corner and were out of sight. Now, even though after some time I went there to drink chai with Tarun or Raju, there was no stir. Ordering sweets and namkeen in simple Hindi only raised a few eyebrows, even though I thought I had established myself as a reliable customer. Placing an order for two trays of custom-made *barfi* made no difference. In fact, the guy at the shop refused to make anything according to a recipe he didn't know – so he would certainly not accept any weird foreigner's ideas. All I wanted was chai-flavoured *barfi*. It didn't seem that alien to me, and it could in fact be a hole in the market. Not so. Neither giving him instructions nor offering to pay double made a difference – I just couldn't crack him, or the others.

So it happened that after about 4 months I left the village slightly disappointed. At least I tried. But I was set for a surprise when I returned a month later. As I walked past, wondering whether they would recognise me, the guy in the first shop who had always been very reserved, started waving and yelling at me, urging me to come over. He made some other men scoot over, sat me down right next to them and pushed a cup of chai in my hands. What a surprise. He seemed elated about my return. When I finished and got up, he would take no money.

Backpack on again, but I had hardly taken a single step before the guy from the second chai shop saw me and beckoned to me. This time I was given one of the nicer wicker stools to sit on, and again the chai was on the house. Coming back to the village seemed to have done the trick, seemed to have gotten me my place. Indeed, as on my very last day, on the way to the barber an old man I'd never talked to before waved me over to smoke a pipe with him. I never made it to the barber.

But all this was only the culmination of 4 months of patience and baby steps, yet most importantly determination and 'action' – that is, adopting the same working mentality as the people there. Because at the start of this process, I wondered how I ought to communicate with the people I was now living and working with. How do we come to an

## HOW TO BEHAVE WELL

understanding of each other? Action is said to speak louder than words. And in the case of there not being any words spoken, action seemed the only way for us to relate.

## WORDS AND ACTIONS

*Words are finite organs of the infinite mind. They cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop, and impoverish it. An action is the perfection and publication of thought. A right action seems to fill the eye, and to be related to all nature. "The wise man, in doing one thing, does all; or, in the one thing he does rightly, he sees the likeness of all which is done rightly.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson<sup>1</sup>

Where in the city some people might approach you regularly to make small talk, in the village people tend to be much more reserved, hesitant to put themselves on the spot by interacting with the stranger. Even saying hello, mostly all I would get as a reaction was a blank face. I am, after all, the white guy, the foreigner. Probably more of a curiosity than anything else. It appeared to me that if I was going to get along with the people here, let alone get anything done, some sort of communication would have to be established not so much through words as through action, through example. But this was not self-evident from the very beginning; it took a couple of instances to dawn upon me. At the same time this forced me to acknowledge and re-evaluate some very basic assumptions I had unwittingly brought along. Assumptions so basic a supposed 'open mind' failed to see through. These instances nicely illustrated how nearly impossible it is to have an 'open mind'; how nearly impossible it is to leave your pre-conceptions and assumptions shelved. But above all, these instances confronted me with myself, my presence and my way of reasoning, as opposed to that of the people I worked with; people from different cultural and educational backgrounds.

Many things in India move slowly, or happen haphazardly - or so it seems. To the foreigner, there appear only two possibilities; either you keep trying to run on your own schedule and pace - which cannot lead to anything but sheer exhaustion and desperation -, or you give in completely and embrace a sense of fatalism- *shanti, shanti*, which could be taken as much or as little as 'take it easy'. The seasoned traveller will inwardly laugh at newcomers trying to make sense of everything, and will quietly feel pride at his or her complete renunciation of the 'Western' conception of time and organisation. But where this adopted sense of fatalism wins in charm, it loses in accuracy. To assume 'everything' that happens in a seemingly chaotic society is indeed chaotic is to romanticise, to stereotype, and to paint a colourful place such as India in black and white. It's not unlike Rudyard Kipling's romanticised portrayals of India and its inhabitants as compared to those remarkably lifelike ones you find in R.K. Narayan's works. Besides, there is only so much you can come to understand through observation alone, when you don't speak the local language. There is an order to things, despite the chaos and randomness that meets the eye. It might not be easy to make sense of, especially as an outsider. But when you find yourself in a working environment, things change.

One of the first things I realised was that this certain sense of fatalism I had proudly adopted was not going to fly. True, assuming everything will just 'work out' when it does, both work-wise and communication-wise, is probably the safest and healthiest attitude. Safest and healthiest in the sense you will not go mad trying to organise and plan things the way you know. But not one that will always get you either desired results or respect.

In the first month I was working on the construction of a dry-toilet. Here I worked not with the organisation's staff, but with local masons and builders. Some of them spoke as much English as I did Hindi, which for all practical purposes was nothing at all. Rafiq, the head of construction, was there to help me a hand with getting stuff together, if he was around at all to be called upon. Besides, he had his own work to worry about.

My first 'wake-up call' came one morning in the second week; I quickly realised that I had too readily assumed being able to bend punctuality with appointments. That one morning I showed up about an hour late for working on the dry-toilet. The day before Rafiq had promised there would be a mason at 8.30 in the morning to help me out. When I finally got there Rafiq, visibly annoyed, told me the mason left already because I didn't show up on time. The mason had been waiting there for an hour, and then was sent home. My mistake of course. I was the one who had said 8:30, so why wasn't I there at 8:30? There and then I realised that times agreed on are not always mere indications taken with a grain of salt. But this distinction may be very subtle. Learning to figure out when they are when they aren't started there. After all, even though the masons and labourers didn't work on a contract, those employed are expected to show up on time and work hard.

Soon after, the second time I realised things don't just 'work out' was in a communicative context. One morning I wanted to start resume construction, only to find out that all the tools and utensils had gone. Rafiq wasn't there to ask, so I went to look myself for an unused bucket in the construction area. None of the people working there spoke English. Even with gestures – which ended up becoming a key part in the semi-verbal pidgin way of communicating with some people, especially the ones I worked closely with – I couldn't make myself clear. At that point I realised I couldn't expect the people there to cater to me. After all, I was the stranger, the outsider. They didn't need anything from me. Why should they adapt to me?

So, by taking the effort to learn some words in their language, I approached them, in a way humbled myself before them. But let there be no mistake; I certainly came across as a fool, and was at first and in fact for the longest time laughed at whenever I tried to communicate. Some people probably never stopped thinking of me as a joker. But through the ridicule I felt I was taken seriously, appreciated or respected by some or most, probably just because I tried to make an effort. Instead of saying "we don't share a common language, so we cannot communicate, and so we will remain strangers to each other", you try to get some of the basics down, and from there connect through actions. But above all, connect through your common humanity.

Still, gestures and appreciating 'the other' only get you so far, especially in a technical context, trying to build something. And so it happened when I was working with my favourite mason, Bhanwar, on the dry-toilet, I needed a measurement tape. I knew he had one – I had seen him use it only minutes before. So I used all possible combinations of the words 'measurement', 'tape' and 'inch'. When that didn't bear fruit, I opted for the gestures. In all likelihood the thing was just sitting in his pocket, so I repeatedly pointed at his pocket. But again a blank face. So it was not in his pocket. What to do then? Eventually I understood I just had to be patient. I knew he had one, so it was only a matter of time before he'd have to measure something, and the tape would appear. And indeed it did – with incredulity I saw him fish it out of his *kurta* pocket where it had been sitting all along. I couldn't help but laugh.

And that's when I learnt two lessons; one, that sometimes neither words nor gestures count and if they don't. Two, you will just have to be patient. But really there was a third; although I had tried the different combinations of the words 'measurement', 'tape' and 'inch', I hadn't tried to pronounce them in different ways. Because when the measurement tape finally came out, and I saw my golden chance to ask him what obscure word it was he used to describe it. Grinning he replied in a thick accent '*inchi-tape*'. Again, I couldn't help but laugh.

So now that I realised smiles and gestures and pidgin doesn't work quite that well in establishing a meaningful understanding, what was I to do? 'Do as the locals do'? Simply work hard? That seemed like a reasonable thing to do. But even here I brought in my own assumptions. Soon I realised that my perception of 'hard work' is not quite

the same as that of the people I was working with. Because after all, when you say 'just do as the locals do', which locals do you mean?

Growing up, I always considered hard work to be heavy, physically exhausting labour. And by virtue of it being heavy work, it was men's work. Coming to rural Rajasthan it didn't take much time to realise that things work differently here in the countryside. Nearly all of the hard – and tedious – labour is done by women; mixing and carrying cement, carrying water, moving bricks and stones and handing them to the masons, sieving sand, etc. It is deemed unskilled labour, even though it takes considerable skill to stand the routine. Work such as masonry and carpentry is considered skilled labour, traditionally done only by men. The organisation I worked for differs herein, in that this rigid division of labour is broken up, where possible. The construction of solar cookers for instance, which involves welding and other metal-work, is done by women, whereas the type of work involved is traditionally done by men. But these women were directly working with the organisation. The masons and labourers helping with construction work were labourers from the village or surrounding villages.

So at moments where the dry-toilet construction was paused, instead of sitting around I figured I should help out on the construction site and demonstrate my good intentions, do the work the 'locals' do. But it didn't take long before I realised most of the people – both men and women – were greatly amused by the lifting and carrying I was doing. Why? Because I was doing women's work. The 'logic' in this is not whether one kind of work is harder or heavier than the other. The point is that women are meant to assist the men, not vice-versa. All these menial things are tasks to assist the masons.

I didn't much concur with this gender-based division of labour, thinking the hardest work ought to be done by the best-abled, so I went ahead with it anyway. But it was obvious that by doing so, I only cemented my image of an unknowing outsider. So, to balance out that image created by doing manual labour which was otherwise done by women, I would also do some masonry work and smoke *bidi's* with the men during breaks even though I usually don't smoke. It also seemed that my *chai* drinking habits commanded some respect. Finishing a scolding hot cup of tea faster than most in 37 degrees heat seemed to be considered no mean feat.

Here I have to side-track a bit. Because although it was blatantly obvious the women were doing all the hard work, this is not how things seemed to be understood. Only when there was a particularly heavy stone, or a stone slab or a tree-trunk that needed to be lifted or moved, did the men help out – undoubtedly to display their superior strength. And of course because women couldn't possibly do such heavy work. This sporadic display of strength seemed sufficient in removing any doubt as to who is the stronger. Regardless, it doesn't take a genius to see that rural Rajasthan and probably most of India is silently carried on the backs of women.

Over the weeks, working with my masons and labourers some things became clear. First of all, a mason is mason. So what does he do? Masonry. That means no carrying of stones or sand and no mixing of cement. Women are meant to do these things so the masons may keep on working. In case of a stand-still, where there wasn't enough cement, the masons would simply light a cigarette and have a chat. It was usually only after a great deal of pushing and with obvious reluctance that the masons would get up and do some of the 'non-masonry' tasks. Of course the attitude differed from person to person, nicely showing who was willing to bend the labour division. Still, it is hard to say what the motives were; open-mindedness and gender-awareness would be the most romantic motivation. But I suspect the reasons for helping a hand were of a more mundane nature. These masons were probably simply less lazy, or actually had a bit of respect for me. Or perhaps it had to do with wages.



The women labourers working for me made 165 rupees per day – roughly the official local minimum wage. Masons on the other hand made three times that amount (yet at times seemed to work three times less hard). There was one man in another team who wasn't qualified as a mason. Regardless, he still made twice as much as the women. But of course this issue is not endemic to 'developing' countries such as India. It seemed that to be paid more for your work means your work is more important, that *you* are more important; to be paid more is to enjoy a higher status. So why should a mason do any lifting of stones?

This trend remained; it was difficult to make anyone do work that they didn't feel was part of their job, especially – or perhaps only – if that 'other' work was *below* their perceived status. Although these gender roles or division of labour is just one example, the apparent rigidity of it and the obvious reluctance to stray from it was startling. It seemed this was just one instance part of a larger context of expectations and 'social stability'. I couldn't help but feel that this attitude had its origins in India's caste system. Most people in any caste are expected and often pressured not to transgress the boundaries – for example in work or marriage – they inherit upon birth.

