

Civil Society

DOSTI TO MARGARITA

Disability films get more sophisticated



'PEOPLE WANT BASIC SERVICES AND RIGHTS'

Nikhil Dey on rising rural anger against the new BJP govt.

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The Godrej logo is written in a stylized, cursive font. The letters are filled with a gradient of colors: green at the top, transitioning through yellow and orange to red at the bottom.

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More films are being made on disability in India with increasing sophistication. Well-known directors and actors are exploring new themes and going beyond stereotypes.

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Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

The voices out there

WHEN 15,000 people, mostly very poor, travel to New Delhi from all over the country to protest cuts in social spending, how should one take it? Is it a scripted display of anguish? Or does it represent a genuine and much wider unhappiness with the Modi government's policies? Our view is that these voices ring true. Poverty is not going away as easily as pro-market reformers might wish. If the government gets too focussed on industry and forgets the social investments it needs to make, it is not just asking for trouble in political terms but also seriously undermining the future of the country. Health, education, livelihood and environment protection should be the foundation for growth – even as incentives and better frameworks are needed and should be offered to encourage investment.

It is sad that we end up with governments that are easily swayed and can't seem to get a fix on a model of development that works for everyone. The Congress rolled out entitlements, but forgot that people have aspirations as well. In the absence of opportunities and a level playing field, entitlements quickly became the equivalent of dole. Now the BJP seems to be doing the opposite in the belief that people will find their own way when the economy gets moving.

Activist groups accuse the Modi government of leaving people in the lurch after coming to power in an election in which it never said entitlements would be done away with. Activist groups are also unhappy that the government does not seem at all interested in taking a fair view of the rural job guarantee programme or the free medicine scheme or pensions.

We spoke to Nikhil Dey of the MKSS, one of the groups that have played a leading role in articulating the pro-entitlements view and putting grassroots demands in perspective. His interview on our opening pages pretty much sums up the 'other view' on liberalisation and what it means for people who have yet to be empowered in basic ways.

Getting to know ground realities should be a priority. The more the outreach, the sharper policies will be. SEWA has done an interesting study on how cash transfers have been utilised by the poor in Delhi and rural Madhya Pradesh. The money was put to productive use and not frittered away on drink or whatever, as critics of cash transfers have feared it will be. Of course this study is a small one and there may be a lot more to learn about what happens when money flows into families. The important thing is that there is empirical evidence to work with. It is the way forward.

We have been reporting on affordable housing for some years in this magazine. We noticed a renewed interest in the sector and decided to revisit it to know what is going on. Many of the old regulatory problems remain. Far from getting cheaper, the cost of affordable homes is actually going up. The National Housing Bank's schemes in rural and urban settings are not working because the interest rate stipulations are unrealistic. Check out the story in our business section.

Contact Civil Society at:
response@civilsocietyonline.com
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Publisher
Umesh Anand

Editor
Rita Anand

News Network
Shree Padre
Jehangir Rashid
Rakesh Agrawal
Susheela Nair

Photography
Lakshman Anand
Ajit Krishna

Layout & Design
Virender Chauhan

Cartoonist
Samita Rathor

Write to Civil Society at:
D-26 Basement, South
Extension Part 2,
New Delhi - 110049.
Ph: 011-46033825,
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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Rishta

Your cover story, 'Growing up with Rishta', was an excellent example of a good corporate social responsibility (CSR) project. The lack of knowledge about reproductive and sexual health among youth in rural areas is rather appalling. Many times they receive dubious information, which is worse. Also, getting adolescent girls and boys to socialize changes their perception about each other. If they work together at this stage, boys begin to understand the word equality and respect girls.

Sheila Dutt

Rishta was a well-written story. This is a worthy best practice for other companies that would like to carry out a CSR project. I think urban areas too could benefit from such a project.

Ashish Gupta

Delhi & AAP

We are glad that AAP has changed its ways and is getting serious about governance. Delhi faces many issues: air pollution, the dirty Yamuna, slums, housing, admissions to schools and colleges and more. There should be safety for all citizens with priority for women. There is a lot of work that needs to be done.

Nisha, Atul and Menaka

Dream school

Your story, 'With ₹1 donation, village gets dream school,' was very moving.

Edward D'Souza wanted to improve the ramshackle school he was posted to and his innovative idea made his dream come true. He, along with sincere parents, set an illustrious

example for those who depend only on the government for funds. This school is a beacon of hope for poor families who cannot afford costly private education. D'Souza's efforts to inculcate moral, social and human values in children are laudable. Equally appreciable are his other team mates Bhagirathi, Naveenkumar and the two cooks, Jayanthi and Deekamma. The story is well narrated and touching.

KB Hebbur and Jyoti Hebbur

Thanks for this nice article. Edward D'Souza's achievements need to be lauded and followed. The children of this country lack basic education and if the community comes forward, it is possible. Religious and political leaders spend crores of

rupees renovating and constructing huge religious places.

Instead, if this money could be used for providing basic infrastructure for education and health in remote villages, the returns will be immense.

MS Rao

Grazing land

Thanks very much for the useful article, 'Villagers get grazing land.' It will be immensely helpful to other rural areas that are facing the same problems. Indeed, I appreciate the court's decision in Gujarat.

Raskin Bakshi

This is a well-written and useful article. It indicates that we do have some socially conscious district collectors who understand the hardship villagers face when their land is acquired and their animals have nowhere to graze. The Gujarat High Court has also delivered very enlightened and just orders.

Ambika Goswami

Dried jackfruit

Meghalaya has huge production of jackfruit which is lying almost unutilised. Shree Padre's article on a new drier for jackfruit is most interesting. We appreciated this article and would like more information.

Dr BDR Tiwari

The economics of drying can be improved by using low-cost solar air heaters when solar energy is available and heat-pump assisted dryers in place of electric hot air-based dryers.

Prof MV Rane

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‘People are asking govt for

INTERVIEW

Nikhil Dey

Civil Society News
New Delhi

ON 2 December, nearly 15,000 people gathered at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi to protest against cuts in social spending and reduction in work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

These were people who paid from their own meagre resources to come to Delhi and camped out in the open. They came from all over the country in response to a campaign by 160 people's movements and NGOs.

Their slogan was: *Abki Baar Hamara Adhikar*. They marched with symbols of their rights: a scythe, a shovel, grain, a boiled egg and so on.

Before the Jantar Mantar protest, a Jan Sansad over two days saw social sector leaders and Left economists caution the government on ignoring the poor in rural India.

At stake is the unofficial cutting back of funds for the MGNREGA, which is the only social security that poor people have in villages. There is also concern over reduction in spending on health and education.

These outlays are insignificant, but are the first to be curtailed when the government wants to spend less.

“The rights of the most marginal people are being attacked, rolled back, diluted and in many ways trivialised without due process of consultation. We are all here to first and foremost demand the right to be heard, engaged with and conferred with on any policy decision that impacts lives of ordinary people,” said Aruna Roy, leader of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS).

Economist Jayati Ghosh said it was “inhuman and preposterous” that the government was cutting back on social spending and that it would hit poor communities the most.

Kavita Srivastava of the Right to Food Campaign said the food security law was not being implemented, no new ration cards were being issued, the socio-economic caste census to ascertain the numbers of the poor had still not been released and there was silence on maternity entitlements.

Medha Patkar of the National Alliance for People's Movements (NAPM) condemned any move by the government to change the law on land acquisition and rehabilitation as an aggressive effort “by the corporate class to facilitate land grab while denying people their right to consent and fair rehabilitation”.

Civil Society spoke to Nikhil Dey, 51, of the MKSS, who was one of the driving forces behind the idea of a Jan Sansad so that issues which affect people but aren't reflected in Parliament get voiced. Dey and a spirited young team of volunteers were also behind the organising of the rally on 2 December.



Abki Baar Hamara Adhikar: People came from across India to demand their rights and entitlements

Why these protests?

Well, people have been struggling. I think there is a misreading of the Lok Sabha election results by policymakers. They think that the election verdict is a vote against entitlement legislation and rights-based legislation. Policymakers are now thinking, ‘Let's put an end to this.’ They don't have an alternative vision.

What are your concerns?

People are not getting work under MGNREGA, whereas previously they were getting 100 days of work. They are also being told that they will not get any more MGNREGA work. This is happening in Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and West Bengal. People came to the protest even from Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, states where MGNREGA is not that strong.

The food security law has not been implemented. You can have laws but if you can't implement them, then what is the use? Over 17,000 government-run primary schools have been closed in Rajasthan. The excuse given is that those schools were not running well. They don't post teachers, the quality of education is allowed to decline, so they create a self-fulfilling prophecy. There are statements against RTE. The Rajasthan government wants to either close down schools or privatise education.



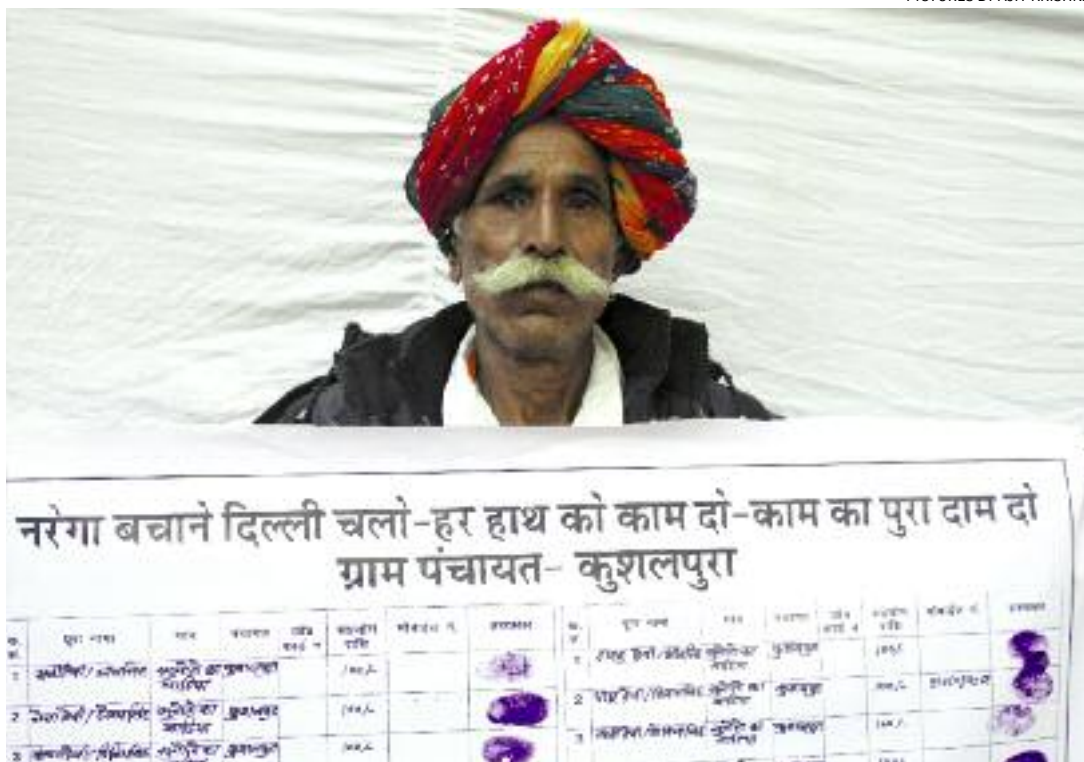
Nikhil Dey

The free medicines scheme in Rajasthan was acknowledged across the world. Good generic drugs and testing were available. All this has been undermined by reducing the number of drugs available.

The response we got to the rally was overwhelming. But not in a happy sense. People have struggled to get some small amount. They haven't become

basic services and rights'

PICTURES BY AJIT KRISHNA



crore. So if you take away ₹4,500 crore from ₹34,000 crore you are down to ₹29,000 crore. Add 10 per cent inflation to this. Take away another ₹3,000 crore. You are killing a robust programme.

What happens when you cut back ₹500 crore from the AIDS Control Programme's allocation of ₹1,700 crore? People are saying we don't have medicines or kits. Women with HIV have delivered babies without those kits which means their children will be born infected.

Is this the feedback you are getting?

See, today people in social sector movements are very well read, very aware and know all the ins and outs of every policy. Women in the Positive People's Network may not have studied beyond Class 10, but they can tell you all the figures, the policies, all the medicines, why kits are not there.

Why are we not consulting people, our biggest resource? Why are we not having these discussions in the public domain? This is why we are having Jan Sansads. Earlier, information used to be leaked. In fact, there was a flow of information from ministries after the RTI Act came. Now suddenly, every bureaucrat is scared to talk.

If they don't have money and they want to balance the fiscal deficit, we would suggest they pass the grievance redress and public services Bill and make sure that the Information Commissioner functions. They should appoint a Chief Information Commissioner, a post that is lying vacant for six months.

You have also made some demands for the coming budget?

The budget cut is just reflective. The demand is for resources. In education we want 6.5 per cent of GDP which the Kothari Committee recommended in 1968. There is no country in the world that does

not accept its responsibility of delivering education up to high school and healthcare.

MGNREGA is an Indian innovation. It has shown that you can build rural assets and infrastructure, that you can give people a minimal level of employment so that they can send their children to school. It is the best form of self-selected cash transfers because you are giving people a certain income capacity. Only those who are willing to do manual labour enrol for MGNREGA. Cash transfers cannot work without selection. You can't target in India.

How politically significant do you think this protest rally is?

I think it is incredibly significant, which is why we called all the political parties. The ruling party was conspicuous by its absence. We used to meet them easily when they were in the opposition. Now, some of them have become ministers and no appointments are given.

Since the new government came, it's had this juggernaut of goodwill from the media and the middle class. Actually, it's the opposite on the ground for most of our population.

The protest is politically significant because politics is not just about the vote. We are in a democratic framework where you have to talk to people.

It is significant because the people who came said we are not here because of the vote. We have come to ask for day-to-day living and that's what politics is about. Everything is being analysed from budgets and so on. We don't have answers but we have an opinion based on reason.

We are asked: is this the politics of the Left since you are talking about the poor and against the companies? But ask the man on the street. He does not know what the Left is. They say, as citizens we are

Continued on page 8

rich or even secure. But they were beginning to feel that at least they could fall back on and survive on a bare minimum amount, that we had all struggled for. Then suddenly this message is coming through, that all this is rubbish.

People have come from thousands of miles away at their own cost. You have 40 to 50 per cent of the rural population living within this range. They are the poorest of the poor. A minimal amount was being given to them and even that is being taken away.

What are the specific demands being raised?

The government is proposing cuts in social spending which they are not admitting openly but pushing through subterfuge. We managed to ferret out information. You have a government that is not increasing budgetary expenditure for the social sector. In real terms, social sector expenditure is falling.

The government uses the fiscal responsibility legislation to cut social sector spending. The budget this year for MGNREGA was ₹34,000 crore which it claimed was ₹1,000 crore more in real terms. They forgot to mention that ₹4,500 crore was due last year. So, first this amount will be taken to pay last year's dues.

The government also forgot to mention that last year's expenditure on MGNREGA was ₹38,000

Continued from page 7

entitled to certain basic services and rights from our government. That's why we want a government. We contribute to the economy so we are entitled to a share which other people are taking.

But states don't often spend the money allocated to them for the social sector.

This is first of all a myth. It was true at one time. States are spending much more than they were. Second, there are accountability mechanisms that can be put in place. If they are not spending, act against the state, the bureaucrat or the politicians. You cannot act against the people.

One argument for budget cuts is that since the states have not spent their allocation, the money can be redirected. The second excuse is that you have already achieved the targets you set, so you can now use that money elsewhere. MGNREGA shows you that we actually have a shortage of funds. The government had a ministry-approved budget from states for ₹60,000 crore for MGNREGA in the last budget but ₹34,000 crore was allocated.

MGNREGA workdays have come down because the programme is being squeezed. You can put money clearly into MGNREGA. It needs it. It is a law that requires you to meet the demand.

But in Rajasthan the Congress government did so much in the social sector. Why did they lose?

The government that did it did not claim it. You need to assert it. People know whether the local politician is delivering or not. The BJP was smart. It never ever said it would cut these programmes. After winning, Vijaya Raje Scindia wrote to the government to change MGNREGA from a law to a scheme. But during election meetings her representatives said, 'We will not touch MGNREGA, we will just make it work better.'

There is a lot of criticism of MGNREGA, that wages have gone up, that assets are not being created, that there is corruption. What do you have to say?

