

A Road for Thoro Ghoat, 1963

Volunteer-wise, this was a cooperative project among three types of volunteers. Dick Beens was teaching English at the Sindh Agricultural College near Tandojam. I was working in the Agricultural Engineering department at the College. Lafayette Seymour was in Village Development just up the road and trained to speak Sindhi. Although the "Official" language of Pakistan was English, our first PCV group was taught Urdu/Hindi since that was the "Bazaar" or common language, which many people spoke in the cities. Only six million or so people spoke Sindhi, but they were in the villages dotting the province. Thus, the special training of the community development group.

Seymour identified a need for a road from Thoro Ghoat village about two miles to the main road. The problem with dirt roads in the Sindh is that, over time, they wear down to form a depression. When it rains, the depression becomes a long mud hole. We learned about a simple road building process from a couple of students from Iran. The road building process was simple. Plow up a ridge or raised bed of earth. Roll it flat and compact it.

Whereas Seymour was the project organizer and procurer, I was, kind of, the "technical man" for the group. I found two tractors left over from a USAID mission some years earlier. Apparently, the people had to leave before the materials they ordered arrived. The John Deere Model 40 tractors had been cannibalized for parts, had no spark plugs, wiring or batteries, but I thought they were fixable.

I took the steam train into Hyderabad and scoured the bazaar for parts. Found that the distributor cap for a Jeep would substitute even though it had four cylinders and the tractor had only two. Sure enough, when all the replacement parts were added and the moment of truth arrived, the tractors started with a huge cloud of dust, but they worked. We also found an orphaned PWD three-ton road roller in a sand dune. I hooked on to it with a tractor and couldn't budge it. Adding the second tractor finally pulled it loose.

My initial visit to Thoro Ghoat with a tractor was somewhat of a disaster. I hooked the village gate with my axle and knocked it down. Although I felt very foolish, it didn't seem to bother anybody. Neither Beens nor Seymour had ever been on a tractor. I was driving one before I drove a car. I trained both guys to use the tractors but not to knock down gates.

The road building process was to be shared. The road was to follow a hedgerow between tilled fields. The village would supply the labor to clear out the brush from the hedgerow and build any bridges needed across ditches. The first day we took a tractor with plow attached out the canal bank road to the village. We needed to start work at the village end so that people could see that something was really happening.

We were on the wrong side of a ditch with no bridge. I could make it thru with the tractor, but not the plow. I couldn't see how to get a half-ton plow across the ditch. I forgot village power. The group of observers (we always had observers) just picked it up and carried it across.

A couple buffalos were brought out to help with the plowing. The roots of the hedge made their work almost impossible. I had a new steel two-bottom plow setup. As soon as I dropped it into the ground and started plowing, everyone could see that this was a job we could do. It took horsepower that you just couldn't get with a yoke of oxen.

These first few days of roadwork were also my closest brush with death during my tour. When I pulled the road roller to the village it was also on the wrong side of the ditch. At three tons it was too big for a carry - not enough villagers. Fortunately, they had built the first bridge; a humped up affair made of brush and dried mud. Not quite knowing the rated capacity of the bridge, I tried to make a run for it and raised the drawbar at the back of the tractor to get maximum traction. If you've ever seen a tractor pull you know what happens. All the weight transferred to the rear wheels and I did a tractor wheelie. I did manage to hit the brakes and clutch and hung there part way up the bridge with front wheels four feet off the ground. I got out of this pickle by slowly lowering the drawbar until the wheels came back on the ground. The tractor still had enough traction to get over the bridge. If I had tipped over backwards, goodbye.

The Agriculture College had just two tractors. They were used for teaching, but not for any of the routine farm work. Oxen and buffalos did most of the plowing and other farm work. At that time there was very little infrastructure for any motorized vehicle. The closest gasoline was at least 10 miles away. Luckily the powers that be in the Peace Corps HQ sent us a pretty blue Jeep CJ3 which we could use to fetch gas, oil etc.

The major enemies of transport to rural villages were mud holes, thorns and dust. These were mud holes with a capital M. Seymour took our supervisor at the time (King Berlew) out to see one of his villages in our Jeep. They come to the mud hole. Seymour saw the wagon tracks leading around but King says "Just plow right on thru, I've never seen a Jeep get stuck". An hour or so later they appeared on the back of a camel to get one of the tractors to pull it out. The jeep was buried up to the top of the hood.

The second problem was thorns two inches or longer and hard as a nail. We changed many Jeep tires and the thorns even penetrated the big thick rear tractor tires a few times. There was a canal bank service road, which we used to get to the village. We used as many as two spare tires on a trip.

Each time we made a trip to the village we would be covered with dust by the end of the trip. We could barely recognize each other. This was also a problem for the machinery. And the summer heat - I could plow for a few blocks, then the tractor would overheat so I had to stop for a while and let it cool off. We could stand the 120° heat, but the machine couldn't.

One nite, it was almost dark when we finished work. The villagers were concerned that bandits might attack us on our way home. They loaned us a weapon for the trip. It was a large hatchet that looked to be at least a hundred years old.

Another time I needed to survey the ground out to the other end of the path. They insisted I take one of the horses from the village. He was a small old horse with a very old saddle. I'm six foot three so my feet nearly dragged the ground. Halfway thru the trip, a stirrup broke and I walked most of the way back. I didn't have to carry the horse.

We left the tractors on site each evening and took the Jeep back to our digs at the college. Each one had a tool bag hanging on the seat post. One day we went to get a tool and happened to look in the bag before reaching in; surprise - there was a black snake in the bag. The villagers said it was a Lundi, very poisonous, but sluggish. We just dumped it out and went on with the work. We never found out whether the snake just crawled in to get warm, or someone put it there.

In the last month of my tour I got sick and left when the road was about half finished. I didn't see the project to completion, and never heard what happened with

it. At least we presented a practical demonstration of what tractors could do. I hope that the road was useful to the people of Thoro Ghoat.