Through conversations with some of the staff, it became clear that people are considered strong when they were willing to do things they were not expected or even supposed to do. People are considered strong when they defy the expectations of others and conventions of society, by transgressing the boundaries which have existed for centuries. For example, Rafiq had been one of the few people ready to help out with the emptying of septic tanks on campus. Human scavenging is something done only by the 'untouchable' cast. And even though Rafiq was a Muslim and so largely falls outside the caste system<sup>2</sup>, it is not hard to imagine it takes strength of character to resist this social stigma attached to human scavenging.

But this is a bit of a diversion from the point I was trying to make. In addition to inquiring when possible – when direct translation was possible – I tried to pick up things through observation. But when in doubt, I would simply 'do what the locals do' and hope for the best, thinking action would be the key in trying to establish an understanding with the people I was working and living with. But not any kind of action. Blindly 'doing what the locals do' didn't work. No, it became quite clear that certain action, certain roles are assigned to certain genders. So by being aware of the 'correct' actions to be performed, understanding was displayed and reciprocated.

As time passed, I realised more and more how important it is considered to work, not to do nothing. But also not only that just talking is no good, but that you ought to spend your time working. Except of course when you're old man. Then you are allowed to hang around and drink chai all day. Otherwise, you ought to work.

But this was a deceiving thing to figure out, given the many times I and others seemed to spend their time waiting on one thing or another. Deceiving because of the many 'appointments' or agreements that seemed to be chronically delayed. And deceiving because of the ease with which some people would take breaks, etc. Seen in this light, I found it hard to believe at first that there was no such thing as 'weekend'. The week has seven days on all seven work will be done. As far as I understood, only one day a month, during new moon, would there be rest. On all the other day there was breakfast between 8 and 8:30, chai at 11, lunch at 1 and end-of-the-day-chai at 5 in the afternoon. At least on campus. In the village seemed to be up and running from 6 in the morning.

In the first month I would take some weekends off, but once I had my own team of masons and labour, this was no option any longer. I didn't want to run the risk of loosing my workers by not giving them full weeks to work. That, and I didn't want to come off as lazy. After a few weeks though this regime started to feel tiring. So I asked Rafiq, the head of construction, who seemed tireless, whether he wouldn't want to have some free time every now and then. Throughout this conversation Rafiq laughed many

times, and repeatedly smiled every time I carefully suggested there is more to life than just work. But his reply remained unchanged. ‘Why have free time?’ ‘What else should you do?’ If your job is to be a mason, then that is what you should do. ‘You must work’. He didn’t have much more to say.

I found it hard to imagine that he couldn’t think of anything to do with his free time. At the very least you could spend time at home with family, for instance. But perhaps Rafiq had his reasons for this staunch work attitude. After all, he was the man charge, a leading figure. He should be the last one to want to take time off. Or perhaps this attitude is grounded in the basic daily realities of many lives. Many people work from day to day, without an actual contract, and many have little to spend on anything but food. So when you’re able to work, you should. Because when you don’t, there won’t be food on the table. Work simply has to be done.

There was one encounter towards the end of my stay, which cemented this attitude in such a simple yet beautiful way I will never forget it. One day Tarun and I were taken on a little tour to the different fields Banshi, the sweets-seller, and his family owned. Banshi’s younger brother took us to one field where his wife happened to be working, irrigating wheat. He remarked that his wife works too hard, that he has urged her many times not to work so much. Remembering my own mother who at times would complain no one ever thanked her for all the work she did at home, I asked the woman whether anyone ever thanked her. The simplicity of her humble reply almost eclipsed its gravity, the implication of the strength of her character. She simply said, “it doesn’t matter whether I am thanked. The work simply has to be done”. These few words laid bare the brute facts of daily life led by many. Daily life, which for many women is menial.

As a final illustration of this working attitude there is the example of education in rural areas. In a conversation I had with someone in the village it was pointed out how many parents are hesitant to send their children to school. Not necessarily because they don’t want them to learn and become literate, but because after they’ve finished school many become lazy and arrogant. They don’t help anymore with farming and become a burden to the household. They often refuse to work in the fields, saying the work is not good enough for them, or they are too good for farm work because they are educated. Instead they want a ‘real’ job in the city.

This is a serious issue, not just for the families, but also for the children who went to school. The problem is that although these children received an education, they are not able to compete with youth from the city. These are able to enjoy a much higher standard of education, whose parents can afford to send them to private schools or better government schools. In the countryside often the only option is a government school. And it is no secret that the quality of education in rural schools often is extremely poor, for instance to due absence of teachers.<sup>3</sup> Being unwilling to continue the work of their parents, and being unable to compete with the urban youth, the rural children fall between two worlds. They become a burden to the household.

In the countryside many or most settled people are subsistence farmers. For them, talking doesn’t bring food on the table. Work has to be done, often hard work. It’s not hard to understand that words simply don’t carry the same weight here as in the world I grew up in. Especially in rural areas I feel action is regarded perhaps as the only valid currency of meaning and understanding. Words are only words, after all. That is the basic reality. This way understanding and communicating cannot come through words alone. Action and example speaks louder than words. If you understand that, and manage to demonstrate it, you’ve come a long way. So if I was going to convince people of my intentions, I was going to have to show them, not tell them about it.

After several weeks of establishing a relationship with the people through the work we did, and of course joking around a bit, I seemed to have been ‘granted my place’. In the meantime several people in the organisation had relaxed their attitude towards me,

people I would speak English with. The conversations with them about the organisation, about the village, about other people and so on were of course very helpful in drawing a mental picture of the environment I was in. Soon after an interesting development happened, namely that Tarun, an architect, decided to settle in the village for a while and team up on the wetland, the starting of its construction which had yet to happen. Not only was having him there extremely helpful because he was a trained architect with a strong interest in water and sanitation. It was especially nice to have someone to talk to, and to talk through. The timing of his arrival could not have been more perfect, since by now an understanding had already been established between all the people I had been involved with until now. Not just an understanding, but our very own pidgin language had been established, a hybrid of English, Hindi and some Marwari with various gestures. Indeed, the gestures were such a big part of our communication that when back in Europe for the longest time I could not keep my hands and head still, something which friends repeatedly pointed out. So at this point a new door opened up, and through Tarun our mutual understanding grew. And of course many more jokes were being cracked.

But again, that was after the 'action' in my behaviour. But it wasn't just that, nor the clothes I wore. All this is about how I wanted to be perceived. But what about the other way around? True understanding begins with the recognition of 'the other'. That despite the extreme simplicity of our communication, I tried not to perceive 'the other' as alien, as essentially different. And I think this is the trick, to pierce through that superficial difference, and instead try and see how 'the other' is similar to you and you similar to 'the other'. This starts by stopping to think in terms of 'I and the other'. Only 'us' without the 'them'. It starts with seeing 'the others' as real people; seeing him or her as a real person. It sounds so obvious and simple, and yet... it is nothing more than that; obvious and simple. After all, you are both human beings.

## REAL PEOPLE

*Whenever pressed in debate over some point of theory or metaphysics, they would shake their heads sadly, draw languidly on their pipes or stroke their beards and mutter something about 'real people' not fitting the clear abstractions of those who 'had never done fieldwork'.*

Nigel Barley<sup>1</sup>

Luckily it doesn't take a pipe, and certainly not old age to see this simple fact. Everywhere around the world, people are people, real people. Real people living their own lives, with their own dreams, their own worries, their own beliefs, their own traditions. And just like you, they are the centre of their own universe. Even if they talk a different language, wear different clothes, eat different food, or have different beliefs, they are not that different from you and I. Why? Because they also speak a language, because they also wear clothes, because they also eat food, and because they also have beliefs. So even if you decide one day that they should be the subjects of your research, they are still real people first – living real lives – and vessels of information second. You should neither condescend nor glorify; nowhere are people either helpless simpletons or modern-day 'noble savages'. But why is it tempting to create that image, and so hard to pierce through it, sometimes, or always? Why is it so easy and tempting to typify people as such, in our thinking and in our writing and even in our dealing with them?

*The least change in our point of view, gives the whole world a pictorial air. A man who seldom rides, needs only to get into a coach and traverse his own town, to turn the street into a puppet-show. The men, the women, – talking, running, bartering, fighting, – the earnest mechanic, the loungeur, the beggar, the boys, the dogs, are unrealized at once, or, at least, wholly detached from all relation to the observer, and seen as apparent, not substantial beings.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson<sup>2</sup>

Two centuries ago Emerson wrote this, but his words still ring true. You might disagree, saying that he refers only to 'a man who seldom rides', while we are so used to being in this position. But this is precisely the point I want to make. That is, we've spent and we spend most of our life in a coach traversing town – academics in their ivory tower looking down at the world, leaning comfortably out of the window. Or glued to a screen, be it a TV, computer, smartphone or a magazine. And when we're tired of it, we close the window, turn off our devices, put away the magazine, and indulge in our own lives. But in doing so what happens? We see those people we read and write and talk about as apparent almost all the time, rarely as substantial.

Yet we talk about the world and its people as if we understand, as if we see all people as substantial beings. And although most of us haven't seen or experienced much of the world, we seem to know all about it. But where does this knowledge come from? Not from experience, surely? At least not much of it, for most of us. No, this knowledge comes from textbooks and lectures and classes, not from direct experience. Instead, we draw different maps of the world, from different perspectives and based on different ideas. Some small-scaled in and highly detailed, others large-scaled but with little detail. And by studying these maps, comparing them and overlaying them we think we understand what they represent, we think we get the full picture. But a map is only a map, it is only an abstraction what it is meant to represent. It is not the real thing, no matter how many different types of maps you make, no matter the tiniest detail you observe. A map remains a map, remains abstraction. So when we've spent most of our lives in formal education, studying maps, how can we claim to know much of the world and its people, let alone talk and write about it in such preposterous language, and claim this to be truth?

So we leave our towers and go to the world down below, to do fieldwork and research. We go out to meet these people, and observe them and try to understand them

and their lives. But what happens? We bring along our hypothesis, our research questions, and if not those, at least our baggage, our maps, our knowledge, our intentions, our schedules. We think we bring an open mind, but we don't. Before we go we make sure we stuff it with all these sorts of things, and by doing so we fill it up and close it. And even if we don't stuff it with anything, we still bring along a suitcase. There is no more room for any direct experience in the field. Instead of thinking 'we are here', we think 'we are here on the map'. Even though we are now face to face with the people we usually only talk and write about, we still have not made the mental shift from seeing them as apparent to seeing them as substantial, as real people. Instead, we see them as containers of data – data that we intend to extract through our pre-conceived ideas and questions, to be placed neatly in a framework, pinpointed and projected on our maps.

The point is that we don't give ourselves the possibility, the time or energy to see these people, 'the others', as real people first. So if we are going to want to say something substantial about someone, observation alone doesn't cut it. Just by being 'out in the field' you don't suddenly come to an understanding. Being an 'objective outsider' will only get you exactly that; a descriptive outsider's view. No, if you're going to want to say something substantial about someone, the least you could do is spend time with this person or these people, not just observe their routines, ask questions, but follow them. Not just try to find out how their condition, their surrounding has shaped them, but try to experience it yourself. We have to make that shift from seeing them as apparent beings to seeing them as substantial beings.

This may sound naïve, but it is certainly not impossible, and neither should it be passed off as a hobby of sorts. Of course, crawling into the skins of your subjects is not something you can 'succeed' in in absolute terms. Seeing the world even through your best friend's eyes is not entirely possible. So in absolute terms, you are guaranteed to fail. Not because of time restraints, but because of your own upbringing, your own baggage, because each of us is alone in experiencing this world.

*We live together, we act on, and react to, one another; but always and in all circumstances we are by ourselves. The martyrs go hand in hand into the arena; they are crucified alone. Embraced, the lovers desperately try to fuse their insulated ecstasies into a single self-transcendence; in vain. By its very nature every embodied spirit is doomed to suffer and enjoy in solitude. Sensations, feelings, insights, fancies—all these are private and, except through symbols and at second hand, incommunicable. We can pool information about experiences, but never the experiences themselves. From family to nation, every human group is a society of island universes.*

Aldous Huxley<sup>3</sup>

But simply because in absolute terms you cannot fully succeed, that doesn't mean you can't reach an understanding in relative terms. It's a process; one that you can never fully succeed in, but nevertheless advance in. So there is no reason you shouldn't start this process. Because if you're trying to understand the other, if you want to say something about the other, it makes sense to try to see things their way yourself as well – to see through their eyes, as real people.

