



# My Path to Setting up an NGO for Women in Rural India

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Women's Day Function, IIT Mandi  
10 March 2020  
*Updated: 3 May 2020*

## Early Years in the US (1950s-60s)

I was born and raised in the United States. My family was middle class, and my upbringing quite normal for America in the fifties. One normal aspect of life in American business at that time, was that my father was frequently transferred within his company to jobs in other cities. We pretty much shifted to a new city every year. As a child I seldom questioned this. It was just a normal annual event. We celebrated Thanksgiving in November, Christmas in December, Easter in the spring, and we shifted to a new place in summer. By the time I finished high school, I had attended ten schools and lived in nine cities in five states.



*With brothers Jay and Tim*

By the time I was 10 this constant uprooting became harder as I had firmer friends and plans laid for the coming year. For some reason, I also became determined to raise pumpkins, and I left behind a trail of ripening pumpkins as we moved. I never did harvest one of my pumpkins.

However, my father was determined that we would make the most of the life we had. He did not tolerate reminiscences of the place left behind, and encouraged us to look for the good things in our current location. By example, he also taught us to connect with and value everyone we met. It was always pleasant to go about with him, because he always connected with everyone we came in contact with and left that person smiling. Neither of my brothers or I was ever as good as he was at making those around him happy. However, my ability to look for the best in each place where I found myself and to reach out to connect with the people around me have stood me in good stead in my adult life.



*With family in Lincoln, Massachusetts*

When I was 11, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was inaugurated as President, and in his address told us “*Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country*”. Shortly after, he founded the Peace Corps. Until that time most Americans experienced the rest of the world only as soldiers. Kennedy’s plan was to send young, newly graduated Americans to share their knowledge, skills and enthusiasm with people in other countries, to learn about those countries and peoples in peacetime and to project an

image of the US as a country that reached out to help others. At that time I decided that I was going to join Peace Corps.

At about the same time my social science teacher showed my class a photograph of Karl Marx and told us that he was the anti-Christ. At this time the US was just emerging from the McCarthy era during which everyone who had ever shown an interest in socialism and many who had not were vilified as traitors. I was never one to accept such statements at face value, so I set out to find more about socialism.

## Exploring Eastern Europe (1960s-70s)

Along the way I fell in love with Leo Tolstoy and explored Russian history. That deepened my interest in socialism and communism. I found an exchange/education program for teens and visited the Soviet Union at the end of high school. That was a mixed experience. There really were magnificent forests of birch trees, which feature often in Russian literature, and the onion domes of all the churches in Moscow shown brightly in their many colours over what was then a rather drab existence under a totally controlled economy and society.

Steaming down the Volga, we met a group of Yugoslav students on a similar program. They, too, found the Soviet system stifling, but called us to visit Yugoslavia which had a more human face to socialism.

I started college intending to study animal psychology. At that point Jane Goodall and Dian Fossey were just making the news with their studies on chimpanzee communication and mountain gorillas. Unfortunately my first psychology professor was rather weak, and I took a course in political science from a dynamic young professor who managed to turn my interest back to people, society and government. In the American college system, I also learned that a degree in politics or history had many fewer required courses and allowed experimentation and exploration in courses and even outside the college.

I set off to explore Yugoslavia and its touted more human approach to socialism. Again I joined a student exchange program and spent eight months living with local families in Yugoslavia. This program was independent of my college, but I set up several study projects in the language, culture and politics of Yugoslavia that I completed on my own while I was there.

By chance at the start, I ended up going off with the niece of my official hostess to live for a month in the small town of Drvar in central Yugoslavia. The socialist partisans under Tito had had their headquarters there for two years during the Second World War. Many of my friends' parents actually knew Tito and worked with the Partisans in a variety of roles. Tito was well



*Tito's Cave, Drvar*  
Sadko / CC BY-SA (commons.wikimedia.org)

loved there, so life in that village introduced me both to a traditional agricultural community and to a happy socialist community.

I started my stay with a few useful phrases in their language like “There on the right is Mont Blanc.” As Mont Blanc is on the border of France and Switzerland, I never got a chance to use that phrase. No one in the village spoke any English. But the total immersion, my Serbo-Croat improved rapidly.

One cousin of the family spoke some French as I did, so to start with it was great when he came from the neighbouring town for visits.

