

A Journey to the Sacred Forest of Sariska

My alarm went off – it was 5:00 am. I decided to wake up to one of my favourite Bollywood songs Chaiya Chaiya. It was a playful tactic to get me out of bed at this very early hour and it seemed appropriate being in India for the Leaders Quest Pow Wow.

[Leaders Quest](#) brought about 100 of us together in Jaipur, Rajasthan to reflect and mobilise around key questions facing humanity today. Although we all come from diverse countries and contexts, we are all, in some way, motivated to help life thrive on this planet. We are asking big questions like:

- What do we want humanity to be?
- What really matters in life?
- What is our personal role in helping to enable the world to be a better place?
- What do we need to shift in ourselves internally before we can effectively engage as leaders of change externally?

The Pow Wow's intention was to help us think about all of these things. And to do so, we needed to be mentally, emotionally and physically taken out of our comfort zones. We were to be opened to completely different ways of being and relating. And, most importantly, different worldviews.

Today was Questing day. We were split into groups of 10 and were each off to visit 8 inspiring examples of leadership in the Jaipur area. Our group was to visit Aman Singh of [KRAPAVIS](#) who is helping the people of the Sacred forest of Sariska.

The night before, Marian gave us our briefing. "I'd just like to let you know that tomorrow's trip is going to be challenging. It will test your comfort levels. All I ask that you just go with the flow. The roads are rough. There are no toilets. There is no electricity. We need to leave at 5:10 am. The community is looking forward to seeing you".



Our group split into 4 vehicles for our 3 hour journey to the Sacred Forest. We bumped and bounced our way through the final stretch of the monsooned muddy track - and we finally arrived at the mud huts of Beru, a small village in Sariska Forest.

Contrastingly, bright flashes of coloured saris popped out of the simple dark mud structures. We tumbled out of the vehicles and were greeted with smiles and a welcome ceremony.

I see you. You see me. We are all interconnected.

As we walked into a mud hut for our welcome introduction I caught the eyes of our hosts - children, men, women, the grandmother. Unlike my normal encounters in London, people here looked deeply into my eyes. And mine into theirs. However, I was seeing more than just their eyes- we were seeing the depths of each other's souls. Despite not having

a common spoken language – we connected deeply. As a natural impulse, smiles emerged.

How freeing was this feeling – to be met with complete curiosity. No judgements, no filters, no assumptions. Just curiosity and a smile.

It was at that moment I realised how our Western cultures, through judgement and assumptions, are automatically suppressing the fullness of our individual and collective



potential selves. We easily separate ourselves from each other and as a result lose a sense of interconnection and a sense of responsibility to each other. The context of our global challenges require us to be nothing less than our fullest selves and realise our fundamental interconnectivity.

- What can we do to meet each other with curiosity and joy?
- How can we practice letting go of our judgement of others (and self for that matter!)?

A thriving community

The community hosted us with care and attention. We helped to make lunch and when it was ready we all stepped into the main hut. We sat on the dirt floor in a circle. Ceremoniously we were all given a plate made of leaves carefully stitched together with grass. Then the leaf bowls.

The pots were uncovered and then, lunch was served. A soup of buffalo curd and spices. Lentil soup. Pumpkin soup. Gram balls. Chapati. Gram flour and sugar. Limes. Yogurt. It was so carefully dished out to us, with love and attention. Before we began eating the elder man said a prayer: “We are joined in community to give thanks. We are a community who plays together, who works together, who does good deeds together and, of course, who eats together. “ Community is something that is important to me – and I can’t think of a better definition of community.

The key ingredient in Change – TRUST.

Aman has dedicated his life to helping communities regain access to the sacred forests, their livelihoods and their empowerment. He told us the story of the Orans. There are 1000s in Rajasthan and they are all self-sustaining forest communities that live in harmony with

nature- economically, socially and spiritually. For 100's of years, they have been living in their Sacred Land. Each Oran has its own deity that protects the forest. The community worships this forest in return the forest takes care of the people and their livelihoods. However tension has been arising.



The Forestry Department has been tasked in saving the last remaining tigers and supporting mining in these sacred forests. However, the unintended systemic consequences of this top down 'protection' means that the government had become out of touch with local communities and had stripped them of their power and rights – such as harvesting firewood- their only source of fuel for cooking and warmth. And frequently, they were not able to provide their milking water buffalo with the essential ponds they need for drinking and cooling.

