

# Civil Society

## PENSION TO ALL INCHES ALONG

**Demand grows, govt dithers**

**PLUS**

Pension is a right

BY NIKHIL DEY

Page 27



### 'WOMEN'S BANK CAN'T BE JUST ANOTHER BANK'

Ela Bhatt on what can be learnt from SEWA Bank

Pages 6-7

### ROTARY'S EYE HOSPITAL

Pages 8-9

### LONG SHADOW OF MAOISTS

Page 11

### MONEY GROWS ON GRASS

Page 26

### FLAWED EIAs SAIL THROUGH

Page 30

### MAGIC MEN OF MAYONG

Pages 31-32

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Page 36



## COVER STORY

### PENSION TO ALL INCHES ALONG

The call for giving the elderly poor money to subsist on has grown louder. The Pension Parishad returned to Delhi for an agitation and got some assurances from the government.

# 20

COVER PHOTOGRAPH: LAKSHMAN ANAND

|  |       |
|--|-------|
| Elephants on railway hit list.....       | 12    |
| Speak up, abandon your fears.....        | 13    |
| Taste for tuber on the rise.....         | 14    |
| DRAG is small and big at 25.....         | 15    |
| Paddy boom in barren Damoh.....          | 18    |
| A kickstart for the young.....           | 24-25 |
| Fair shops good for small farmer.....    | 28-29 |
| Shreyas is the natural way to chill..... | 32-33 |
| Ikat weaves and silk spread.....         | 38    |

Contact Civil Society at:  
[response@civilsocietyonline.com](mailto:response@civilsocietyonline.com)  
 The magazine does not undertake to respond to unsolicited contributions sent to the editor for publication.

# Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

## *Inconvenient faces of the aged*

**M**OST talk about economic growth tends to avoid those who have been left out of the party. It is inconvenient to factor them in because then the math goes haywire. The growth models we like to play around with thrive on sentiment. We only want the good news – no doubt in the hope that, in time, the bad news will fade away. Either you are successful and thriving, or you simply don't deserve to exist.

The Pension Parishad, which we feature as a cover in *Civil Society* for a second time, has performed the important role of forcing us to think about millions of very poor aged people who have no means of supporting themselves. Can any economy with serious ambitions afford to ignore such a large number of those who have no access to social security or basic healthcare?

Several thousands of these old people – who have spent their lives as workers in the unorganized sector – travelled to Delhi from villages across India in March to register their support for the Pension Parishad's demands. Our political and business leaders nor our economists have any answers for them.

The stories of the aged are written in the frailty of their limbs. At Jantar Mantar there were inconvenient faces – the ones we don't like to see because they remind us of the fragility of our successes.

The Pension Parishad's demands deserve to be discussed with some seriousness even if the government thinks there are hard economic reasons for not implementing them right away.

We also feature in this issue an interview with Ela Bhatt on the women's bank proposed in this year's budget speech. It is unclear how a women's bank is going to achieve more than any other public sector bank. Ela Bhatt has hands-on experience in working for the financial inclusion of women through the SEWA Bank. She tells us how important it is to get banking services out from behind counters and into villages and homes so that the real financial needs of women can be met.

So, we really need to know from the government whether it has serious intentions of living up to this challenge by being innovative and rethinking outreach or whether this is just another piece of empty political symbolism? Why have a special bank for women? Why not instead get our public sector banks to learn to be more inclusive?

**Publisher**  
Umesh Anand

**Editor**  
Rita Anand

**Associate Editor**  
Saibal Chatterjee

**News Network**  
TS Sudhir, Shree Padre, Jehangir Rashid, Rakesh Agarwal, Susheela Nair

**Photo-journalists**  
Gautam Singh, Lakshman Anand

**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, 9811787772

Printed and published by Umesh Anand from A 53 D, First Floor, Panchsheel Vihar, Malviya Nagar, New Delhi - 110017. Printed at Samrat Offset Pvt. Ltd., B-88, Okhla Phase II, New Delhi - 110020.

**Postal Registration No.**  
DL(S)-01/3255/2012-14.  
Registered to post without pre-payment U(SE)-10/2012-13 at New Delhi PSO Registered with the Registrar of Newspapers of India under RNI No.: DELENG/2003/11607  
Total no of pages: 40

#### Advisory Board

ANUPAM MISHRA  
 ARUNA ROY  
 NASSER MUNJEE  
 ARUN MAIRA  
 DARSHAN SHANKAR  
 HARIVANSH  
 JUG SURAIYA  
 SHANKAR GHOSE  
 UPENDRA KAUL

#### Get your copy of Civil Society from

**Delhi:** Bahri Sons, Central News Agency, stalls at Green Park market, South Extn Part II, Aurobindo Market, R. K. Puram, Vasant Vihar, Vasant Kunj, J.N.U., S.D.A. Market, Saket, Kalkajee, C. R. Park, New Friends Colony, Lajpat Nagar, Defence Colony, Hauz Khas, Moti Bagh, Sector 62 Noida.  
**Gurgaon:** DLF Phase 1

Market, Galleria Market, Qutab Plaza, Sector 14 Market, Sector 17 Market, Sector 54, Sector 44.  
**Kolkata:** Oxford Bookstore, Classic Books.  
**Bangalore:** Variety on St Mark's Road.  
**Lucknow:** Ram Advani Bookseller at Hazratganj.  
**Chandigarh:** The Browser.



## IN THE LIGHT

by SAMITA RATHOR



## LETTERS



### Glocal hospitals

The cover story in your March issue, 'Low cost hospitals are here' is an important one because it has many lessons to offer in reaching healthcare to poorer people. The Glocal Hospital is a model that many private healthcare providers will be watching carefully. Glocal proves that in India it is volumes that matter and volumes depend on the quality of healthcare the hospital provides. Also, at last we have a government scheme – the

Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana – that actually works. So when the private sector and the government work together with honesty and sincerity, the outcomes can be quite good.

*Dr Amit Prakash*

RSBY has worked better than Aadhaar because all the groundwork was done first. Insurance companies were chosen, smart card providers identified, followed by computerization. Now there is a grievance redressal mechanism in place. Congratulations to Anil Swarup and his team. The success of Glocal is thanks to your dedication.

*Dr Swarup Chatterjee*

I just went through the last two issues of your journal. You are really doing a commendable job.

*Sushil Rathi*

The cover story written by Arjun Sen was very educative and informative. However, I would kindly request you to make some corrections to the story. The original licenses for the following hospitals should have been: Sonamukhi: 40 beds, Dubrajpur: 50 beds, Khargram: 45 beds, Berhampore: 50 beds and Bolpur: 100 beds.

*RK Maiti*

### Border school

Your story, 'School near border waits for teachers' was commendable. Education is most important for any kind of development. We must ensure that children living near the border get primary education.

*Mudasar Mughal*

A silent crisis is taking place near the border. Innocent villagers are its victims. About time their plight was highlighted. Thank you for taking up this issue.

*Azhar*

### Meerut scissors

'Meerut's special scissors' is an important story. India's traditional skills extend to the science of metallurgy. We are famous in history for such craftsmanship. I am glad the government is supporting the Meerut scissor manufacturers. The condition of workers too must improve.

*Md Hasan*

### Goonj

You're a real warrior Anshu Gupta, so please keep doing what you're doing, for you're doing the right

thing. "There's no greater purpose than service to others."

*Abhishek*

Lovely article and inspiring work. But the story was unclear on the work being done by the villagers in terms of who decides the work, who gets to do the work and how exactly they get compensated by the clothes. Would be interesting if that could be covered as well.

*Micro Housing Finance Corporation*

### ERRATA

In the story, 'WISE spots Pratham in innovation hunt,' it was wrongly stated that Dr Madhav Chavan was awarded the WISE prize in February 2013 by Stavros Yinnouka in New Delhi. In fact, the WISE prize was awarded to Dr Madhav Chavan in Qatar in November 2012 and Stavros Yinnouka was in Delhi to attend a world conference on education.

The error is regretted.

*Editor*

**INTERVIEW / Ela Bhatt** Flexible RBI regulations a**'A women's bank cannot be just another bank'**

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

**A** highlight of the Union Budget this year was the government's decision to set up a bank catering exclusively to women. It is not yet clear how such a bank will be managed or how innovative it will be in reaching out to women. Can a women's bank make good for the shortcomings of the entire banking sector, which hasn't been successful in helping women open accounts, fund businesses and acquire assets?

Some 40 years ago, Ela Bhatt led an effort which resulted in the setting up of the Shri Mahila Sewa Sahakari (SEWA) Bank Ltd in Gujarat, a cooperative bank designed to cater to the special needs of women.

Through its field workers called bank *saathis*, the SEWA Bank has assiduously provided doorstep financial services and financial literacy to women. Their clients are women who work as vendors, hawkers, potters, weavers, agarbatti makers, labourers and small producers.

The SEWA Bank doesn't limit itself to credit and savings but extends its services to pension, housing and insurance. Today, it has about 300,000 women members and a working capital of ₹200 crores.

*Civil Society* spoke to Ela Bhatt on what the women's bank now proposed by the government can do.

**The Union government has announced the setting up of a public sector women's bank. Do you think such a bank will serve any purpose?**

It should serve a purpose. After all, it is high time we invested in women, their lives and livelihoods. Women should be brought into the world of mainstream finance. The more we invest in women, the more stable our society will be. There will be less poverty. So I see it as an investment in



Ela Bhatt: "When money moves down to poorer women it eventually leads to higher GDP"

women and their inclusion.

But if this bank copies other nationalized banks and remains, you know, just a bank run by women staff and for women customers, then it will continue to face challenges.

A bank for women will have to be taken very seriously. It is necessary to understand women and where they are. Women are not a homogeneous group. They cut across regions, class, sub-class and patterns of work. And the bank must find ways to not standardize but address this diversity.

Such a bank will have to work more and more at local level. A lot of innovation in process, prod-

ucts, and programmes will be needed and a lot of understanding of how women live, learn and work. I hope the government and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) will be open and flexible. Of course this is public money so there have to be regulations and accountability and transparency. Those basic norms must apply to a bank for women. But there should be more flexibility in operations and objectives and ways to help women access opportunities. Ultimately, a lot of learning on how the women of India live can emerge from this not only for the banking sector but for everyone.

**What do you think is important for a women's bank?**

We need financial products that will follow the life cycle of women – the financial services they require in different stages of their lives. That will have to be understood. A women's bank can't be just another bank.

The other thing is financial services. Only credit and savings is not going to work though they are important. Full financial services are required. There should be a package of services that includes pension and housing. Let me give an example.

The financing of a creche should be regarded as an economic activity. That is the kind of openness and flexibility we need. I don't know how far the regulatory bodies are willing to go. We will have to encourage them with care and confidence.

After all if the purpose is inclusive growth how can women be left out? Women should own assets. Can we work on that? For poverty reduction asset ownership is the foremost step. Poverty cannot be removed without the active participation of women from poor families and this important matter is now being addressed with this bank if it moves ahead in earnest.

There is also a need to increase productivity



# must for informal female work force

and income. The bank must work on this, and not only savings and credit. Building capacity is required so that women are able to compete in the market. Women are all economically active, but they are often marginalized or pushed out of mainstream markets. So a lot of capacity has to be built by such a bank. These are the challenges.