The cousin's town was the home of Gavrilo Princip who fired the shot that killed the Hapsburg archduke and set off the First World War. My connection to this village eventually led to my Ph.D. thesis which focused on central Yugoslavia and the natives' experience under Habsburg rule from 1878 to 1914.

## Teaching in Peace Corps (1972-74)

My final year in college, while most of my classmates were focused on jobs or graduate school, I remained tied to my dream of joining Peace Corps. At that point the President was Nixon, a Republican, so funds for programs like Peace Corps started by Democrats, were held up. One of my friends was signed up to start post graduate studies in the fall, and I was still waiting to hear about my application for Peace Corps, so we decided to use our free time to cycle across North America. Days before our departure, funds finally came through to keep Peace Corps up and running, and I was told to report to Philadelphia. My assignment was "To go". That seemed a bit open ended to me, until I figured out that the space was accidental and I was actually assigned to *Togo* in West Africa. I left for Philadelphia, and another friend took my cycle and my place in the cross country cycle journey.

In Philadelphia we were welcomed to the Togo team and told in glowing terms of the wonderful experience that awaited us – the people were welcoming, the food was great, sex was freely available, the country was luxuriant with trees and flowers, etc. After all that, they mentioned that we had the option to join the Afghan team instead. The Afghan reps trooped in. They told us that they needed teachers, people for an inoculation drive, and men for a public works program. They warned us that Afghanistan was tough. Afghanistan was brown, the people were brown, the buildings were brown, the land was brown. It has an extreme continental climate with freezing winters and extremely hot summers. The food was oily rice and dry bread. You couldn't even look at the opposite sex. There were no toilets or running water, etc., etc.

For some reason only three of us changed to the Afghan team. I joined for three reasons:

1. I could teach. In Togo I would have been part of a health team.
2. I liked the honesty of their approach. I figured where ever we went there would be adjustments, and I did not trust the Togo promise of paradise.
3. I was interested in the unrest in the Soviet Muslim regions, and figured I'd learn more as Afghanistan was just across the border.



*Marketplace, Herat, Afghanistan*

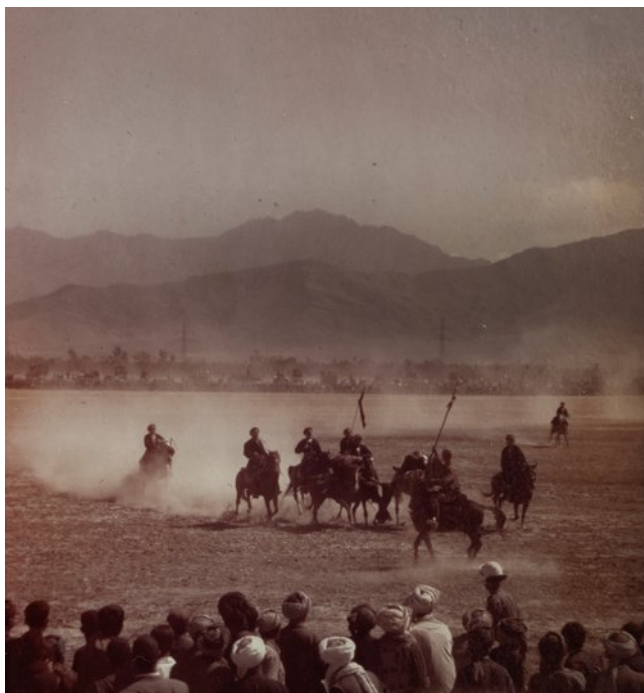
I found that Afghanistan was indeed brown. But there were emerald gems of rice fields and gorgeous turquoise lakes at 14,000 feet. And some of the brown was ancient forts and Buddhist statues and cells, and the first home of the Parsi religion. There were also handsome palaces built by Babur and magnificent tiled mosques and covered market places.

The two pillars of Afghan society are Islam and family. One of the most impressive sights to me was when my vehicle stopped at prayer time on a seemingly endless crossing of a desert, and all the male passengers lined up to pray. To my eye there was nothing but rocky desert as far as I could see, but they stopped to pray, to thank god and praise him.



My assignment in Mazar-i-Sharif was to teach English to girls in high school. I broadened it to work with the teachers on improving our teaching, added some first aid and basic health lessons, and introduced sports.

