

Diary of a Visit to the Netherlands

An EYE Exchange visit to the Netherlands in June was memorable for several reasons, not the least for the warm hospitality

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Three of us from Pradan, Arnab Chakraborty from Purulia in West Bengal, Ashok Kumar from Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh and I from Jamshedpur in Jharkhand reached Amsterdam at 6 am on June 24, 2006 on an EYE (Exchange Young Executives) visit. Since this was my first trip outside India, I was a little tense before reaching Amsterdam, although I knew that Nelleke would come to receive us.

The weather at Amsterdam was chilly. Nelleke van der Vleuten, Programme Manager for EYE Exchange, gave us a warm welcome. She took us to Utrecht, which is about 40 minutes by road from Amsterdam. The Netherlands looked so planned that it looked like a picture postcard. We stayed at an ICCO (Dutch funding organisation) guesthouse. It was cosy and had all facilities including a kitchen. Nelleke stayed with us till the afternoon, discussing the aim and focus of different programme activities in the week ahead.

We then went to a supermarket to buy groceries and vegetables. It was like an Indian supermarket, but with a big difference. All vegetables, chicken and eggs came with a serial number. One could track farm origins and other details. I understand that all Dutch people are highly quality conscious. For me, it was very difficult to buy anything as I was calculating everything in rupees and everything seemed to be very expensive. We bought some stuff after a lot of mental struggle!

In the evening we strolled in the market area of Utrecht. I saw people of all ages sitting in hotels sipping beer or other drinks. It was a Saturday and most restaurants had laid out tables and chairs on the pavements where everyone was enjoying their weekend.

We had dinner with Pauline Jansen and Mayra Ortega Maldonado, who had visited with us in India in November 2004. It was nice to meet them again after two years. Pauline was in a new job and Mayra had a baby now. It was interesting to know the new initiative at low cost undertaken by Philips, where Mayra works. We met with a new friend, Mr Kaus from ABN-AMRO. He will be supporting Pradan in making a business plan of all poultry co-operatives. He will be visiting Kesla in Madhya Pradesh and various locations in Jharkhand in September 2006. For me the most interesting part was that it was daylight even at 9.30 pm!

Second Day

The next day was a Sunday. For the Dutch the weather was horrible as it was raining, windy and cold. I however enjoyed the weather as in India one needs to go to a hill station for such weather.

At the start of the day we went to Nelleke's home in Nijmegen. It was a lovely house with wooden flooring. There were many Indian handicrafts, which made me feel proud of the rich culture of my country. All the houses in the locality were of the same

will work with ICCO in the EYE Exchange programme. Nelleke joined us at dinner.

Fifth Day

The morning of the fifth day of our visit started with the visit to a supermarket that sells only organic products. I found that the prices of all produce were double the cost. We saw some Indian pickles, mango chips and dried raw mangoes, which made us think that if we could promote such products in the villages we work in. These types of products would fetch premium prices. It would however require strategic planning and a robust business plan.

In the evening we went with Nelleke and Joost Moonen to Agriterra, a co-operative that works with 50,000 farmers. Mr Clevering of Agriterra discussed how the co-operative model became successfully in the Netherlands. Mr Kees Blokland joined us later. We tried exploring options for linkages. They suggested that we contact the federation in India, which was registered two years ago.

We then went to Annette's home. She had invited us and prepared some Indian dishes for us. I felt like home and was touched by her hospitality. We met with Myrtle, who joined us for the dinner. We talked about export markets and possibilities.

Sixth Day

The next day Mr Kaus of ABN-AMRO and I went to Cobroed to see the chain of poultry production. Mr Hans and Mr Paul accompanied us throughout the day. First we went to a farmer who has a shed capacity of 1.60 lakh birds in the Netherlands. He also owns a poultry farm of similar capacity in Canada. He mentioned that he was a medium-scale producer. He sells his produce on an annual

contract price to a processing unit.

I found that everything was automatic. He managed the farm alone. He only hires two labourers to clean the shed after the produce is sold. He mentioned that it would not be economical if he keeps any more helping hands. This gave me an idea of the competition in the market and also the scale of viable operation.

We then went to a processing unit that has a capacity of processing 9,000 kg of chicken per hour into premium pieces like breast, leg, etc. This was my first exposure to a processing unit of such magnitude. There were few workers working in the factory. Everything was automatic. The director of the company mentioned that most of the producers have an annual contract with him. He also mentioned even after having an annual contract, he has the liberty of making changes in the rate, if prices drop extraordinarily.

We then visited a small feed plant producing cattle feed. It was started by his parents. The feed was initially grinded by a windmill. Now the plant has modern instruments. He mentioned that it has become very tough to survive and he had to be constantly vigilant about the quality.

Seventh Day

The seventh day started with a meeting with Mr Willem Middelendrop, who chairs the organisation called Platform Aarde Boer Consument. It is platform where small farmers can fight for the rights and entitlements with the government and the corporate sector.

We then rushed to Wageningen University where we had a meeting scheduled with Mr Peter van der Meer and Mr Rob Kselik.

Annette accompanied us. We showed them the film 'Reaching Out'. We also explored possibilities of linkages between the University and Pradan. They suggested that we send them a proposal mentioning possible areas of collaboration.

We had dinner with Mr Gerhard (Impulsis) and Mr Michael of Indian Roses, an NGO. They support a few organisations in India for that promote self-help groups (SHGs). We made a presentation regarding our computer munshi programme (computerisation of SHG accounts). Both of them were impressed by the concept. Mr Michael suggested that we send a proposal if Pradan is interested in funds for SHGs.

We had dinner in an Indian restaurant. The most interesting part was when the soup was served. It was basically dal mixed with coriander leaves. It was a blow to us when we paid for it in Euros. The names of the dishes were Indian blended with Dutch. It was a memorable dinner.

Eighth Day

The next day Annette, Miranda, Mr Peter of ICCO and 3 of us went on a long drive to Mr Joris Baeke's farmhouse. He is a board member of NAJK. He owns a 90 ha farmhouse with all modern equipment and two large warehouses. He mentioned that he was a medium-scale farmer. He took special interest in showing his farm. We came to know how the Dutch government controls use of fertilisers within limits. The government sets crop rotation schedules, levels of fertiliser use, etc. It can take any legal action if these norms are violated. It shows the government's keenness on quantity and quality.

In the afternoon we went to see the North

Sea. Since it was a sunny day, there was a huge crowd. We could see how the dykes are constantly holding back the sea. We also saw many windmills. We drove back via Rotterdam, an industrial township. This city was completely destroyed during World War II. The city now has magnificent modern structures.

The Visit Ends

Our last day in the Netherlands was a Sunday. Pauline and Elise took us to the market. I bought lots of chocolates and some souvenirs. We then went to a park. In the evening we went to Pauline's place. She hosted us dinner. She made Indian dishes especially for us. She also had a plan of making rotis. I was touched by her sensitivity.

That night I could not sleep, as we would fly back to India the next day. All events were flashing in my mind and I was eager to share them with people back home.

In conclusion I would like to mention that it was a memorable trip. We need to follow up on the linkages that we have discussed with various people. I am hoping that with Mr Kaus plans of coming to India, the poultry business plan would take some definite shape. Our visit was very well designed. I must thank Netteke for that. I also appreciate the fact that Netteke and Annette tried so hard to make us feel at home in an unknown country. Elise was always by our side to make us comfortable.