## How should such a bank be rolled out?

Governments by nature go by the politics of votes. That is taken for granted. If we really take women seriously, they should be the number one priority. If we really invest not only in sources of finance but in all kinds of resources – then women will change the world in a more sustainable way. Here is an opportunity for us to not only launch a women's bank but in fact show the world, and more importantly prove to ourselves, that we can reinvent banking to address both income and gender inequality. This is a historic moment. Not a political opportunity.

Government programmes and schemes are not able to reach women at the local level. So, I for one am wedded to cooperatives. I would wish that our women's SHGs (self-help groups) and their clusters build up a women's bank of their own at the taluka level or form a local area bank. The announcement may be made at the top but the bank must be built bottom up.

## What is the learning from SEWA Bank?

The learning is that women are trustworthy, have high credibility and a natural tendency to save. We have seen that women, who are from the informal sector and poor, can learn to manage and own a financial institution like a bank if they are given definite inputs. That is a crucial need for poor women. A bank account gives them economic status, citizenship, and a way to enter and shape markets.

Middle-class women too understand money very well because they understand savings so well. And savings are a national asset. I have faith in women building the future of our country if this bank captures this opportunity.

SEWA Bank has shown that as money moves down from the top to the middle and lower levels of income, from men to women, this is the money that stimulates savings, enterprise, faster growth, and in fact, leads to higher GDP. More importantly such a movement of money builds economic and social stability to withstand a crisis.

## Is SEWA Bank planning an expansion?

No, I don't want to grow vertically. I want to grow naturally. Let there be more branches, more district level SEWA Banks. I wish I had more energy to show that there is something called an ecosystem of banking and finance. It is an option that we must experiment with and India should offer to the world. Inshallah!

## How do you staff your bank? The quality of services provided by mainstream banks is often not up to standard.

Eighty-seven per cent of our staff are from the working class. SEWA Bank does not work from

the counter, from the office. It works from the field. There are our *saathis* who are our local leaders from our union. They act as counsellors, reaching out to women customers. We have six branches. I would like to have 40 branches.

Every day SEWA Bank puts ₹10 crores into the city's (Ahmedabad) informal economy. That is the turnover. The results are obvious.

Except for the first year of the bank, every year SEWA Bank distributes a dividend of 9 per cent to their shareholders.

## So it is really a very successful bank.

We face many challenges. The biggest one is women have special needs. They are working in the unorganized sector of the economy. The women's own way of working is non-formal while the bank is a formal institution. On the one hand,

**'Here is an opportunity for us to show the world and prove to ourselves that we can reinvent banking to address income and gender inequality.'**

we have to fit into the very formal structure stipulated by the RBI and the government and on the other hand we have to cater to the special needs of women. It is a challenge to achieve that balance. And the challenge changes from time to time and so does the balancing act. This means gaps, overlaps, and the need to improve.

## So your challenge is on one hand to work in the field and be innovative while meeting all the requirements of the RBI and the government?

Yes, we have to. If we could trust in *lok shakti* then how much simpler it would be. Women are so resourceful, so ready to learn new things and take up new challenges. The earlier trust in *lok shakti* is over. Today the governments want to do the implementation – big or small. It will not work. Any scheme on the ground must be at the local level, owned and managed by the stakeholders themselves. The time of top-down changes is on its way out, I think.

## Do banks approach you to understand how SEWA Bank functions?

Well, they do appreciate what we do. Sometimes they say they want to do something for women but often they can't. The problem is we don't think or act on our own, or try to know our people and country and understand how to go about it. We just copy the West. The West has indeed done many good things. We must value that, but we must find our own solutions on our own. Copying will not lead us to a solution and this country will not become a leader. If we trust our own ways in environment, in the economy or

finance, it will make us think and be creative.

## Has the profile of women reached by SEWA Bank been changing over the years?

Earlier, women would take on average a loan amount of ₹1,200 or ₹1,500. Now the loan amount has grown to about ₹9,000. So, slowly their credit capacity is increasing. There are borrowers who take loans for asset creation. I am very particular about asset ownership by women. Secondly, loans are being taken for working capital, for improving productivity and for being able to compete in the market. These poor women are some of India's original economists providing authoritative answers to India's overwhelming questions.

But we are slow. That is not good. We don't have big numbers. It has taken us 40 years to grow and come to this level. I am not enamored of big numbers. SEWA Bank grew slowly. I am never in a hurry! We grew at the pace of the women, but true, we have to work faster.

## What were the early days of the bank like?

It was started in 1972. As a lawyer, I had joined the legal department of the Textile Labour Association (TLA) started by Anasuya Sarabhai on Gandhian principles.

Working at that time with the working class, I realised that women in the informal sector were involved in different economic activities. But they were under the clutches of moneylenders, contractors and touts from whom they took loans at exorbitant rates of interest. They did not even own their means of production like sewing machines, pushcarts, even their verandahs were rented. They needed working capital to come out of this exploitation.

At that time Indira Gandhi had announced nationalization of banks. The slogan was *garibi hatao*. We had a meeting on this where the women talked of their troubles. But there was a big gap between the banks and the women. The banks could not understand the women. And women were overawed by the banks.

After a year our women leaders said, why can't we have our own bank? I said to them, we are poor and we need share capital. One leader, Chandben, said we are poor but we are so many. Each woman contributed and in six months they had collected the necessary share capital.

When we went to the registrar of cooperative banks he flatly said, how can you trust the women, they will not repay. I was confident that the women understood money, its value, interest rates and I believed in them. Finally, our bank was registered in 1974. In the first year it was all about savings. Women would borrow as little as ₹50. But gradually their loan amounts grew and their savings and assets grew. They took loans to buy their tools of production and then came loans for working capital.

With limitations and scope for improvement SEWA Bank has tried to show that another bank is possible. SEWA sisters have shown that banks are not only to build prosperity but banks can also bring down poverty. But there is a long way to go. A very long way. ■

## Talks on for land reforms

**Bharat Dogra**  
New Delhi

ON 11th March, a national conference on 'Land Rights-Efforts and Prospects' was organised by Ekta Parishad, a people's movement for land to the landless. The conference sought to arrive at a consensus on a land reforms policy.

Last October, after Ekta Parishad organized a massive Jan Satyagraha march from Gwalior to Delhi to press for a land reforms policy, the Union government had announced that such a policy would be prepared in six months. That deadline expires in mid-April.

P.V. Rajagopal, president of Ekta Parishad, said that merely preparing a good policy is not adequate. It should be implementable at the grassroots. The landless must be able to take ownership of land they are entitled to. Most land is merely given on paper. When activists try to help the landless poor get their land entitlement they face violence at the hands of powerful villagers and the state.

The consensus that is emerging is:

- Rural areas must have land banks. Land that can be handed over to the poor should be identified at district and panchayat level. This land can include ceiling land, land that has remained unutilized, wasteland that can be reclaimed for cultivation and bhoodan land.
- Land ceiling for irrigated land should be fixed between five to 10 acres and for unirrigated land between 10 to 15 acres.
- A Land Reforms Commissions should be set up in all states that will regularly monitor the progress of land reforms. Gram sabhas should be strengthened particularly in scheduled areas and they must be empowered to check land-grab efforts.
- Land given under a land reforms policy cannot be taken away by any other legislation. For example, currently land provided by the Forest Rights Act (FRA) can be acquired under the land acquisition law.
- There should be a review of bhoodan land that has been distributed. Mostly, it has been grabbed by the powerful. Such instances should be identified and the land handed over to the landless.
- B.K. Renike, who had earlier headed the commission on Denotified and Nomadic Tribes, said that great care should be taken to ensure that nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes who now need to settle could also get land. Legal changes to ensure they get land must be made. ■



Patients at the eye hospital



A surgery underway

## Rotary's visionary eye

*Rich pay, poor benefit from better*

**Subir Roy**  
Kolkata

ABOUT 15 km from southwest Kolkata in a nondescript small town called Budge Budge, members of the local Rotary Club have for nearly two decades now developed a highly successful model of affordable healthcare. The state, local charity, foreign philanthropy and paying patients have all contributed.

The GRSM Rotary Eye Hospital, which began in 1996, now treats over 30,000 outpatients and conducts around 2,000 cataract operations a year. Half the operations are done free. Outpatients pay ₹20 to register, ₹15 for a subsequent visit and ₹30 for a refraction test (prescription of glasses). Paying patients choose from a number of packages ranging between ₹2,500 and ₹25,000. There are 18 free beds and seven paying ones.

Nobody, absolutely nobody, is turned away because of an inability to pay. If you have a BPL (Below Poverty Line) card your cataract operation is done free and the hospital gets ₹3,000 from the government under the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY). Last year the hospital did over 100 RSBY cases. Those who have neither the RSBY card nor money are put through an informal assessment by the administration and a fee, if any, is determined for the patient to pay.

Pradip Chitlangia, then chairman and now patron-in-chief of the Rotary Club of Budge Budge Welfare Trust which set up the hospital and runs it recalls, "After the first two years we never struggled to perform free operations." Dr Niloy Mukherjee, secretary to the trust during its early days and now a trustee and director for the hospital, says,



Dr Niloy Mukherjee with a patient

"Healthcare can never be a losing proposition."

Saturday afternoon is set aside for those who cannot afford ₹20 for registration. They need to pay only ₹10, inclusive of OPD procedures. Significantly, few turn up then to avail of the concessional rate.

Most healthcare debates in the country see opinion polarized – for free state-funded healthcare versus private paying healthcare, with or without health insurance. The Budge Budge Rotary model





at the hospital



Services like spectacles have been outsourced

# hospital

## standards



eye surgery done in the hospital. On the other hand, the need to cater to free patients creates tremendous pressure to keep costs low, helping paying patients too. So successful is the now standardized Budge Budge model that it is being replicated in 50 hospitals coming up all over the country, 10 of them in West Bengal.

If there is any one intellectual inspiration and role model that the Budge Budge hospital had before it then it is the famous Aravind Eye Hospital. Before the hospital started, six of its key movers, including Dr Mukherjee, went to Madurai and did a one-week course in community eye care at Aravind Eye Hospital. They revealed to the trainees a critical truth: the more free patients you have, the more paying patients you will attract.

A key element in affordable healthcare is getting doctors to offer their services not for free but at less than market rates. A doctor visiting the Rotary hospital once a week earns ₹10,000 a month; the current lead doctor who comes five days a week earns ₹1 lakh a month. A doctor earns a token ₹100 for performing a free surgery. A free surgery costs the hospital ₹1,200. Of this, ₹400 is garnered locally (cross subsidy and local philanthropy) by the hospital and ₹800 comes from overseas Rotary Clubs. A thousand free operations fetch a matching grant of ₹8 lakhs.

Dr Mukherjee is an example of one who works to earn and also has a social agenda, with invaluable help from his wife. He came to Budge Budge in 1979 to work in the municipal maternity hospital as a gynaecologist and stayed on at the job till 1998. For his private practice he began with a fee of ₹10 which is now ₹100. If you think that is abysmally low, he counters by saying, "I have more than one apartment in Kolkata and I have not missed out on any of the good things in life."

The key to his professional success is the reputation he has built up for conducting normal deliveries. As a result not only does he get a whole lot of women patients who would normally go to a woman gynaecologist, many of them are Muslims who are usually more conservative.

The hospital began when Rotary Club members keenly felt the need for a permanent hospital as the eye operation camps they conducted in schoolrooms for poor villagers posed risks of

infection. Follow-up and measuring outcomes was difficult.