Because when you've spent so much of your time in formal education, expanding your knowledge, studying maps, in an environment where everyone else is too, it seems to make a lot of sense to spend some, or even a lot of time trying to come to an understanding of the people you will be studying or working for or with – understanding what they think and feel, understanding what living their lives is like. Understanding, not knowing. So not through textbooks, lectures, or even pre-decided questionnaires. But through interacting with the other as a real person. Perhaps through a healthy mixture of observation, curiosity, humbleness, patience, participation, and simply 'hanging out'. And although time often doesn't allow for this, it should. Coming to an understanding of things and people is not a fixed process that can be accelerated, like a subject at school. On the contrary; the more time you spend,

the slower you go, the better your understanding. It is something that comes with time – time which ‘Westerners’ tend to value so much they dare spend so little of it.

*There are some things which cannot be learned quickly and time, which is all we have, must be paid heavily for their acquiring. They are the very simplest things and because it takes a man's life to know them the little new that each man gets from life is very costly and the only heritage he has to leave.*

Ernest Hemingway<sup>4</sup>

When he wrote this, Hemingway probably had in mind things such as love, friendship, ego or perhaps common sense. What he most likely didn't have in mind was researchers on a schedule, getting out of their AC'ed cars, quickly interviewing some people ‘out in the field’, and taking off again to head to the next town, or to be back on time for dinner. Still, the point stands; it takes time to come to an understanding of things, and not everything can be learnt through study. Some things take a lot of time and practice to see, to be revealed. A presumably well thought out questionnaire is certainly not a substitute for spending time with your ‘subjects’, getting to know them, them getting to know you, so you may be able to put their answers in their appropriate context rather than abstract them from everything human, their immediate context.

The people you're trying to understand – be it through tightly-scheduled, pre-designed interviews or that healthy mixture of observation, curiosity, humbleness, patience and ‘hanging out’ – are indeed real people. Real people who will quite naturally react differently to strangers than to familiar faces. Real people who will respond differently to ideas or solutions offered by suit-clad, AC-cooled, writing-pad-hugging, tight-scheduled researchers or someone who takes an interest in their lives, takes the time to get familiar with them, on their terms, at their pace – someone who invites them for tea.

And again, although time often doesn't allow for it – it should. Why? In my case, I feel, because sanitation is not quite that light, bubbly topic people have a chat about over dinner. It is the kind of topic most people will not be completely honest and open about, especially not to any stranger asking strange questions. This is not to say it should remain taboo, that I should go along with treating it as such. No, my wish was to make people think and talk about sanitation. To try and slowly make them see the topic of sanitation not just in a *new* light, but in one that is sufficiently convincing not to be ignored. The aim is not to overcome what the founder of the NGO in Rajasthan called ‘the memory of centuries of suffering’<sup>5</sup> or pretend this never existed, which might otherwise continue to prevent people from talking about it. No, the aim was to address sanitation in such a way that will not be ignored in the light of this taboo-context.

But how to go about this? I still could not conveniently ignore this deep-rooted history. I could not tell people to forget about it, or the suffering, move on, and see sanitation only as a public health issue, an environmental issue or a technical issue – telling them ‘Hey, I studied waste water treatment – I have an excellent solution to your problem, so you may reduce your water consumption in this semi-arid environment with  $x\%$ . Let me build it for you, you'll love it. And if not, you'll learn to, don't worry’. Not only is this far too much to expect, it is paternalistic, it is rude. No, to try and ‘forget about’ this history in the light of some new ‘technology’ is overzealous, to put it in modest terms. It would be to miss the point completely.

Imagine trying to convince your neighbours to stop using a flush toilet – for which the infrastructure that is necessary to handle the wastewater in fact has more than one valid arguments going against it – and instead get nice-looking yet smelly dry-toilets installed in their homes. You might appeal to their ‘rationality’, but as you'll soon learn there's more than one type of ‘rationality’ at play; that of the environment, that of comfort, and perhaps most importantly, habit. And in this case there's no ‘several centuries of suffering’ at play.

In the same way, I couldn't just tell the people to abandon their bucket-flushed toilets for dry-toilets – which they would have to empty manually; smell or no smell, all excrement composted or not composted – for the sake of reducing their water consumption. No, they won't stand for it. In a country where so many people are behind so few in terms of income, to mention but one difference, many of the many want the same comforts 'modernity' offers as the few have. That includes a flush-toilet. Semi-arid area or not. Not only that, but using dry-toilets again is simply perceived as what the founder of the organisation described as 'a step back into the past, which will remind them of the suffering and social inequality'<sup>6</sup>. Any proposed solution reminiscent of this is unlikely to be adopted. And even if your proposed solution manages to circumvent this rather large obstacle, there is still a very human quality at play namely habit. And habit is not something that should be underestimated nor understated.

Because what was my intention? I wanted to provide an alternative, build something, something which I know works – or at least so my books and teachers told me. But I should also want people to want to use it, otherwise any alternative is not a solution. And in order for people to want to use it, they must be convinced of it. I also had to be sure that whatever I intended to build would actually work in the on-the-ground reality, not merely the textbook-reality, so that it serves the purpose as being a working example, and may convince others who were at first doubtful. It all seems so very straightforward, but to see it like that is not always easy.

This is where I think it becomes crucial not to let your ego slip in, and to think of the goal with an open mind, that is to offer *a* solution, not *the* solution. Because you might think you know what works, what could work, what could be a 'solution'. After all, you know the theory; you've done the math. You're excited to start doing something, to build something, or, as many would consider, 'help someone' – which, by the way, is a deceiving term to think in. There is probably one solution that is technically or ecologically most suitable. But what do you do when others disagree? Not on technical grounds, but for reasons that you can't relate to yourself?

After all, you cannot expect everyone to jump on board instantly, or at all – for everyone to be in favour of what you think will be best. Some people will and some, or perhaps many won't. This doesn't mean that your intention is wrong. It doesn't mean that your proposed solution is technically wrong. It also doesn't mean you should be completely defeatist about the whole endeavour. And it certainly doesn't mean you should just go ahead and build something, thinking people will get used to it. It simply means that you cannot expect the people you are working for and with to accept your reasoning above any other, to see what you see, and to feel what you feel. So if they don't, well, then you'll just have to continue the dialogue or come up with another solution, preferably together.

That is why I think it is necessary to see people as real, substantial people. Because you cannot understand someone who you see only as apparent. Understanding them in a *human* way, not in an empirical, scientific manner – as humans, not as variables or as data. As humans, whose 'rationality' isn't only affected by their rational mind, but by their circumstances, their entire history, and by their future. Once you see them as real people, you can start trying to understand them. Understand them first, before undertaking anything. Because ultimately that is exactly what you want from the people, that they understand and accept you, your rationality, your ideas. What you want from them is to see you as a real, substantial person, not an apparent person. So if you show willingness to understand 'where they are coming from', if you show them that you see them as real, substantial people, they might just do the same.

I say 'might', because before passing off this reasoning as 'new romanticism', we shouldn't lose our sense of pragmatism, and remember that in reality many people simply don't care. Not about 'the other', not about sanitation, not about any initiative,

## REAL PEOPLE

not about any change. But of course this is not just a phenomenon in 'the field'. It happens back at home also. Regardless, if you can't see people as real people first, you'll be hard-pressed to make anything work, to find anything genuine in the field. So, once you see people as real and substantial, not apparent, it will be possible to come to an understanding of them. But how do you do this? You cannot simply observe them using your eyes. Part of seeing people as real is engaging with them. So you must also listen to them.



## CONVERSATIONS and LISTENING

*There is an art of listening. To be able really to listen, one should abandon or put aside all prejudices, pre-formulations and daily activities. When you are in a receptive state of mind, things can be easily understood; you are listening when your real attention is given to something. But unfortunately most of us listen through a screen of resistance. We are screened with prejudices, whether religious or spiritual, psychological or scientific; or with our daily worries, desires and fears. And with these for a screen, we listen. Therefore we listen really to our own noise, to our own sound, not to what is being said. It is extremely difficult to put aside our training, our prejudices, our inclination, our resistance, and, reaching beyond the verbal expression, to listen so that we understand instantaneously.*

J. Krishnamurti<sup>1</sup>

*Let me now focus on the central act of listening that underlies this book, without which it could not have been written. I would stress the 'act' of listening, because listening is no mere reflex, or passive state of aural perception. Listening is active. Listening is embodied. And above all, listening is a communicative strategy.*

Rustom Bharucha<sup>2</sup>

Where sanitation wins in terms of being an extremely relevant and pressing topic in various contexts such as public health, gender equality and ecology, it is an understatement to say that it is a bit of a looser in terms of popularity. The fact of the matter remains that sanitation simply isn't much fun. If you want to work on something people get excited about, don't go with sanitation. Yet if uphill battles is what you're into, then look no further. Sanitation can be an uneasy topic, sensitive, even taboo or traumatic. And more often than not it is, especially in many parts of India, especially for *Dalits*, people of the 'scheduled castes'. To actively discuss it, to try and introduce new ideas is to address all those undercurrent tension and often painful memories. Discussing it is to call to mind a history of suffering for many. And this suffering continues today. I vividly recall one conversation with a staff member about his brother who died from toxic gases going down a manhole.<sup>3</sup> For some sanitation is a topic that never crossed their minds. Others will talk about with zeal. And yet for others it is traumatic, best to be ignored. Sanitation in India is a blatantly pressing issue, yet it's rarely given its due attention – not that it is ignored, but that it is not addressed appropriately. So on the one hand it's a topic that should be addressed with discretion. But at the same time it's something that has to be pulled out of the shadow, something in dire need of confrontation.

Once I knew I was going to be working on sanitation for a while, I wanted to find out what people had on their minds; what their thoughts and their ideas were, their problems and reservations. But for that I needed to 'get familiar' and 'favourable' with the people in the community where I was to live for a number of months. Just knocking on everyone's door from day one with a survey in your hand doesn't work. Instead I wanted to try and understand people's problems, listen to them, without immediate categorisation. I wanted to show that my aim wasn't to just be there, find out what people had on their minds, and leave again. So the point was not to go in there, proposing a 'new technology', one that supposedly works better than the existing infrastructure, and telling everyone just to get used to it. No, the point was to try and understand the situation there and then, and based on this figure out what will work best, there and then.

As mentioned, given the nature of the topic of sanitation I wanted to get familiar with the people. Showing genuine interest and empathy, I figured, would be an excellent way to go about it. So in the same way, finding out what people had on their minds I figured would be best by just letting people talk. Just *talking* to people, not *interviewing* them. To get through to people, truly getting to know them doesn't work

through interviews. It works through exchange, through active listening, through 'simple' conversation.

The first time I sat down to talk to one of the staff at the organisation was after about 2 weeks. That was the first time someone I wasn't directly working with asked what I was actually doing there. So we ended up talking for about half an hour, an informal conversation. We started off talking about the internal structure of the organisation, and from there we moved on to sanitation. At that particular moment I didn't have a notebook and pen with me. Being so used to writing things of interest down straightaway, halfway through the conversation I rushed up to my room to fetch paper and a pen wanting to capture everything we were talking about. I remember returning, apologising, making Vasu repeat what he had said, and then try and resume the conversation. But something had changed, felt different. The entire context of the conversation had changed, as did the atmosphere. It had changed from being 'just a talk' where both of us participated equally, and Vasu was 'just telling me some things', to a one-way stream which I managed to keep going half-heartedly. Half of my attention was with the pen and notebook, the other half trying to be in a conversation. But I wasn't really listening anymore; I was analysing, translating, transcribing. Not the kind of listening you do when you're talking to someone with genuine interest. It felt strange. Afterwards I reflected on the conversation, which felt spoiled by the introduction of that notepad. Should I have simply had the notebook ready from the start of the conversation? Or how else should I go about 'collecting data'?

After this I decided to stop using a notebook for a while. Instead of dividing my attention, I would just listen intently and actively take part in any conversation. Just simple conversation; non-scheduled, unplanned and informal without pre-set questions. I would just see where each conversation goes and get to know people a bit.