If wages have gone up then let's accept it and celebrate it because we really need rural wages to go up. In my opinion, wages have gone from being exploitative to being minimum. I am therefore happy to say that MGNREGA has done more than its ₹33,000 crore spent set out to do.

As for assets, we have all been saying you need better assets and for that you need a better planning process. But show me a single study – and my voice has turned hoarse saying this for 10 years – that says we are only digging ditches and filling them up. I believe it is the contractor lobby that is behind this. They are doing this through some economists. Otherwise why is it we have not got a single study from an economist saying we have studied this district, this block.

MGNREGA has produced basic infrastructure which is the best form of sustainable development. You are saving water, groundwater and tree cover. *Kutcha* roads that connect hamlets and on which some transport can move have been made.

It is also the most transparent programme in the country. No other programme puts every detail on its website. In villages, expenditure is painted on the walls. The World Bank, previously an enemy of MGNREGA, today acknowledges it as one of the best-designed programmes. ■

Report presents grim reality of Bilaspur deaths

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE 16 young women who died after sterilisation in Bilaspur district of Chhattisgarh were herded through surgeries in unhygienic conditions, according to the report of an independent fact-finding team.

The team, drawn from four reputed voluntary organisations, found many of the women were lactating mothers who should not have been allowed to undergo sterilisation. But they weren't counselled or informed about other forms of contraception.

In all 137 sterilisations were performed over two days on 8 November and 10 November. One of the surgeons did 83 surgeries in rapid-fire fashion – spending about a minute and a half on each woman. This was at a long-abandoned hospital with no facilities.

More than a month after the tragedy, as *Civil Society's* January issue went to press, there was no final word from the Chhattisgarh government on the cause of the deaths.

It was officially indicated that spurious Ciprofloxacin caused the deaths. But the fact-finding team has questioned this, saying there is evidence of septicaemia and the deaths seem to be the result of infections acquired during and after surgery and not from spurious medicines alone.

The independent team was put together by Poonam Muttreja, Executive Director of the Population Foundation of India (PFI), to provide a public audit of what had transpired.

The team consisted of three doctors – Dr Alok Bannerjee of the Parivar Seva Sansthan (PSS), Dr Kalpana Apte of the Family Planning Association of India (FPAI) and Dr Subha Sri of Common Health. There was also Muttreja and two of her



Women after their surgery in Bilaspur district



AJIT KRISHNA

Bijit Roy, Kiran Karnik, Poonam Muttreja and Dr Alok Banerjee release the report in Delhi

colleagues from PFI: Sona Sharma and Bijit Roy.

Their report, 'Robbed of Choice and Dignity: Indian Women Dead After Mass Sterilisation', was released in New Delhi and points to innumerable weaknesses in health infrastructure and family planning initiatives.

The team spoke to doctors and support staff, went to the locations where the sterilisation camps were held, interviewed the women who had been through sterilisation and also visited the families of the women who had died. It also met with senior government officials in Delhi and in Chhattisgarh.

The team notes that when women began reporting back in a serious condition, the district administration acted promptly. It admitted all the women who had gone through sterilisation to the district

hospital, the Chhattisgarh Institute of Medical Sciences (CIMS) and Apollo.

The team visited these hospitals and its report says: "... at Apollo a few cases showed raised levels of Procalcitonin that suggest septicaemia.... Discussion with the doctor who conducted the post mortem examination at CIMS and the district hospital revealed that there was evidence of peritonitis with fluid in the peritoneal cavity, and septic foci in the lungs and kidneys, suggesting sepsis leading to septicaemia."

On Ciprofloxacin, the report says laboratory tests have only established the presence of a toxin, but not identified it. If the drug was contaminated with zinc phosphide, as suggested by some government doctors, then the women would have had to consume 4.5 gm of zinc phosphide for it to be lethal. The Ciprofloxacin tablets were of 500 mg.

"Even though it is impossible," the report says, "but for the sake of argument if we assume that the entire 500 mg was zinc phosphide a woman would have to consume a minimum of nine tablets to make the poison fatal, which was not the case with the women who died. So it is amply clear that zinc phosphide in the medicines could not have been the major cause of these deaths, even if we accept that it could have been one of the causes."

The fact-finding team presents a sorry picture of India's family planning programme, saying it remains focussed on numbers when the emphasis should be on promoting informed choice and dissemination of information.

It points out that, as a signatory to the programme of action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994, India is committed to eschewing coercion in its family planning programme. This is also reflected in the National Population Policy of 2000.

But, sadly, national guidelines are not followed in practice. The quality of family planning initiatives should be judged on choice of method, digni-

ty and comfort, privacy and confidentiality, safety of procedure, follow-up and referral of patients.

In Bilaspur none of these standards was adhered to. The young women, because they were Dalits, from tribal communities and generally poor were treated very shabbily.

The team reported a "complete disregard for the dignity of the women at the camp. The operations were carried out in an assembly-like fashion with male ward boys positioning the women for surgery and then physically carrying them out of the operation theatre."

The team was told that the staff did not change gloves during procedures. The same injection needle, syringe and suture needle were used in all cases. These weren't sterilised nor were new needles taken for each case. "The laparoscope after the procedure on each woman was cleaned by dipping it into a big tray containing warm water and betadine, and cleaning with a dry gauze before using in the next case. Only one laparoscope was used while the Ministry of Health guidelines prescribe three for a maximum of 30 patients," the report says.

Muttreja says, "The Nema Chand Jain Hospital, where 83 of the sterilisations were done, was an old disused and dilapidated premises with dirty walls and cobwebs everywhere. It was shocking."

This situation prevails because of a lack of healthcare infrastructure. Women are taken to primary health centres and district hospitals but these places are lacking in facilities and trained staff.

The family welfare programme's success is measured in terms of the numbers achieved. Expenditure on the programme reinforces this inhuman approach. The emphasis is on compensation and incentives. The surgeon who performed 83 sterilisations got ₹85 per case, the nurses ₹15. The women were paid ₹600 to come to the camp and be sterilised.

The report states that in India as a whole, in 2013-14, more than 85 per cent or ₹396.97 crore of the total expenditure on family planning was directed to female sterilisation. Of this the main chunk, ₹324.49 crore, was spent on incentives and compensation. Only ₹14.42 crore was spent on facilities at camps. Less than 1.5 per cent of the annual expenditure goes towards spacing methods.

"There are deaths happening all the time," says Muttreja. "It is just that they aren't noticed. The women who may not die continue to have multiple health problems. Once again there is no record of this."

The independent team in its report has made a few key suggestions. It has emphasised the need to do away with incentives for doctors, nurses and support staff so that they don't take on more cases than the infrastructure can handle.

It has called for an end to sterilisation targets and camps. Instead, it has proposed sterilisations on fixed days by trained doctors and staff at equipped government facilities.

But the family planning priority, the team says, should be on spacing methods using contraception. There should be counselling and awareness programmes so that men and women can make informed choices. Strengthening Rogi Kalyan Samitis and Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committees would help achieve this. ■



The same injection needle, syringe and suture needle were used in all cases. These weren't sterilised nor were new needles taken for each case. "The laparoscope on each woman was cleaned by dipping it into a big tray containing warm water and betadine and cleaning with a dry gauze before using in the next case. Only one laparoscope was used," notes the report.

Mood in Kolkata will decide

Trinamool's civic score may not help it much

Subir Roy
Kolkata

A strange contradiction marks the political scene in West Bengal. The Trinamool Congress has not performed too poorly in terms of actual work done during its stewardship of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) in the last four years. But it may not be able to reap commensurate rewards for this when municipal elections are held in West Bengal's capital city sometime early 2015 because of the prevailing political mood.

These elections mean a lot to the Trinamool Congress which now wields power in the state as also a good majority of its urban local bodies. But when the last KMC elections were held in 2010 it was the Left Front which was still in power in the state as a whole. The sweeping victory of the Trinamool Congress in the KMC polls dealt a severe blow to the Left Front, turning out to be a harbinger of the change that would engulf the whole state. There is a feeling in the state that the coming KMC elections may also signal change, not of the magnitude which swept the state in 2011 when power shifted into the hands of the Trinamool Congress, but still significant.

Few will be surprised if the Trinamool Congress returns to power at SN Banerjee Road but with a sharply higher count for the BJP, thus establishing it as the main opposition party in the state and ridding the Trinamool Congress of its zing or moral authority. In the 2010 elections the Trinamool Congress won 95 seats, the Left Front 33, the Congress 10 and the BJP 3. In the 2014 parliamentary elections the BJP was ahead in 29 wards.

If the BJP manages to improve its councillor head-count by several multiples (both the Left Front and the Congress remain demoralised), the moral victory will be of the Hindutva forces in a state hitherto considered a bastion of secular opinion. A partial turning of the tables is not ruled out as the Trinamool Congress is on the defensive over the progress of the investigation into the failed Saradha ponzi scheme threatening to engulf some of its top-most leaders.

The city's educated middle-class and its intellectual leadership, which are considered the bell weather of the political mood of the state, appear to have turned firmly against the Trinamool Congress because of its extremely poor record of overall governance (as opposed to the running of the KMC). It is the desertion of the Left by these very sections



Amit Shah at a BJP rally in Kolkata

which is considered to have signalled its defeat in the last Assembly elections.

The Left may be down but the politicisation of the state – the overwhelming influence of politics on virtually every walk of life – which aided the Left in its historic rise to power from the late 1960s remains. This is why it will be very ironic if the tide turns against the Trinamool Congress in the KMC elections. If this happens it will be because of the change in direction of the political winds and not because of the actual performance of the Trinamool Congress in running the affairs of the city. By a lot of objective measures, the Trinamool Congress has done a much better job of running the city's civic body than the Left Front did.

EARN & SPEND

An important way to measure how well the municipal corporation has functioned in the last four years can be had from the state of its finances. During the five years of Left Front rule (2005-2010), collection of property tax, the most important source of the KMC's own earnings, as distinct from government grants which make up around a third of total revenue expenditure, rose by an annual average of 10 per cent. During four years of the Trinamool Congress rule, property tax collection rose by 14.3 per cent.

A measure of how the Left Front was going to pieces as its rule ended can be had from the way "own resources" (property tax plus non-tax revenue like sanctioning of building plans) collection fared. During 2008-10 (Left Front rule), "own resources" fell by an average of minus 7.2 per cent. During the next four years from 2010-14 (Trinamool rule), they grew by an average of 11.5 per cent. Despite

poor collection, revenue expenditure grew by 21.5 per cent during 2008-10, compared to a lower 7 per cent during 2010-14. So the Trinamool Congress had both better control over expenditure and did better on resource mobilisation. But this does not get reflected in the overall revenue balance. During 2008-10, the revenue deficit grew by an average ₹148 crore, but under the Trinamool Congress it grew by a higher average of ₹179 crore. The explanation lies in slow growth of government grants. The state government under the Trinamool Congress had very little to spare.

In touting its record as the head of the KMC, the Trinamool Congress cites most often its showpiece achievement – the transformation of the city's riverfront, the east bank of the Hooghly tributary of the Ganga which runs through the city. Derelict till a few years ago, around a kilometre has been paved, lighting installed and ornamental gardening put in place. The stretch is also kept spotlessly clean. After a little gap there is another shorter stretch and there is a project currently on to build a bridge, copying the design of the Sydney harbour bridge. When the two stretches are joined, the city will get a longish promenade which has been "beautified".

While this is a showpiece, the most important way in which the overall city has changed is by virtue of its cleaner look. There is a lot less garbage on its roads but what is even more impactful is the disappearance of many of the garbage dumps or vats across the city which were both a health hazard and an eyesore. In their place have come reconstructed vats which are lined with ceramic tiles, have a roof overhead and are regularly cleaned and bleached with disinfectants. But perhaps the most eye-catching is not so much these reconstructed

saffron vs. blue battle



Mamata Banerjee in her party's blue and white colours

vats but the compactors and their stations. There are nine of the latter now, housing 17 compactors. These have been acquired with Asian Development Bank funding.

Garbage is brought to the compactor stations by sweepers in the usual handcarts, then the compactor does what its name suggests and the resultant garbage, sans a lot of water and more dense, is transported by lorries to the landfill to the east of the city. The reduced volume lets lorries carry more garbage. The compactors and their stations give the city a new look and are widely appreciated.

Lately, some of the city's streets look extra clean as they are swept somewhat intensively by groups of people who work under the urban equivalent of the rural employment guarantee scheme. This is over and above what the regular municipal sweepers do. Also, the garbage is shipped out more often, with lorries sometimes making their last trip in the evening and not late morning as was the case earlier.

There is also better monitoring of how much garbage each lorry carries through three weighbridges in place of the earlier single one. Cheating on weight is one avenue of corruption and, according to sources, this has gone down. In fact, it is said that lorries make more trips and carry more garbage but the recorded total weight of garbage is lower because of better monitoring. The weighbridges are under surveillance cameras which can be monitored from the municipal headquarters.

Credit for the city looking cleaner is given to Debabrata Majumdar, member, mayor-in-council, for conservancy. There is also a move to eliminate the vats altogether and a pilot project is on in 12 of the city's 144 wards for transfer of garbage straight from handcart to compactor. There is also a project on to build a waste-to-energy plant on 20 acres which will have a power plant run on the city's solid waste. One longstanding vat behind the ITC headquarters is gone and another on the centrally located Camac Street will be made into a compactor station soon.

CLEANING UP

Another area in which there has been visible improvement is public health. There has been a concerted drive to banish mosquitoes and this has had its impact on the incidence of malaria and dengue in the city. In 2010, when the Trinamool Congress came to power, over one million cases of malaria were reported in the city. This came down to 15,600 in 2013 and in the current year till 9 November, 140 cases were reported. The dengue picture is a bit mixed. From 1,852 cases, including two deaths in 2012, the figure came down to 238 last year (no deaths) but has risen to 850 till November this year (no deaths).

One ward in which the fight against mosquitoes has gone particularly well is no. 100 where Amitava Banerjee, an engineer, is the councillor. The seat came to the Trinamool Congress after being held by the Left for 40 years and was the ward of the former mayor, Bikash Bhattacharya. Banerjee proudly mentions that last year there were zero cases of malaria or dengue in his ward. This success has been achieved with regular spraying of insecticides in every corner where the vector can breed.

Several spraying teams work in 15-day cycles and maintain notebooks of homes visited, noting in them residents' phone numbers. From these notebooks, small teams of women make random calls to find out whether spraying has actually been done. Along with this there is a functioning health clinic in every ward, attached to pathological labs and a

certain amount of medicines are distributed free.

Susanta Ghosh, member, mayor-in-council, roads, takes credit for the city's roads being in better conditions overall. He has one particular feather in his cap which is more in the nature of a pilot but significant nevertheless. In a city plagued by hawkers who are now taking over the carriageways of roads after gobbling up pavements, he has been able to restore stretches of the pavement along the Rashbehari Connector which joins up with the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass. By getting hawkers to reduce the size of their stalls, a portion of the pavement has been rescued for walkers. How did he manage to do this? "I have been speaking to the hawkers for two years. If you can explain to them that what you are suggesting is good for everybody, including them, then they will listen." His ward has seen a decline in malaria cases since 2011 but a rise this year, though not anywhere near previous levels.

There are many areas in which results are mixed. The city, till recently woefully deprived of public toilets, now has at least one in every ward. The new structures can be seen in many prominent places and street corners but they are often filthy, the running having been outsourced. As for compactors, they may be a great public relations success but they rule out sorting of garbage.

THE FLIPSIDE

A lot of the so-called beautification work is misconceived. Solid brick and mortar medians have been put on roads with a bit of gardening on top but the gardens are often unkempt. Also, there is no awareness of the safety hazard that such solid medians pose. A car running into them can meet with a severe crash and it is always better for a median to be more visible and notional than physically solid.

But the biggest misguided effort at beautification are the trident streetlights. Installed early in the life of this administration, they are the brainchild of the mayor, Shovan Chatterjee, and have been faulted on several counts. They have sharply upped electricity bills. Plus, they have been overpriced and in order to overcome financial rules, orders for them were broken up into small parts so as to keep them beyond tendering norms.

What is worse, streets with adequate lighting have had trident lights installed between existing lamp posts. In fact, excessive lighting is the bane of many 'beautification' projects like the riverfront. As one person familiar with the corporation said, "Councillors and contractors have to get something." What visually strikes one the most is the repainting of public areas. While fresh paint looks good, every repainted surface bears the Trinamool colours of blue and gray! For all its love for the revolutionary colour red, the Left Front did not actually go about painting the town red, not literally at least. ■



Kolkata's riverfront now has gardens, lights and is spotlessly clean

PRASANTA BISWAS

Poor being shut out of cities

Civil Society News
New Delhi

CITIES in India are becoming more difficult to live in for the working poor. In the past decade, slums have been mowed down and their residents dumped on the outskirts of the city. Municipalities do not extend basic civic facilities to slums. This is a familiar pattern in Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad and smaller cities. Cities do not want the poor and are making it harder for them to survive.