Chitlangia recalls how a core team made it all happen. In 1996 Dr Mukherjee, a prime mover and source of professional advice, persuaded the Budge Budge Municipality to give on long lease the land within the maternity hospital premises on which stood the unused structure of a defunct chest clinic. Jagannath Gupta, a local philanthropist, spent ₹9 lakhs to construct a proper two-storied structure. Eight Rotarians contributed ₹20,000 each and the hospital got going with a medical team led by Dr Subhasis Nag. In 1997, its first full year of operation, the hospital conducted 300 operations. It managed with two operating beds and a borrowed microscope.

Vital help came to the hospital early in its life from Sight Savers International, a UK based charity, which organized help from Rotary Clubs in the UK and donated equipment for the free care agenda. Vital support has been given for 40 years by the Rotary Club of Munster-St Mauritz. All remember Dr Peter Berghaus who nurtured the friendship between the two clubs.

At the end of the day the hospital books a surplus. This year it is likely to be ₹20 lakhs. Last year revenues totalled ₹87 lakhs and expenses ₹79 lakhs, including capital expenses. The hospital has earned a cumulative surplus of one crore rupees which has been ploughed into the latest equipment. It has 26 full time employees out of whom 20 are women who are either in the administration or serve as technical assistants.

Services like pathology, spectacles, kitchen, laundry and maintenance are outsourced. Originally staff were paid a salary but it was realized that productivity could improve. Then they switched to a system of salary plus incentives.

Technological change, the advent of phaco-foldable lens procedure, has greatly standardized operations so that cataract removal has become a game of numbers. The more patients you have, the more you can cut costs. The Budge Budge hospital has been doing just that by reducing a package that used to cost ₹7,500 to ₹5,500 with all procedures being phaco. Chitlangia says that their main aim is to keep costs at around half of what would hold for a Kolkata facility. ■

indicates that quality healthcare can be delivered at affordable rates when free and paying patients are treated under the same roof. A mixture of cross subsidy and philanthropic contributions underwrite free care for the poor.

Paying patients in a hospital demand and help establish certain standards which deliver value for money. They also help build the hospital brand. The chairman of the Budge Budge Municipality got his



## CONFLICT ZONE

# Escaping the long shadow of the Maoists



CHARKHA

Mukhbiron ki Basti in Narayanpur

**Asha Shukla**  
Raipur

**A**FTER spending 44 years in Sersangi, a remote hamlet in Antagarh Block, Rameshwari moved to the outskirts of Antagarh town in Kanker district of Bastar in Chhattisgarh. The decision to leave her home and fields behind was forced upon her after the Naxals killed her husband, Sukh Ram, since they suspected him of being a police informer.

The distance Rameshwari travelled overnight with her meagre belongings and two children was only a few kilometres. But she left behind memories of a lifetime. Rameshwari now lives in a cramped house with no regular source of income to bring up her children with.

In the neighboring block of Narayanpur district, similar stories of misfortune unfold as one walks down a settlement consisting of a row of houses. From every tiny window in these little brick-walled homes, watchful eyes filled with anxiety follow your every move.

The residents assess each visitor, wondering if she is a friend or foe. But then, in these thickly forested villages, suspicion is their only means of defence. Their lives could depend on the accuracy with which they gauge every individual they interact with.

This is life as usual in a settlement locally referred to as *Mukhbiron ki Basti*, or the 'Village of Informers'. Residents have long stopped fighting this tag. If being labelled an informer helps them escape the wretched lives they were leading in their forest dwellings, so be it.

These wise ancient people, traditional custodians of forest wealth, have chosen to walk away from their forest homes to live in these tiny isolated dwellings, away from their lands, their only source of sustenance. They have opted for a life of hunger and uncertainty.

Narayanpur block is not where these tribal families hail from. They have migrated from Abujmarh, another block in Narayanpur district in south Chhattisgarh, believed to be the stronghold of the Maoists. Some families have been here for decades, while others arrived as recently as two months ago.

Why would anyone leave home and hearth to lead a life of destitution in areas vulnerable to attack for taking a stand to not support the Maoists, or worse, being labelled police informers?

Some families moved out of compulsion, explain the villagers. If a family member is picked up by the police for questioning, the entire family is at risk. Many have never been informers, but the label sticks.

The residents recalled a defining moment when

the necessity of moving out became evident to them. This was a few years ago when the Maoists went on a 'recruitment drive', but you can still discern the intense, palpable fear among the silent, listening group as they recall those harrowing days.

A few families in some remote villages collectively decided to oppose the recruitment efforts of the Maoists and said so. Shortly after, 26 boys aged 18 to 25 years of age were executed while the rest of the village was forced to witness the macabre sight.

The villagers believe that at least 10 to 15 people from each village have been abducted and subsequently killed. The Maoists accused them of passing on information to the police.

"Life in the village was worsening every day. There were constant threats. People would be roughed up. Hunger is easier to live with than fear and constant dissent," said a tribal woman in a tattered sari.

A man listening quietly so far burst out. "Back home, we were simply not allowed to get on with our daily chores or work in our fields. They would call a meeting and it was compulsory to attend in silence. Asking a question was forbidden. We did not even have the right over our field's produce - it would be taken away by the Maoists."

"When we obtained PDS rations from the government, they would take half of it. After some time, even that source of food grains dried up. What were we to eat?" There was no choice but to move out, explained the residents.

The villages in the forest, they point out, no longer have schools and health services. Gradually, families began to leave. Those who stayed back are either Maoist supporters or those who were forced by circumstances to continue living there, say residents.

As violence escalated, more families started trickling out of the forests, moving to places that seemed safer. Over the last decade, many similar settlements have come up behind Narayanpur town, in open spaces like the hills in the vicinity. Bereft of agricultural land, the people sit idle during the harvesting season.

One of the settlements is ironically named Shanti Nagar, the Abode of Peace. It has electricity, a school, access roads, even drainage. Many families have settled here. The one factor that unites them is a sense of desolation and loss, and often, antagonism and grief. Their lives may be safer here than in their forest homes, but what does the future have in store from them, landless and unschooled as they are? Who is to blame? Most importantly, will they be able to return home?

The villagers hesitate to answer.

Close to these unsecured settlements of alleged informers is a heavily guarded row of 30 to 40 houses where 'special informers', recognised as Special Police Officers (SPOs) by the state, reside. SPOs are mostly locals. They accompany the police, acting as guides in the thick forests. They earn a monthly salary, are trained in the use of weapons, and are protected. The distinction between the their settlement and the others is stark.

Political will is essential if more such settlements are to be prevented from coming up. People are not just vote banks. Till then, the problems of these invisible, displaced communities are likely to continue. ■

Charkha Features

Names of people have been changed to protect identity



# Elephants on railway hit list

**Vivek S. Ghatani**  
Siliguri

ELEPHANTS in the Buxa Tiger Reserve continue to be killed by speeding trains while the forest department and the railways point fingers at each other. Stretching across 760 km in the Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal, the Buxa Tiger Reserve has the highest density of elephants in the region. Railway tracks cut right through this elephant corridor, endangering the lives of hapless animals.

West Bengal, it is believed, has around 652 elephants. Out of these as many as 529 live in Buxa. Last year, minister for forests Hiten Burman had stated in the State Assembly that out of 63 elephant deaths in the last two years, 49 took place in north Bengal. Twenty-seven were natural deaths and the rest of the elephants were mowed down by the killer railway tracks.

"During our meetings with railway officials, we repeatedly requested them to bring down the speed of trains from 80-90 kmph to 25 kmph so that the driver can stop the train in time after sighting elephants. But our pleas fell on deaf ears," says RP Saini, field director of Buxa Tiger Reserve.

The indifference of the railways has caused the death of three more elephants and injured one baby calf in Rajabhatkhaola, Jalpaiguri. They were all hit by the Jhajha-Guwahati Express. In June 2011, two elephants, part of a 60-odd herd, suffered a similar fate near a tea estate after they came in the way of the Asansol Express. They did not die immediately, but succumbed to fatal injuries a few days later. In September 2010, seven elephants were run over by a goods train between Banarhat and Binnaguri.

According to local people, elephants regularly cross the railway tracks to go to an adjacent forest or to raid nearby fields for paddy or maize. They also cross over to invade homes for bananas or for food stored in the kitchen, breaking a wall here or a window there. Sometimes, solitary elephants or herds are chased off the tea gardens by villagers or by peo-

ple from the forest department. This, in some cases, has caused chaos resulting in elephants coming suddenly in front of trains and getting killed.

According to people, crop-raiding incidents by elephants have increased over the past five to six years. Several families have stopped farming completely. Some have also been asked by the forest department to stop growing rice or maize since it tempts the elephants to cross the railway tracks to get to their fields. Also, most local villagers and tea garden workers understand that elephants are



Baby elephant killed by the Indian Railways

large-bodied mammals who can't be constrained by the boundaries of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries.

Initially, this tract of land was covered by forests and sparsely populated. The British invested hugely in the growth of tea estates. The meter gauge railway system was built here for these tea plantation estates.

Conversion from meter gauge to broad gauge started in 1999 and was completed in November 2003. This happened despite a PIL filed by WWF-India, West Bengal, in the Calcutta High Court, opposing the conversion on grounds of safeguarding wildlife. The NGO pointed out that a broad-gauge line already existed, some distance away

from the meter gauge line. In India, the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) notification of 1994 and its subsequent amendment does not include the railways as one of the sectors identified for an EIA study.

The conversion to broad gauge increased rail traffic. More and faster trains zipped through Buxa carrying passengers and goods. Not surprisingly, the frequency of elephant deaths due to train accidents has increased from an average of about one per year to more than four. This excludes other animals like gaurs, leopards, fishing cats, sambars, chitals and pythons who have either been killed or injured by trains. Many of these accidents go unrecorded by the forest department.

Based on the recommendations of an investigative team set up by the Calcutta High Court, the court issued directives to the railways in 2002 to minimise negative impacts on wildlife. These suggestions include construction of barriers at certain stretches to restrict elephant movement and cautious driving at specified stretches, amongst others. While most trains honk all the way, some villagers say that the honking agitates the elephants who often charge at the oncoming train instead of moving away.

Since elephants regularly move through this entire landscape, imposing speed limitations in just a few stretches is not an answer. Speed is not monitored effectively and warning systems are not functional.

Elephants move mostly at night. Therefore, night trains should be banned to minimise damage. One example of a successful ban on night traffic to minimise wildlife accidents is in the Bandipur National Park in Karnataka.

An alternate broad gauge line exists through Falakata in Jalpaiguri, not far from the railway line which cuts through Buxa. Railway authorities could double the route there to ease traffic. It is high time that the forest department and the railway authorities worked together to save wildlife. They must snap out of their apathy instead of passing the buck. ■

## SAMITA'S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR



**MY STORY / Rina Mukherjee** This victory is the culmination of a long battle that required me to overcome the trauma of sexual harassment

# Speak up, abandon your fears

A 10-year battle that I fought against illegal termination arising out of a complaint of sexual harassment at the workplace has resulted in an award by the Industrial Tribunal in Kolkata granting me reinstatement and full back wages since the time of termination.

The award was delivered by Judge Kundan Kumar Kumai on 6 February and has been endorsed by the Labour Department of the Government of West Bengal. According to my advocate Debashis Banerjee: "This is a landmark judgment concerning illegal termination arising out of sexual harassment at the workplace that has been fought and won."