After several such conversations, all of which flowed naturally, I scheduled a meeting with one of the staff who was otherwise hard to catch at random. He had created a planted infiltration trench attached to the trainees' residence to prevent stagnant pools from forming, especially in the monsoon season. For the occasion I had brought a notebook initially to take notes during his 'tour' of the infiltration trench, writing as he explained the different plants types and the functioning of his system. The conversation continued in his office, and I started enquiring after his opinions on sanitation and the conditions on campus. I automatically continued taking notes, but immediately I felt the conversation to be of a different nature. And immediately I felt I was in a different position compared the haphazard, informal conversations I had had before. There was a stark contrast. No longer was I 'just' the listener, but also the 'interpreter', urging the other along with only half of my attention.

Multitasking may be wonderful for efficiency's sake, but it's hard to do whichever things you do simultaneously as proper, as attentively, as when you do them separately. And this shows to the other; if you're only listening, let's say, with half of your attention, then what are you to the other in the remaining half of the time you spent? A dictation machine? A wall? This bothered me not only because I noticed was unable to really do both conversing and writing at one time. It bothered me also because I myself was not able to pay due attention to the other person; this felt disrespectful, even if I had no intention on 'getting familiar' with the people in the community. I didn't feel that writing up notes (for myself) was a valid excuse to take half of my attention away from the other and be distracted in a conversation that should be compelling for both. Such a conversation truly becomes "a monologue, poked along with tiny cattle-prod questions" which then "isn't a conversation any more. It is a strained, manipulative game".<sup>4</sup>

So after this conversation during which I took notes, my decision was final. I wouldn't record the conversations any longer, neither with notebook nor with a recorder. I did

not want to disrupt informal, unselfconscious atmosphere which I found to be most fruitful. And I did not want to disrupt the dynamic between me and whomever I was having a conversation with, and be able to give them my full attention.

But what would I remember, and how would I remember it? At first I worried I would forget a lot of what was said. I worried whether I would be able to recall the conversation without re-interpreting. Even though I would transcribe the conversation as soon as possible afterwards, something would get lost or twisted. At the same time I realised that it's impossible to take notes throughout a conversation without using keywords and concepts, picking out bits and pieces. That in itself is an interpretation process you cannot escape from. It is an inherent part of recording. Even with a voice recording of a conversation, the words that are said will not change, no matter how often you listen to them. You might suddenly notice or realise certain things you didn't the first time around, but that is merely a change in yourself, in your interpretation; it is not a change in what is being said at the moment of recording. And so again there is no escape from interpretation. And if that was the case, I would gladly accept the chance of forgetting one or two things in my conversations, in favour of being able to give my full attention.

But as it happened, from the first conversation on I was surprised to find out that by listening intently I could recall the vast majority of conversation – much more than just the gist of it. Over time this only got better. It seemed a matter of activating my memory and giving my full attention. Actually engaging with the person and the content matter made memorising easier and memories more vivid. Surely many students will contend it is much easier to recall a lively conversation than a monologic and monotonous lecture. And how skilful young children are at playing memory games! Why? Because they are completely absorbed, and because they have not started to use written words as a substitute for their memory. But this is not only with children. After a couple of weeks at the organisation I picked up a book by Rustom Bharucha titled 'Rajasthan, an Oral History – Conversations with Komal Kothari'. Without going into too much detail, the book is structured around a set of conversations by the author with Komal Kothari, a well-respected authority on Rajasthani history, culture and folklore. In Chapter 2 orality and literacy in relation to memory is addressed. Kothari states: "So literacy raises a lot of complex questions relating to memory. On the one hand, you can fall back on the written word when your memory fails, but in those contexts where the written word is not available, then the brain itself develops the capacity to memorize – there is simply no other option. What we find is that, when folk musicians become literate, the text of their songs diminishes – it gets squeezed and squeezed in relation to its early size".<sup>5</sup>

So now I was able to give my full attention without falling back on written words, which is exactly what I wanted and needed given the often delicate nature of the topic. Being an active participant, or at least an active listener in a conversation creates a comfortable atmosphere. This visibly encourages the other person to talk freely. But also, when you're not taking notes you can *actively* listen. Not writing both forces and allows you to listen carefully. And when you are able to give all this attention, you begin to notice other things too. You notice not only *what* is being said, but *how* things are being said. Intonations, body-language too, and mannerisms become apparent. All these add colour to the conversation, create a richer picture, a richer understanding.

But not using any external means of recording the conversations as they happen has another profound effect. By being *active*, not *extractive*, not only did I remember much better. But by being active, not extractive, as mentioned earlier the conversation flowed naturally. And what does that really mean, a naturally flowing conversation? One way to begin to answer that question is to think of what it is *not*. Bharucha, reflecting on his conversations with Komal Kothari remarks: "Even the slightest shift through the insertion of a seemingly innocent technological device like the microphone alters the

intentionality of a ‘conversation’. In essence, the conversation is no longer entirely a conversation.”<sup>6</sup> By using a recording device, however innocent, you immediately change the apparent nature of the conversation; you demonstrate your intention to extract from it. This has two consequences. One is that it makes the role of whomever you have a conversation with *performative*. The other, directly related to this, is that it suggests the *canonisation* of the things being said,

When I started talking to people to get an idea of what they thought, it was not my intention to collect facts. No, I simply wanted people to share their thoughts and ideas freely, in a non-performative way. Sanitation being the topic that it is, I wanted neither to encourage nor discourage anything from being said. Inserting any recording medium with the other’s knowledge causes a psychological change. It is a well-observed phenomenon that people when people know they are being recorded, they become self-conscious, displaying behaviour they otherwise wouldn’t, in a way start performing. Having a voice-recorder with me, let alone a notepad, changes the relation between me and the other; a conversation turns into what could easily be perceived as a one-way act of extraction. This in turn creates expectations or suggests my looking for certain answers. The act of selectively writing down what is said easily makes the speaker self-conscious. He or she might think certain things are more important to be said than others, self-censors and withhold some seemingly trivial things. That way, not using a notepad and having repeated informal conversations, the performative nature of the interaction was reduced to a minimum. It felt and feels that what was being said was in fact taken to heart rather than, quite literally, straight onto paper. At the very least on the surface, you avoid information collection appearing as the primary aim of the conversation. This way the person being talked to is no longer a vessel, a container ready for extraction, but an actual, real person. And this way, the conversation stops being a self-conscious performance – but a naturally flowing, unselfconscious, uncensored conversation; a talk between two people.

But not having a notepad or recording device has deeper implications, perhaps mostly for the ‘researcher’. My aim was to make conversation with people, and not change that context, the relationship between me and the other, by using a recording tool. Not only that, informal conversations are called informal conversations for a reason; the topics that are discussed, the things that are said and the manner in which they are said, let alone the setting in which everything takes place, is, you might guess *informal*. By recording or writing all these things down accurately and later on re-reading them, analysing them, it is extremely tempting for the researcher to take those words and have them become permanent, unalterable ‘facts’, *canonise* them. Why? Because it is surprisingly convenient and satisfying, not unlike ticking off a checklist after the desired or necessary items have been addressed. Really though, you were just ‘having a talk’ with someone. The most mundane thing might have caused the other to say something different, or nothing at all; perhaps only by virtue of having had a bad night’s sleep, being hungry, or feel uncomfortable for whatever reason. A conversation you have once with one person might well be different the second time around. So instead of interviewing as many people as possible one time, asking the same questions every time, I simply continued to have conversations with people *during* my time there. Different occasions, different people, different questions and topics discussed. Sometimes I would indeed float an idea, or make a suggestion. But rather than popping in a place for only a few days or even a few hours, this way it was possible to have a continuous dialogue, where both I and the other had time to digest the things that were talked about. With this in mind, it seems vain to have the contents of any one conversation made *canon*. This is not to say entire conversations should be discarded on the ground that they are untruthful. That is to miss the point. The point is to use some common sense and realise that what people think and say is fluid, not static. This way ‘facts’ are a matter of degree. Their value and meaning depends on their respective contexts and circumstances, which cannot fully be manipulated or accounted for.

One final remark on taking notes during conversations, something that hardly crossed my mind before going to Rajasthan. Growing up in Western Europe, literacy is taken for granted. In the community I spent time in, not everyone I talked to was literate. In rural Rajasthan in general illiteracy, or better said oral literacy, is not uncommon. This is not hard to understand historically, as large parts of Rajasthan support only a nomadic existence. In fact Rajasthan has a rich oral tradition, especially in terms of folklore. Komalda Khotari gives another striking example memory and illiteracy in folk musicians: "... the nomadic *Kalbelia* women who are illiterate can sing songs with thirty or forty or fifty lines with no memory lapses whatsoever, even though the order of the lines in the song remains totally fluid."<sup>7</sup> In my mind, at first oral literacy seemed a mere 'condition', that some people simply did not know, never learnt how to read and write. But through several encounters and the more I thought about this 'mere condition', the less I saw it simply as a 'lack of education', the impairing lack of a skill. Instead, I began to understand its implications on people's lives, how they interact and the fluidity of memory, words and ideas. To talk to people who don't read or write, and then write parts of conversations down as you're having them then not only strange or even disrespectful, it also alters or introduces a power-relation between you and the other. By taking notes I would *become* the interviewer, and the other person *becomes* the interviewee. I become a literate, 'educated' person, while the other remains an 'illiterate local'. It puts pressure on the other person to 'say the right things', pressure because I might be perceived as more knowledgeable, the expert. Again, this is likely to strain the flow of any conversation.

At the end of the day, I simply didn't want to be that person who would go in there, extract relevant information from as many people as possible about sanitation and then based on this brood a design on my own and present it to the community as 'the solution to your problems'. No, I wanted the process to have continuous input and continuous feedback, so that I wouldn't be that guy coming in there and telling people what's best for them. Of course I had my ready-made ideas, or at least notions of what would be feasible technically. But by training I was thinking mostly in, if you will, an ecological or efficiency rationality; not so much in terms of what people actually wanted, what suited their *personal* or individual needs. And that was precisely what I wanted to be open to; to come to understand that side.

What I realise more now is that what I wanted to do, what I did, was perhaps not completely forget and unlearn what I knew; aiming to do so is not only hopelessly naïve and pretentious but completely besides the point. Rather I wanted to try and start with a clean slate and try to come to an understanding of the way the people in this community thought about sanitation. So instead of juxtaposing every new thing I heard, learnt and started to understand with my own, trained ecological or technical rationality – or even try and give it a place in some theoretical framework – I simply wanted to try and take things in a non-dualistic way, not instantly labelling things in terms of good or bad, clever or dumb, feasible or impossible. I just wanted to hear people speak their mind, as unframed, unrestricted and unselfconscious as possible.

Of course this must sound overly idealistic, and of course that's not what happens all the time when you're listening to people and trying to understand their viewpoints and opinions. At times, and perhaps or even inevitably most of the time I would put mental tags on things coming out of a conversation, categorize them, think of possible solutions, etc. But what I didn't do – or to be fair rarely did – was interject these ideas or mental notes; I largely refrained from making them part of and influence the conversation. What I tried to avoid was letting my own projections, my ego, interfere by avoiding interjecting my assumed knowledge on the topics I would happen to have a conversation about with the other. And in doing so I avoided a twist or the creation of a power-relation.

So, informal conversations I felt were the right way to go about addressing and discussing the topic of sanitation. To maintain a natural flow by actually interacting and actively listening to the other seemed to make sense. Removing any recording devices and giving your full attention and energy to the other, to the conversation, rather than dividing it between him or her and a notepad created an unobtrusive setting. Giving the other your full attention is acknowledging the other as real, as an equal part in an *actual*, non-extractive conversation. But removing those recording devices is the easy part. Memory can be trained and customs can be learned. The hard part, really, is removing *yourself* from the conversation, from the interaction; your mind, your projections, your *ego*. That is not something not so easily done. Yet until you manage, most of what you will hear is what you want to hear, and what you will see is what you want to see.

## KNOWLEDGE, EGO and IGNORANCE

*A man's ignorance sometimes is not only useful, but beautiful, – while his knowledge, so called, is oftentimes worse than useless, besides being ugly. Which is the best man to deal with, – he who knows nothing about a subject, and, what is extremely rare, knows that he knows nothing, or he who really knows something about it, but thinks that he knows all?*

Henry David Thoreau<sup>1</sup>

The apparent advantages to being 'prepared', of 'knowing what to expect' seem all too obvious. So obvious, perhaps, that they make it very difficult to see the very real disadvantages. Having an idea of what to expect surely is useful, if anything so you know what to pack. But I think it makes little sense to assume you can jump in somewhere 'completely prepared', expecting if not everything, perhaps most things to go according to or fit in your pre-conceived plan, based on information that you probably didn't gather first-hand.