But everybody has the right to migrate to the city and have access to its facilities. To underline this, a Right to the City Campaign was launched in New Delhi on 1 December. Around 100 individuals from various organisations have joined the campaign. Some notable individuals include Simpreet Singh of Ghar Bachao, Ghar Banao Andolan, Shaktiman Ghosh of the National Hawkers Federation, Gautam Bandopadhyaya of Nadi Ghati Morcha and Amita Bhide of the Tata Institute of Social Studies. A banner and the Charter of the Right to Housing Campaign were also unveiled.

The inauguration of the campaign was attended by Dharamvir Gandhi, MP and member, Standing Committee on Urban Development, Anita Agnihotri, Secretary of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, Amitabh Behar of the National Foundation for India, Prof Amitabh Kundu, and Lakhi Das of the Sanyukt Basti Samiti in Jharkhand.

Rajendra Bhise of YUVA spelt out the issues that cities face. It is estimated that around 50 per cent of Indians will be living in cities in the next two decades, he said. Neither houses nor infrastructure exist for the working poor. City governance is weak with little people's participation. There is a paucity of NGOs in cities and very few work on housing for the poor. Researchers, architects, urban planners and activists need to come together and plan for the city, said Bhise.

Gandhi expressed full support for the campaign. He said it was important for the Smart City project to include the urban working poor in its design. He hoped the campaigners would help.

Agnihotri admitted cities were becoming more exclusionary for the urban poor. She said slums in Delhi occupy just a tiny percentage of Delhi's land yet there are evictions and they do not have amenities. Cities, she said, are becoming full of gated communities. A market in low-cost rented accommodation could mitigate the housing problem.

Prof Amitabh Kundu agreed with Agnihotri. It has become more and more expensive for a person from a rural area to migrate to the city, he said. You need police verification for a job; if you want to be a domestic worker, the placement agency will keep three months of your salary. A *jhuggi* in a slum costs at least ₹25,000.

He was sceptical about India's pattern of urbanisation and whether 50 per cent of Indians would be living in cities in the coming years. "We are preventing the poor from migrating," he said. He pointed out that it was mainly the upper and middle class that were migrating. ■

'In India disasters

INTERVIEW

Anshu Gupta

Civil Society News
New Delhi

AFTER floods in Uttarakhand and Kashmir and the ravages of Cyclone Hudhud, disaster management in India has come to be seen as more complex than ever before. The scale of calamities has been changing and the challenge of restoring infrastructure has become not just tougher but more expensive as well. Saving lives and providing immediate relief, however, remain the most important tasks. But what do we really know about helping people in calamity zones? How clear are we about the water, food and medicines they need, the clothes they could do with?

For the past 15 years, Goonj has been collecting discards from middle-class homes and giving them to the needy. While making this connection it has become deeply involved in the lives of communities in different settings. It puts this experience to good use at the time of disasters. So, whether it has been Kashmir, Uttarakhand, Visakhapatnam or the Odisha coast, Goonj has been out there to help.

Civil Society spoke to Anshu Gupta, the founder of Goonj, on what the NGO has learnt from this exposure to the aftermath of disasters and how relief operations can be made more effective and shaped to people's needs. Extracts from an interview:

You have been going to regions hit by disasters. What is the first thing that strikes you when you arrive there?

We have to understand that India is a country of disasters. If you see Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, the north-eastern states or Odisha, floods are an annual ritual. When we had floods in J&K we also had floods in Assam. Both Uttarakhand and J&K were unusual places. But what we have to understand is that disasters have become part of life. People in cities like Mumbai face floods. Kurnool, which used to be a dry area, also got flooded. We have to stop thinking that disasters happen mostly in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. If Srinagar can see this kind of flooding in 100 years for the first time or towns in Uttarakhand can be flooded, we need to understand that disaster does not strike only in particular areas. And here we are not factoring in other disasters like drought or human-made disasters like communal riots.

You mean the definition of disaster should not be restricted to calamities like floods and earthquakes?

Actually, we are not even prepared for floods and earthquakes. The immediate response to a disaster is still primarily by local communities. Reaching on time is not enough. Reaching on time and doing the right thing is more important. If we go in with a boat but we don't have a pump, there will be a prob-



Anshu Gupta: 'The focus in India is on rescue alone'

'People return home to utter devastation. Their fields are full of salt, flooded, they have no food to eat, no facilities. Rehabilitation is all about livelihood and infrastructure. But the focus (in India) is on rescue alone.'

lem. We need to be much more prepared.

The era when we earmarked an area and said these are disaster zones is over. Cyclone Hudhud affected an entire city. But media and statements by political leaders gave the wrong impression. We stop after we rescue people. Take Phailin, the cyclone that preceded Cyclone Hudhud. Almost a million people were successfully evacuated. But because deaths did not happen, it doesn't mean it wasn't a disaster on a big scale.

People return home to utter devastation. Their lives come to zero. Their fields are full of salt, flooded, they have no food to eat, no facilities. Rehabilitation is all about livelihood and infrastructure. But the focus (in India) is on rescue alone. Once rescue is over then work should begin. During Cyclone Phailin we saw the kind of suffering people faced. Yet no one was working there. International

have become a part of life'

AJIT KRISHNA



relief material is old cloth, remember, you can't store it. People affected by a disaster can use only one set of clothing or bedding. They don't have storage space.

Do you get sufficient relief material?

There is a lot of difference between what is given in cities and what rural areas require. In cities what is collected are jeans, T-shirts, salwar suits and so on. But what women in rural areas need are blouses, petticoats and saris. In Kashmir we thought ladies' salwar suits would be quite acceptable. What we found was that the kind of suits women in Kashmir required were quite different. They needed *kurtas* with long sleeves that would cover them up wholly. So it's a huge gap in culture, shapes and sizes.

What we need to do is work out a proper need assessment. Tonnes of basmati rice, costing around ₹80 per kg, came to us. Now people in Kashmir eat a rice variety that costs ₹20-22 per kg. We could have bought four kg for the price of one kg of basmati rice.

Or take 200 ml bottles of water. In a disaster area, when you send thousands of those bottles, they become an environmental hazard. Distribution is also an issue. Water is the cheapest thing to give but look at the transportation costs and how it destroys other things that go with it. We should try and access water locally.

Biscuits are very important for the first two or three days, but after that everyone wants to eat their own food. We keep educating and informing people on what is required after a disaster through our Facebook page and through emails.

I think the time has come when we really need to tell people how to give.

What is the first need of people after a disaster?

They need medical attention, for sure, and ready-to-eat food. But the fact is that, after a disaster, needs change every single day. Take tablets to purify water. One tablet may be good for 100 litres. You distribute it and explain how these are to be used.

But if the person receiving it doesn't understand he may put it in a one-litre bottle and get sick. This is a most common occurrence. We have not as yet found standard operating practices of what should be given and what should not.

Disasters are also big opportunities for traders. They clear their old stocks. I remember in 2013 we got a truckload of biscuits that had expired in 2011.

Huge consignments of medicines come to us. Half of them are either not required in disaster zones or they are close to the expiry date.

Also, it is the family and not just the individual whose needs have to be taken care of. What can a packet of *namkeen* do except spread garbage.

What essentials do people need?

Cooking utensils are most important. People may get rations but they don't have utensils to cook in. So the government will distribute rice but not the means to cook it. Buckets are another important item. The water tanker goes to villages and perhaps parks there for over an hour. But disaster-hit people don't even have a jug to store water in. On record it will be stated that people have been given water. The fact is, they can't carry or store that water.

We have to think of a package after the disaster. The needs of the people vary from place to place. Say, in Kashmir you distribute blankets that are 1.5 kg in weight. But the average quilt that Kashmiris use is 7 kg. Agencies will claim they have distributed 10,000 blankets, but what's the use? Actually, after a disaster people need better quality of material. They are living out in the open without anything.

Transportation is also an issue. It is very cumbersome to move things in large containers because we have to reach places that are remote and where roads have been damaged. We have to move supplies in smaller vehicles, sometimes on mules. In fact, since the past two years we have found that disasters are recurring and happening in unexpected places. Thinking things through, we are now creating a separate disaster wing in Goonj. ■

agencies did not release funds for Cyclone Hudhud though tribal villages in coastal Odisha were badly affected. We spoke only of Visakhapatnam.

How do people respond?

The response from ordinary people is extremely good. When a disaster occurs, people really come forward. Kashmir is the best example. We, at Goonj, got tremendous response and nobody asked which community was affected. In Kashmir we got the maximum support from individuals rather than from companies or anyone else.

Yes, we need some corrections. If 70 per cent of

SAMITA'S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR



PHOTO FEATURE

Ajit Krishna

Slum learns from a fire

When a fire destroyed the Masoodpur slum in south Delhi, it seemed like the end of everything. But eight months later people have rebuilt their lives. The slum now has more open spaces, wider alleys and easier access. “Don’t call it a slum. It is a colony,” one of the residents told us.

THEN
25 APRIL
AAPRUJA AND MARJIA AMID RUINS


Aapruja, just 12 years old, with her baby sister, Marjia, looking at the place she used to call home

NOW
13 DEC
AAPRUJA AND MARJIA AT HOME


Aapruja and Marjia now in their restored hut with Farida, the eldest, on the right

Brighter days for dark Sirohi

Rakesh Agrawal
Sirohi (Haryana)

TAIYAB Hussain, a daily wage labourer, was never happy to reach his village, Sirohi, in Faridabad district of Haryana. Although his village is just 60 km from Delhi, it did not have electricity. Hussain’s two sons and a daughter studied with a kerosene lamp. His wife cooked with a lantern.

Sirohi, with its population of about 3,500 people, comprising 355 households, is a classic case of a dark village surrounded by light. Although it is in the National Capital Region (NCR), one of the fastest growing areas in India, the benefits of development have not reached. There are similar villages in Haryana which have been overlooked by the last government.

“Our village used to depend on quarrying. After the court banned it we turned to less paying, semi-permanent jobs, mostly on construction sites, in Faridabad town. Then, one day Gauri approached us and offered to bring light to our village,” recalls Hussain.

A former investment banker, young and attractive Gauri Agarwal decided to quit her job with a German bank in Mumbai to help village communities access essential services. “I wanted to help communities. I had worked with IIT students in rural areas to promote tourism. This gave me an insight into the problems villages faced. I noticed many of them did not have electricity,” she says. Agarwal is a postgraduate in finance and economics from the University of Warwick, UK.

After she left her job she began searching for a vil-

lage she could work for. “I was contacted by a bunch of students from the National Training and Power Institute (NTPI) to work in the area of sustainable development. They introduced me to a boulevard of villages near Faridabad. Sirohi was chosen since it had not been exposed to politicians and NGOs and they were receptive to us,” says Agarwal.

After identifying the village, she started a venture, Skilled Samaritans, to make her dream come true. Engineers Without Borders, India (EWB-India) joined hands with Skilled Samaritans. Soon, Bechtel Corporation and students at the NTPI also chipped in.

Agarwal began her project in mid-July 2012. “She was a regular visitor to our village. Me and my family of eight children became her extended family,” recalls Sawan Kumar, the first villager she befriended.

SURVIVAL IN THE OPEN



For a long time there were only tents to live in. Animals remained part of families

PICKING UP THE PIECES



A woman begins her day by attending to her goat

CLEANER, WIDER PATHS



Life has become normal and the slum is now fully functional with better living conditions

COMMON WATER TANKS



Underground and overhead tanks to store water

It was important to understand the real needs of the village to address them holistically. “The Samaritans work with college students to conduct a need-based assessment to understand the lighting requirements of a village. After evaluation of the data, they come up with the best solar solutions for the community. Later, based on this assessment, vendors are identified and solar lights are installed,” explains Agarwal.

In two years, she has ensured that all 366 households in Sirohi have light. Each home has a 10-watt standalone system with 2 LED lights of 3 watts each. The people are grateful. Those who got inadvertently left out approached Agarwal. “Last November, I suddenly saw shimmering lights in my neighbourhood. I called up Gauri and asked her to bring light to my home too,” says Sahila, an elderly lady in the village.

In fact, the villagers of Sirohi were extremely enthusiastic about Agarwal’s solar project. They participated in every way. “Each solar home system costs at least ₹4,000. There was this fear that the system would be sold by the family to earn some money. To monitor that, once the systems are

installed, we hand over ownership of the project to a Village Electricity Committee (VEC) that comprises individuals from the *gram panchayat*, villagers and volunteers from EWB,” says Agarwal.

A company in Gurgaon financed the solar lighting project. The cost of a home system for each household worked out to around ₹12 lakh. A joint bank account has been opened in the name of the corporate, the *sarpanch* of Sirohi and a member of the VEC. Each household pays ₹70 per month. This money is used as a revolving fund for the development of the village. Another ₹10 per month is levied by the VEC as collection charges.

“We hope this will ensure sustainability of the project,” says Agrawal.

The VEC is responsible for maintenance of the solar home systems. “We take care to repair systems as soon as we receive a complaint. The common machine is also regularly serviced,” says Amit Gupta, a villager and member of the VEC. “We also explain how the whole mechanism works to everyone,” says Surajmal, the *sarpanch* of Sirohi.

Skilled Samaritans has two volunteers from EWB.

“The VEC meets regularly to supervise the functioning of the system. We take care of all technical aspects and repair any faults,” says Nitesh Kumar, a volunteer from EWB.

Skilled Samaritans is happy with the success of their solar project in Sirohi and hope to take light to many more villages shrouded in darkness. “The point of our initiative is to identify villages like Sirohi that live in oblivion. Our next ambition is to light up Khoiri, a village adjacent to Sirohi,” says Agarwal.

Skilled Samaritans has identified as many as 20 villages near Sirohi that lack electricity, such as Tikkeri Khera, Khoiri, Samped, Bahalgarh, Khanpur Kalan and Vishwamitra.

“We are constantly looking for donors and sponsors to support our initiatives. Each project starts with a pilot run of installations in 50 houses,” says Agarwal.

Skilled Samaritans also organises eco-walks to villages in the Aravalis in Haryana. This way, urban dwellers get to spend time with villagers and get first-hand experience of village life. ■



Activists from the Koel Karo Jan Sangathan receiving the award from Justice Madan Lokur

River activists find common ground

Himanshu Thakkar
New Delhi

INDIAN rivers are in crisis, agreed participants at the first India Rivers Week (IRW) conference held in New Delhi over 24-26 November. More than 110 participants from India and abroad attended the conference, the first of its kind. Uma Bharti, Union Water Resources Minister, Jairam Ramesh, former Union Minister, and Justice Madan Lokur of the Supreme Court were present.

The conference was organised by the Peace Institute, WWF (India), INTACH, Toxics Link and the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People (SANDRP). Notable co-sponsors of the event included Arghyam, People's Science Institute and Global Greengrants Funds.

Around 150 participants discussed the multiple threats that rivers in India face and pledged to continue their efforts to bring rivers into the focus of India's water resources and environmental governance. Activists, researchers, community leaders, experts, affected people, academics and the media interacted closely.

In Indian law and according to the Constitution, rivers belong to the government. The water resources establishment and other government agencies basically see rivers as a source of water, hydropower, as dam sites, mining sites, dumping grounds or as future sites for real estate development. During elections, mega river projects are announced and a higher GDP growth is projected.

While rivers are perceived most reverentially by society, the same society in general treats rivers "with utmost unconcern and disrespect", said Jairam

Ramesh in his inaugural address. Ramaswamy Iyer, former secretary to the Government of India and chairman of the IRW organising committee, highlighted the threats that Indian rivers are facing.

Participants discussed in four parallel groups what a river is, what the functions of rivers are, what the threats to rivers are and the future of rivers. These group discussions, and the plenary that followed, saw enthusiastic and energetic participation. The recommendations from the groups were

A Charter for Indian Rivers was framed based on suggestions made by participants who broke up into four groups for discussions.

framed into a Charter for Indian Rivers, one of the key outcomes of the meeting.

One of the highlights of the IRW were the Bhagirath Prayas Samman Awards given to three initiatives for their contribution to protecting, preserving and rejuvenating India's rivers. Justice Lokur presented the awards.