My victory is the culmination of a long battle that required me to overcome the trauma of professional and sexual harassment and of being abruptly terminated of my job as a Senior Reporter. It saw me pick up the pieces of my professional career and reach several milestones, thanks to some excellent editors who never denied me the opportunity to prove myself.

Although I was a physiological and psychological wreck, I gradually built a resolve to move the state juggernaut and seek justice. Complaining against the News Coordinator at *The Statesman* had cost me my job. But making the details public, with the help of the Network of Women in Media (NWMI), saw my avenues of employment shrink further. I realized that no one wanted a troublemaker. On the other hand, my harasser was promoted to the rank of Deputy Editor!

It also meant a difficult time seeking out advocates willing to take up my case. There were no precedents – and it was not easy to win. Senior advocates want to win. And my case could not guarantee a win. The West Bengal Commission for Women under its venerable Chairperson, Professor Jashodhara Bagchi, realized how difficult it was to bring offenders to justice. My complaint proved a harsh test for the Commission. They had to face the reality of what the powers bestowed on them actually amounted to, thanks to the recalcitrance of *The Statesman*.

The police, too, were highly confused. Handling roadside harassers is an easy job for the Indian cop. But a well-educated white-collar offender familiar with legalese is a difficult prospect.



Rina Mukherjee: "Complaining against the News Coordinator at *The Statesman* cost me my job"

Thankfully, meeting Sutapa Chakravarty, director of the Human Rights Law Network (HRLN) got things going. Young advocates keen to change the world were eager to take up my case. The award, coming a month prior to International Women's Day this year, is, in my opinion, the best gift to India's working women. With the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Bill having been passed by the Rajya Sabha, and soon to become an Act, things are finally beginning to look up for the Indian working woman.

Or are they?

Let's look at the facts.

The Vishakha Guidelines were issued by the Supreme Court way back in 1997. In the absence of suitable legislation to curb sexual harassment at the workplace and ensure the safety and security of women, these Guidelines were supposed to be followed meticulously by all organizations. However, *The Statesman* was not the only organization that refused to follow them (until compelled to do so). A nationwide survey by Women Power Connect a few years ago revealed that several government departments in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar lacked a mechanism to address this issue.

In the case of *The Statesman*, public pressure generated by the NWMI compelled the organisation to set up a Sexual Harassment Complaints Committee in 2003, which was six years after the Supreme Court's ruling. According to Naina Kapur, a senior advocate who acted as lead instructing counsel before the Supreme Court in 1997 and

PRASANTA BISWAS

played an important role in the drafting of the legally-binding Vishakha Guidelines on workplace harassment, "employees of an organization can challenge an employer on the absence of a Sexual Harassment Complaints Committee since (the lack of) it infringes on their human rights as 'employees.'" However, this has never happened, partly because employees are largely ignorant of their rights in this matter.

A recent Workplace Sexual Harassment Survey, carried out by the Centre for Transforming India in the information technology and BPO/KPO industries revealed that as many as 47 per cent of employees did not know where to report, while 91 per cent did not report for fear of victimization. The findings are in line with those of a National

Commission for Women study on the working conditions of women print-media journalists. Although sexual harassment emerged as a major concern in the NCW study, only 22.7 per cent admitted having faced it, while eight per cent said they were 'not sure'. A mere 31.5 per cent accepted that it had 'seriously' undermined their confidence and affected their work, with 24 per cent admitting it had 'mildly' affected them. An alarming 41.3 per cent claimed that it had had 'no effect.'

Perhaps, unions would be the right body to take up such matters. But today, contractual jobs barring employees from joining any union have broken the back of the labour movement.

Add to that the burden of a patriarchal society, where the victim of a sexual offence is herself condemned as an offender. Society conditions women to keep quiet. Hence, women prefer to overlook harassment in the shape of sexual innuendoes, sexist remarks, physical molestation, cyber stalking or much worse despite the effect this has on their well-being.

An added burden is the fear of losing a job. In places like Kolkata, with limited opportunities, this fear reigns supreme. But more than anything else, it is a war of David vs Goliath, where most Davids would prefer to slink away than get crushed by the weight of a Goliath.

It is to these Davids that I would address myself. Come forward and demand your rights in the workplace. You have nothing to lose but the chains of self-doubt that bind you. ■



# Taste for tuber on the rise

Shree Padre  
Kasargod

THEY grow underground, in great abundance and in a range of climates. If tapped right and added to the common man's daily diet, tuber crops could end much of this nation's worry on the food security front. This was the principal takeaway from a tuber exhibition organized recently in Karnataka's Dakshina Kannada district.

"A tuber like *toona genasu* (huttari *genasu*, *dioscorea elata*) can feed a whole family for a month. Of course, no one can eat the same vegetable at every meal. But our apprehension about food scarcity is unfounded," says Vasantha Kaje, a farmer and software engineer from Manchikaje.

It was Vasantha's farming family that, without any government help, hosted the unique programme, *balu upakari gadde tarakari* (tuber crops are very useful). Everyone liked the tuber-dominated breakfast, lunch and snacks. Idli was prepared from *toona genasu*. Arrowroot yielded a sweet dish. *Payasa* was made from *suvarna gadde* (elephant foot yam, *amorphophallus paeoniifolius*).

About 40 varieties of tubers brought by farmers were exhibited. On show were rare tubers like *adike kesu*, *motte kesu* (both *colocasia* species, the former looks like arecanut, the latter like eggs) and *balli batate* (vine potato). "In my childhood days," recalls 76-year-old KS Kamath, "vendors selling cooked tubers were very common. I would buy them from an aged woman at Kadri Mangalore. It cost only an anna – one sixteenth of a rupee – to fill the belly. But once land reforms came, tubers were slowly relegated to history."

The love for modern ready food items and changing lifestyles hastened the disappearance of tubers from the common man's platter. "Now we think only of potato as a tuber crop," laments AP Chandrashekar, an organic farmer of Mysore.

The half-century-old Central Tuber Crops Research Institute (CTCRI), an ICAR (Indian Council of Agricultural Research) institution, is located in Thiruvananthapuram. CTCRI conducts research exclusively on tropical tuber crops. In the early



An exhibitor displays vine potato, a rare tuber

1970s, the Institute released many hybrid cassava varieties and developed production technologies. They also saw the need for a separate body for popularizing tuber crops. So the Indian Society for Root Crops (ISRC) was created in 1973.

Dr S Ramanathan, principal scientist at CTCRI and president of ISRC, says: "Tuber crops are in general rain fed. They can grow even in low fertility conditions. Tuber crops have higher biological efficiency. With their higher carbohydrate and calorie content, they can substitute cereals."

According to National Sample Survey statistics, in Kerala, per capita consumption of cassava as a 'cereal substitute' for a month during 1999-2000 was 0.96 kg in rural areas and 0.45 kg in urban areas. The corresponding all-India statistics were 0.05 kg and 0.03 kg respectively. *Nare gadde* (*kand* in Gujarati, *dioscorea pentaphylla*), a narrow elongated tuber, was favoured by the working class in the past. It grows in the wild. Says Vasantha Kaje, "I came to know about this variety of tuber at the festival. It seems that our own hilly land has quintals of this tuber. All these years, I was unaware that so much food source was hidden around my home."

Shivakumar CK, a civil engineer and wild fruit enthusiast from Madikeri, consumes about 16 varieties of tuber every year. He himself grows eight of them. "If we collect the ancient knowledge and put it to use for four months a year – from November to February – we can depend on root crops," he says.

Tuber crops have wide variety. Says Shivakumar: "I have seen an unusual variety locally called as *handi genasu* (pig potato) that comes to Dandeli market. Like *balli batate*, this tuber grows both under and above ground."

The Harangi backwater area in Kodagu in Shivakumar's district has large areas under tuber crops. Tapioca and *suvarna gadde* are the two main crops here. Biju, 39, one such farmer, grows root crops on leased lands apart from his own. His annual production of *suvarna gadde* alone is around 150 tonnes! According to Shivakumar, root crops are seldom con-

taminated by pesticides.

In the last decade, CTCRI scientists have undertaken periodic field visits and surveys in several states to document potential pockets of tuber cultivation. "In such regions," says Dr Ramanathan, "these crops are raised intensively as market-oriented commercial crops. They get high yields and bag higher net returns from tuber than from any other crop of that locality".

He says: "It is estimated that in the 21st century, about one-fourth of the world population will be in the grip of severe poverty. With the burgeoning population in India, we might have to import 40 million tonnes of food by 2030. In this context, tuber crops assume a lot of importance."

Argues Chandrashekar: "A concerted campaign like the ones for millets and jackfruit is needed." It might be better to make women the target of the tuber fests. If they start adding it to their shopping list, more growers would invariably emerge."

Though other tuber crops still remain by and large neglected, tapioca (cassava, *kappa* in Malayalam) utilization in Kerala has increased. "Of late production in Kerala has decreased considerably. Rubber has taken over the earlier tapioca area. Tamil Nadu, a recent entrant into tapioca production, is diverting its produce to starch factories," observes Ushakumari S., an agriculture specialist of Thanal, the Thiruvananthapuram-based Public Interest Research, Advocacy, Education and Action Trust. "But then, more and more upscale hotels and restaurants are now making tapioca dishes. The per capita consumption has gone up."

According to Shivakumar, the Soliga tribals in Biligiri Rangana Betta of Karnataka have been conserving a few rare tuber varieties. "Similarly, in Kodagu, a few farmers have planted tuber crops. However, such efforts aren't documented nor is there a network between such silent conservationists," he says.

It is evident that only an awakening at the grass-roots level can bring tubers to dining tables around the country. ■



# DRAG is small and big at 25

Saibal Chatterjee  
New Delhi

**G**AUTAM Vohra did not drift into activism. His move from journalism to a more rigorous form of social intervention, obviously triggered by deeply ingrained idealism, had a ring of inevitability about it.

"I was a journalist for 15 years. It helped me learn a great deal about my country. But I got restless. I realized I wouldn't change people's lives by writing editorials for a newspaper," he says, sitting in the book-lined living room of his home in south Delhi.

It was a time, he recalls, when the NGO sector was gaining prominence. The then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had made the pertinent point that of every rupee that the government spent, 80 paise went into non-productive use. It set Vohra thinking, and he figured out the direction that his life would take.

He got involved with the National Wasteland Development Board, headed by Dr Kamla Choudhary, and did a stint at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, in order to understand how the voluntary sector could help the marginalized and the disenfranchised.

Finally, in 1988, Vohra created the Development Research and Action Group (DRAG) with the express purpose of intervening on behalf the adivasis of Pen taluka in Maharashtra's Raigad district, "whose lives did not appear to have been touched by the development programmes launched by independent India".

Now, 25 years on, as the sexagenarian writer and grassroots activist looks back on the work of his NGO, he has reason to be filled with satisfaction. "We've not only survived, we've grown stronger with time," he says.

DRAG has come a long way indeed. It has several projects under its umbrella. Among other things, it has a school for indigent children in the national capital; does organic farming in a Haryana village; runs adult education programmes and women's centres in urban slums; spearheads a campaign to save the Delhi Ridge; and works to highlight the need for water conservation.