As mentioned earlier, any pre-conceived notion of how the situation will be 'on the ground' will make it harder to see things for what they are in their respective context. They become abstracted and made to fit in your personalised mental construct of where you are. 'Pre-research' creates an image in your head, a roster, a skeleton, with which you then see your new environment. And unless you are acutely aware of your mind's functioning, all components of that new environment will be pinned onto this existing roster. So before you've even entered your new environment, everything is already pre-arranged in your head, even if think it isn't. Upon arrival your mind frantically sets out to organise, going 'this is *this*', and 'that is *that*', instead of 'this *is*', and 'that *is*'. Your mind sets out to make sense of everything, to *know* everything. It wants to dissect and analyse and write and speak and externalise, all fuelled and built on what you already knew, or thought you knew. This makes it very difficult to get passed the knowing and begin understanding. Arguably, the process of critical dissection is necessary when doing research, but if anything it should be a *secondary* process, second to the *primary* process of simple, common-sense understanding and acceptance, seeing things for what they are. In much the same way previous 'knowledge' isn't a 'bad' thing. But it can become a huge hurdle between you and understanding. It requires a cautious mind and a humble personality to keep that previous knowledge as it is, one version of the story, and to see the new as new, rather than a function of the old.

If you enter a new place with a pre-conceived structure or concepts, a pre-conceived way of seeing things, making sense of things, categorizing things, then that which you see and experience in your new environment will be mere clothes with which you dress up that pre-conceived skeleton. You will end up cherry-picking elements and create your own picture instead of taking a step back to see the whole picture and take it as it *is*. And even if you refrain from going with a pre-conceived methodology, you will still bring with you the way you understand the world, how you make sense of reality, your way of interacting. The questions you will ask don't come from nowhere.

In my case, my efforts at the organisation did not require me to relate my experience, my findings and understandings to an external, academic context. I was not required to export this experience and translate it to fit into any methodology or theoretical framework. Instead the opposite was true. I had to internalise my environment first and foremost, and try to *import*, adapt something *external*, namely sanitation technology. I had to translate what I studied before into the language of the reality I was in. Still, to make things work, I had to unlearn first, dismantle my mental skeleton, my roster, and build a new one up in my new environment by coming to an understanding of it. And only then could I try to add the elements of my previous knowledge to this new skeleton.

This is why the importance of having *time* when you're 'in the field' cannot be stressed enough. Because it takes time to dismantle your roster, your mental skeleton, and time to build up a new one, to gain an understanding of your new reality. Time not to be fully planned, but time to be able to do things unhurried, time to just sit down and observe with no agenda. Enough time to be able to find yourself having nothing on your mind. This is easier said than done, especially when where you come from constant occupation and distraction is the norm; where time is so precious so little of it is spent; where doing 'nothing' is always a vice, never a virtue. It truly is a shame that more often than not it takes old age for anyone to be content with just sitting down with no purpose. Because when you have no purpose, you allow your mind to become quiet, allow your mind to stop discriminating what comes in.

Time, and having little previous *knowledge*. These two are probably the best ingredients to start to see things as they are. Because the more knowledge you have, or think you have, the harder it will become to let go of it, the harder it becomes not to relate what is in front of you, around you, to what is already in your head. The more knowledge you have, the more extensive your roster becomes, the more you will tend to connect what you see and experience with things you know. The more knowledge you have, the harder it becomes to unlearn. Unlearning and relearning, as was ideology of the organisation. Unlearn your pre-conceived notions and concepts, your pre-conceived what-is-what, and re-learn, learn and understand your immediate reality.

So instead of translating everything you see and experience into the 'language' you know already, learn and get a feeling for the local 'language'. Why? Because it is not possible to translate everything without twisting or losing some of its meaning. Languages are uneven; all too often there is no direct equivalent of a word one word in another language. You will simply have to understand that new word, and make it your own. Much the same way, there is a crucial difference between not only to start to speak in that new 'language' (to have knowledge, understanding your new reality), but to start to *think* in that new language (to have an understanding, a *feel*, understand circumstances in their local context). Because if you only try to understand with your rational self, not with your gut-feeling, your common sense, you will be hard-pressed to gain a genuine, indiscriminate understanding.

The thing is, previous knowledge in itself is not the real issue. It is both impossible and undesirable to keep a virgin mind, to prevent exposure, to prevent your surroundings from making a mark on you, shaping you. No, your mind, a tool for survival, is designed to be busy. It analyses, it discriminates, and so it accumulates. So a having a lot of time and little previous knowledge is not *the* answer. Surely it helps, but no, the real challenge is to leave whatever you have accumulated in your mind as it is. Leave it as it is, so that whatever new thing comes your way you are able to see as new without discrimination.

But this is extremely hard, because all that which your mind has accumulated is what you perceive as *you*, is what shapes you, is a huge part of your identity. Or at least that is what your ego tells you. To let go of all of that, to un-render that as all-important is difficult. It is your ego protecting itself, protecting your sense of self-importance and identity, telling you all that you have accumulated *is* important. Why? Because it allows you to make sense of your surroundings, *based on what you know already*. This way, it is your ego putting that previous knowledge on a pedestal, preventing you from seeing and understanding things for what they are, preventing you from listening to what people actually say. Your ego, bolstered by your previous knowledge blocks the road of coming to a genuine understanding of how things work on the ground, what people think, what they want (which really is not that different from what they in fact need). And in my case, before would I understand, before I would 'speak' the language, it would be extremely difficult to find a genuine solution, one that would work.



Every now and then I was aware of how my previous knowledge, my ego, popped up and snuck into conversations about figuring out what to build. This happened several times, and each time it took me by surprise. And only after several times came the point where I finally realised my ego was actually preventing me from accepting the best way to go about things. Not what *I* thought was most suitable technically or ecologically, not what *I* wanted to do based on what I had learnt in university. No. But what the staff and residents I was discussing with thought was best – not based on technical know-how but on personal and cultural preferences, and habit. And it was my job to facilitate those preferences, not go against them, not try and persuade anyone of anything.

Because quickly I learnt that most people didn't really care about the 'ecological functioning' of any design, the treatment efficiency of a wetland, how nutrients are cycled and why that should be considered important. All those technical and fancy terms I was so used to think in while at university, the terms which I would use to describe 'what we're doing' to outside visitors and donors, almost without failing lost their meaning like 'dew in the Rajasthani sun' while discussing solutions with those who would be living with them.<sup>2</sup>

Slowly my conceptual thinking dissipated. And as it dissipated, so it soon dawned on me that although all these technicalities mattered, at the same time they really didn't. I could name things whatever, but at the end of the day whatever it was that was going to be built, it simply had to work. With this conceptual thinking taking the backseat, I realised I was going to build this wetland for the people here, not for me. This may sound strange. After all, obviously that is what you're doing. Yes, of course. But in the process my ego had snuck in, if it hadn't been there all the time already. And so I found I had been arguing against what people actually wanted and accepted. That is, a solution which is most suitable or most-liked by them, something that will work (and most importantly continue to work) on the ground, here at the organisation – it's working being largely dependent on whether it is accepted. This is not necessarily the same as what you've learnt, what you know is possible, or what you know you can do. And as this happened, I suddenly realised that what I had actually been doing was finding a solution for myself, for my satisfaction – to model it after how I wanted it to be, how I learnt to build it, in theory, in concepts.

All the while I had tried to convince people to use source-separated, composting dry-toilets, arguing that in a semi-arid region flush-toilets made little sense, and that in such a hot and dry climate composting would be quick. But there was vehement opposition. They simply didn't accept them. The residents on campus were used to flush-toilets. Building dry-toilets now would be considered a huge step back. Not necessarily in terms of technology, but because of its implication; they would have to be emptied manually. And although I assured them they wouldn't smell, my word wasn't taken for it. Indeed, it was mine against theirs, and with no tangible case to present, why should they agree? So in the end we decided not to push for dry-toilets. Simple trenches with infiltration would have been the easiest solution, but surrounding soil was hard and clayey and riddled with hardpans. There was limited space and no accurate means of testing surface permeability, let alone check for sub-surface hardpans. Instead we decided to build a constructed wetland. The resources would be made available, and this way we would avoid constructing an entire new parallel sanitation system. Instead we could adapt the existing infrastructure, funnel the effluent in the extensive drip-irrigation system that was already in place, and demand little or no change in the residents' behaviour.

Occasionally Tarun quizzed me about the functioning of the wetland, saying that theory from a book doesn't guarantee its functioning on the ground. I would reply saying that the design was based on tests, that you simply need to make certain assumptions; that you got to start somewhere. I think both of us were right. But after a while I realised Tarun probably didn't question the technical functioning of the wetland, whether it *could* work *here* on the ground. What he was after was whether it *will*

work. That is, whether we can safely assume it will be used in the correct manner, and whether maintenance will be done. Just because something *can* work, that doesn't mean it *will*, not always, not everywhere. So all that time we were building the wetland, I, for myself, knew it *would* work if built properly. It took some time though to think beyond what I knew was possible, and to imagine also what would be *and* remain possible. It took some time to think beyond myself.

After this moment where I realised I'd been holding on to what I knew, being pushed along by my ego, I realised that the work I'd been doing the preceding first month on the dry-toilet had been all in vain, that it simply wasn't going to work. Well, not all in vain. After all that was what got the ball rolling. Besides, it taught me a valuable lesson.

Even though I fancied not taking full responsibility for it, as I wasn't the one initiating the project, admittedly, I did continue the construction of the dry-toilet. In doing so I conveniently ignored what could be 'read between the lines'; the reluctance that could be observed during the first meeting.<sup>3</sup>

But also during the construction process signals could be read, some less explicit than others. Towards the end of the construction process I had worked with several different masons, some speaking a few words of English, some none at all. Now here was a mason that spoke no English and I still no Hindi. I tried to explain how I wanted him to build the roof and windows of the dry-toilet. At first I gestured it to him, took the 'inchi-tape' and showed him the measurements. He nodded. I stepped back. Then he started building something quite different. So again I took the tape, this time piled up bricks to demonstrate what he should do. Again the smile and the nod. Again I stepped back, and again he started building something quite different. I figured perhaps it's too much to remember all at once, so I made a sketch on a piece of paper with all the measurements and I went over it with the mason, indicating which side of the structure corresponds to which image on the paper. Just to be sure, I did this three times.

When I came back the next day, optimistic, I soon learnt the mason had done his own thing. I wasn't sure what to think. After a few minutes I figured I should just accept it – that is, accept that the image I had in my head was not realised accurately. Ultimately an ego-thing, that didn't really matter much for the functioning of the structure. And even if it did, it probably didn't really matter as much as I thought it did. Afterwards I learnt that this particular mason was illiterate. That piece of paper I gave him was entirely meaningless, which perfectly explained why he had pocketed it the moment I finished the sketch and gave it back to me the following day.

This put me to think, and briefly made me question entire dry-toilet endeavour. Just as that piece of paper had no meaning to that mason, the dry-toilet we were building seemed to have no meaning at all to the people there, to those who were supposed to use it, be in charge of it. None of that had been pre-arranged. But those thoughts I soon pushed out, and continued anyway.

It's a wry process though; in the back of your head there's this nagging thought that you know it's not really, or even at all going to work. But you continue anyway because not finishing would be giving up, or more accurately, amounts to admitting that you were wrong. And of course you're not wrong. After all, it's a source-separated, composting dry-toilet, a very simple and clever solution to many problems. It's the people that are wrong, for not understanding that, for not wanting to use it. You talk yourself into this illusion, because you're so convinced it will work, which in theory is true. And because sometimes there are simply few other people to talk to who 'understand you', your reasoning – or whom you share a common language with in the first place. And as the dry-toilet snaked into its final stage of the construction, we had already started talking about and planning overhauling the existing sanitation system for the residences. So that euphoria experienced when nearly completing something, slowly but surely was swamped by a nagging feeling; the emerging realisation that all this time and effort was for nothing, that simply completing the construction is not the same as

actually succeeding. That completing the construction as going to be the end of it, not the beginning.