The three recipients were the Koel Karo Jan Sangathan (KKJS) in Jharkhand, Akhil Gogoi of the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) in Assam, and Dr Latha Anantha of the Chalakudy Puzha Samrakshan Samiti (CPSS) in Kerala. Each recipient received a plaque, a scroll, a shawl and a cheque of ₹60,000.

The Koel Karo Jan Sangathan has carried on a long and heroic struggle against two dams that were proposed to be built in 1973 across the Koel and Karo rivers. The movement has been led by the local Munda tribal community. It is believed to be the longest and most successful anti-dam movement in India. It sought to save the two rivers, the riverine community and its culture. The proposed 710 MW Koel Karo project has been cancelled.

Gogoi was honoured for his efforts to ensure the integrity of the Subansiri and the Brahmaputra. Led by Gogoi, the KMSS, with other organisations, has forced the government to make several changes in the construction and proposed operation of the Lower Subansiri dam project. Work on the project has remained stalled for three years now. The Union government, the Assam government and political parties have promised that work will only resume after consultation and with the consent of agitating organisations. The success of the KMSS has had an impact on other river projects in the Northeast.

Dr Anantha has been leading the CPSS' work on demonstrating the importance and effectiveness of using the basin approach and the necessity of environmental flows for river restoration. Because of the efforts of the CPSS over the last two decades, the proposed Athirapally dam project on the Chalakudy river, with its rich riverine forests, has remained stalled. However, the project is again being promoted by the Union and state governments.

Giving away the awards, Justice Lokur expressed appreciation of the IRW and the Bhagirath Prayas Awards. Noting that the conference had started with defining rivers, he described how any law starts with a definition and it is important to have a definition for any resource in the eyes of the law. Anupam Mishra, the guest of honour, enthralled the audience with his wisdom and straight talk on how our society, politicians and governance systems are treating rivers. More than rivers, it is our society that is in crisis, he said.

In her valedictory address, Bharti welcomed the IRW initiative and reiterated her government's resolve to rejuvenate the Ganga. But she also talked of fast-tracking the Interlinking of Rivers (ILR). This was quickly opposed by Manoj Misra of the Peace Institute on behalf of the organisers. He emphasised that the ILR will further destroy India's rivers.

Bharti then said that ILR projects would be taken up only if there are no adverse impacts on the environment. But activists are sceptical. The ILR meeting held by the government on 21 November under the auspices of the Jal Manthan was a closed-door affair. Independent critiques of ILR were not invited. The minister promised to look into the recommendations of the IRW.

A number of well-researched notes, a compilation of the river journey of 47 participants, titled 'My River Journey', a 2015 desk calendar featuring pictures of 12 different rivers and highlighting the sacrifice tribals made during the Koel Karo agitation were other aspects of the IRW.

There were also photo exhibitions of the Yamuna river and the impact of hydropower projects in Himachal Pradesh. SANDRP's report, 'Headwater Extinctions' on the impact of hydropower projects on the Ganga and Beas rivers with specific focus on fish and river ecosystems was released at the IRW on the last day. ■

Himanshu Thakkar, SANDRP (<http://sandrp.wordpress.com/>)

Sanawar students know to give

Bharat Dogra
Shimla

THE bleak existence of leprosy patients is suddenly enlivened with the entry of a bunch of energetic teenagers. The young visitors greet the patients warmly. Many patients get up from their beds to chat with them.

The teenagers are Class 11 students of The Lawrence School, Sanawar, in Solan district of Himachal Pradesh. They have brought along small Diwali gifts for the patients in the leprosy care and rehabilitation centre in Dharampur. But, more than the gifts, it is the presence of the enthusiastic youngsters and the warmth they exude that lights up the ambience.

"I like it whenever these students come here," says Lal Chand, a patient who has been at the centre for a long time. "When they come, we feel cheerful. It is a very good change for us," adds Gyanchand, another patient.

Shikernand, another patient, says, "The students and teachers ask us what we need, and when they come the next time they try to bring it."

After the interaction, a student, Angad, says the patients face a shortage of water. He intends to ask his teachers to write to the authorities about this.

As the students prepare to leave, most patients in the ward get up to see them off at the gate. However, the departure is delayed for about 20 minutes as there is still seemingly much to discuss.

It is heartwarming to see that despite the apparent gap between them the students are able to establish a relationship of care and concern with patients so quickly, a relationship that doesn't seem imposed and is welcomed by patients.

This is just one instance of the avenues of wider social concerns that can open up before students because of the SUPW (Social, Useful and Productive Work) provision in the curriculum. While, on the one hand, students can acquire very creative craft and vocational skills under SUPW, its community work component opens up exciting new possibilities of linking students with surrounding social realities and concerns. Pursued properly, this can be one of the most significant components of school education. Some schools take up these activities only for name's sake. But heartwarming and significant results can be achieved when schools like Lawrence School treat SUPW seriously.

The teachers select needy, vulnerable communities or groups with whom the students can link up. The students are also encouraged to make donations from their pocket money for this work, and in the course of their periodic visits, they participate in various constructive activities.

At Nande Ka Tara, a Dalit hamlet, toilets were desperately needed. These are being constructed under SUPW. As students reach the construction site, they form a line so that bricks can be passed along. A large number of bricks are shifted within a short time. Poorva, a student, is advised by her teacher to stand at a safer place and go easy with the work. "No, I can stand anywhere and do any work," she insists.

Students and teachers discuss with villagers what other work they can do. Deep Ram, the articulate and highly educated *pradhan*, says that a few other families need toilets because they have more elderly members. So a suitable site is inspected. Nabhadevi and Chanchla add that a school for very young children is needed as a highway has to be crossed to reach the existing primary school. The villagers' requests are noted down by a teacher and will be examined later.

Deep Ram, and other villagers, emphasise that the visits and concern of the students are appreciated. One woman insists that a photo of the villagers and students working together be provided to her.

In the run-up to Diwali, the students also visit a childcare home, Shanti Niketan, in Dagshai, taking along small Diwali gifts and a computer for the inmates. Children from both groups mingle and play. The students from Lawrence School have been giving computer lessons to the inmates. Paras, a Class 8 inmate of the home, says that he looks forward to the visits.



Students from Lawrence School chat with leprosy patients

A similar relationship has been forged with another children's home at Swatoo. Here, the children from Lawrence School also painted furniture in a group activity. Simon, an exchange student from South Africa at Lawrence, commented, "Such interactions are good and useful, but if they are more regular it would be better and we would have better chances of building friendships."

The students were full of enthusiasm and joy, singing songs and having endless discussions in the bus to and from these places. They took a lot of their cheer and enthusiasm to the places they visited, apart from contributing in more utilitarian ways.

SUPW impact on students can increase further if more effort is made to sensitise them about the inspiring and constructive work being done in the country. Gandhian principles underlie SUPW, and if they can be presented in a current context, it would be both useful and interesting for students. ■

INVITATION FOR APPLICATIONS

For

GIRISH SANT MEMORIAL YOUNG RESEARCHER FELLOWSHIP 2015

Girish Sant, a pioneering policy researcher and public interest advocate in the energy sector, passed away unexpectedly in February 2012. Prayas and several friends and well-wishers of Girish, have set up a Young Researcher Fellowship to encourage young researchers to imbibe his values and approach of high-quality analysis, commitment to social equity and emphasis on policy impacts. The objectives of the fellowship are to encourage young Indian researchers to take up public interest oriented research and advocacy in the Indian energy sector, and to provide some financial and professional support to youngsters at an early stage of their career.

Applications are invited from interested candidates to avail of the fellowship for 2015. The fellowship is open to all Indians below the age of 35. The last date for submitting fellowship applications is **February 10, 2015.**

Please visit <http://tinyurl.com/yrf2015> or write to gsm-yrf@prayaspune.org for more details on the fellowship and how to apply for it. Please visit www.prayaspune.org/peg for more information about Prayas (Energy Group) and the work of Girish Sant.

DOSTI TO MARGARITA

Disability films in India get much more sophisticated

Saibal Chatterjee
New Delhi

WRITER-director Shonali Bose's second feature film, *Margarita With a Straw*, is unlike anything that moviegoers in India have seen before. The film, scheduled for nationwide release this year, is a compelling drama about a woman born with cerebral palsy who lets nothing get in the way of her pursuit of happiness.

She embarks on a voyage of sexual discovery that takes her from Delhi to New York and back – and across and over many a daunting barrier erected by society and her own physical constraints.

Margarita With a Straw tackles the theme of disability and the complex social and emotional issues surrounding it with resolute directness, startling insights and flashes of life-affirming humour.

The film is buoyed by a remarkably convincing and profoundly moving performance from Kalki Koechlin as the wheelchair-bound rebel, a writer determined to live life on her own terms.

In *Margarita With a Straw*, Bose goes beyond her protagonist's disability and presents her as a strong-willed woman with normal urges and aspirations that she is determined to fulfil.

"I did not want the character to be seen as a challenged woman," says Bose. "She is an individual in her own right with the liberty to follow her heart."

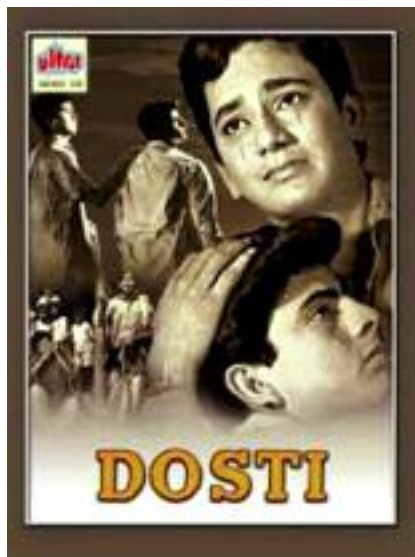
The importance of *Margarita With a Straw*, which had its world premiere in Toronto in September before playing to great acclaim at the BFI London Film Festival, stems from the fact that it represents a movie industry that tends to gloss over the lives of the differently-abled.

It isn't that films about the physically and mentally challenged have not been made in India, but only a handful of them have gone beyond scraping the surface.

The lack of genuine awareness is a major stumbling block. Says Koechlin: "I had no idea what cerebral palsy really was. All I knew about it came from what I remembered from Daniel Day Lewis' performance (as Irish writer and artist Christy Brown) in *My Left Foot* (released in 1989). The experience has helped me develop as a person and an actor."

Exactly 50 years ago, Hindi movie fans were witness to a far more conventional tearjerker about physical disability that, in its own way and in the context of the era it was made in, broke many stereotypes.

The film in question, *Dosti* (1964), produced by Rajshri Films founder Tarachand Barjatya and directed by Satyen Bose, centred on two boys – one visually impaired, the other crippled – who forge a firm friendship that helps them tide over their lot in life.



Margarita With a Straw: Kalki Koechlin essays the role of a strong-willed



Paa: Amitabh Bachchan plays a boy afflicted with progeria

Dosti has no heroine – a commercially risky proposition for a Hindi melodrama back in the 1960s – and very little

comic relief.

A remake of a 1959 Bengali film (Agradoot's *Lalu Bhulu*), it is a classic 'underdogs' tale narrated entirely from the standpoint of the two physically challenged, impoverished but gifted boys who surmount all the odds stacked against them.

One sings, the other plays the harmonica. They perform on the streets of Mumbai, both singly and in tandem, to raise the money that one of them needs to get into school and complete his matriculation.

The film was designed essentially to tug at the heartstrings, but the portrayal of the two protagonists was largely positive. They do start out as objects of pity, but their story has a happy ending.

Dosti was a money-spinner in its time although the lead roles were played by two little-known actors – Sushil Kumar and Sudhir Kumar – whose fortunes saw no upswing despite the film's runaway success.



woman born with cerebral palsy



Barfi!: Ranbir Kapoor's effervescent performance as a deaf-mute person



‘Films on disability still emphasise what the characters do not have rather than celebrate their strengths,’ says Gulzar.

THE ROADBLOCK

Half a century on, Indian cinema has evolved appreciably and it is the big box-office stars that now seek out opportunities to play characters with disabilities with an eye on critical acclaim.

Indian cinema was once notoriously insensitive in its depiction of disabilities. Films routinely ridiculed physical deformities and mental illnesses while treating the disabled merely as convenient dramatic props in larger-than-life sagas.

So, has the scenario changed for the better? With megastars in Mumbai and India's other filmmaking centres pushing the envelope just a little, awareness about disabilities has certainly been enhanced.

Delhi-based Satish Kapoor, who has been organising since 2003 the We Care Film Festival, a travelling showcase of documentaries and fictional features about disability issues, says: "As a result of these mainstream films more people in India are today aware of once-rarely heard of disorders like dyslexia and autism."

Yet there is a nagging feeling that many of these films are marred by inadequate understanding and gross exaggeration of the conditions that they portray.

"The number of mainstream films about disability may have increased of late, but I do not think the situation has actually improved," says filmmaker and lyricist Gulzar.

"I have been working for many years with Arushi (a Bhopal-based NGO that serves the needs of special children) and what I see on our screens is far from the reality of the lives of these amazing people," he says.

Gulzar believes that the current crop of films about persons with disabilities is at best superficial. "They do not reflect any grasp on the real issues that confront the physically challenged. They still emphasise what the characters do not have, rather than celebrate their strengths," he adds.

THE EARLY 70'S

In the early 1970's, Gulzar made *Koshish*, about a spirited deaf and mute couple striving to integrate themselves into the mainstream without seeking any quarter from society. The film remains a landmark in the history of Hindi cinema's sporadic and uneven engagement with disability-related themes.

Only two other major Hindi films – Sai Paranjpye's *Sparsh* and Nagesh Kukunoor's *Iqbal* – have projected impaired characters with the same degree of empathy and realism.

Sparsh (1980), set in a school for the blind, explores the relationship between a visually impaired principal (Naseeruddin Shah) and a sighted teacher (Shabana Azmi). The film was produced by Basu Bhattacharya.

Iqbal (2005), produced by Subhash Ghai, follows the trials and tribulations of a deaf-mute village boy (Shreyas Talpade) who aspires to play cricket for India.

In 2005, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's much-hyped *Black* hit the screens. The film was inspired by the real-life story of Helen Keller as well as Arthur Penn's Oscar-winning take on it, *The Miracle Worker* (1962).

Black revolves around a blind and deaf girl, played by Rani Mukherji, and her stormy relationship with an elderly male instructor (Amitabh Bachchan) who himself develops Alzheimer's in his advancing years.

Among the present lot of Bollywood filmmakers, Bhansali was the first off the blocks with a film that placed disability at the centre of its plot (*Khamoshi – The Musical*).

Featuring Nana Patekar and Seema Biswas as a deaf-mute Goan couple, the 1996 film focuses on the struggles of their musician daughter (Manisha Koirala) to connect with their 'silent' but eloquent universe.



Force: A Bengali film starring Prosenjit Chatterjee who strives to help his autistic son

Since Aamir Khan, in 2007, acted in and directed *Taare Zameen Par*, about a much misunderstood dyslexic boy, India has seen a spate of films in which A-list movie stars have tried their hand at embodying, or highlighting, rare genetic, physical and mental conditions on the big screen.

In 2009, director R. Balki made *Paa*, in which Bachchan plays a ‘boy’ afflicted with progeria, an extremely rare genetic disorder in which ageing sets in early.

In 2010, Shahrukh Khan played a man with Asperger Syndrome, a form of autism that hinders social interaction, in Karan Johar’s *My Name is Khan*.

In the same year, Hrithik Roshan took on the role of a quadriplegic radio jockey and former magician contemplating euthanasia in Bhansali’s overly melodramatic *Guzaarish*.

In 2011, southern superstar Vikram played a mentally challenged adult with the maturity of a six-year-old in writer-director A.L. Vijay’s Tamil drama, *Deiva Thirumagal* (God’s Daughter).

The same year saw the release of the Malayalam film, *Beautiful*, in which director V.K. Prakash cast Jayasurya as a quadriplegic millionaire.

In 2012, director Anurag Basu’s *Barfi!* had Ranbir Kapoor in the role of a deaf-mute prankster who befriends an autistic girl played by Priyanka Chopra.

In the recently released Bengali film, *Force*, veteran Kolkata actor Prosenjit Chatterjee plays a super cop who fights tooth and nail to give his autistic son the opportunities he needs to shine as a young athlete.



REGIONAL REDUX

Beyond the domain of mainstream Indian cinema, too, several filmmakers have begun to turn the spotlight on persons with disabilities.