"Our greatest achievement," says Vohra, "is that DRAG has remained a small NGO in terms of funds, but assets-wise, we are big or medium-sized. We have resources worth ₹10 crore. We maintain a staff of 20 to 25 people and keep our



Gautam Vohra: "We dip into our own corpus to do our work"

activities going without having to kill ourselves looking for means of sustenance."

DRAG, he points out, stopped accepting external grants and funds by the turn of the millennium. "We now dip into our own corpus to do our work," he adds.

A casual conversation with Vohra is enough to reveal that the man has no delusions about the scale of his achievements. "Some of my friends have adopted more radical methods, declassified themselves and stayed on in the villages to fight. From the revolutionary perspective, I am no rebel, nor am I a hero," he says.

But he is also aware that DRAG is no ordinary "middle class voluntary set-up" that is in the business only because it makes them feel better about themselves. Vohra spends weeks and months in villages and slums in order to work with, not simply for, the communities there.

Vohra's is really a sort of middle path that focuses on drawing members of the under-privi-

leged communities into the campaign to better their lives through primary and adult education, income generation, improved hygiene and awareness of their rights as citizens of this country.

Water conservation is a key area for Vohra. "The current development-at-any-cost model has led to a heedless rush to destroy land and water resources," he complains. "The NGOs are questioning this model but there is no genuine sympathy at the government level. The bureaucracy has no time for these voices."

Vohra believes that DRAG has demonstrated that poverty can be tackled on the ground at one-tenth the cost of government programmes. "Delhi is only a part of the larger phenomenon," he says. "Our model can be replicated elsewhere in the country."

The community-driven approach has been the DRAG norm no matter where the NGO has interacted with the urban poor – in the Kusumpahari jhuggi jhonpri cluster of migrants in South Delhi, the unauthorized shanties of West Delhi's Mohan Garden, or in the resettlement colony in trans-Yamuna's Trilokpuri, the scene of the worst anti-Sikh rioting in 1984.

At the outset of any project, Vohra works closely with the people. Once a movement has gathered momentum, DRAG members step back and allow it

to grow organically. For example, as part of the adult education initiatives, DRAG has found teachers and volunteers from within the slum communities and employed its own workers only as catalysts to initiate the process of change.

When his NGO was registered, reveals Vohra, DRAG was a left-of-centre organization opposed to taking money from donors. But when it moved to Delhi from Mumbai, the governing council changed, and so did DRAG's strategy. "We became a centrist organization that began to take grants in order to fund different projects," Vohra recalls.

Now that DRAG has been a self-sustaining outfit for over a decade, how does he see the future? "I want to pass on the baton," says Vohra. "But I really cannot afford the salary that my replacement would have to be paid." Come to think of it, money might be able to buy the required competencies, but will another dreamer and a man of action with his feet firmly on the ground, another Gautam Vohra, be easy to find? ■



# Forest dwellers struggle for rights



Forest dwellers: "The forest department refuses to recognise our community rights"

**Rakesh Agrawal**  
New Delhi

**F**OREST rights activists held a *halla bol* public hearing on 17th March in Delhi where more than 300 forest dwellers from 12 states presented their cases. They have been struggling to implement the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006, briefly called the FRA.

The main stumbling block, they point out, is the forest department. The Government of India (GoI) notified the Act on 1st January 2007 and shifted the responsibility of implementation to state governments. But the forest department comes under the control of the central government. The forest department controls over 23 per cent of India's land classified as forest, and it is not ready to yield an inch.

"More than 20 crore tribals and forest dwellers continue to live as second class citizens on forestland," said Vijaylakshmi, a representative of the Adivasi Janjati Adhikar Manch from Tamil Nadu.

Dressed in typical tribal attire with a colourful cotton clump on his head, Jairam Darihya from Amguda village in Raigada district of Odisha explained the problems faced by his village nestled in the tapering Niyamgiri hills, the epicentre of a long people's protest against the Vedanta Group. The company has been trying to take over this area for mining.

"We are totally dependent on our forest but the forest department hasn't recognised our community rights. We have resolved to fight to the bitter end," he said in desperation.

Corroborating his statement, Huika Sadau, a middle-aged lady from Sunakhaw village in Kalahandi district, said: "Around 712 villages have filed claims, but 112 villages falling in Niyamgiri hills haven't got any rights. We'll die but we will

not leave our land."

The situation is worse in Protected Areas. The Simlipal National Park with an area of 2,750 sq km is in the centre of the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. Sixty-five villages are located in its core and buffer zone. More than 10,000 people live here. The state government has been relocating them without providing basic amenities.

"Seventy-two families from three villages – Jamuna, Kobatghai and Bakua – are living a life of sheer hell without any food and land to cultivate. The forest department doesn't even allow us to collect biomass. It hasn't recognised our rights so far," said Hagal Ho of Jenabli in Mayurbhanj district, a village that has been partially relocated.

Similar situations prevail in Western India. In Rajasthan, people living in 193 villages in and around the 423 sq km Sita Mata Wildlife Sanctuary in Pratapgarh district are most disillusioned. "Out of 1,523 individual claims for land, only 952 were approved and the rest were rejected without any reason. Even those who got land rights received much less than they claimed," said Ramesh Kumar who lives in a forest village inside the sanctuary.

A study by Action Aid on the implementation of the FRA surveyed 400 villages in eight states. Their findings support Ramesh Kumar's statement. "The numbers of forest villages exceed the government's data of 2,474 villages. This situation has arisen because such forest settlements have not been converted into revenue villages," explained Debabrat Patra, Regional Manager, Action Aid, a funding agency that helped organize the public hearing.

"Our study also reveals that while 74 per cent of individual claims have been accepted, claimants got far less land than they had claimed for. The picture of community rights to forests is even worse. Only 32 per cent of villages have been recommended for such rights. West Bengal

hasn't approved even a single community rights claim," said Bratindi Jena of Action Aid.

The story is almost the same in revenue villages. "The officials of the forest department mock us. They gave us land which measured four yards by six yards, just enough to dig a grave," said Jayant Bhai Wasawa of Khedbrahma village in Sabarkantha district of Gujarat.

In Maharashtra, forest people suffer a similar fate. "Rejection of claims without any reason is the norm. In my district, only 60 out of the 5,628 claims filed have been approved," said Shyam Singh of Nandurbar district.

Implementation of the FRA is equally poor in tribal Jharkhand. "Less than 65 per cent of individual claims have been approved. Practically no community rights have been accepted. Instead the forest department is promoting joint forest management (JFM), in clear violation of the FRA," alleged Hemkund Gormu of Godda district.

In the hilly northern Himalayan states, the forest department's strategy has been to turn a blind eye to all claims. "In Himachal, our government decided to implement the FRA in the districts of Kinnaur, Lahul, Spiti and parts of Chamba. We filed a writ petition in the Himachal Pradesh High Court. Now the government has issued a notification to implement the FRA in the entire state," said Akshaya Jasdodiya of Padyarla village in Kangra district.

In Uttarakhand too the forest department lives in denial. People alleged that out of 182 claims filed, not one has been entertained. "We filed claims in 2010 but no one has paid any attention to us," complained Gopal Ladhial of Pandechhod village in Nainital district. He said his Dalit village was being repeatedly harassed by a neighbouring upper caste village.

The FRA was primarily meant for Adivasis to get their rights to land and forest produce. Non-Adivasis who are also forest dependent are having a tough time since they have to prove that they have resided in the forest settlement for several generations.

"Had we been Adivasis, everyone would have listened. As many as 145 claims from our village have been rejected," said Saroj Yadav of Gokulpur village in Bahraich district of UP. Incidentally, this was the first non-Adivasi village to get some rights to forestland in the country.

The public hearing tried to find a way forward. "It is true that Adivasis participated in the freedom struggle in the hope that their 'own' government will restore their rights. This hope has been totally shattered. Now it is the duty of us, the policymakers, to rekindle their hopes by raising the issue of converting forest villages into revenue villages in this session of Parliament," promised A.V. Swamy, member, Rajya Sabha and the chief guest at the public hearing.

"We need to use the most potent weapon and that is information. We should educate all of India about the FRA and create awareness about our rights," said Bela Ram, a prominent Adivasi leader and a jury member. ■

# Paddy boom in barren Damoh

**Rakesh Agrawal**  
Damoh (MP)

FOR many years, Lalla, 30, was just a poor man who worked as a construction labourer in Mumbai. He owned three acres back home in Jharauli, a village in the Damoh district of Madhya Pradesh. But it was barren land and he couldn't see it as an asset.

On a trip back home Lalla tried his hand at cultivating paddy using the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), a method that was being promoted by the Gramin Vikas Samiti, a local NGO in partnership with the People's Science Institute (PSI) in Dehradun. Lalla's fortunes began to change.

"In 2011, I earned ₹78,000 growing paddy. Finally, there was enough food for my family of five. I even invested ₹35,000 in repairing my home," he says with a smile. No, he is not going back to Mumbai, he replies firmly. Other youth from his village are returning home to take up farming.

The SRI technique, locally called Sri Vidhi, is proving a boon for farmers in 38 villages of Damoh district of Madhya Pradesh bordering Bundelkhand in Uttar Pradesh. Invented by a French pastor, this method alters transplanting, weeding, water and nutrient management to yield an impressive harvest. Sri Vidhi uses traditional organic techniques and requires less labour and inputs. Farmers are, finally, reaping profits.

The boost in income from agriculture is having interesting side effects – homes are being repaired, small shops and businesses are coming up and a reverse migration from city to village is taking place.

This is the third year farmers in Baildana village are using SRI techniques.

"Sri Vidhi is a boon. I get about 60 quintals of paddy from our two acres of rain-fed land. So now I can feed my family of 11. I even sell rice and make money," explains Balkishan Kewat, a Dalit. Last year, he earned ₹30,000 and bought silver ornaments for his wife and daughter, he says.

The project began in 2010 when PSI was scouting for grassroots partners and chanced upon the Grameen Vikas Samiti, an NGO which was so anonymous it did not even have a signboard. But the partnership clicked. "SRI techniques result in higher straw production so there is plenty of fodder to raise livestock too," explains Yadav.

He strongly recommends that Sri Vidhi be tried out in Bundelkhand where crop productivity is among the lowest in India. The soil there has poor water retention and drought is frequent. The SRI technique, says Yadav, needs less seeds and water. The workload of farmers is reduced and only organic manure like Panchgavya is used, reducing input costs dramatically.

Initially, convincing people in Damoh to switch to Sri Vidhi was not easy. "After a lot of effort we could persuade only 205 farmers in eight villages to try out SRI. The total area covered was 45 acres.



Yield has improved dramatically and farmers are making small investments

But in two years the project has snowballed. Now 1,200 farmers in 32 villages are doing Sri Vidhi agriculture on over 1,400 acres," says Yadav.

The most important technique is the preparation of a nursery where paddy saplings are grown. These are then transplanted to a field bereft of any weeds. For this a weeder, a handheld roller with grooves, is used. It digs up earth and uproots the roots of the last crop. "After 10 to 15 days, we transplant the paddy saplings from the nursery to the field and plant them around eight inches apart," explains Sheela Bai, a farmer from Baildana.

Women farmers confirm their workload has reduced. The men help out at the nursery and it doesn't take much effort to raise saplings. The technique doesn't require much irrigation either. "Since digging and sowing is not really needed we save time. So we can take better care of our children and some of us are earning more money by rolling bidis," says Urmila Devi, 42.