So what was the lesson learnt? All this forced me to reflect, and admit that I had made a mistake – a mistake in assuming that explicit consent and proper planning are crucial. A mistake in assuming that once the infrastructure is in place, acceptance and habit will follow and mind-sets will change. To some degree of course this is true. People want to see things before they believe them. At the same time you can't just go ahead with something if it isn't wanted in the first place. Awareness and acceptance and curiosity should go hand in hand with demonstration. Building anything is the easy part; convincing people to use what's been built and changing their perception and habit is the real challenge.

This is what should happen, this realisation, not just in my case, but with any project-gone-(or started)-wrong. The sad thing is many people probably refuse to admit it. Admitting you were wrong can be the hardest thing. Especially when you're a 'person of knowledge', armed with degrees and titles. Then it becomes hard to admit you were wrong, that you were not clever enough; not clever enough to foresee this failure. And why? Because you were too convinced of what you know, your solution.

Sadly, what happens often is that this mistake is not only not recognised (let alone admitted), but repeated. It is not an uncommon phenomenon in the world of 'development' – big money is spent on projects addressing one of the 'many problems' or hardships people in the 'developing world' face.<sup>4</sup> Big words are used to impress investors, politicians and academics alike. And much prestige is gained by being able to say you completed x amount of projects, and that your technology or effort is saving 'poor people's' lives in the 'underdeveloped' world. But not rarely are these problems wrongly contextualised and interpreted, causing the proposed solutions not to be real solutions, or worse, creating other, new problems.<sup>5</sup>

So again, despite obvious obstacles, building something is the easy part. The hard part really is figuring out what will *work*, deciding on something *together*, something that will work not theoretically but practically. The hard part is people; getting them genuinely involved, finding out what is acceptable and what will work best – and will continue to work – and reach a consensus on it. After all it's people's *behaviour*, their use of what is built, and its continued use and functioning through maintenance, which determines its success or defines it as a solution, whether it improves the situation.

This brings me to the following, the words which are so easy to understand, yet so hard to practice. That is, *nothing is a problem in itself*. There can only be a condition. And that condition only becomes a problem when it is decided it is so; decided by those living in and affected by this condition. In the very same way nothing is a solution in itself. No technology alone is a solution, and no construction of it is a success – especially not when it is simply handed on a silver platter. Only when people agree it is beneficial and experience it as such, use it, and continue to use it, does it become a solution. It is entirely open-ended, a process set in motion; no single step in the process defines it as a definite success.

But all too often it is not regarded as such, so that I myself, the people in government, NGOs or companies can pat themselves on the back, make a name for themselves, pamper their egos and continue receiving money and support for all the wrong reasons. And what is quickly forgotten are the people, who've changed into numbers on presentation slides, living in places which are unlikely to be visited again, to check whether the built 'solutions' are still solving 'their problems'.

This is why it's important to acknowledge two things. First, perhaps you don't know as much as you think you do. Perhaps the knowledge you do have is not as useful as you think it is. Perhaps that knowledge is actually working against you. The other is that you, as a researcher, as a counsellor, as a planner, as a person, you are very much

part of the whole process – acknowledge this, so that you may remove yourself, your ego, from it. Because what people need is not what looks the most beautiful, what sounds the most sophisticated and modern, what you've studied, published about or even invented, or what will impress your peers back home most. No, what people need is something that works, something they are willing to try, something that will keep on working. Preferably something that they can build and maintain, by themselves, without being dependent on anyone but themselves. So, if you manage to remove your ego and replace it with a good dose of pragmatism and common sense, you've already achieved a lot. Because with that awareness you are well equipped to avoid the pitfalls that are so obviously there, pitfalls which your ego and supposed knowledge prevent you from seeing.

Of course, it is easy for me to say all of this, to criticize based on so little knowledge experience. After all, at the moment of writing I am only a student. From what little theoretical knowledge I have gained in those years in educational institutions I cannot say – and hardly pretend – I am an expert in anything. Besides, this has only been my first experience 'in the field'. So why should my opinion matter? What authority do I have? What do I know? Not that much - I am quite ignorant really.

But if anything, I consider myself quite fortunate to be ignorant. It made it easier to admit I know little. I think I've been lucky having had no previous practical experience nor expectations to fall back on, and no theoretical framework or guidelines to go by. Lucky that I do not represent or have to answer to any institution, organisation or company – I do not have their ways to go by, their image to uphold or their interests to protect in the competitive world of the development industry. I don't have a position or image that is at stake. So I don't think it is experience that is all-important – in fact, the exact opposite might just be true.

It's the principle that counts here, that the more knowledge and experience you have, or you think you have, the harder it becomes to admit your ignorance. The harder it becomes to see things as they are, not as a reflection of your mind. The harder it becomes to reflect on whether what you are doing in the field is in fact beneficial to those whom it is supposed to be. The harder it becomes to be critical of your actions, which you would otherwise justify through some 'proven' method or formula. And the harder it becomes to change your methods, habits, yourself, in favour of those you are supposed to be assisting – because you think you know already, because it is your ego is talking and thinking and doing.

## PATIENCE, TIME and JUGAAD

*No people whose word for 'yesterday' is the same as their word for 'tomorrow' can be said to have a firm grip on the time.*

Salman Rushdie<sup>1</sup>

*Proximity is not alien to us in India. We are able to speak at some length.*

Amartya Sen<sup>2</sup>

To use common sense, to dress well, behave well, communicate, see, listen and understand, you need patience. Patience to let all these things manifest themselves; patience with yourself; patience to let go of your mind's constructs. Patience to take things as they come and to make do with what is at hand. Patience to let people get used to you, your presence, and the new ideas you are trying to introduce. But also patience with those who seem to run on a different time and with those who think you a fool for asking questions. And perhaps above all, patience with those who love to talk and argue without end, who love to give you their heart-felt opinion on every single matter.

Patience truly is one of those things you cannot have enough of, especially when in India. But what does it take to be patient? Well, for one, it is quite useful to understand how patience is – perhaps entirely – dependent on your conception of time, and expectations you create.

Probably the first test of patience for anyone coming to India is in dealing with the boundless elasticity of time, the other-worldly clock which everything and everyone seems to run by – not GMT but IFT; Indian Flexible Time. No matter whether a day is divided in 24 hours, the speed with which it passes is determined solely by your mind. Westerners in particular find this hard to grasp, and cling to time indications such 'today', 'this hour', or even 'right now' as a drowning person clings to a buoy in turbulent waters of unfathomable depth. The mistake is to connect these concepts with pre-imagined durations of time, and so you find people or things to be slow at best, or unreliable, lazy, or even untruthful at worst.

But after a while you might realise this mistake, and start to see time in a different light. At least, that is what should happen, if you plan on remaining sane and stress-free. To think in terms of anything or anyone being slow or fast is to create a mental projection, to decide how much time something *should* or *could* take, instead of just accepting how much time something *will* take, and letting things 'take their time'. Things happen when they happen. Things finish when they finish. When exactly more often than not is irrelevant. What matters really is *whether* that which has to be done is set in motion.

Once this is understood, time takes on an entirely different meaning and form. You will start to see that it is always *today* – never yesterday or tomorrow. And this makes it a lot easier to understand and accept that *tomorrow* not necessarily means the day after today, but simply *not today*. This may be blindingly obvious. To me this understanding of time became very clear with the learning of some Hindi. When I asked what word is used for tomorrow, I was told 'kal'. When I asked what word was used for yesterday, I was told 'kal' – at least, that's how the people there seemed to use it. This way, tomorrow or yesterday is indicated 'one day away' or simply as *not today*. In a similar way, the meaning of *now* also differs. *Now* doesn't necessarily mean *right now*. Consider yourself exceptionally lucky if it does. All too often now simply means whatever is supposed to happen is (or will be) set in progress, and will probably happen soon, with luck before lunch.'

So really, there is only *today*, which of course is true; nothing ever happens tomorrow. Understanding this – and living by this – is immensely liberating. Letting go of that buoy you suddenly find that turbulent water to be calm, and yourself floating in

peace. This is how I soon came to use the 4 ubiquitous time indications – *aaq* (today), which would either be *before* or *after lunch*, and *kal*, which practically meant anything not today.

Now I often found myself unable to accurately answer questions the most basic questions. When will the work be done? '*Kal*'. When will the building materials arrive? '*Kal*'. What time will people show up for work? '*Maybe before lunch, if at all*'. But more often than not there was no point asking in the first place. And so after stopping to ask, I was taken by surprise when on one good day the grey-water infiltration trench for the mess was finished. I realised I had started to focus on each day alone – work as much as we can – rather than focus on the completion, the final moment. It is quite liberating not to connect that finishing stage to a moment in time. It will be done when it is done. After all, there is always tomorrow.

Of course all this sounds overly romanticised. And of course not everything was as elusive. With many things people seemed religiously punctual or precise. Food, for instance. That is, lunchtime, chai time and dinnertime were keenly observed. But then you can't work on an empty stomach. Also, being in charge of several projects, I was to keep count of people's attendance, keep check of expenses and the arrival of building materials. All this went into an extensive accounting document, accurate to the date.

So it would be a mistake to romanticise time. Of course people have a calendar to go by, and a planning of sorts. But this seemed determined more by the rhythm of the day and the seasons, rather than the dial of a clock – especially in the countryside. Wanting to know exactly when something will happen – if it will happen at all – creates expectations. And expectations, when not met, lead to disappointment and frustration. What I simply felt people understood very well was that something unexpected could always come up; expectations or projections ought to be taken with a grain of salt, because uncertainty is certain.

And indeed, a lot of unforeseeable things tended to come up. But while this made planning difficult, it made seeing the elasticity of time and embracing uncertainty easier. Looking back, something going 'according to plan' was a rare exception to the general rule of things taking their own course. What I had in mind, be it a timeline or a construction plan rarely materialised in the exact same way. Here too, patience proved to be a virtue.

Of all the factors that determined the progress of planning and construction – and there were many – there were practically zero on which I could exert any tangible influence. Even Raju at the metal workshop, who would generally be very happy – and quick – to help me with anything I needed, would have his hands strapped when there was no electricity. That said, a daily visit with an innocent bribe in the form of some sweets or *namkeen* did seem to coax him to deliver faster, or at least promise to do so more often. But other things were beyond control. Every morning would be a surprise to see which of the workers showed up. Often sickness in the family, someone who'd have to be taken care off, be it a distant cousin, caused a mason not to show up for a few days. This was often completely unannounced. One of the workers once had a quarrel with her husband and didn't show up for a while. We found out from her mother who was sent as a replacement. During the harvesting period just before the *Diwali* festival, it was almost impossible to get any labour as most people would be out in the field taking in their crops. Depending on the religion, in case of death in the family a fixed mourning period is strictly observed during which everything but family seemed to be put on hold. Similarly, sometimes people would be gone for several days to attend a wedding. Again, work was put on hold.

In most of these cases, I noticed that it was the social life, the private life of the people I worked with taking precedence over their 'professional' life, over work. That said, the two perhaps were simply intertwined. Someone being away for a couple of days for a family matter was just not frowned upon at all – that was just the way it was. Work

is important, but so is life with all its surprises and uncertainties. And so time-planning was constantly subject to change, subject to things that happened beyond control.

Much the same way, construction plans seemed to change without end. If it wasn't due to the constant re-evaluation of plans – arguing over what would in fact work – it was the unsteady flow or even lack of building material. That, or something or another that we encountered during the construction process which forced us to overhaul the plans. This way, there was lots of arguing back and forth over what level of maintenance we should expect of people – to what extent we should simplify the construction of the wetland to make it as easy to maintain as possible, whether or not we should include a pump in the design, etc. Then, when we finally decided on a design and started digging for the septic tank, the machine hit a layer of rock before we reached the required depth. Since there was no space to put the septic tank anywhere else, we were forced to recalculate and resize the entire system. Similar events tended to happen on a regular basis.