A Telugu film released earlier this year, *Minugurulu* (*The Fireflies*), directed by K Ayodhya Kumar, is set in an orphanage for the blind near Visakhapatnam, where a corrupt caretaker (Ashish Vidyarthi) siphons off government funds meant for the upkeep of the centre.

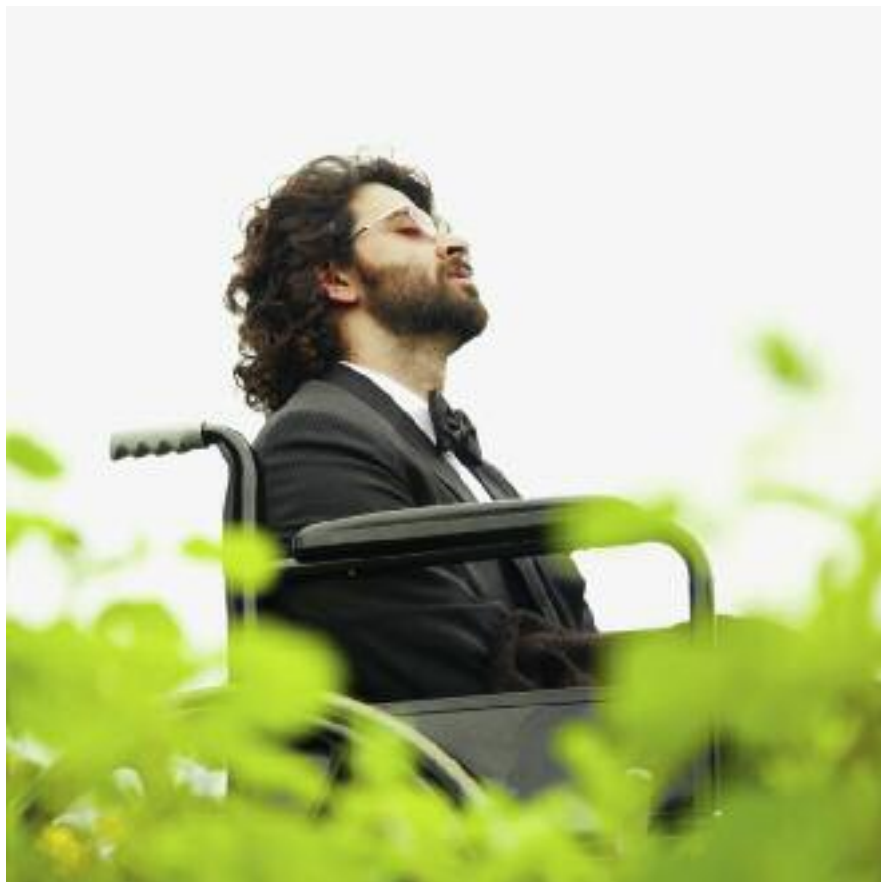
A new resident, a 13-year-old boy who has lost his eyes in an accident and has been abandoned by his family, arrives at the orphanage and joins hands with a group of visually impaired children to bring the warden to book.

“Conditions in the blind schools of Andhra Pradesh are appalling,” says the director. “I wove into the screenplay several of the real stories that I unearthed during my research.”

Barring the young lead and the adult actors (Vidyarthi, Raghubir Yadav, Suhasini Maniratnam), the entire cast of *Minugurulu* was made up of sightless children – 40 of them – in an experiment that the director admits has changed him forever.

Despite the rave reviews that the film garnered, the commercial release of *Minugurulu* was limited. “The critics praised it, members of the industry saw it and lauded it, but we got hardly 30 screens to show the film to the public,” the director laments.

“For such films to be seen more widely, it is imperative to publicise and pro-



Guzaarish: Hrithik Roshan plays a tragic former magician contemplating euthanasia



‘I did not want Margarita to be seen as challenged. She is an individual in her own right with the liberty to follow her heart,’ says Shonali.



Taare Zameen Par: The moving story of a little

mote them in a more concerted manner. Unfortunately, paucity of funds is an impediment,” says Satish Kapoor.

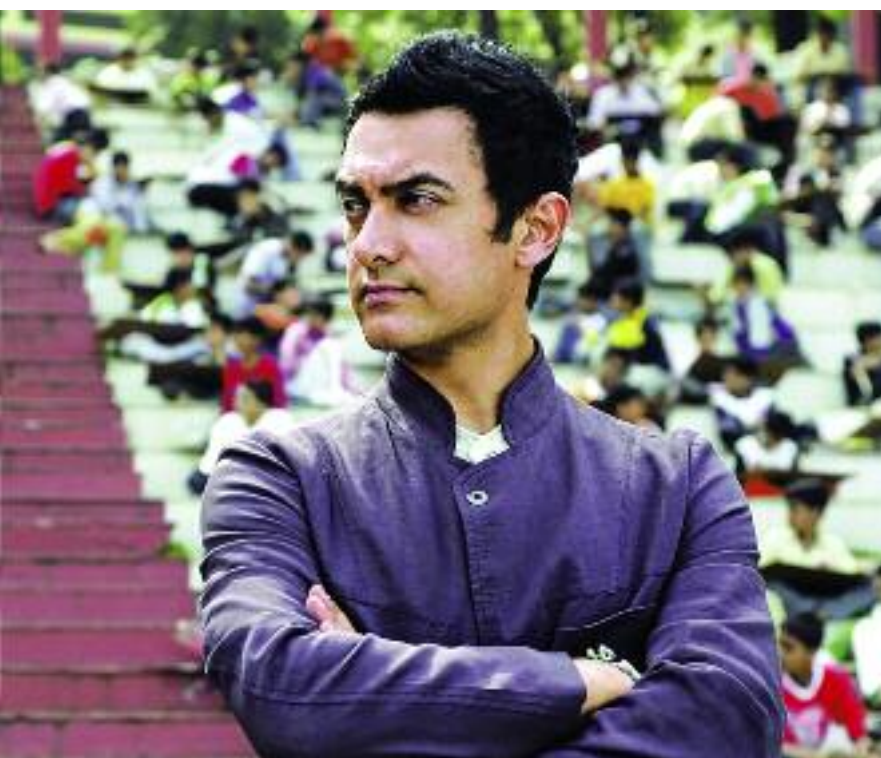
Bengali director Goutam Ghose’s 2001 drama, *Dekha* (*Perception*), which is regarded as one of the finest films ever made in India about how blindness is perceived, also had a sightless actor in its cast.

The male protagonist of *Dekha* is a veteran poet who has gone blind in middle age (a character played with stunning finesse by Soumitra Chatterjee). He comes up against a man who has been blind since birth (played by Kamal Kanjilal, visually impaired in real life) and is forced to review his own life in a new light.

Kerala filmmaker Vinayan had a cast of 300 real-life dwarves for his 2005 film, *Athbutha Dweepu* (*Wonder Island*), with the lead role essayed by an actor (Ajay Kumar, alias Undapakru) who made it to the Guinness Book of World Records as the shortest man to play a full-fledged role in a feature film.



My Name is Khan: Shahrukh Khan in the role of a man with Asperger Syndrome



boy who is dyslexic

The story is set on a mysterious island where all the men are dwarves while the women are normal. Also in the cast of the film was Prithviraj, playing a naval officer. So successful was *Athbutha Dweepu* that it was remade in Tamil a couple of years later by Vinayan himself.

Cinematographer-turned-director Mahesh Limaye's first feature film, *Yellow*, a Marathi film, tells the true story of a girl with Down's Syndrome who goes on to become a Paralympics swimming champion.

Limaye turned to Gauri Gadgil, whose life *Yellow* documents, for the lead role after spending four months looking for an actress who could play her real-life character.

"Gauri is an incredible girl!" he says. "She is full of life and what she has achieved is amazing. No actor could have done justice to her story quite to the extent that she has."

The professionals in the cast were somewhat sceptical to begin with. "I took

them from Mumbai to Pune (where Gauri lives) and introduced them to her. They were completely floored by her level of confidence," says Limaye.

Yellow was released commercially earlier this year and was also selected for the Indian Panorama section of the 45th International Film Festival of India in Goa.

Like *Margarita With a Straw*, *Yellow* draws its power from its realistic and matter-of-fact portrayal of the life of a person with a disability.

"I did not want to bank upon Gauri's disability to arouse sympathy," says Limaye. "I wanted *Yellow* to be an inspirational story not just for those with disabilities but for every member of the audience."

Independent of the demands imposed by commerce, some directors and actors are clearly beginning to make a difference.

Gulzar had made his *Koshish* lead actors, Sanjeev Kumar and Jaya Bhaduri, spend hours and days with real-life deaf-mutes to help them get a hang of the mannerisms and body language they needed for their roles.

In *Sparsh*, Naseeruddin Shah demonstrated exactly how a visually challenged character should be played on the screen.

MORE WORK

Three-and-a-half decades later, Koechlin has set the benchmark for all Indian screen actors who will henceforth play characters with cerebral palsy.

Both Shah and Koechlin invested time and effort to get the nuances right. Not only did the former spend days with students of a blind school, Paranjpye scripted the film in consultation with the visually impaired.

Similarly, for *Margarita With a Straw*, Koechlin spent six months "on and off" with Malini Chib, the director's writer-activist cousin who inspired a large part of the story, before participating in a six-week workshop.

"Malini let me into her personal life," says Koechlin. "She let me go out with her for a drink, to watch movies, to party." For the director, Koechlin was the first choice "because only she could give me two months without a break for the project."

"It helped that Kalki does theatre and is accustomed to living with a character over an extended period of time, internalising the person she is required to play," says Bose.

Koechlin describes her *Margarita With a Straw* experience as "a physically exhausting performance". "I had to stay slumped on the wheelchair the whole day and back pain was inevitable," she says.

What is amply apparent is that films like *Koshish*, *Sparsh*, *Yellow* and *Margarita With a Straw* are no cakewalk. They cannot be mounted in the manner of regular commercial movie projects. They demand more than just an actor's skills or a director's vision to be effective, which explains why they do not roll out with regularity. ■

BUSINESS

ENTERPRISE | CSR | ICT | GREEN TECH

‘Affordable housing can be up to 50 per cent cheaper’



An affordable housing project in Rajasthan with flats priced around ₹3.5 lakh

Civil Society News
New Delhi

GOVERNMENTS have been waking up to affordable housing, but how to fund homes that families with modest incomes can afford? Structuring a loan of ₹50 lakh for someone with a salary is fairly simple. Lending ₹10 lakh to a vendor on the street is a different kind of challenge. Most commercial banks have no time for small customers. Government schemes with subsidised finance are a solution but have made little headway because closing a loan is complex and expensive. Meanwhile, the need for housing continues to expand – in a growing economy people have aspirations and want a roof. Housing also delivers other benefits like better public health and educational standards.

Six years ago, Madhusudhan Menon, 60, Rajnish Dhall, 46, and Nachiket Shelgikar, 29, set up the Micro Housing Finance Corporation to serve homebuyers with extremely small needs (See *Civil Society*, July 2011). Till they got into this act, Menon and Dhall had been hardnosed bankers who had put away a personal pile. But this trip has been in the opposite direction from the big-ticket stuff.

Civil Society spoke to Menon about the journey and the challenges that still come in the way of making affordable housing more accessible. Excerpts from an interview:

What are the changes that have taken place in the affordable housing sector?

When we started out six years ago it was with the realisation that there was a great gap between the housing and mortgage finance available to those who needed it. The first challenge, therefore, was how to provide finance to a person who could afford it but could not prove that he could afford it.

The second challenge was that there was not enough supply of new homes priced at below ₹5 lakh – the bracket we were interested in. There were very few good projects, like one by the Tatas just outside Mumbai. But that was it.

Since then, the people who had started building new affordable housing have built more. In some places like Ahmedabad and Bhopal we have seen the emergence of a whole ecosystem for this kind of housing. Basically, what has happened is when one project came up successfully a lot more builders came into the sector.

How many dwelling units that can be termed affordable housing are getting built at this stage in India?

A lot of what gets built is self-construction, which we don't address at all as a company. So, I have no clue about the numbers there. Self-construction is the larger part of the market.

If you look at the organised sector delivering large

projects of 100 apartments at one time, we as a company are currently addressing around 300 projects across the country. There may be lots more with which we are not associated.

These are brand new homes in the range of ₹3 lakh to ₹15 lakh being created by developers.

Would this number include government interventions?

Yes. The government in the past couple of years has become a big, big player. In Rajasthan, for instance, in the past two years, more than 50,000 apartments have been delivered just around Jaipur.

Those would be priced at how much?

They would be even cheaper than the private sector homes because there are subsidies from the government in terms of land. For instance, 340 sq. ft. is available for less than ₹3 lakh.

And these are projects that have been completed?

In Rajasthan, the projects have been completed, the customers have moved in and paid us for the past two years.

In the six years that you have been lending, has the profile of your customer changed?

The customer profile is a function of location. In Mumbai, the story is different from what has happened in Rajasthan.

In Mumbai, the prices of apartments have gone way higher. Nimai, our first customer, who was selling chow from a pushcart, would not be able to afford an apartment in Mumbai now. The apartment that Nimai bought six years ago for ₹4 lakh is now ₹18 lakh.

Nimai cannot afford it because his income hasn't kept pace with real estate prices.

What was Nimai earning when he bought a ₹4 lakh home?

At that time he was assessed as having an income of ₹12,000 a month.

What would he be earning now and what would he need to earn to buy a ₹18 lakh apartment?

He would now be earning about ₹15,000, which is not enough. The EMI on a ₹18 lakh loan would be ₹25,000 a month for which a family income of ₹75,000 is required.

That kind of income is not possible for someone selling Chinese food on the street. We are still giving loans of not more than ₹10 lakh, but our customer profile has migrated northward. Our cus-

tomor now in Mumbai would be someone who has three tourist taxis or a grocery store.

Has the definition of affordable housing changed?

It depends on who you are talking to. The RBI, for instance, has recently defined affordable housing as high as ₹50 lakh in the four metros. So, a commercial bank giving a loan of ₹50 lakh for housing in Mumbai or Delhi meets its priority sector lending obligations by doing so.

What we have been saying is that instead of pushing the price of affordable housing upwards, you should be pushing it downwards so that more people can have access to housing.

What is pushing up prices of housing?

Land is a significant part of the cost. Then there is time taken in getting approvals. Whether you are building large apartments or small apartments, the time taken for getting all the approvals is the same. In Maharashtra, for instance, it takes up to two-and-a-half years to get all approvals.

As a result, the cost of money goes up. What happens is that you buy the land and are paying interest on whatever you borrowed while waiting for the approvals. This cost gets transferred to the customer.

Then again, 30 per cent to 35 per cent of any housing goes in taxes paid to the State – excise, stamp duty, etc.

What is needed is a system in which there can be quick and even automatic approvals for affordable housing. Affordable housing could be treated as a priority and be defined on the basis of the size of the apartments. There should also be incentives such as taxes flowing back to developers – excise on steel, cement and so on. There could even be an SEZ kind of approach.

So what you are saying is that affordable housing could be much cheaper if the government did just three things: freed up land, reduced taxes and speeded up approvals.

Yes, it could reduce the cost by as much as 50 per cent.

So is that how Rajasthan has managed to provide apartments at ₹3 lakh?

Exactly. In Rajasthan the government has done two of the three things. It has provided subsidised land and speeded up the approvals. What it hasn't been able to do is to refund the taxes because that is a complex thing – there are central, state and local taxes.

But the Rajasthan government has brought down the cost and also ensured transparency?

Yeah. To some extent, the government has had a say in who is buying the apartments so that people who really need them, get them. The profile of people buying there totally fits into what we are trying to do – which is to finance people with very meagre incomes. I am talking here of a manual rickshaw-puller who may be earning as little as ₹5,000 or ₹6,000 a month. He takes a loan of ₹1.8 lakh for a flat that costs ₹3 lakh, having saved perhaps ₹1.2 lakh of his own money.

Have the margins in your business changed over time as you have built expertise, knowledge and outreach?

The sad thing is that the cost of money has not



An affordable housing scheme in Haryana with flats from ₹15.24 lakh



Madhusudhan Menon, one of the founders of the Micro Housing Finance Corporation

come down. A housing finance company like ours gets money from commercial banks or financial institutions and then lends further.

Even when money is subsidised by the government it doesn't work for us though it may be good for the customer. For instance, there is a rural housing finance scheme. The National Housing Bank (NHB) actually provides finance at 7.6 per cent under this scheme. But the money comes with the rider that we cannot lend it for more than 2.5 per cent more. Now, it is not economically viable for us.

What would be your preferred margin?