The cost of raising an SRI paddy field is extremely low. "Just 2.5 kg of seeds per acre are needed. In contrast a conventional paddy field requires 40 kg. Also, Panchgavya manure is much cheaper than urea," says Raj Kumar Yadav, 45, a farmer from Nibaura village, Damoh district.

In 2010, eight villagers volunteered for the SRI methods in Baildana. Now all 25 farmers in this village of 300 households have taken to it. "I was the one to begin SRI in 2010. When I grew 30 quintals of paddy on a portion of my 2.5 acres with only three kg of traditional paddy seeds, my

brother got convinced," says Kashi Ram, 60.

Ram spent ₹20,000 repairing his home and bought new clothes for his daughter. "I used to wear my school uniform at home also. Now, I wear my home dress," says his seven-year-old daughter Didiya, showing off her flowery frock.

Some farmers have used the money earned to buy more land. "I bought a plot at Tendukehda, a nearby town," says Nathu Ram Kewat, 58. Others have invested in small businesses. "I earned Rs 70,000 and invested in a small flour mill last year," says Pritam Kewat.

Agricultural experts are endorsing SRI techniques for Bundelkhand. "The average rice yield in Bundelkhand is 17 to 20 quintals per hectare. But the average SRI yield is 75 to 80 quintals per hectare," says Dr. Sanjay Vaishyampayan, Senior Scientist, Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Damoh, affiliated to the Jawaharlal Nehru Agriculture University in Jabalpur.

In the SRI system the paddy plant is six feet long and has around 600 grains. Conventional paddy is 3.5 feet long and has about 350 grains.

#### However some concerns need to be addressed:

- SRI technique needs to be extended to wheat, maize and urad.
- Thoroughly cleaning the field of weeds is an arduous process.
- Farmers find operating the weeder very cumbersome and would like it to be made mechanical. This would increase the cost of the machine but it would ease the work of the farmer. ■



# PENSION TO ALL

## DEMAND GROWS LOUDER BUT GOVT DITHERS

Arjun Sen  
New Delhi

A year after the Pension Parishad left Jantar Mantar in New Delhi well-nigh empty handed, it returned for another five-day agitation that ended on March 8th with some minor and uncertain concessions from the Union government. The Pension Parishad is asking for a universal pension of ₹2,000 for workers in the unorganized sector since a growing number of older people have no means of earning a livelihood after a lifetime of hard manual labour.

Currently, only the very poor – below the poverty line (BPL) – are entitled to ₹200 a month as pension. The Minister of State for Rural Development, Jairam Ramesh, in talks with the Pension Parishad's leadership, promised it would be raised to ₹500. But when he turned up at Jantar Mantar he declared it would be ₹300 and there was no real clarity on how much the government was ready to yield.

The Pension Parishad was formed in Pune in February 2012 at a conference where veteran trade unionist and social activist Baba Adhav and Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) leader Aruna Roy were elected national convenors of the movement. It is now a broad-based coalition of nearly a hundred organizations from across the country. Last May, the Pension Parishad organized its first five-day *dharna* at Jantar Mantar to press for a universal old age pension system for all workers irrespective of whether they are BPL or not.

Hundreds of disadvantaged senior citizens – porters, farm hands, domestic workers and other members of India's unorganized labour force – assembled to lend support to the agitation. But it eventually yielded little in terms of meaningful government interventions.

With Ramesh addressing the agitators on the penultimate day of their sit-in the story was more encouraging this time around, but only just as it later turned out. The minister announced that the government had, in principle, accepted the key demands of the Pension Parishad, including immediate establishment of a non-contributory and universal old age pension system, dissolution of the APL-BPL divide in the matter of eligibility, and enhancement of the paltry pension that is currently paid to only one-fifth of the nation's elderly population of roughly 100 million.

However, the statement that the minister made in Parliament the following day steered clear of a commitment on the time-frame for the rollout of universal old age pension. Moreover, the enhanced pension amount he offered was way short of what the Pension Parishad has been demanding.

An estimated 12,000 unorganized sector workers attended the latest Jantar Mantar *dharna*. They came from diverse locations in as many 22 states. They represented some of the poorest of the poor – ragpickers, construction workers, domestic workers, auto-rickshaw drivers, sex workers, weavers and fisher folk. And they were all either elderly or were widowed, single or abandoned women or people living with disabilities. Around 2,500 villages took part. It was the largest-ever mobilisation of its kind. The government had to sit up and take notice. But the headway made was nowhere near enough.

Pension Parishad leaders assert that the fact that India does not have an old age pension system is a result of lack of political will and not of paucity of resources. The latter pretext is often cited by official quarters as an impediment to increasing the monthly pension to a level "not less than 50 per cent of mini-



Aruna Roy: "We will extend our movement to every single village"

imum wage or ₹2,000, whichever is higher".

Says noted economist Dr Jayati Ghosh of the Jawaharlal Nehru University: "It is appalling that India has neglected this issue for so long. How can we talk of becoming a superpower when we can't meet the minimum entitlements that a civilised society must ensure for its citizens?" She adds: "Because this issue has been ignored for so long, it may now appear that we require a lot of resources. No matter what, the resources have to be found. The government gives a raft of tax concessions to companies, gold exporters, SEZs and so on, while not providing funds for something as basic as pension for the elderly."

For 74-year-old rickshaw-puller Dwarika Paswan from Muzaffarpur, Bihar or Vatsala Kukde, a 63-year-old widow from Maharashtra's Sangli district, a universal pension could be the difference between living with dignity and languishing and dying in utter penury. Countless others trapped in similar straits made the trip to the national capital to add their voices to the movement aimed at forcing the government to act. Among the demonstrators was 30-year-old Munni Devi of Bihar's Arariah district, whose husband left her seven years ago. She had two sons, but both died of illness. She now lives with her parents, both landless labourers, and has been running from pillar to post for a BPL card. A pension of the kind that is being demanded for elderly workers and deserted women could bring new hope into Munni's life.

Like Munni, 70-year-old Maya Devi, a widow from Banda district, Uttar Pradesh, is desperately seeking an identity. She has neither a BPL card nor



# INCHES ALONG

LAKSHMAN ANAND



any job guarantee, which leaves her struggling for survival.

While the government seems to have woken up to the plight of people like Paswan, Munni and Maya, it is still not clear whether it is ready to abandon the dilatory methods that have hitherto been the norm. "The government assurances are a step in the right direction but there is still a long way to go," Pension Parishad national convenors Baba Adhav and Aruna Roy told *Civil Society*. "We will continue our movement and extend it to every single village in the country till the government accepts all our demands in toto."

In his address, Ramesh told the Jantar Mantar gathering that at a meeting with Pension Parishad leaders a broad agreement had been reached on six of the demands. These, he added, would govern "the restructuring of the existing National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) as instructed by the Prime Minister". The minister's announcement was understandably greeted with loud applause. But in the minds of the leaders of the movement, including Nikhil Dey of the MKKS, doubts persist. They aren't sure that the measures will be implemented immediately, as promised by the government.

Ramesh said the existing NSAP pensions for the elderly, widows and the physically challenged would be expanded within a month and a half to ensure universal coverage without any APL/BPL distinction. He added that the exclusions would be based on clear criteria such as those that fall in the income tax bracket or those that already receive pension due to their employment status. The minister announced that the pension amount, too, would be raised from

LAKSHMAN ANAND



It is not humanly possible for the elderly to earn a living

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Elderly women: "We go everywhere to raise our voices"

₹200 per month to ₹300 per month. This was way below the Pension Parishad's demand, and Ramesh admitted as much.

He assured the gathering that in the next few weeks, the Ministry will confer within the government and with the Pension Parishad to determine what the pension amount should be. "This is a decision that the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister will have to approve," he said. The quantum of monthly pension is a major sore point for the Pension Parishad leaders and they made it clear that the agitation would continue till the government agrees to increase the amount to at least ₹2,000 per month.

Ramesh further said the government had agreed that the pension amount should be indexed to inflation and would be adjusted accordingly every year as is done for wages paid under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS). The minister announced that the government had also agreed to the demand that pensions would be delivered on the first day of every month by ensuring direct delivery to them through the system of Direct Benefits Transfer (DBT) that the government had already introduced at a pilot level.

The genesis of this movement can be traced back to 1955, when Babasaheb Pandurang Adhav, then a 25-year-old doctor with a clinic in a Pune slum, organised the city's *hamals* (people who carry huge sacks on their backs in wholesale markets) to form the Hamal Panchayat to fight for legal protection of their rights, better wages, health benefits and provident fund. In the next



year, for the first time, the *hamals* went on strike. After several satyagrahas and many arrests, they finally got their trade union recognised and minimum wages fixed for their work. In 1969, the state government passed the Maharashtra Mathadi, Hamal and Other Manual Workers Act, the country's first piece of social security legislation for unorganised labour. It became the model for many such movements throughout the country.

Now 83, Baba Adhav continues to spearhead the movement to secure a better deal for unorganised sector workers and Dalits all over the country. Despite all these years of struggle, the *hamals*, as also other unorganised sector workers, have not earned the right to a universal pension. To address this issue on a national scale, Baba Adhav joined hands with others across the country, including Aruna Roy, who is also a member of the National Advisory Council, a Parliament-approved quasi-governmental body chaired by the UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi.

For last year's *dharna* in New Delhi, 102 *hamals* came all the way from Pune on 51 motorcycles. On the journey, they stopped at village squares and grain *mandis* to create awareness among unorganised sector workers about the demand for a universal pension that would make no distinction between APL and BPL. "We talked to a whole lot of people on the way and got overwhelming support for our demands," said Gorakh Mengade, a *hamal* leader who headed the motorbike cavalcade campaign in the scorching heat of May.

"Since last May we've travelled throughout the country visiting every major city to mobilise people," said Baba Adhav. "Our *dharna* last year also led to negotiations with the government. The Cabinet not only approved an increase in the rate of central assistance under the widow and disability pension schemes in October 2012, but also asked the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) to come up with a proposal for a Comprehensive National Social Assistance Programme," he added.

The ministry accordingly constituted a task force under the chairmanship of Mihir Shah, Member, Planning Commission, in November last year. The task force submitted its final recommendations in January this year. While the recommendations did include some of the demands of the Pension Parishad, it still left much to be desired.

"It was extremely distressing to find that the task force had recommended a phased rollout of the scheme during the 12th Plan period," said Baba Adhav. "By the time the scheme reaches the elderly in 2016-17 as recommended by the task force, many of them would be dead, given their precarious existence," added Roy.

The Pension Parishad leaders felt that unless the government tried to achieve universal coverage with immediate effect, the very purpose of revamping the scheme and extending it to the nearly 100 million elderly would not be served. So they decided to organise the *dharna* from 4th to 8th March in New Delhi to highlight the urgency of the demand and to caution the government not to take the elderly for granted, Roy said.

In February 2013 the Pension Parishad began mobilising thousands of unorganised sector workers across the country to bring them to the national capital. The *dharna* saw not only the congregation of thousands of elderly men and women workers from the lowest income bracket from Delhi, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, West Bengal, Assam, Karnataka, Orissa, Haryana and six other smaller states, but also the participation of a number of political leaders cutting across party lines – from the BJP, the Congress, CPI, and CPI(M), to name a few – as also well-known economists and social activists from across the country.