In colloquial Hindi there's a word to describe this way of 'improvising' – *jugaad*, which could be translated to 'improvising', or to be 'innovative'. It is used to reflect the ability to make do, to find a solution with the limited or uncertain resources at hand. This did seem to cause many to cause nearly anyone to be able to provide expert advice on nearly anything – although perhaps this should be considered in the context of a distinctively Indian tendency to have an opinion on nearly anything, and the strong desire to express that opinion. But despite this it was beautiful to see people's ability to improvise. Although not only that. Because this ability to get by and be creative with frugal means could not be without an attitude of acceptance towards unexpected conditions or situations and an openness of mind to differing explanations and solutions. Indeed, in trying to understand this open-minded attitude, Amartya Sen offers a refreshing insight when championing India's tradition of heterodoxy;

It can (..) be claimed that the simultaneous flourishing of many different convictions and viewpoints in India has drawn substantially on the acceptance – explicitly or by implication – of heterodoxy and dialogue. The reach on Indian heterodoxy is remarkably extensive and ubiquitous.<sup>3</sup>

The contemporary relevance of the dialogic tradition and of the acceptance of heterodoxy is hard to exaggerate. Discussions and arguments are critically important for democracy and public reasoning. They are central to the practice of secularism and for even-handed treatment of adherents of different religious faiths (including those who have no religious beliefs). Going beyond these basic structural priorities, the argumentative tradition, if used with deliberation and commitment, can also be extremely important in resisting social inequalities and in removing poverty and deprivation. Voice is a crucial component of the pursuit of social justice.<sup>4</sup>

Amartya Sen

Reading this, it is not hard to imagine how a distinctively Indian tradition of heterodoxy has ingrained an attitude of discussion and open-mindedness. This should not however, be understood as an attitude of unquestioning acceptance but rather as one of indiscriminate yet critical understanding. This then is manifested not only in politics and society at large, but also in people's attitude in general towards dealing with everyday problems and looking for solutions. To me it seems this attitude, together with accepting the elasticity of time and the cultivation of patience are yet other manifestations of common sense, the refusal to accept singular formulas. Using common sense helped me tremendously in adapting to a new environment. And this in

turn aided me in coming to an understanding of this environment and the people living in it.



## EPILOGUE

At around 6:30 in the morning, from the top of the hill in the middle of the village you can see an orange shimmer climb up and slowly turn into a fiery sphere. You can also see the people of the village walking towards a field at the foot of the hill, carrying a bottle. They are not going there to have a drink and socialise – they are going to relieve themselves, out in the bushes.

These people, by the way, are all men and boys. Women you won't see doing this when it's daylight out. In fact, you don't see them doing it at all. They would almost have you believe the stories you're told when you're younger, involving roses or other flowers. No, the women get up early, well before sunrise, and have started their morning routine – collecting water, making fire, and preparing breakfast – before any man or boy fills up his bottle.

And the sun... the sun makes sure that whatever is left behind in the field dries up in an instant. No smell, no trace.

So, is it really an absolute evil, open defecation?

Most of Rajasthan is semi-arid or desert area. Many diseases or pests present in different climates and geographical areas, especially waterborne diseases, are not as much of a problem here. Compare this to a state such as Bihar, which receives plenty of rainfall and is subject to annual flooding. Also especially in rural areas, where the population density is far lower as compared to urban areas, it is not hard to imagine that open defecation in small village in semi-arid Rajasthan, is indeed not such a bad thing. Little water is used. It is nutrient cycling in its purest form. No infrastructure needs to be built. No one caste, no entire segment of society is forced to maintain that infrastructure. It could be considered as egalitarian sanitation.

Many people indeed, though probably mostly men, prefer open defecation to using a toilet. To put it in a pragmatic way; a morning crap is a morning walk also. Why have a toilet when you can go out in the open and enjoy the scenery? No cleaning required. Isn't it strange in fact to have a little room in your house, where you lock yourself up to relieve yourself? It requires thorough routine cleaning and is prone to smell bad. Does it make sense to flush down 10L of water each time you use your toilet, especially in a semi-arid region? Or otherwise to build a dry-toilet that someone will still need to empty out regularly, in all likelihood manually?

Of course it is important not to understate or ignore the many health hazards and social problems open defecation and poor sanitary conditions *can* cause. Especially in densely populated areas or in wet climates the results can be rampant. And, for the very young, the old, the sick and the disabled, having to walk several minutes to relieve themselves can be an enormous obstacle. Not to mention the risks women may be exposed to when they go out before or after daylight.

The point however is that although these are very real problems, they do not apply everywhere to the same degree, if at all. So it is useful indeed not to adopt a rigid position regarding sanitation. This makes it easier to evaluate each context individually, and so to look beyond a single formula of answers and solutions.

How did my perception of sanitation change through the way I went about things? Well, as just mentioned, I've come to understand that in each situation, sanitation ought to be carefully reconsidered. Geographically, climatically, culturally and behaviourally conditions will vary. And, simply put, sanitation simply means different things to different people, even within the same community. To some it means public health, to

## EPILOGUE

others it plays an indispensable part in ecological reasoning. Some will see it as a matter of expanding infrastructure where others as a matter of changing perceptions and behaviour. For some it is a sore in the eye of gender equality, or perpetuating discrimination against differently-abled people, or the young or the old. For some it is their calling where for others it signifies a living hell and centuries of suffering. Yet for many sanitation is a taboo, or doesn't mean anything at all as it's hardly been given it any thought. All these different meanings or understandings are equally real and valid. All of them co-exist.

So, again, how did *my perception* change? On the one hand, I think this question is not that important. Because I feel what matters not so much is whether anyone's perception *changes* from one to the other, but instead whether all the different meanings and understandings are *understood* and *respected*, so that any problems can be adequately addressed. On the other hand, I cannot but admit that through this experience I found that the real challenge of sanitation lies not so much in technology, but in behaviour, in people.

## FINAL REMARKS

*In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few.*

Shunryu Suzuki<sup>1</sup>

I feel lucky to have gone to Rajasthan without a plan, without many expectations. It would have been very difficult to try and keep an open mind had there been a pre-determined plan. It would have been difficult to try and use common sense first, before opening up a textbook and looking for guidelines and instructions. I don't mean to say that one way is always good, and the other always bad. Without some of the knowledge I've gained in my formal education, I doubt it would have been possible to do all of this. But without having tried to use some common sense, I would have exactly the same doubts.

A rigid approach, no matter which school of thought, simply didn't feel to make much sense, neither in phrasing nor resolving the problem at hand. It didn't feel like it made any sense to treat the people you live and work with as subjects, objects, carriers of information to be amassed and later on neatly divided in neat categories from which a neat conclusion could be distilled, no matter how eloquently and diligently justified by whatever benevolent method. It didn't feel like it made sense to pretend to be scientific, to cut out the human part when dealing with humans, not to acknowledge and include the human dimension in my work, and above all, not to regard this common-sense attitude as a valid method of inquiring and going about things.

Again, I'm not saying that the way I went about things was *the* right way, let alone the *only* right way. But I also don't think it was the wrong way. The way I went about gathering information, understanding the people, finding out what's what, I went along with because it seemed to make a lot of sense – a lot more sense – especially given the circumstances and the topic of sanitation. What I simply feel is that through using *any* method, whether pre-determined or not, whether positivist or constructivist, you forego genuine empathy, selflessness; you cloud your mind and cut your common-sense. Openness of mind is not something you *learn*, or *study*, or *say* or *write* or *decide on*; it is something you *practice*. Textbooks cannot teach you. Neither will you learn it from one formula, nor from two or even a hundred. There is an undeniable human dimension to doing fieldwork, and this demands unbridled empathy of the would-be observer. So no matter how 'humane' or 'participatory' or 'bottom-up' or 'all-inclusive' or 'as-close-to-the-truth-as-possible' your method or framework is, if you dogmatically stick to any method you will end up doing exactly the same as anyone else choosing any other method<sup>2</sup> – merely colour in a pre-existing outline using a benevolent yet arbitrary colour. That, instead of trying to draw a unique picture altogether by seeing and thinking for yourself.

Admittedly, the tone of this writing is perhaps a bit antagonistic, and some might feel indifferent, uneasy or even insulted. But why? Is it because using 'common sense' is not an acceptable means of going about things? Or because admitting that there is no sure, clear or best way to go about things is simply frightening, disempowering. Because it undermines that which would otherwise give structure, meaning and purpose? Or maybe it's just because some think to have too much knowledge, keeping closed what could otherwise be an open mind.

Or is it because you are not supposed to 'exist'? That we are not supposed to play any role in whatever it is we are doing or writing? Because we learn to minimise our bias, exclude ourselves and so forth. So we think of all sorts of methods and techniques to minimize ourselves, to hide behind. We say 'because I follow these rules, I am now no longer part of the process. Some even go so far in pretending to be

‘objective’ they remove the *I* in their writing, and instead speak of ‘the author’ or ‘one’, as though the ‘I’ does not exist, as if the I was never there. Yet they, just as much as those who don’t pretend, proudly claim authorship of our writing.

But obviously we were there, and we are still there. So instead of hiding behind those methods and techniques, it would be extremely helpful to understand ourselves first, and the influence we exert. Because it is simply not possible to be completely outside of that which we engage in. So acknowledge yourself, your presence, your influence. And once we are aware of ourselves, we can account for ourselves. Then we can and begin to see how we influence that which we engage in, and see how we are in fact a part of it. Because if you want to claim that something is true, you will have to be completely honest. And when you are completely honest you will see that because you are the one who is formulating this truth, you are actually the one that is making it true. You, your entire person, is part of this truth. Even if you claim to find something through supposedly objective means, it is still you who formulated the problem, you who went looking for answers, and you who framed the findings. But this takes tremendous awareness, and honesty, and humbleness, and an open mind and a pliable ego and patience and common sense. It is not easy, even though it is truly effortless.

Common sense, common sense. What is it really? It is not something you can really put your finger on it seems. Not something tangible, not something quantifiable. And what does it really mean? It probably means many different things for many different people. In that sense the term seems rather useless. So why did I use it?

Just looking at the words, common sense, it seems to me that it is a way of making sense of things, of reality, a way that is common to everyone – everyone, regardless of the hundreds and thousands of categories we have made up to distinguish ourselves, set ourselves apart, and all that which surrounds us; categories through which we invent ‘the other’, categories which are imprinted on our minds from the day we are born. It is a way of seeing which every human has inside of him or her, something everyone has the potential to; to see anything *selflessly*, with a truly open, indiscriminate mind. This I think is precisely what it means to be human.

It is not something you acquire by study, at least not by adding new knowledge to that vast library that is your mind. Rather the opposite. Probably the more knowledge and experience you have, the more baggage you drag along always, the harder it becomes to use your common sense, let alone cultivate it. It requires openness of mind and the absence of judgement. By judgement I don’t mean stating that something is either good or bad, but simply stating that something is *this*, or is *that* – conceptualising, discriminating. And how can you not judge when you have so much knowledge in your head, knowledge which you use to relate any new experience to a past experience, a memory, a pre-conceived notion or symbol – knowledge which, in doing so, prevents you from seeing the new as new. Of course some of this knowledge is valuable, and indeed we couldn’t survive without it – the kind of knowledge we use in our daily lives, to get around, to survive. But that’s not the kind of knowledge I am referring to as a potential burden. It is that other kind of knowledge, which only covers up what is inside. It creates not openness of mind, but a closed mind.

Why am I so adamant about using common sense? Because I feel presently common sense is both much undervalued, and much underused, especially in formal education. Because I think we are getting so used to following rules and guidelines and formulas and theories and pre-determined paths that we forget to learn from direct experience, that we forget to see things for ourselves first with our own eyes, that we forget to make our own mistakes. We make it difficult for ourselves to learn from direct experience. We make it difficult for ourselves to see things for what they are. Instead, we see things, events, people for what we *think* they are, *conceptually*, not *substantially*. And we justify this ‘think first’ attitude because that’s all we know, because we are told to do so. We feel so

comforted by *knowing* what something is, that we forget to actually *understand* what something is.

Of course I don't mean to say that all science and academia is futile. No, these can be extremely useful in communicating ideas, the carrier for which is language, words. Indeed, without words it would be hard to communicate everything we want to communicate. But words are symbols, a conceptualisation, an abstraction of reality they are meant to represent. And concepts and abstractions exist only in the human mind, not in reality. This way any representation of reality is inherently inaccurate. Representation is not absolute; it is merely approximation, which can never entirely substitute direct experience. And so by taking mere words for reality you in fact forego reality. Words and concepts can only be aids at best. But seeing and experiencing you can only do for yourself.

This is why my case for common sense and open-mindedness. Because without common sense, without direct awareness, you will not be able to go beyond the ideation of reality – you will not be able to go beyond your mind and indiscriminately see things for what they are. And that is just a pity. Even more so because this is supposed to be the *raison d'être* of science and academia, to 'uncover truth'. Yet we get so hung up on talking and thinking about what is real that we fail to see it.