We need a margin of 3.5 to 4 per cent. We have operational costs. We also have to make a provision of 0.4 per cent against each asset whether it is performing or not. Then we have to provide for credit loss if any – though credit loss is not common with the small loans. Over and above this, we have to pay 30 per cent tax.

Also, when money comes from the government it is expected of us that we lend to all customers within the 2.5 per cent cap. This sort of violates the principle of lending because the risk varies from customer to customer. It is important to be able to price the asset correctly. I am not saying we should charge one customer 18 per cent and another 11 per cent. But a variation of 1 per cent or 2 per cent depending on the risk, is necessary.

The operating cost is high because of the verification and due diligence that we have to do for our customers who are all undocumented. The opera-

tion cost does not change whether the money comes from commercial sources or as subsidised from the NHB. In fact, we work with very small amounts. When you do a loan of ₹50 lakh and get 1 per cent upfront, you get ₹50,000 to defray your operating costs. But when we do a loan of ₹5 lakh we also get 1 per cent upfront but that is just ₹5,000.

In our business we can only concentrate on three things – one is operating cost. You try to control it as much as possible and it is in your control. The second is credit quality or whom you are lending to. And the third is how you structure your capital – the cost of borrowing, the cost of raising equity, etc. You try to keep it as efficient as possible. The rest is all a function of scale and doing more and more of it as efficiently as possible.

What are the other sources of funds?

Like the rural housing scheme, there is an urban housing scheme. If you go to the NHB and ask them they will tell you that the off-take is nothing much. Here, once again, there is a rate gap.

When we get money from commercial banks, it is because they have to meet the RBI's requirement to lend to priority sectors. We know to reach this kind of customer and so a commercial bank will come to us. They are also not interested in this type of customer but need to meet their social obligation.

Now, no commercial bank has a base rate of less than 10.5 per cent – apart from SBI, which has a base rate of 9.8 per cent. The average rate of borrowing from commercial banks for us is 11.5 per cent. We add another 2.5 per cent to that.

How is it that you can manage with a margin of 2.5 per cent on money from a commercial source, but not 2 per cent on money from NHB?

Our portfolio is funded with a mix of funds from commercial sources, NHB and our own capital. The weighted cost of all borrowings for us is 9.5 per cent. This allows us to lend at an average rate of 13 to 13.5 per cent.

How big is your portfolio?

By March we would have (cumulatively, over six years) done ₹350 crore in sanctioned loans and ₹250 crore in disbursements. ■

Mining town has new forests

Rina Mukherji
Kolkata

NOAMUNDI is a laidback town in Jharkhand with a sparse population, a single railhead, a sleepy wayside station and very little habitation. Its main claim to fame is as a mining town. Life here revolves around the mining of iron ore, its transportation and processing.

Mining, whether manual or mechanised, destroys the environment. Huge pits of earth are scooped out to reach the ore. Forests disappear, wildlife runs away and an eyesore appears: barren, uneven, dug-out land.

Yet, apart from the mining sites, greenery abounds all around this neat town. The thick forests surrounding Noamundi look natural but they are, in fact, manmade.

In 1925, Tata Steel began mining in Noamundi. Soon, the verdant forests disappeared and the topsoil was lost. In its place, there were miles of red earth unevenly exposed. Rather than abandoning such land, the management at Tata Steel made efforts to restore the green cover and the forests. They began restoration nearly 30 years ago. This was in line with the vision of the company's founder, Jamshedji Tata, who had envisaged tree-lined towns.

To do so, it was important to opt for species that would initially stabilise the soil and restore its health. On the abandoned site, the earth is stabilised by planting leguminous varieties to improve the quality of the soil. The land is terraced and vetiver (*khus*) is planted since it has roots that penetrate deep into the soil. After three years, saplings are planted in spaces between the vetiver growth. The leguminous plants specialise in fixing nitrogen and restore the health of the soil and balance its pH (which determines soil acidity or alkalinity).

To ensure the forest looks natural, the trees that are planted do not follow the rules of a plantation. Saplings are planted close and hence, as they grow, the canopies overlap. The trees planted are indigenous varieties: banyan, neem, mahua, chironji, tendu, subabul, shisham, palash, bottlebrush, gulmohar, silver oak, jackfruit, teak, gliricidia and pongamia.

"These have deep roots and can bind the soil," explains Rakesh Sharma, Senior Manager (Horticulture). "The network of roots creates organic humus and helps greenery to sprout. This factor is especially important as the land in Jharkhand is characterised by a rocky substrate that cannot be easily penetrated. In fact, this is why the

thick roots of planted trees stand out prominently over the soil."

Altogether 43 different species have been planted. The forests abound in edible fruit. The greenery has started attracting monkeys, small mammals, birds and butterflies. The manmade forest covers 126 hectares and two hills overlooking Noamundi town. Afforestation is currently in progress on Hills

ing bushes, and a bonsai and cactus section. A butterfly park is also maintained on the premises. The butterflies are released periodically into the gardens once they emerge from the pupae stage.

Budding, grafting and cross-breeding of species are undertaken to grow the best fruit and flowering species here. "The Amazonian rain trees are slow-growing and last 400 years. We have hence reserved a small patch for them," explains Sharma.

Restoration of once degraded land has created jobs for contract and permanent workers who maintain these gardens. One such is Nanda Prasad, who found herself stranded when her husband, Mahadev Prasad, a security guard working for Tata Steel at Noamundi, went missing 16 years ago. With four little children to look after, she was facing the prospect of being homeless with no money to fall back on.

"I had no death certificate and nothing to claim since my husband was untraceable but not dead," she recalls. After 15 days of training, she was given a contractual job at the botanical garden. She earns ₹220 per day. She was also extended the kind of help given to all Tata Steel staffers for their children's education. Today, she is adept at all horticultural work, including budding, grafting and planting of saplings. Of her four children, her eldest daughter is an army doctor, another is a civil engineer and her youngest daughter is studying for her B.Tech degree. Her son, the third of her children, is a computer professional who has just got through campus recruitment to join a foreign multinational.

Samrat Mahato from Ramtirth village near Noamundi was employed as a domestic cook in a doctor's household. But he had to find another job when his employer retired. He has been working at the

botanical garden for 17 years. Gurho Triya is a Ho tribal. A marginal farmer, he got employed as a contract labourer through the Noamundi Adarsh Adivasi Co-operative Society. The contractual job ensures decent wages and health facilities at the company-run hospital. He also gets financial help for his children's education.

There is an aqua park here and a fountain park with percolation ponds and rainwater harvesters. Saroj Kumar Banerjee, Chief (Engineering Services and Projects), explains that the water in the percolation pond is made to rush up in the form of several fountains to bring down the biological oxygen demand and chemical oxygen demand levels of the water and render it free of organic pollutants and impurities. It also adds to the natural beauty of the parks. ■

PICTURES BY PRASANTA BISWAS



The team that rejuvenated the botanical garden in Noamundi



A natural forest has been regrown on an area devastated by mining

3 and 4, which are still being mined. As mining concludes, terracing begins and afforestation is undertaken, step by step. The conversion is gradual, and may take a few years. However, the sum total of the exercise is the all-encompassing greenery that greets any visitor to Noamundi.

Besides manmade forests, many abandoned mining sites have been transformed into botanical gardens, parks and percolation ponds for rainwater harvesting. Tata Steel's afforestation policy applies to all mining sites that it has been managing, including those in other mining towns in Jharkhand and Odisha.

The botanical garden in Noamundi has been planted at a site once ravaged by manual mining. Today, it is resplendent with native species of fruit trees, slow-growing Amazon rain trees, spice-yield-

INSIGHTS

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Teaching needs perspective



DILEEP RANJEKAR

BACK TO SCHOOL

SOMETIME in 2007 I was invited to facilitate a session with a group of about 35 high-quality faculty members in one of the Institutes of Advanced Studies in Education (IASE). The topic was “Evolving a Framework for Faculty Development”. The discussion began with “what is your concept of education” and soon I found that people had extremely diverse views on what constitutes “good-quality education”. It was important to create a shared understanding on this before we discussed how we wanted to develop ourselves to contribute to good-quality education.

I proposed that we used the existing framework of education that India has committed, to based on three important reference documents – the Indian Constitution (that articulates the kind of society we want to be), the National Policy for Education (1986) and the National Curriculum Framework 2005, which was evolved barely two years ago. Being a relatively new document, the National Curriculum Framework 2005, was the focus of a lot of discourse in the country, during that time. In fact, the Azim Premji Foundation had organised five regional conferences that were open to people who wanted to know more about the curricular framework and what went into formulating it. The conferences were facilitated by people who had directly contributed to the various chapters in the framework.

When I mentioned the National Policy for Education and the National Curriculum Framework, I found several blank faces in the audience. So I said: “I hope most of you know about the National Curriculum Framework.” After getting no response, I asked them, “How many of you know the National Curriculum Framework?” The response startled me. Only four of them had heard of it and one of them had browsed through it. None of them could claim that they knew what it contained. And this was a premier institution.

On my subsequent visits to schools and in my interaction with thousands of head teachers and teachers, I realised that most of them had barely heard of the National Curriculum Framework and very few, if at all, had gone through it in depth and understood the import of its content. Nor were they aware of the State Curricular Framework. As a result of this, most of them were unable to engage with very important



It is necessary to move away from memory-based learning

issues such as the purpose of education, the purpose of teaching a particular subject or how a subject contributes to the overall development of the child.

Any good curricular framework attempts to define and elaborate three critical aspects of our education: First, what is worth learning; second, what are some of the good processes to make such learning happen; and third, how do we know that such learning is happening.

In my visits to schools and my interaction with teachers I realised that most of them had barely heard of the National Curriculum Framework.

The first aspect defines the philosophical agenda of education in a given social context. The second aspect deals with the classroom processes and pedagogical aspects that are most conducive to realisation of the potential of learners. The third aspect deals with continuous evaluation of not just the learner but also the process of learning and therefore the effectiveness of the classroom strategies deployed by the teacher.

The curricular framework is intended to provide a perspective on education to all those who are involved in the process of organising a quality education system – starting from the Education Minister to the teacher who finally interacts with

the learners in the classroom.

If a majority of the people engaged with the education system are unaware of the depth of such a framework, you can well imagine whether such an education system would be able to achieve the national goals of education.

As opposed to the current status of a serious lack of an ‘education perspective,’ if we build such a perspective at all levels in the education system, I can visualise several good things happening at both the strategy and ground level:

First, there would be clarity on the philosophy that is driving all our policies, programmes and actions at all levels of education. Most people would be clear about the “aims of education” and be driven by the linkages between education and society, between education and our constitutional framework, and education and the future of our nation. We would evolve a long-term vision for education that would contribute to a nation that is committed to the principles of democracy, secularism and long-term progress.

Second, such a perspective would educate and inform our political and bureaucratic masters to evolve long-term policies that would transcend individual political interests and allow the nation to focus on an agenda that is in the larger interests of society. Both politicians and bureaucrats would be compelled to allocate necessary budgets and quality human resources to realise this long-term vision. The nation would invest in building institutions (universities and schools of education) that would continually develop top-class education professionals with competence in several aspects of education.

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Pension system is overdue



MATHEW CHERIAN

GREY LINES

IT has long been alleged that one reason people in developing countries have so many children is for old age security. Without reliable saving instruments or public pension programmes, children will be the best bet. And because infant and child mortality rates are high in poorer states, having a large number of children helps ensure that at least some children – of the ‘right’ gender – will survive to provide support in old age.

However, with migration of children, older parents in many rural areas are left to fend for themselves. In a district like Pathanamthitha in Kerala, where I come from, one in three people are old which is the likely future scenario after 2040 for most of India. In most houses there are only older people living alone. Their sole companions are their pet dogs and cats. Some families have more dogs and cats than human beings for companionship. If this future is not to fall on all of us, we will have to create alternative pension systems for India’s elderly.

Only a good pension system will help India’s elderly if we are to avert an old age crisis. In industrial countries and most low-income and middle-income countries, governments have developed formal arrangements for old age support. An estimated 30 per cent of the world’s elderly are covered by these formal arrangements, and 40 per cent of the world’s workers are contributing with the expectation of being covered when they grow old. The answer to these pension system questions determines how a country’s old age security system affects the economy and how its benefits and costs are divided between old and young, rich and poor.

Studies by Dr Rajan of the Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Thiruvananthapuram, have shown that pensions are used very well by the elderly and help improve the economy. Our neighbouring country, Nepal, has a universal pension

system, but not its superpower neighbour, India.

Recently, Aruna Roy, Convener of the Pension Parishad, was in Delhi at Jantar Mantar in early December along with thousands of older people, some from Rajasthan, some from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, demanding universal pension for all older people. Aruna Roy recounts how she met an elderly woman in a village in Rajasthan living on a meagre ₹50 per month keeping body and soul together. Unless Indians get universal pension, old age will be a misery. Can we improve the dignity of India’s

LAKSHMAN ANAND



older people and treat them better?

What is this universal pension? India, from the 1990s, had an old age pension scheme for very poor old people who were Below Poverty Line (BPL) cardholders. We call this a means-tested pension which is available only to the really poor. This started in 1992 with a plan allocation of just ₹75 per month per person and then increased to ₹200 per month per person in 2003. This currently reaches about 12.5 million BPL cardholders, according to the Ministry of Rural Development. But it leaves out about 60 million older people who do not get any pension or social security and do not have a living wage after 60 years.

leading at the school level.

Fourth, we would move away from currently largely “memory-based” education to something that promotes comprehension, application, critical analysis, independent thinking, creativity, scientific temper, sensitivity and empathy towards fellow human beings, the importance of commitment to Constitutional values, universally accepted values such as pursuance of truth, non-violent behaviour, importance of dialogue and adherence to the established law of the land. This would transform several things – ranging from the belief system of teachers and parents about children, classroom processes, the way we evaluate children’s performance

How do we ensure they live with dignity? Pension Parishad advocates that all elderly, who are not taxpayers, are given a living wage of ₹2,000 per month which is half the amount of wages that will be available if they worked under the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGN-REGA). This universal pension is likely to be the solution for hunger for the marginalised elderly in India. Fifty-five million elderly, almost the whole population of the United Kingdom, go to bed with no food to eat, which is very cruel for a country with overflowing food stocks and claims of being a superpower. Social security systems in India face increasing financial pressure, particularly during times of economic crisis and high inflation, and are absent for almost 90 per cent of the population.

The Government of India (GoI) launched a scheme in 2010 called the National Pension System (NPS) or NPS Lite, a low-cost model aimed at economically disadvantaged sections of society. For the weaker and economically disadvantaged sections, this is a pay-and-build model of pension for securing old age income security and involves small amounts which builds up an NPS Lite account. This would help part-time workers, auto-rickshaw drivers, vegetable vendors, fish workers, hawkers etc. However, NPS Lite and its predecessor, the Swavalamban Scheme, have not had great success despite strong promotion from the GoI.

Ninety per cent of India’s 100 million elderly do not have pension or social security. Ensuring social security is like ensuring a ‘living wage’ which is offered when you cannot work or earn your living. We call it a ‘social wage’ which is a core entitlement that must be fulfilled by the state and society. Many civil society groups like HelpAge India, Pension Parishad and Baba Adhav from the Hamaal Panchayat have been demanding universal pension. Unless we do this, in future decades we will have a tsunami of old age distress. India’s 100 million elderly will grow to 200 million by 2035. The demographic dividend, which we now have, will be over by 2035 and will become a demographic burden. We have a small window of 20 years during which we have to create a pension policy for India’s elderly or we will be overtaken by the tidal wave of sheer numbers.

This old age crisis will then be very hard to avert. We must act now. ■

Mathew Cherian is CEO of HelpAge India

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Third, our teacher education would be completely overhauled in the way countries like Finland and Sweden did some 40 years ago to develop and prepare teachers that would be such important pillars of both our society and our education system. By building a rigorous five-year teacher education system, they made it difficult for anyone to become a teacher. We would invest in developing an “Indian Education Service” cadre competent to deal with long-term, deeper issues involved in education. We would invest in developing our school leaders who would be adept in dealing with academic, administrative, cultural and developmental issues that they are responsible for

(both continuous assessment and the periodic examination system) and the way we develop future members of our society.