While the first two days of the *dharna* saw the



The elderly cannot wait for years to get pension

tempo build up, on 6th March, the Pension Parishad leaders organised a massive rally on Sansad Marg. The demonstrators raised slogans and listened to various worker representatives from different states. Veteran CPI leader D. Raja spoke on the occasion and said he would raise the issue in the Rajya Sabha.

He did so, and MPs of almost all parties supported the demand for the universalisation of pension. It was soon after that Ramesh came to the Pension Parishad manch on Sansad Marg to address the gathering.

"In our meeting with Ramesh on 5th March, the minister had agreed to a pension amount of ₹500 per month, but on 7th March he announced only ₹300. I am not satisfied and our agitation will go on till the government agrees to our demand of 50 per cent of minimum wage or ₹2,000, whichever is higher," Baba Adhav said.

"But we are hopeful – the matter is already in Parliament, the Budget session is on and the government cannot defer a final decision anymore. They will have to universalise pension within the next few weeks. That is a significant step forward," he said.

"This is a crucial issue for the poor and the demand for pension is not asking for a dole," pointed out Dey. "All the estimated 100 million elderly have contributed to the economy and for all these workers in the unorganised sector, any kind of contributory pension is simply not feasible. So the government has to recognise their right to a dignified life in old age and create a fund to pay the pension," he said.

The task force chairman Mihir Shah has also concurred. "We have neglected



Nikhil Dey makes a point as Baba Adhav looks on

this issue for too long but thanks to the Pension Parishad movement the government was forced to set up the task force. Our recommendations do reflect their demands but there is a problem of resources and the government will have to find a way out," he said during a panel discussion on the subject on Lok Sabha TV.

"Although we aren't satisfied, what the minister has announced is a significant breakthrough. We are now certainly on track for a comprehensive social security system. The government will have to continue negotiations with us on the amount of pension, the issue of identity, and so many other issues that





Noted activist Gyarsi Bai with members of her Jagrut Mahila Sangathan from Baran district, Rajasthan, hold up their list of demands with signatures and thumbprints

plague the poor in this country," Dey said.

"We have state-level cells of the Pension Parishad but we are going to set up cells in every village of this country. This is an election year and our target is to make sure that our demands get reflected in the manifestos of every political party," the MKSS leader said.

"It is not a question of how to find the money; it is a question of social justice. We tell the government you can't do anything about inflation, you can't end corruption that hits the poor the most, you can't end the mafia raj that shuts out the poor from expressing themselves in the democratic process. So you have to provide social security to the poorest of the poor or else what will they do, where will they go, who will take care of them when they reach old age and cannot work anymore? It is a question of political will, that's all," Baba Adhav said.

"The government can always find the resources because the idea of pensions to 100 million people makes a lot of economic and political sense. This is certainly not just a social welfare scheme, but it will also provide a much-needed stimulus to an economy which is slowing down – the money in the hands of the people will all be spent on consumption and that would automatically spur growth," Dr Jayati Ghosh said.

"By its own admission, the government gives tax concessions to companies to the tune of a staggering ₹5 lakh crore or six per cent of the economy to entice them to invest. But that investment is not taking place. Instead, if they spend less than half that amount on giving a pension of ₹2,000 per month to 100 million people, that is ₹2 lakh crore, it will boost aggregate demand and automatically pull in not only domestic investment but foreign investment as well," Ghosh said.

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Demonstrators from Bihar

The narratives of some of those who participated in the *dharna* underscore the urgency of the demand for universal pension. "I have one son but he lives in another city for work and is also married. He doesn't look after me or my wife who is 68 years old," said Dwarika Paswan. One look at him and you know he cannot possibly continue doing the work that has sustained him so far.

"I have been separated from my husband for 15 years and I have three sons and a daughter. They don't earn enough to look after me. I don't even have a BPL card because the gram pradhan keeps asking for documents that I cannot produce – nor can I pay the bribe that some people pay to get these cards. I hardly earn ₹1,800 a month," laments Maya Devi. "So we go everywhere to raise our voice – we go along with these activists," she said, pointing to a lady member of the Vanangana Sanstha, an NGO that works for the rights of women and Dalits.

The stories of Vatsala Kukde or 80-year-old Galiben Baria of Gujarat, a Panam Dam oustee and member of Panam Mahila Sangathan, are no different. None of them earns more than ₹2,000 a month and they are old and infirm. Whatever little they could once earn is no longer possible as the advancing years take a physical toll.

Hope and indomitability of spirit keep them going. They respond to every call by social activists to join demonstrations like the latest one in New Delhi. "I have nobody. So everybody is my family and when they call, I join them," Vatsala Kukde said, a smile flashing on her wrinkled face. If only the government would respond to her justified aspirations with the sense of urgency that they deserve, she would no longer have to undertake these strenuous trips to New Delhi to fight for what should have been hers as a fundamental right in the first place. ■



# Business

- Enterprise
- Inclusion
- CSR
- ICT
- Go Green

## A kickstart for the young

*YouthSpark  
will create  
global change  
leaders*

**Civil Society News**  
New Delhi

**M**ICROSOFT is stepping up its efforts to reduce the gap between privileged and underprivileged young people with a project appropriately titled YouthSpark.

The idea is to assist underserved young people with skills to get better jobs, become innovators, entrepreneurs or study further, just like their privileged counterparts.

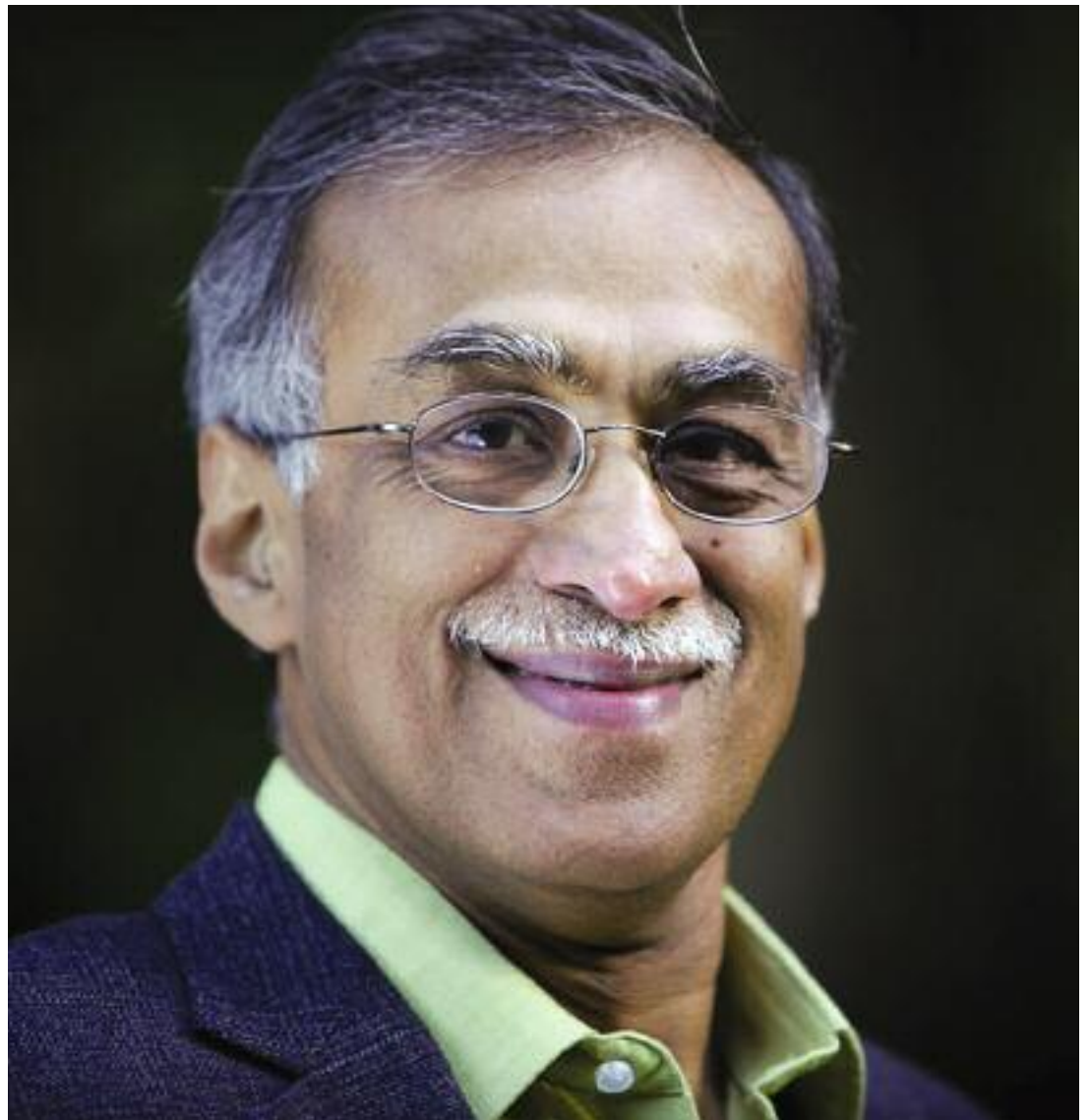
YouthSpark is a global project for 300 million young people around the world in partnership with governments, non-profits and businesses.

In India, Microsoft is launching 10 YouthSpark centres. The first, a pilot, was started in New Delhi in November last year. The second, was inaugurated in Trivandrum in February.

Skill-building is not exactly new terrain for Microsoft. Since August 2004, the software company has been running Computer Technology Learning Centres (CTLCs) in India under its Project Jyoti programme.

Each CTLC is a hub of activity. People of all ages converge here to learn about computers and interact and develop technology skills. The CTLC is free or low-cost. Pasted on its walls are advertisements for jobs and information about government schemes and projects.

As of now, 1,425 CTLCs have been set up in India in partnership with 14 NGOs. Microsoft has invested about ₹47 crore in 27 states and Union



Akhtar Badshah: "Our training programmes are for underprivileged youth"

Territories to help bridge the digital divide in the country.

YouthSpark hopes to take young people several notches higher in terms of skills. It seeks to intensify Microsoft's interaction with the young and place them in a likeminded online community. In this way, Microsoft expects to create an international network of change-leaders in the next three years.

Akhtar Badshah, Senior Director, Citizenship and Public Affairs, was in India travelling from Mumbai to Trivandrum and Chennai. *Civil Society* spoke to him.

**You have been running Computer Technology Learning Centres (CTLCs) very successfully for some years now. So what ignited the idea of YouthSpark?**

After eight years of innovating and tweaking the CTLC programme we felt it was time to step back and look at the challenges the company should focus on.

When we did a company-wide survey with different partners and product groups, what became evident was that youth was a resonating message for everybody. And as we started looking at the economic crisis we found that it impacted young people more than anybody else in terms of creating a great opportunity divide.

We felt this was something we could address. And if we could create a more holistic programme, we would be able to have a far more impactful programme.

We thought, let's go beyond just empowering the young. Let them imagine what the future can look like and let us help them realize it. So, now we are trying to help young people – through technology, training and capacity building – to get jobs, start something on their own or go in for further education.

### **You have started a YouthSpark programme in Delhi. What has the response been?**

I think it is a little too early to tell because we launched this very recently in November. Our partners have just started implementing it. But what do I want to see happen? Up till now our programme was all about trying to serve the underserved community.

With YouthSpark we are also building a community of young change-makers. It's a global community and it's an online community. We have about 800 of them already online because last year we did a few regional events. We took young people from India to Singapore as part of a regional effort and we are now doing more of these events round the world.