Sports was the most fun. I coached the girls in volleyball and basketball. Volleyball was reasonably successful, but basketball was another matter. After a couple of weeks of doing various drills on shooting baskets, dribbling, passing, etc., I decided that we should try a half court game. My girls had never seen any organised sport, and mostly heard only of buzkashi. Buzkashi is a wild game introduced by Genghis Khan. Originally played with the bodies of prisoners, it is now played with a goat skin filled with sand. The players are mounted on horseback and the playground is the limitless steppe. The basic idea is to collect the goat skin from the goal circle, carry it out across the steppe and return it to the goal. The horses are trained to kick and bite, and the players hold whips and are also vicious. There are no teams, and few rules. I started my half court match and within seconds it turned into buzkashi. All niceties of dribbling and passing, no touching, etc. were forgotten as the girls jumped on each other, clawed, scratched and bit to get the ball. I collapsed with laughter before I stepped in to break up the melee and have another go at explaining the finer points of basketball.



*Buzkashi, Afghanistan*

In Afghanistan, I learned the limitations and benefits of a traditional society which segregates men and women. Only there did I realise how much heterosexual interaction limits our own society. I am speaking especially of Western society with coeducation and a limitation of most social interaction to gatherings and discussions involving couples and both genders. Indian society varies greatly between North and South, rural and urban, but even in IITs a lot of the time, conversation groups are defined by gender, kitty parties are common, etc.



*My school girls, Mazar-i-Sharif*

In Afghanistan, unrelated women and men do not interact at all. When I visited families, often there would be up to 25 females present with two or three generations living together in large compounds. I was amazed at the freedom that interacting only with females brought. There was lots of suggestive dancing, sitting on laps, holding hands, all of which were frowned upon in western cultures. Only then did I truly realise how much we had been limited by gender stereotypes in our culture. Women had to sit properly, walk prop-

erly, not appear too smart and of course a lot of the attention would be focused on a dominant male with the females all acknowledging his wisdom, humour and power.

After Afghanistan, I decided the best way to fulfil Kennedy's wish that young Americans learn about other cultures and share their understanding when they returned, would be to teach. So I enrolled for a Ph.D. going back to my long fascination with Russia and Eastern Europe and moving to history because it would allow me to include economics and sociology. My thesis focused on the development of central Yugoslavia during the period of Habsburg rule.

One thing that I found in the course of my research was that all Habsburg programs for development were focused on men. They built industries to employ men and sent men for training, even in traditionally female fields such as dairying.

## EWOK: Enabling Women of Kamand (2014-20)

So when I arrived in Kamand and saw the traditional culture in the area, I sought to find a way to reach out to the women and give those who wanted a chance to finish their education, find training, find employment or start their own businesses.

Initially, IIT Mandi showed the same encouragement to local men as the Habsburgs had. Local men secured jobs as gardeners, sweepers, mess workers, lab or work shop assistants, drivers or security guards. Women secured mainly the lower paid jobs – gardening, head load work at the construction sites, and sweeping.

Noticing this imbalance, in 2014 Tulika Srivastava and I initiated an ISTP project by 3<sup>rd</sup> BTech students to study women's education levels in the valley. That study found that most women over the age of thirty had completed only eight years of schooling. Many women under thirty had completed high school and several had taken college degrees in Mandi. This trend towards higher education for girls has continued since. Now more women, and even married women, are allowed to complete high school and college.

Following up on this study, the Women's Cell at IIT established EWOK (Enabling Women of Kamand) in June 2016. We were fortunate in hiring Sandhya Menon as our first project associate. Sandhya has put tremendous effort and commitment into her effort to reach out to the women of the Kamand Valley. In 2017, we hired Urmila from Katindi village to conduct a survey of the women in the Kamand Valley. She completed an excellent survey of all the women in the valley gathering information on the education, family situation, skills, and aspirations. She also provided those of us from outside with personal guidance in understanding the local mindset and condition. Both Sandhya and Urmila are still invaluable members of our team.

Initially the aim of EWOK was to make information easily available to local women and potential employers and trainers so that local women who sought to enhance their lives through training, education, employment, or entrepreneurship could find the path to achieving their goals. After several years we finished this mainly software project with the dedicated work of a local female intern.