If we don’t address this “crisis in perspective of education”, we will continue to administer an education system that is meaninglessly engaged with rituals, announcements, programmes, tinkering of policies and fragmented decision-making, with very little contribution to genuine quality of education. Our dreams of the “kind of society” and the “kind of superpower” that we want to become will remain on paper and we will continue to be a “developing nation” forever. ■

Dileep Ranjekar is CEO of the Azim Premji Foundation

The travails of toilet talk



NITYA JACOB

THE man in the centre of the crowd takes a glass of water and offers it to another person who swallows a mouthful. Then he squeezes some brown goo into the glass, shakes it and offers it again to the man who recoils and calls him mad. “I am not mad,” the first man says. “You eat and drink shit every day when you defecate outside and think nothing of it.”

This is the first step in ‘triggering’ behaviour change to make people understand what hygiene is and how defecating in the open is hazardous to health. It is extreme but gets the message across.

This strategy is part of a globally used process called community-led total sanitation (CLTS) where people are shown the ill-effects of open defecation through dramatic means. Sometimes the strategy backfires with demonstrators being chased out of villages for literally talking shit. Often, though, it catches the attention of the crowd. Whether it achieves the desired result – making people want better sanitation and raising standards of hygiene – is debatable.

Changing behaviour is a slow process. Most people from NGOs working in communities say it can take anywhere from six to eight months to convince a community about the need to do something or stop something. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, workers from the Arthik Samata Mandal say it took them nearly a year to convince mothers to insist on birth registration certificates for their children. Changing behaviour as ingrained as defecating in the fields is much harder and takes longer.

However, that isn’t what comes across from the way most NGOs, who have often worked very successfully on other projects, go about trying to effect change in hygiene behaviour. Their staff organises a *gram sabha*, makes a few speeches and distributes some material. They talk of government schemes for promoting sanitation, mostly the subsidy. Like a politician whipping up a crowd to fever pitch, they conclude the meeting by loudly asking, “Who will build a toilet?” To which there is a tepid response.

I’ve attended many *gram sabha* meetings and it is evident that the size of participation is directly proportionate to the time the NGO has been working

in the village and how successful it has been in the past. Reactions to such an NGO’s work on sanitation are much more convincing and broader. I have participated in meetings where both men and women, seated separately, have endorsed the call to clean up their village and stop open defecation. The degree and sincerity of their response depends on how long and how well the NGO has been working there.

It is also a function of local leadership.

A strong *sarpanch*, ward member or other local leader is more effective than any NGO in stirring people to action. Time and quality of engagement notwithstanding, NGO staff are often outsiders to a village and seen as service providers. A local leader is perceived to be acting for the good of the commu-

the government is paying. For the last, it is as crude as saying the government will give you ₹12,000 for making a toilet.

This is a perversion of CLTS that seeks behaviour change and stopping open defecation. It excludes subsidies. But under the government programme, talk of subsidies is central to the whole exercise of behaviour change. NGOs working with communities see it as a shortcut for hygiene behaviour change. This perversion backfires as people take the money, accept shoddily made toilets and continue defecating in the open as before. Their reaction is of acquiescence – if the government wants to give them money for a toilet, its fine. They will take the money, spend the minimum needed for compliance and use the rest for other things. People are happy

SANDEEPA VEERAMACHANENI

to get ₹12,000 even if they need to pay a bribe to the *sarpanch*, junior engineer or village secretary. Even in the past, subsidies have been quite generous.

The problem in India where there is no safety net or system of food stamps, is that subsidies are the only way to ensure the really poor, the lowest wealth quintile, get money to make toilets. These are people who have shown the least increase in access to sanitation. The problem is not with the subsidy, it is with the messaging that uses it for fast-tracking behaviour change. This runs counter to everything NGOs know and do for building social capital, a process that by their own admission takes



nity, even if corrupt. If the leader is convinced of the utility of sanitation or better hygiene, he or she makes for a very powerful agent of change. Reactions to what the leader says are almost uniformly positive and sincere.

Since 2000, when the Total Sanitation Campaign, the first of the demand-led avatars of sanitation, was launched the focus has been on changing the behaviour of the poor. This is because, being on the BPL list, they are the beneficiaries under these programmes. The messaging does not actively exclude the non-BPL families as the assumption is they will make their own toilets after hearing the motivators and getting the message. The money for messaging comes from the sanitation campaign in which over 85 per cent is for hardware activities for BPL families.

In reality, things are different. The preparation of BPL lists is one of the most politicised and perverted activities in a village as the entire decision of who will benefit from government largesse rests on them. Thus, the messaging that goes out includes hygiene behaviour change, information about government schemes, the kind of toilets to be made, agents who will make them and how much money

several months. Here lies the crux of the problem.

Therefore, reactions to sanitation messages are coloured by whether the recipient is eligible for subsidy. If yes, it is of guarded optimism but they would like to see the money and the toilet before committing to having one in their backyard. A promise of a five-figure sum is too good to be true, especially if it is packaged as “the government is paying you ₹12,000 to make a toilet”. There is the all-pervading struggle to get on the BPL list, eligible or not. The ineligible ones are indifferent since they do not get either money or the toilet. So the good intentions of CLTS run aground on the subsidy reef.

A possible solution is to use CLTS for hygiene behaviour change without referring to the subsidy at all. Money should enter the messaging only after people have signed up to make toilets, constructed them and have been recorded as using them for at least six months. At this point, the subsidy can be released as a reward for having kept the village free of open defecation. This may ensure that the animator’s offering of dirty water is a concrete step towards social engineering. ■

Nitya Jacob is Head of Policy, WaterAid India

Circular shortcircuits EIAs



KANCHI KOHLI

A circular issued by the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) on 7 October 2014 states: “It has been brought to the notice of this ministry that sometimes the EACs/SEACs, during the appraisal process, revisit the issue of the site of the project and/or seek additional studies on various issues which do not form part of the ToRs. This, besides delaying the whole process, goes against the spirit of the EIA Notification 2006. This ministry has been requested to issue instructions to EACs/SEACs on the subject.”

As per the procedure laid out in the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006, specialised expert committees play a role twice in reviewing any application submitted for grant of an environment clearance.

All the activities and operations listed in the Schedule of the EIA Notification require the preparation of a detailed EIA report in accordance with the Terms of Reference (ToR). These ToR are issued by Expert Appraisal Committees (EACs) for Category A projects and are processed at the central government level. For Category B projects, it is the State Expert Appraisal Committee (SEAC) which carries out this task.

Obtaining an environmental clearance or approval from the MoEFCC is mandatory for a range of industrial and infrastructure projects before the company initiates construction or expansion activities. A procedure laid down under the EIA Notification of January 1994 (issued under the Environment Protection Act, 1986) made this compulsory. In 2006, the 14th Amendment to the notification was substantially overhauled to achieve greater efficiency and speed in granting approvals.

What are the implications of the circular issued by the MoEFCC? We need to understand two critical issues. First, the ToR and the preparation of an EIA are critical processes based on which the next two steps of the clearance process are determined – public consultation and expert appraisal. They form important baselines for affected and concerned individuals to understand what kind of changes the setting up of a power plant, industry, highway, dam or a mine will have and what will be its effect on their area.

Secondly, the legal space available to the people under the EIA notification has been used by affect-

ed communities and many civil society organisations to raise a range of issues. Sometimes the expert committees simply miss out components on which impacts are to be assessed. Even if they are highlighted during ToR granting meetings, they don't find a place in either the final ToR issued or the EIA presented before the public. It is only after a formal public scrutiny that the missing elements in these documents are discovered. The project sites are misrepresented, data is copied from other reports, information on water bodies, wildlife or rivers is wiped out, or significant studies are not even attempted.



PRADIP KRISHEN

In some cases, the feedback mechanism has led to directions asking for fresh EIAs or additional studies to ascertain impacts.

It is because of this that public scrutiny of ToRs and EIA reports have generated a vigorous response ever since the EIA notification was first put into place. Instances of shoddy EIA reports, incomplete data, underplaying of impacts are enormously important aspects which have been pointed out to the expert committees and EIA consultants by those participating in the public consultation process.

In some instances, this feedback mechanism has led to directions asking for fresh EIAs to be conducted or additional studies to be added to ascertain impacts. This obviously meant that project authorities and EIA consultants had to carry out the task that they had decided to ignore in the first place. Hence, there were delays in the time taken to approve a project.

Many large projects, including POSCO's steel plant in Odisha, Mahan's coal mine in Singrauli, Madhya Pradesh, OPG's power plant in Kutch, Gujarat, or the JSW power plant in Raigad, Maharashtra, have had

to carry out major studies only after these were brought to the attention of the EACs.

If the recent circular of the MoEFCC is to be implemented then all this will not be possible any more.

The 7 October circular states that the EACs and SEACs should ask a comprehensive set of questions and studies only when the ToR for an EIA report is issued. Additional studies, especially “fresh issues” can be added at the appraisal stage – if these are required. A justification for such studies has to be unambiguously stated in the minutes of the meetings where project approvals are discussed.

According to the circular, this is to avoid delays for project proponents. New changes that might have come up during the public consultation stage are not taken into account.

Ironically, the circular states that asking additional questions at the time of the appraisal undermines the spirit of the EIA notification. What the circular does not reflect upon is the definition of appraisal clearly laid out in the notification, which says: “Appraisal means the detailed scrutiny by the Expert Appraisal Committee or State Level Expert Appraisal Committee of the application and other documents like the final EIA report, outcome of the public consultations including public hearing proceedings, submitted by the applicant to the regulatory authority concerned for grant of environmental clearance.”

Experience with the implementation of the notification and the kind of issues raised at the time of litigation reveal that it is only at the time of the public consultation that serious lacunae in the ToR and EIA documents are brought to light.

EACs and SEACs usually grant ToRs based on the information provided by the project authorities and their understanding of the subject. There is no site inspection or local input. Therefore, not allowing for additional information and studies to be sought at the time of the appraisal is no less than defeating the purpose of the exercise.

If the MoEFCC and project authorities are worried about delays, why not be open to conducting public hearings at the time of issuing a ToR itself? Why not carry out EIAs with the involvement of the affected people? While the EIA is being carried out it will be clear what the range of impacts will be and what the public sentiment about the proposed project is.

But taking away the right to appraise makes the task of appraisal given to the EAC or the SEAC a mechanical exercise. No space is provided for public inputs, for a rethink or for a true reflection of what the impact of land use changes are likely to be. Ask no questions, says the MoEFCC, it's too inconvenient. ■

The author is an independent researcher based in New Delhi

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SUSHEELA NAIR



Reclining Buddha at the Thai Buddhist Temple in Penang

Juncture of world cultures

Heritage at its best in Penang

Susheela Nair
Penang

STROLLING down the quaint alleyways of the old part of George Town, we felt we had stepped back in time. This multicultural city in Penang is littered with a myriad neoclassical churches, Hindu temples, gilded Chinese temples, palatial mosques, opulent mansions and white colonial buildings. Its streets are lined with ancient tile-roofed louvered shophouses where traditional traders reside.

The imprint of successive foreign influences were discernible – from the early Indian civilisation that took root in northern Malaysia, to that of the Portuguese, Dutch and later the British who barged into this part of the world in search of spices, and stayed back to participate in the lucrative trade.

The seat of administration, and the state's commercial hub, George Town is on the UNESCO

World Heritage list. Its seafront is awesome, while inland one finds large parks surrounding old structures. East meets West, as can be seen from the beautiful white colonial-style buildings at every corner.

We witnessed the delightful fusion of the old and new in the Pearl of the Orient. The stately City Hall is a fine example of British Palladian architecture featuring magnificent Corinthian columns and huge windows. Nearby is another landmark. Presented to Penang by local millionaire Cheah Chen Eok in 1897 to commemorate Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee, the 60-foot Clock Tower looks down at the traffic that swirls around it. Bicycle rickshaws stream by giving the city a redolent, evocative appeal.

There are some amazing religious buildings, mainly built by settlers at the turn of the last century. We found churches rubbing shoulders with mosques and temples. We could simultaneously hear the clangs of church bells, chants emerging

from a Buddhist temple, and a muezzin sounding the call to afternoon prayer.

Walking the length of the Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling, also called Harmony Street, we passed from the white columns of St. George's Church, the oldest Anglican church in Southeast Asia, to the bustling, smoke-wreathed Goddess of Mercy Temple and then to the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple.

We followed the street to its end and found ourselves in the walled precincts of the Kapitan Keling Mosque. Named after the Indian merchant, Kapitan Keling (headman) Caudeer Mohudeen, the Kapitan Keling Mosque features an ochre yellow façade and dome-shaped minaret, reflecting Moorish Islamic influence. They are literally concrete testaments of how our different religions have co-existed in harmony.

Modern Penang's history goes back to 1786 when Captain Francis Light persuaded the Sultan to cede

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Pulau Penang (Betel Nut Island) to the British East India Company. The island was originally named the Prince of Wales Island and the settlement that formed was named George Town after King George III.

This 1,045 sq. km. sun-kissed state comprises the 285 sq. km. island of Penang and a narrow strip of some 760 sq.km. on the mainland known as Seberang Perai (Province Wellesley). They are linked by the longest bridge in Asia, the Penang Bridge, as well as the oldest cross-channel ferry service in the country.

No trip to Pulau Penang is complete without a visit to Fort Cornwallis, built on the site of Light's historic landing in 1786. It was originally a wooden stockade that was subsequently replaced by a brick structure in 1804. Once there was a fort, but we found a chapel, gunpowder magazine, cell rooms, an open-air amphitheatre, a history gallery, and a handicraft and souvenir centre. Some half-a-dozen cannons were prominently displayed, facing sea-wards. There's the famous Dutch canon or *meriam seri rambai* on wheels, presented to the Sultan of Johor by the Dutch, which finally ended up in Penang after being looted by the Portuguese.

SUSHEELA NAIR



The Kapitan Keling Mosque in Penang

SUSHEELA NAIR



The funicular rail track leading to Penang Hill

Housed in a colonial-style manor house, Penang Museum and Art Gallery is worth stopping by. We had an engrossing overview of the island's history, architecture and multi-ethnic population. One can learn about local history and heritage illustrated by photos, maps, charts, paintings, Malay daggers (*keris*), Chinese furniture and embroidery. Amidst a century-old setting, the items trace the history of Penang. The Art Gallery displays the works of local artists and hosts special exhibitions. Plenty of space is devoted to kitchen culture, local specialties and even the history of Penang's *kopitiam* (coffee shops).

I took an amazing tour around the enchanting multicultural city of George Town to discover the unique wrought-iron caricatures with anecdotal descriptions of the streets that they adorn. It all started off with a street art project called Mirrors George Town by George Town Festival 2012. Since then, street art has been popping up all over the



A glimpse of street art

inner city. As I strolled along the crumbling pavements, caricatures jumped out at me from the lively street art, mimicking earlier life in the city.

Next, we headed to the two Buddhist temples on Burmah Road. At the Wat Chaiya Mangkalam temple, the largest Thai Buddhist temple in Penang, I saw a 33-metre reclining Buddha. The courtyard entrance is ornate: two heavyweight green-faced ogres guard the doorways, and a couple of sprawling mythical dragon-headed serpents rear their painted heads. Across the street is the exquisite Dhammkarama Burmese Temple. It is remarkable for its intricately carved wooden ceiling and a huge standing Buddha set within a gilt filigree framework.

We culminated our trip with a visit to Penang Hill, the oldest British hill station in Southeast Asia. Getting to the top in the funicular train is half the fun. The ride took five minutes. At the summit, there is a flower garden, a mini bird park, an owl

museum, bungalows, guesthouses and the historical Bellevue Hotel. Rambling through wooded pathways, we came across interesting plants such as tropical oak trees and also the carnivorous pitcher plant. Up top, the air is fresh and cool, and the vistas unparalleled: to the south, George Town's neat rows of clay tile roofs; to the north, undulating hills backed by a turquoise sea. After all the brisk walking, we felt recharged to continue our sojourn in the Pearl of the Orient. ■

FACT FILE

GETTING THERE

Penang is well-connected by air with major capitals of the region and by rail from Kuala Lumpur. There are also ferry services.

Shopping: Visit the sidewalk bazaars and night markets for souvenirs.

Eating Out: Penang is a gourmet's paradise. Try the street food.

Delhi tastes Adivasi food

Ravleen Saluja
New Delhi

WHEN it comes to green, leafy vegetables, most city-dwellers are familiar only with spinach, mustard and amaranth leaves. But forest-dwelling communities consume an amazing variety of greens gathered from forests. A display of their foods in Delhi attracted curious city-dwellers who had never seen anything quite like it before.