Now, I have said more than enough already. I would like to end with two passages from two great minds.

*We can never dispense with language and the other symbol systems; for it is by means of them, and only by their means, that we have raised ourselves above the brutes, to the level of human beings. But we can easily become the victims as well as the beneficiaries of these systems. We must learn how to handle words effectively; but at the same time we must preserve and, if necessary, intensify our ability to look at the world directly and not through that half-opaque medium of concepts, which distorts every given fact into the all-too-familiar likeness of some generic label or explanatory abstraction.*

(...)

*In a world where education is predominantly verbal, highly educated people find it all but impossible to pay serious attention to anything but words and notions. There is always money for, there are always doctorates in, the learned foolery of research into what, for scholars, is the all-important problem: Who influenced whom to say what when? Even in this age of technology, the verbal Humanities are honoured. The non-verbal humanities, the arts of being directly aware of the given facts of our existence, are almost completely ignored. A catalogue, a bibliography, a definitive edition of a third-rate versifier's ipsissima verba, a stupendous index to end all indexes – any genuine Alexandrian project is sure of approval and financial support. But when it comes to finding out how you and I, our children and grandchildren, may become more perceptive, more intensely aware of inward and outward reality, more open to the Spirit, less apt, by psychological malpractices, to make ourselves physically ill, and more capable of controlling our own autonomic nervous system – when it comes to any form of non-verbal education more fundamental (and more likely to be of some practical use) than Swedish Drill, no really respectable person in any really respectable university of church will do anything about it.*

(...)

*Systematic reasoning is something we could not, as a species or as individuals, possibly do without. But neither, if we are to remain sane, can we possibly do without direct perception, the more unsystematic the better, of the inner and outer worlds into which we have been born."*

Aldous Huxley<sup>3</sup>

*There are other letters for a child to learn than those which Cadmus invented. The Spaniards have a good term to express this wild and dusky knowledge, Gramática parda, tawny grammar, a kind of mother-wit derived from that same leopard to which I have referred.*

*We have heard of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. It is said that knowledge is power, and the like. Methinks there is equal need of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Ignorance, what we will call Beautiful Knowledge, a knowledge useful in a higher sense: for what is most of our boasted so-called knowledge but a conceit that we know something, which robs us of the advantage of our actual ignorance? What we call knowledge is often our positive ignorance; ignorance our negative knowledge. By long years of patient industry and reading of the newspapers, – for what are the libraries of science but files of newspapers? – a man accumulates a myriad facts, lays them up in his memory, and then when in some spring*

## FINAL REMARKS

*of his life he saunters abroad into the Great Fields of thought, he, as it were, goes to grass like a horse and leaves all his harness behind in the stable. I would say to the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, sometimes, – Go to grass. You have eaten hay long enough. The spring has come with its green crop. The very cows are driven to their country pastures before the end of May; though I have heard of one unnatural farmer who kept his cow in the barn and fed her on hay all the year round. So, frequently, the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge treats its cattle.*

Henry David Thoreau<sup>4</sup>



## NOTES and REFERENCES

### Opening Quotes

1. Nigel Barley, *The Innocent Anthropologist* (1986), pp. 9-10
2. Aldous Huxley, Foreword, in: J. Krishnamurti, *The First and Last Freedom – With a foreword by Aldous Huxley* (1975), p. 11
3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836), in: *Nature / Ralph Waldo Emerson. Walking / Henry David Thoreau, introduction by John Elder* (1992), p. 39

### Preface

1. In a nutshell, these two opposing options represent the 'positivist' and the 'constructivist' research methodologies within the social sciences, the latter especially embraced by a particular branch of constructivist methodology called 'grounded theory'.

### Common Sense through an Open Mind

1. Aldous Huxley & J. Krishnamurti, Foreword, in: J. Krishnamurti, *The First and Last Freedom – With a foreword by Aldous Huxley* (1975), p.13
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, (1836), in: *Nature / Ralph Waldo Emerson. Walking / Henry David Thoreau, introduction by John Elder* (1992), p.58
3. Nigel Barley, *The Innocent Anthropologist* (1986), p. 11
4. Aldous Huxley, Foreword, in: J. Krishnamurti, *The First and Last Freedom – With a foreword by Aldous Huxley* (1975), p. 9
5. Nigel Barley, *The Innocent Anthropologist* (1986), p. 9
6. And even though data might not be collected in the image of a pre-conceived theory, method or perspective, certainly that does not mean this 'raw' data remains unstained of the researcher's personality. Besides, what is the required quantity and quality of empirical data to be collected before it can be said to amount to a 'representative' sample? And to what extent does actively 'searching' or 'collecting' affect the nature of the data, if not completely?

### Words and Actions

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836), in: *Nature / Ralph Waldo Emerson. Walking / Henry David Thoreau, introduction by John Elder* (1992), p.39
2. Here I have to admit my ignorance as to the specific functioning of caste in India when it comes to religions other than Hinduism. This was as much as I found out.
3. Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian – Writings on Indian culture, history and identity* (2005), Ch. 10 Class in India

### Real People

1. Nigel Barley, *The Innocent Anthropologist* (1986), p. 8
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, (1836), in: *Nature / Ralph Waldo Emerson. Walking / Henry David Thoreau, introduction by John Elder* (1992), p. 44
3. Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (1954), p. 13
4. Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), First published by Charles Scribners Sons, Ch. 16
5. Founder of NGO in Rajasthan, Personal communication, October 2013
6. *Ibid.*



### Conversations and Listening

1. J. Krishnamurti, *The First and Last Freedom – With a foreword by Aldous Huxley* (1975), pp. 19-20
2. Rustom Bharucha, *Rajasthan an Oral History – Conversations with Komal Kothari* (2003), p. 7  
Bharucha's book is "the outcome of many hours of conversation with Komal Kothari over a two-year period" (p. vii). It is based on transcriptions from these conversations, which involved careful listening. Bharucha concedes; "I had wanted a verbatim account of Komal's discourse, which was provided by a stenographer with admittedly meticulous copying abilities, but no comprehension of what had been said. Stenographic copying, as became only too evident from the gibberish, does not result in a transcription" (p.10). Much the same way, formulating and asking pre-set questions, no matter how open, do not result in 'meticulous' answers. They are no substitute for careful, active listening.
3. Conversations like this are a slap in the face. What would be impossible for most to imagine is in fact brute reality for others. And this is but a singular instance, one result of something systematic and perpetual, a dark undercurrent of Indian society in which millions of people find themselves unable to swim against, trapped. And yet many indulge in writing about sanitation, talking about it with complete abstraction from and empathetic ignorance of this reality.
4. Barbara Waters, *How to Talk to Practically Anyone About Practically Anything*, (1979)
5. Rustom Bharucha, *Rajasthan an Oral History – Conversations with Komal Kothari* (2003), p. 24
6. *Ibid.*, p. 9
7. *Ibid.*, p. 24

### Knowledge, Ego and Ignorance

1. Henri David Thoreau, *Walking* (1862), in: Nature / Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Walking / Henry David Thoreau*, introduction by John Elder (1992), p. 113
2. These *concepts* seemed to mean 'nothing' in the context of sanitation, because what it would come down to was human scavenging; handling human waste to use for compost. But although there was no talk of nutrient cycling in general, this was general knowledge for most in the village. Among farmers it was widely practiced, reusing manure. Indeed, when starting a tree nursery we soon learnt that manure, especially goat manure was a precious resource with a rich trade. Haggling down the price on 2 bags of goat manure was no easy thing. Much the same way no food seemed ever wasted, going directly to the animals belonging to each household. Many times too I saw women diligently collect fresh cow-paddies with their bare hands, to use for plaster or make dung-cakes out of to burn. So the awareness of nutrient cycling was very much ingrained. It appeared to be such a matter-of-fact thing that talking about the 'concept' of nutrient cycling seemed utterly silly. Only human manure seemed a no-go; not a resource but a nuisance, a taboo, the physical manifestation and memory of discrimination and suffering, or something 'others' dealt with. But even that wouldn't be completely accurate. Because when I asked where the contents of the septic tanks in use were being dumped, Tarun mentioned that any farmer would be happy to have a pump-truck being emptied over their fields. It seemed the actual *handling*, physically touching human excreta was 'not done', to put it lightly. This understanding was confirmed when several members of the community at the NGO mentioned that using a pump to empty the septic tanks was acceptable, and that they would be willing to help out. And once a pump and tanker were built, they indeed did.
3. It was meant to be a demonstration unit to promote 'ecological sanitation', so people could get used to it. Two people working for a permaculture organisation in Brazil were asked to start this project. I was supposed to help. They had just come from the state of Bihar, where they joined an NGO promoting and constructing source-separated, composting dry-toilets, working in a 'participatory' and

‘decentralised’ approach. But in a later phone-conversation, the founder of this NGO conceded that acceptance was slow, and the process was a long and slow battle. Now the two came to Rajasthan hoping to repeat the same.

But conditions aren’t the same. The state of Bihar witnesses annual flooding. It is a wet and humid state where people are all too familiar with water-borne diseases. The climatic conditions and people’s experiences with these diseases create a context completely different from that to Rajasthan, most parts of which are semi-arid or desert. Here, water-borne diseases hardly present any problem. Open defecation too, at least for most part of the year, from a health-perspective is no problem. Heat, low humidity and little rain play their part. So where the advantages of using a dry-toilet in a state like Bihar might ultimately be considered tangible enough to offset its disadvantages, in Tilonia this was hardly the case. Also, most importantly, the dry-toilets built in Bihar were usually just for one family of subsistence farmers. They were not shared, public toilets as would be the case with that first demonstration model in on the Barefoot campus.

Before starting any construction however, the two from Brazil were adamant about having meetings with the staff to discuss with them the possibilities and what they thought was best; it would have to be *their* choice. But the meeting kept on being postponed. And when it finally happened, mild indifference and reluctance wasn’t too difficult to observe. The reservations against these dry-toilets, as I slowly find out about two or three weeks into the construction process, were never explicitly uttered. No-one during that group meeting raised their voices, perhaps not *daring* to criticise or confront. Perhaps because it was a group-setting. Perhaps because this project was set in motion by Bunker Roy, the head of the organisation, the man they all respected so much. And if things looked bleak already, they became more so when it was decided in the end that the dry-toilet would be built in a far and awkward corner of the campus, away from the newly built training centre. Why? Because there was no rubble there, we wouldn’t be in the way of anything or anyone, and so construction could start immediately.

This served as an illustration of the fact that you cannot simply copy-paste either methodology or technology. Conditions are rarely identical, and without a proper understanding of the local context and power-structures, using ‘proven’ method easily leads to auto-piloted non-critical implementation. Doing this ‘groundwork’ first may be a lengthy and tiring process, much less exciting than any implementation stage, but it is essential to the success of any research or project.

4. In his talk ‘What happens when an NGO admits failure’ (2011), David Damberger, points out several mistakes NGOs make in their development work and discusses how we should learn from them.
5. Of course the criticism I am uttering is not new; there have been many others who observed the issues arising from copy-pasting methodology or the transferring of appropriate technology. My aim however is not to make a comprehensive list of their different findings and discuss them, point out what went wrong. I would only be able to *say* something about another person’s interpretation. No, my point is simply to provide a reflection on my own experience and use this as a case not in an attempt to make any methodology, approach or formula more streamlined, more seamlessly fitting. Rather the point is to put into question using *any* pre-determined method, and instead use your ‘common sense’, evaluate each situation as it is.

### **Time, Patience and Jugaad**

1. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* (1981)
2. Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian – Writings on Indian culture, history and identity* (2005), p. 3
3. *Ibid.*, p. ix

4. *Ibid.*, p. xiii

**Final Remarks**

1. Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (1970), p. 21
2. It wouldn't be much of a stretch to dub the way I went about things in Rajasthan as 'participant observation' as used in ethnology and cultural anthropology. But whether or not that is the case is irrelevant and completely beside the point. The point is to show that no method, however suitable, is a substitute for having an open mind and using common sense; no method is a substitute to a critical attitude towards your own mind.
3. Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (1954), pp. 60 – 63
4. Henri David Thoreau, *Walking* (1862), in: *Nature* / Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Walking* / Henry David Thoreau, introduction by John Elder (1992), p. 111 - 112

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