Along the way, we realised that we wanted a more direct contribution. In 2017 we first introduced mentoring. We held meetings with groups of potential female entrepreneurs and assigned ment-



*Sonam Wangchuk visits EWOK stall*

ors to individual women who wished to start small businesses involved in serving the IIT Mandi community. Businesses mentored included beauty, tailoring, home cooked meals, laundry, and mushroom cultivation.

A few of these businesses are still operating, but overall our success was limited. There were three major hurdles:

1. The local women were not ready to change their daily routines. They were interested in some small income on the side, but their first priority was their families. Those with school age children wanted to be home when the children returned from school, and all wanted to be home at 5 to prepare the evening meal. As people at IIT are mainly free only after 5, this was a major hurdle.
2. Lack of childcare compounded by caste sensitivities.
3. The local understanding of business is totally family centred. Even most merchants in Mandi town are not ready to trust someone outside the family.



*Sandhya teaches spoken English*

We also noted hurdles on our side. We were competent consumers, but few of us were really capable of guiding a tailor or laundress. Also, we had approached from our point of view without researching the women's wishes and strengths. We saw mainly that a large new community was coming up, and would require many services, and we sought to prepare local women to provide these services. Somehow, we had actually overlooked the fact that all of the local women have a great deal of expertise in agriculture. The mushroom cultivation project was one of our more successful ones.

We finally realised that many of the older women, in particular, had many skills and interest in agriculture. Many of the younger women with more education were, predictably, more interested in government jobs. Government jobs for the men had given a tremendous boost to many families in the area, and government jobs remained the main goal for their prestige and security. Opening a shop and providing services like laundering were definitely less prestigious.

At this point we shifted the EWOK office. We had been operating from a lab in IIT. Many of the local women were reluctant to come into IIT, and the bolder ones were sometimes turned away by over zealous security guards. We took the important step of becoming more open to

the local women by shifting EWOK to a small office in Salgi, the small village near IIT's North Campus. This greatly improved our accessibility.



*Computer classes in the Salgi office*

Considering the aspirations of the older women, we guided four of them to register as PWD horticultural contractors. These women are employing 65 women and men and up to early 2020 they had a total turnover of Rs. 65 lakhs. We also joined with the Medicinal Plants lab in promoting a variety of projects introducing new agricultural techniques including organic farming and



new crops such as rose for rose oil, tulsi for tea and marigolds for pharmaceutical uses. These projects are all going well, and we have won a grant of Rs. 35 lakhs from NABARD to continue this work.

For the younger women, we learned that they were not getting jobs on campus due to their poor spoken English and their weak computer skills. Few had actually used English and even women with BCA (Bachelor of Computer Applications) had not actually used a computer. We introduced courses from NIIT in spoken English and basic computer skills and hired some of the graduates as interns to finish the development of our local resources app. Fifty women have completed the courses. Some of our graduates are still in college, others have secured jobs on projects in IIT.



IIT Garden by EWOK horticulture contractor

On 18 November 2019 EWOK became a Registered Society. This enabled us to run projects, seek grants and accept donations independently. We still continue to have several joint projects with IIT Mandi, specifically with the Medicinal Plants Lab and with Catalyst, IIT's technology business incubator.

There have been various potholes and hairpin bends along the way over the four years since EWOK started its journey. Now we have successes and strengths to build on. All along, we have stuck by our founding vision: to help the women in the Kamand valley achieve their goals, to listen to them, and to try to refrain from imposing our goals on them.

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Helping Kamand women take command!



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| <p>Aligned with UN Sustainable Development Goals</p>                                                                | <p><b>8</b> DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH</p>  | <p><b>45+</b> women impacted through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* incubation</li> <li>* skills training</li> <li>* capacity building</li> </ul> |  |  |
| <p><b>5</b> GENDER EQUALITY</p>  | <p>Creating eco-system of women-centric entrepreneurship &amp; employment</p>                                                       |                                                                              | <p><b>12+</b> rural women led startups incubated<br/>Rs 65 lakhs revenue</p>         |  |
|                                   | <p><b>1</b> NO POVERTY</p>                       | <p><b>60+</b> employment created</p>                                                                                                                            |  | <p>Bridging industry, academia, government and local community</p>                    |