

The Beginning of a New Journey!

(#LPRD# A Field Worker's Diary [#Part 47](#) # 18 September 2020)

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Undertaking a journey like this was a rare opportunity! In fact, I am not talking about my journey as a field worker. I am talking about the journey that led me to be selected as a field worker. After completing my MBA in 2002, I was working as a part-time lecturer in a college, when I came across a notification for a job as a community coordinator in the Andhra Pradesh Rural Poverty Reduction Project and applied for it. The gist of the notification was that young women or men who had completed post graduation and were interested in working in the rural areas can apply for the job.

After applying, our selection was done in 5 stages. Written exam, group discussion were followed by village immersion. Later, we had been interviewed by the Project Director and the District Collector. Once the group discussion was completed, those who were selected in it received letters to come to the Guntur Project office for a 3-day **Village Immersion** at a village allotted to us by the project. I went from my hometown Repalle to Guntur (in Andhra Pradesh) with my uncle. As I don't have father or brothers, my uncle used to personally take me wherever I needed to go. On going to the project office, they told all of us that they have allotted one village each, and that we had to go and stay there for three days and report back to the office on the fourth day.

We were all given sealed covers and were told to give it to a person in our respective village whose name was written on it. On the day of our return, we would get another sealed cover from that same person which we had to bring to the office. There were some other conditions as well. We must not say in the village that we were from a government project. The person to whom we will handover our sealed covers will not provide us with any living arrangements. We had to make our own arrangements. We should not take anyone along with us. We had to go alone.

The village allotted to me was Perumallapalli in Vinukonda mandal in Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. My uncle had asked me doubtfully if I was capable of going alone. In fact, until then I had never traveled alone anywhere except with family. I said I would go anyway. Before I could take the sealed cover and start my adventure, my uncle had

wandered all across the office campus and brought a man along with him to me. My uncle explained that even he had applied for the same job. Apparently, he was also allotted another village in Vinukonda mandal. My uncle advised us to go together till Vinukonda, and told me to find out how to go to the village from there. After me and my prospective colleague got down at the Vinukonda bus stand, I asked passers-by about the way to my village only to find that there were no buses to that village. They said that I could go till Enugupalem village in the bus, and from there, had to walk to my village. Enugupalem was the village allotted to my companion. My village was around 3-4 kilometre from that village. By the time we reached Vinukonda, it was already 3 p.m., so I directly booked an auto and reached my village before it became late. The man who came with me got down near Enugupalem on the way.

Perumallapalli was a small and nice square-shaped village with only four roads. After getting down in the village, I went to some elders sitting under a tree at the Centre of the village and showed them the sealed cover and asked them to show me the house of the person whose name was written on the cover. He was the Sarpanch of that village, it seemed. Due to some reasons, he was not staying in the village but was living in Vinukonda, they said. I cursed myself for not telling the auto driver to stay until I found the house. I told the elders that I was a student doing a study on villages and that I wanted to meet the Sarpanch for the purpose of staying in their village for a few days. One of the men sitting there was the village RMP doctor. He said that it would be difficult to go back to Vinukonda at that time, and asked me to stay at his house for the night. He also said that they would call the Sarpanch the next morning to the village itself. My dilemma of where to stay for the night in this small village vanished with his words.

While the words RMP doctor sounded grand, his house happened to be quite small. It was a tiny hut with mud walls and divided into three rooms by wattle fencing. At the back of the house, they had built a tiny bathroom with four more wattle fences. After speaking about his village, the doctor asked me if I would eat a non-veg curry, which had been prepared in the morning, for dinner. I said yes. When his wife was serving dinner, I noticed that the meat dish looked unfamiliar. Upon asking her what it was, she said that it was beef. I told her that I hadn't eaten it before. She said in dismay that she hadn't made anything else for dinner as I had said I would eat it. I told her not to worry and to serve any pickle with my rice, and finished my dinner. Then, I took a stroll around the village before calling it a night.

We didn't get any specific task to do in the village from the project officials. They asked us to study the village and prepare a report on what we understood. Not knowing where to begin, the next morning I started my study by going to the village school.

There weren't even 20 children in the school. I spoke to the teacher for a while and, based on his suggestion, went to the Anganwadi teacher to take the details of population and status of the village. Just then, somebody came and told me that the Sarpanch had come. So, I went and gave him the cover. He was an illiterate. He said that he would have it read by somebody later and that he would give me the other cover on my last day there. He asked if my stay in the village was comfortable and then went away after I said yes. Feeling bad that I had eaten only pickle rice the night before, the doctor (brother) had his wife cook chicken for me. After eating, I went and sat on the patio when I saw a big hunting knife on the ceiling ledge. I asked the doctor why they needed such a big knife, and he replied that the village has faction related fights, and that it was better to be on guard. Vinukonda is in the Palnadu area, which is known for its factionism. It made me laugh to hear about factionism in a village where there were not even four roads.

The village didn't have proper electricity, no main road, no bus service and drinking water facility. The village women were getting water from very far away. Though there was a school in the village, children weren't going to school regularly. But politics and factions were quite strong there. On the third day of my stay, I went around the village and noted down all the problems I noticed and the things I understood about the village. In the evening, I went back to doctor's house and asked him some more details about the village, and prepared my report. Later that evening, I went to the Sarpanch's house as he had sent for me. His son was also present there. They gave me the sealed cover that I had to give in the project office. As I was set to leave the village early next morning, I thanked him for his and his villagers' cooperation and left. The next day, the doctor dropped me till Enugupalem. I took a bus from there to Vinukonda and finally reached Guntur from there.

I later learnt that the man who had come with me to Enugupalem on the first day, couldn't stay in the village even for a day and left on the same night for Guntur. The project officials had selected all the stubborn ones like me who had stayed in their respective villages and survived. I don't think they even read our reports. Maybe, through this village immersion, they had tested us to see if we had the basic survival skills to go and work in a remote rural area without knowing anybody there.

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