At the Forest Foods and Ecology Festival held at the Aurobindo Society from 12-14 December, around 1,200 forest foods from 15 states were exhibited. Organised by Living Farms, a non-profit that works with small and marginal farmers in Odisha, Kalpavriksh, an environment NGO, SADED (South Asian Dialogues on Ecological Democracy) and Vividhara, a non-profit that conserves and promotes indigenous seeds, the festival attracted considerable footfalls despite thundery weather.

People got to taste these colourful foods. On the menu was *ragi vada* with *sunsuniya*, *ganderi saag* from Odisha, *theplas* and *muthiya* with *phang* greens from Gujarat and foxtail millet *kheer*.

"The government thinks we are poor, but we eat a lot of good food. About 20-30 dishes are cooked in our kitchen. None of it is poisonous, as the world likes to think. The forest helps us lead a healthy, disease-free life," said Akhil Sabara, an Adivasi from Odisha.

Balwant from Baiga Chowk in Madhya Pradesh's Dindori district said he includes 43 green, leafy vegetables in his diet. Lakhmi Kiloka from Malkangiri in Odisha and Durwan from Jhabua consume about 15 varieties of greens. They don't eat only leaves. Balwant includes 20 varieties of mushroom and Kiloka about seven in their meals.

In times of drought, forest-dwellers are known to



PICTURES BY AJIT KRISHNA

An amazing display of 1,200 forest foods from 15 states

spurn relief works provided by the government as they can turn to the forest for survival. "Crops fail because of drought or flooding. But the forest acts as our mother, providing us roots, tubers, fruits and flowers all through the year," said Jagannath Majhi, a Kondh Adivasi.

A study by Living Farms reveals that uncultivated

food in the forest is a rich source of nutrition and diversity in the Adivasi diet. Forest-dwelling communities in Rayagada and Sundergarh districts in Odisha depend on uncultivated food for 20-50 per cent of their needs, says the study. It documents 28 kinds of meat, 30 mushrooms, 23 tubers, 26 green vegetables and 14 fruits in the forests that are consumed by adivasis. Tubers, mainly various varieties of yam, act as famine food, as they are harvested in maximum quantity. On an average, an Adivasi household harvests about 4.5 kg of food from the forest, which, if it lasts two or three days, is more than the ration supplied by the Public Distribution System (PDS), says the study.

The government and mainstream media view consumption of forest foods as a sign of backwardness. But this is far from the truth. Forest communities save money when they collect foods from the forest and their diet is nutritious.

Kiloka from Malkangiri spends only ₹150 at the weekly *haat* where she buys cooking oil, spices, onion and sometimes potato. She grows *ragi* and other millets on her patch of land but the vegetables are all uncultivated produce sourced from the forest. "This cost would go up to ₹400-500 per week if we did not have a forest nearby," said Kiloka.

"Green vegetables are a rich source of vitamins and most other micronutrients but due to groundwater pollution and pesticide use, they are contaminated now. However, uncultivated greens from the forest, even if several are considered 'weeds' by modern agriculture, are respected as food by locals. They offer a full package of iron, the vitamins to absorb it, fibre and antioxidants as compared to the starchy staples cultivated through agriculture or supplied through the PDS," said Salome Yesudas, one of the researchers who conducted the study.

Unfortunately, the perception of Adivasis of their sensible diet is changing. The PDS rice is altering their dietary pattern. It does bring in a sense of food security but its nutritional value remains questionable. "Adivasis follow the bowl concept. Earlier, they would eat a bowl of foxtail millet porridge for breakfast. Now, it is a bowl of rice. But there is a huge difference in the nutritional value of the two," said Madhu Ramnath, an ethnobotanist working in Bastar district of Chhattisgarh.

Besides decreasing forest cover, access to forests, migration and increasing plantation of commercially viable trees has led to a decline in the availability and consumption of forest foods.

"The government and civil society need to recognise the importance of forests for the food and nutrition security of the Adivasis. Forests aren't just a source of timber and minor forest produce. Accordingly, policy and laws around forest rights and change in land use must involve traditionally consumed uncultivated food," said Kavita Kuruganti, one of the researchers of the study.

Adivasis have always been givers, like the forest. "Before an Adivasi harvests something from the forest, she makes sure that there is more of the same plant growing – unlike the government and industry who are looting all our available forests," said Balwant of Dindori. ■



Communities cooked some of their dishes for curious Delhiites

'Cash transfers were used

Civil Society News
New Delhi

A debate rages over giving of social benefits directly to people as cash transfers. There is concern that the money will be mis-spent and already creaking government services will be disabled, leaving the poor exposed to market forces.

Supporters of the idea, on the other hand, say cash transfers are more efficient.

As the debate rages, one cold fact is ignored: very little is known about the effect cash transfers have on the poor. Do they waste the money? Or do they put it to good use? Do poor people respond in exactly the same way across circumstances or are there variations?

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) set out a couple of years ago to do a study and have a better understanding of what goes on at the grassroots. SEWA has been experimenting with cash transfers. It did a study in Delhi and, more recently, in Madhya Pradesh. This survey and its findings are now available in a book, *Basic Income: A Transformative Policy for India*.

For over a year, SEWA transferred a modest sum of money to villages in Indore district, including two that were wholly tribal. They tracked the effect the money had. At the end of the survey, SEWA and their researchers found that people spent money very responsibly.

SEWA's interest in cash transfers is rooted in its search to find social security for its women members who work as vendors, hawkers, artisans and small producers.

The iconic organisation, founded by well-known activist Ela Bhatt, has been expanding into other states, like Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. Its national federation, called SEWA Bharat, now includes 12 organisations.

Renana Jhabvala, National Coordinator of SEWA and Chairperson of SEWA Bharat, is also an economist. She spoke to *Civil Society* about SEWA's perception of cash transfers.

Why did SEWA get interested in cash transfers?

Over the years, SEWA has been working for the social security of its women members. It is the government system we turn to since employers don't provide social security and self-saving is not enough. We do undertake social security instruments ourselves, like pensions and insurance, but it is limited. We have been trying to influence gov-



Renana Jhabvala: 'We should do more experiments on cash transfers'

'If we chose those with BPL cards then many of the poor who did not have those cards would be left out. So we decided to give cash transfers to the whole village.'

ernment policy too.

The government's social security measures, whether it is the Public Distribution System (PDS), pensions or childcare, are weak. Those schemes don't reach us. We have been agitating for the PDS to work. You have a right to it, yet you need to agitate to get rations. We got the PDS working in some places but how much do we agitate?

Around five or six years ago the debate over cash transfers heated up. There were groups for and against it. We asked our people whether they would prefer cash. Our small survey found the opinion was 50:50. We approached the Delhi government, which was looking at cash transfers. We thought, why don't we experiment? We could give

cash transfers to those who wanted them and those who didn't could continue as they were.

What did the Delhi experience reveal?

It was a small experiment for a year. We hired a research agency.

We surveyed those who opted for cash transfers and those who didn't. We found there was no decrease in nutrition. The amount of rice or wheat remained the same but consumption of pulses went up, so did eggs and meat. Surprisingly, people spent on their health. The money was given to the women. And it was not spent on buying liquor.

For those who didn't take cash we found their access to the PDS improved. The local ration shop began performing better.

We recommended there should be a policy of choice. We saw that administratively it's not difficult. We faced a lot of opposition.

Why did SEWA undertake a second cash transfer survey in Madhya Pradesh?

Rural areas are needy. We wanted to gauge how villagers would spend cash. I was very insistent that it should be unconditional. The government puts a whole lot of conditions on cash transfers. This makes the scheme difficult to access for villagers and thereby meaningless. UNICEF agreed to fund the study.

We had a researcher from England who suggested we do cash transfers into individual accounts so we could see the pattern of spending. We called a meeting of the women and asked them if we should transfer the money to them. They said, no, transfer it to the husband so it won't create a conflict. The money for

the children is transferred to the woman's account.

We randomly chose 20 villages in Indore district. SEWA was working in some of them. Finally, we picked eight villages which would get the cash transfer and 12 villages as the control group.

The question arose who the beneficiaries should be. If we chose those with BPL cards then many of the poor who didn't have those cards would be left out. So we decided to give cash transfers to the whole village.

We did a survey to find out everybody who lived there. It wasn't easy. People who didn't live there said they did. We did a baseline survey, an endline survey and a midline survey. The MP government asked us to add tribal villages so we added two tribal villages.

productively'

How much money was given and for how long?

We started in mid-2011. We were supposed to end it in mid-2012 but we had some money left over from UNICEF so we continued for almost 18 months. In the tribal villages, since we started later, we did it for a year.

We gave cash transfers to some 5,000 to 6,000 individuals. Initially, each adult got ₹200 and each child ₹100. At that time inflation was very high. So, for the last six months, we hiked the amount to ₹300 and ₹150. With the tribal villages we started at ₹300 and ₹150. So a family of five, which is the average size in the village, received ₹700 and, at the later rate, ₹1,000.

The amount was scientifically calculated so that it would not match with employment earnings. At the same time, we realised it should not be so small as to be meaningless. We decided to peg it at between one-third or half the poverty line, as defined by the government.

Did you face problems?

We did. In Mhow land prices were going up and the place was infested with land sharks. Rumours were floated that we would take fingerprints of the villagers, do a survey, put money into their accounts and take away their land. We had to scotch that rumour.

Richer people refused the cash transfer. The ₹700 we were giving meant nothing to them. But when we began opening bank accounts, women from those families approached us. They wanted to be part of the cash transfer. They said they had everything – food, jewellery – but they didn't have any personal money. They said the money would enable them to have personal savings. It was an anomalous situation.

How did you ensure all the villagers had bank accounts?

That was the main problem. There was no Jan Dhan Yojana then, though the no-frills account existed. We went to the RBI, to the head offices of banks. They all said they would help.

In the first three months we gave actual cash because it takes time to open accounts. We identified seven banks and their nearest branches. We got the accounts opened but it was a tremendous task.

There was resistance at the branch level. Some banks were good and even conducted campaigns in the village. But most felt it was a headache. We would explain the survey to a bank official and then two months later he would get transferred. The banks that didn't want to do it would keep putting conditions.

We got identity proof for the villagers. Then the banks wanted proof of residence which is tougher

to get. We offered them the panchayat's signature.

Anyway, in six months we got bank accounts opened for 80 per cent of our beneficiaries. In some of the villages where SEWA was working we opened savings accounts in our savings and credit cooperatives.

The actual online transfers were very easy. They were smooth and hassle-free.

How did people spend this money?

People would spend small amounts in different ways. We thought, how do we calculate this? We then decided to examine if the money had any transformational aspect. People spend money according to their need and choice. This causes transformation.

The most transformation we found was in the two tribal villages. The result I like best is that many people used this money for productive reasons. They bought seeds, fertilisers, goats, *desi* cows, pump-sets and sewing machines. Yes, mobile phones and home appliances too.

In the baseline survey a lot of people said they were agricultural labourers. After a year, they said they were farmers. They explained that they had small pieces of land that they could not cultivate earlier since they did not have money to buy seeds or fertilisers.

People also spent on education. We found that girls were going to secondary school and not dropping out after primary school. People were also seeking medical attention earlier. Previously, they would use home remedies and go to the doctor only when it got serious, so they spent more. The incidence of sickness dropped. They also took their medicines more regularly.

Their debt levels dropped. People here pay very high interest on loans and there is also some bonded labour. The money became emancipation for them.

Whom would you recommend for cash transfers?

My dilemma is whom would you cut out? BPL cards are not reaching many people. But I would say we should do more experiments on cash transfers. I would highly recommend unconditional cash transfers for tribal villages. They suffer from a shortage of liquidity. That's why they get into debt and cash is expensive. Once you give them liquid money it breaks through many barriers.

A different strategy is needed with banks. Banks want profit but no-frills accounts don't give them money. So, if you are giving ₹1,000 to a beneficiary, let the bank keep a small amount as processing charges. Why make opening bank accounts an unprofitable activity? ■



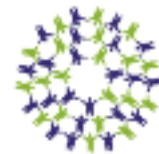
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PEACE REFLECTIONS

HUZAIFA KHORAKIWALA

A big heart



GIVING is a state of mind. A mind which is inclusive, compassionate and forgiving. A mind where love and joy reside. Giving starts with a small feeling. A feeling and a certain thinking.

Giving is selfless. When you give, you give something of yourself. Thus, you lose some part of yourself to the receiver. So, it is selfless.

What happens when you lose a part of yourself to the receiver? Your sense of self-importance and ego becomes less. The 'I' becomes less.

That part of the self which you lose, merges with the universe. You become universal from being a particular. You represent less and less of the small 'I' and become part of the bigger 'We' – the Universe.

Yes, giving makes you merge into something bigger. In a materialistic sense, when we look at giving we see we are losing something. But when you look at the same act through a more philosophical spectacle cloaked with wisdom, you realise that every act of giving makes you merge into something bigger. You enlarge your sphere of influence, presence and residence.

When you give love, your presence and affection resides in someone else's heart also. You enlarge your presence.

When you give wealth, the benefit of its use for someone else, it enlarges your sphere of influence. Thus, you become bigger.

When you give knowledge, its beneficial understanding and application for someone else brings great spiritual benefit to you. Thus, your act increases your light. You are like a candle giving light to other candles.

When you give service, the help and aid that the receiver receives make you part of his prayers. Thus, you merge with a larger humanity.

When you give time to someone, you become part of his support. His gratefulness to you will add to your peace of mind as you move from internal caring for yourself to external caring for others.

Indeed, giving is to enlarge oneself. It is about becoming larger than one's individual self and becoming part of the universal consciousness. In this universal consciousness resides love, care and compassion. When the love, care, and compassion for others becomes your natural self, you become a part of the whole. The true meaning of giving begins to manifest itself. ■



Nature's gifts

THREE years ago, Purvi Mehta, an architect and photographer, left Mumbai to settle in the Bhayander Hills in Thane district of Maharashtra, with her husband, a graphic designer. She says the beauty of the countryside overwhelmed her.

"I did not want to despoil it in any way. I thought a lot about how we could replace the many chemicals we used at home with natural products."

She began growing lemongrass, aloe vera, neem and other plants. Mehta began looking up Ayurveda texts to figure out how she could produce natural products. That led to her starting a small cottage industry that manufactures a range of chemical-free soaps, face and body serums, anti-frizz hair potions, rose-water eyedrops, natural loofah, lip balm and baby oil.

Her company's name is Beautiful Garden. You can buy wheatgrass soap, lemon and coconut soap, honey cream and oatmeal soap, herbal hair serum and a neem comb enriched with neem oil. Purvi began by selling on ebay and Amazon. She now exports her products to many countries. ■

Contact: Purvi Mehta Parida: 09221188211, Email: mehtapurvi77@gmail.com
E-store: <http://beautiful-garden.itshandmade.in>

Banish waste

MAKE your kitchen waste disappear and reappear as manure for your garden. Daily Dump offers a range of composters in attractive shapes and sizes with a complete kit to ensure that your household waste dissolves quickly.

The Leave-it pot is a store and maturation chamber for semi-composted material that is generated in other composters like the Mota Lota, Kambha, Patta Kambha, Gamla, Remix Bind and Manthan. It comes in four sizes and can be used to compost your garden material alone.

The Kambha is in three tiers and comes in two sizes. Dump your kitchen waste here and cover with dried leaves or shredded newspapers.

Started in Bengaluru by Poonam Bir Kasturi, Neelam Chibber and Geeta Ram, Daily Dump has expanded to seven outlets in Delhi-NCR. "We now provide customers with an accelerator to speed up the initial composting process," says Priyanka

Satyawakta who manages the Vasant Kunj outlet. "Once they see the results, we encourage them to compost using dry leaves."

The composters are made of terracotta and are all outdoor products. You can also buy gloves, rake, lemon spray, neem powder and other accessories from Daily Dump outlets. ■



Contact:
Priyanka Satyawakta :
09891855458





Skill training provides employment for rural youth.

After I graduated from college, I wanted to work and support my parents who get a meagre income as daily wage agriculture labourers. The only opportunity for employment in my village was working as a farm hand that was poorly paid seasonal work. Without any job prospects and income, I was depressed to be financially burden on my family.

SST team help me in finding a suitable job for my qualifications. They enrolled me in a 10 days youth development training program in soft skills. Once I completed the training, I got a job in a KFC restaurant in Mysore. Now I have a regular income of ₹ 7000 per month. This helps me to meet my need and also contribute to family income.

Mr. Chaluva Nayaka
Kembal village, Mysore district, Karnataka.

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Indeed, the values of equal opportunity is what works at Tata Steel.

TATA STEEL
Values stronger than steel