However, there is hope. Aman is actively working with 100's of Orans and through his experience he understands how change at scale happens. Here are a few things we can learn from him:

- He is taking a **whole systems** approach to change.
- He understands **power dynamics** and its interplay between and within the government and the community.
- He believes that **relationships** are important.
- He is **demonstrating and amplifying** the **positive impact** of how the community model is better for all.
- He provides a **platform for learning across** the communities.
- He appreciates **learning by doing** and experimentation.
- He is building the **capacity of** the community to have self-autonomy.
- He is connecting this **community to the policy makers** to enable legal structure shifts for change.
- He is building a movement for change by **aligning Orans around a common intention** –together they are stronger.

I ask him, “ Aman, What have you learned about catalysing change at scale-- What are the most important things to consider? To this he replies “It's important to get everybody who has a stake in the forest in the room. The policy makers need to be sitting next to the village elders. They have to see each other as equals in the solutions for change. And the key ingredient in all of this is Trust. Trust between all of the stakeholders, especially those who have very opposing views”. So, I wonder, in our efforts for change,



- How do we create conditions of Trust?
- How can we build collaborative processes whereby everybody is involved in co-creating solutions?
- What are the minimal optimal structures that allow local communities (and individuals) to have their own empowerment whilst being part of a wider whole?



“I am a facilitator, not a leader.”

As Aman spoke, it was clear he was an important leader in this world. He is an Ashoka Fellow and is often sharing the Oran story at international conferences. However, when asked about his leadership role, he responds humbly –“I don’t see myself as a leader, I see myself as a facilitator. It’s up to the other people to come up with the solutions so that they are empowered. I just help to orchestrate things. Although I am clear on my mission, I don’t see myself separate to others, I am part of the whole system.” We then asked him to explain more about the women’s empowerment programme. Although he was clearly knowledgeable on the subject, he stepped aside and asked Pratibha Sisodia, a Director of KRAPAVIS, to come up to tell us more. Stepping aside to let others shine. Now that is a man truly in service to others. Respect.

- What is your life’s mission?
- What role do you/we each play in the system?
- How can we be of service and help others shine?

We protect what is Sacred.

After lunch, we went to see the holy man of Beru. He is protector of the deity and thus of the Sacred Forest. I am pondering on some important questions – why is it that whatever is sacred we protect? What if we held more things sacred in our lives?



The current holy man was nominated by the village about 35 years ago live in the thick of the forest and in the temple above. As we walked up the steps to the temple, I felt excited – to meet a holy man – what does a holy man do? What does he look like? What advice does he have for us?

We arrive at the temple door and there he is. A sparkly eyed man – 50 years old or so. Long grey hair that falls down his back. A trimmed beard, a wispy moustache and eyebrows that are as lush as the forest

outside. We all sit around at his feet like school children awaiting the teacher's instructions.

He is calm and graceful. He straightens his long white shirt over his legs, mindfully. He does not speak.

Marian then asked the holy man, through translation, "We'd love to hear your story".

He then speaks. Slowly. With those sparkling and knowing eyes. With a tilt of the head. And the small curl of a smile on the side of his mouth. He speaks of his dedication to his meditation practice. Through meditation he has been able to develop his higher consciousness- "To show good feelings to all that lives". He says it's important "to let calm the mind of the self" – so that you can be all that is interconnected. This will bring you true happiness." I am reassured though, as, even the holy man said that developing his own consciousness has been hard work.

- What is sacred to you?
- How can meditation help you to clear the busyness of your mind, so that you have greater clarity and power.
- How can we demonstrate nature as sacred? Would we then protect it more?

It was an amazing day!

I never knew that I'd have so many rich learnings all wrapped up into 12 hours. Personally, there are three things that I am taking away to fold into my own practice. They are:

- To practice meeting and seeing others without filters, judgment or assumptions and with curiosity, love and lightness.
- To be more disciplined in my meditation practice as a means to calm my mind and to tap into my inner strength and knowing.
- To extend and build TRUST – in myself and others. And to create trusting environments when I am convening and facilitating others.



I've also come away more widely inspired about humanity and even more clear that we are all fundamentally good. We are a deeply interconnected community. Through amazing authentic leaders like Aman we are seeing powerful models and methods for change. And most importantly, I've witnessed that it is possible for humans to live economically, socially and spiritually in harmony with nature.

Now that is sacred.



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