### **Who were these young people?**

One of our young beneficiaries was from our CTLC centre in Maharashtra. He had shown great promise of trying to be a leader. We took him to Singapore. Through the training he got he came back and has now started his own non-profit that is supporting young people to get trained. We are holding an event in India on 25 April. We are going to identify 100 young leaders who have gone through our programmes and put them into a community. That will accelerate the process by which individuals will become leaders for us in this movement.

### **Well, we usually look for leaders among young people who are already empowered, not among underprivileged youth, isn't it?**

That is what we are trying to address. Our training programmes are for underserved youth whom nobody else is really talking to. Are we seeing leadership qualities in some of them? We can harness that and put them into a global community so that they can mutually learn, reinforce each other and become leaders in their own right.

### **What is the kind of training you will be providing?**

There are two kinds of training. One is just work-



Akhtar Badshah gives away a certificate at a computer learning centre

ing with non-profits and getting them to narrow down their training so that they are actually giving the youth support to either get a job, start something on their own or go in for further education.

Once they get selected and get into this community called Innovate for Good, we will provide them with additional training. We have developed courses online and there are our events. The emphasis in this programme is really on handholding them, helping them to think through their ideas, develop them and do a project plan. For funding we have created an online portal. Give for Youth, where they can post their projects and raise money.

### **Is there any institutional support coming from governments or banks?**

For these young people we are really focusing on micro projects. So think of it as a kickstart. We are looking at individuals coming in and providing young people with support. Once we find this is gaining traction then we can start exploring what partnerships we need to form globally for them.

### **What about academia?**

I think what we are seeing is that a lot of people are watching us from academia. We have historically used academia to evaluate and do research for our projects. I taught in MIT for many years. We are getting a lot of informal advice. It's too early to look for new linkages.

It's become a very interesting journey for us too. Young people need to have a say in what their future will be. One of the things we have been looking at is – should we form an international youth advisory committee?

Some folks will have some very interesting things to say. At our events – I attended four out of seven – we learnt a lot from young people. They were extremely bright and talented. Part of this is going to be a listening and learning exercise for us. There is a lot of room for change and improvement.

**Given that a lot of these young people come from backgrounds which are quite oppressive in terms of governance, civic amenities, access and rights, you may be looking here at ideas which solve problems of governance, resources and so on?**

Absolutely. We are already seeing that. At the

regional events young people were raising issues that were very similar across different parts of the world – whether it is Latin America, Europe, China, Africa, the Middle East.

A lot of it is, hey, don't worry about our future, just provide us the support we need. You don't have to design everything for us. The issue of education is on top of their minds. Training, the environment, health, human rights are also concerns for them. So these are interesting things young people are concerned about.

### **How will you mentor and handhold this young community?**

We have been working with an organization called Taking it Global started in Canada by two young people some 12 years ago when they were 15 or 16 years old.

They developed an online community of close to 400,000 or 500,000 people that get mobilized around all sorts of causes. They have these wonderful training programmes that they use. We are working with them to develop lots of training programmes and also evolving because we get feedback.

On mentorship we find young people want connections to Microsoft, to our employees, to talk to them. They keep asking us. They want somebody who will be just a mentor. Just somebody they can Skype or have an email conversation with, ask questions on growth, development or discuss ideas.

So we are now trying to mobilize our community to get engaged. We have young hirers, Microsoft academic and college hirers. There are young people who have just come into Microsoft. They actually have an HR (human resource) community that does all kinds of activities with them to help them adjust to Microsoft. We are using them to become mentors to these young people. They are connected to these causes anyway and willing to spend time.

There are lots of groups in Microsoft that we call our diversity action communities. We are trying to mobilize these folks to become supporters of this effort. A lot of what I am trying to do is establish connections between our employees, our expertise, technology, knowhow and our resources so that they can go support these young people. It is going to be interesting to see how we are going to bring these things together.

### **In which states would you prefer to launch the YouthSpark programme.**

One programme we are looking at is: how can we be more impactful for girls in India. How can we, through technology, training and support, get them into the workforce or utilize their innovations to help them start something on their own? We are close to finalizing our partnership with a non-profit focused on these issues.

In terms of geography I don't know yet. We have done a lot of work in north India, in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. We are going to Kerala and Tamil Nadu. We think there are opportunities in West Bengal and the northeast. These are areas we are exploring. ■



# Money grows on grass

**Rakesh Agrawal**  
Dehradun

**K**OTDWARA, a small town in the Pauri district of Uttarakhand, is surrounded by hills carpeted with citronella, lemon grass and palm-rosa. Villagers always dismissed these grasses as mere weeds. But Jagat Singh Negi, a lab technician in the local college, realized there was wealth hidden in grass. He began an enterprise, converting citronella, lemon grass and palm rosa into fragrant oil and gave grass a whole new meaning.

A movement to grow aromatic grass and arrest environmental degradation has now caught on in Pauri district.

"Actually I was really moved by the plight of youth here. They abandon their fields and migrate to the plains in search of a living. I wanted to create some job opportunities so they wouldn't have to leave," says Negi, 52, explaining why he began his venture.

Negi has always been a problem solver. A doctorate in geography, his Ph.D thesis was on the scope of micro hydel power in the Nayar basin of the Garhwal hills. His research attracted the attention of the state government which set up two micro-hydel projects on the Nayar river based on Negi's findings. Both power plants are working fine.

The idea of starting an enterprise germinated in Negi's mind in 2003 when he attended a workshop on oil extraction from geranium at the GB Pant Agriculture University in Pantnagar, as part of a research project.

He was told since his village was at an altitude of 1,100 metres, three grasses – citronella, lemon grass and palm-rosa – could be grown and their oils extracted. "I believe research should not be confined to labs. So I started this cottage industry in my own village," says Negi.

He delved into his research grant of ₹1,50,000 to begin his enterprise. He set up a distillation plant in his village Kailakher in Pauri district, 15 km from Kotdwara. The distillation plant cost him ₹80,000. Another ₹20,000 went into building a shed over it and ₹50,000 was spent on beginning a plantation. His distillation plant doesn't need any electricity. Oil is extracted manually and the grasses are then burnt. Extraction of these perfumed oils has been yielding him a net profit of ₹1 lakh a year since 2010.

Negi spread word about his enterprise. Other villagers got very interested. Eight villagers have joined hands with him to form the Kailakher Aromatic Plants Growers' Society. They are all shareholders in the distillation plant and maintain it as their common property resource.

Negi sells citronella and lemon grass oil for ₹600

per litre in Kotdwara. In Delhi, he earns ₹1,000 per litre while palm-rosa oil is sold for ₹1,500 per litre. "These natural oils are in demand for beauty and cosmetic products but they are also bought for medicinal purposes as they are a good source of Vitamin A. Five star hotels buy my oils to add



Jagat Singh Negi, right, at his plantation of fragrant grass

**Since Negi's village was at an altitude of 1,100 metres, three grasses, citronella, lemon grass and palm-rosa, could be grown and their oils extracted.**



Women filtering the extracted oil into bottles

flavour to exotic cuisines," says Negi.

Around 450 ml to 500 ml of oil can be distilled from a quintal of grass. If irrigation is available these grasses can be harvested three times a year. Otherwise, grasses can be harvested twice a year. Since hill farms are mostly rain fed, such an enterprise is very sustainable.

His efforts impressed women small farmers who have started planting these grasses in their

fields. "We are growing citronella and lemon grass on 0.5 ha. Our land was just lying barren and fallow. Now we can also earn some money from it," says Shanti Devi, 43, of Kailakher village. Her neighbour, Santoshi Devi, is also quite hopeful. "We started growing lemon grass on 0.4 ha this year. If we manage to sell the oil that we extract from this distillery, we will plant citronella next year," she says. Most of these oils are apparently being imported.

An additional environmental advantage is that planting these grasses on barren land prevents landslides, says Negi. Way back in 1996 he mobilized his village to save a large piece of land from being washed away by heavy monsoon rains. "We stopped grazing and human trespassing on this land totally. Then, we built bunds and check dams. Finally, we planted these grasses to arrest landslides," says Negi.

He has also taken on other challenges on a war footing. For instance, lantana, an irritating grass which grows profusely on hillsides, has been on his hit list for quite a while. Negi gets lantana removed and replaces it with amla and fragrant grasses.

"If you don't grow anything after removing lantana, it pops up again. *Amla* fetches villagers an income," explains Negi. True to his word, Negi sold three quintals of *amla* this year.

Altogether Negi has planted around 25,000 trees and tonnes of grass on more than six ha of barren land with no government support or funding.

This creative entrepreneur is passionately committed to turning vegetation into money-yielding products. A local bush called *kunaja*, (*Artemisia vulgaris*) has caught his eye. "This bush has medicinal properties and its oil is used as an insecticide," says Negi.

*Kunaja* also has religious importance. It is used to make incense sticks. "*Kunaja* can be a good source of revenue for hill folk as its oil is sold in China for as much as ₹10,000 to ₹12,000 a litre," says Negi who seems to have done all his homework.

Negi is quite thrilled by his experiments. His grouse is that the government does not spread awareness about the potential of such vegetation to increase incomes. He points out that growing fragrant grasses could be done with NREGA funds. If distilleries are set up alongside, NREGA workers could earn an additional livelihood.

Negi has written to the Chief Minister of Uttarakhand but received no response. Recognition has come from another quarter: the Aromatic Plant Growers Association of India has made him Joint Secretary of its Uttarakhand division. Negi has shown how it is possible to start a small enterprise with local natural resources. ■

# Insights

- Opinion
- Analysis
- Research
- Ideas
- Angst

## Pension is a right

NIKHIL DEY

SEVENTY-five-year-old Dwarika Paswan travelled with 250 others from Bihar's Muzaffarpur district on a journey that most of us who read this column will find difficult to understand. He is bent over, shuffles along, and has as family his wife, who is too old and infirm to move, and a disabled son. He can barely walk, but he has to ply a cycle rickshaw to support his family. He gets nothing from the State – not even access to a BPL card to get cheap rations. It is difficult to imagine what his frail body endures as he transports others in his rickshaw, or what his family eats with the little he manages to earn.

He went with a delegation to a couple of meetings with ministers. For obvious reasons, they could not muster the gumption to look Paswan in the eye, and trot out the standard "We have no money..." for a Universal Pension that can allow elderly Indians to live with a modicum of dignity. The question is whether they will forget as soon as he is out of the room, or will they muster the courage to put some of India's enormous resources aside for a vast community of workers that has in its lifetime helped build and parent this country.

Paswan was one of the thousands of elderly who came to Jantar Mantar for five days from 4th March demanding pension for the elderly, the disabled, and for single women. It was a difficult journey for them to undertake, but one they made with a sense of hope, and quiet determination that was inexplicable. Some of them had come for all five days on the call of the Pension Parishad to bring their demands to the national capital. This was the fourth consecutive session of Parliament – all within a year where the Pension Parishad has agitated. The first demonstration in Delhi was organised in May 2012, and it passed the message to policy makers that this was a question they could not ignore. Three thousand elderly people from India's unorganised sector gathered together to place their condition and demands on record.

For many of us who have spent decades working with poor people, organising protests, this was a new and disturbingly moving experience. We have seen elderly people all over the country clutching



LAKSHMAN ANAND

An independent income is the most important entitlement for the elderly

papers and applications – hoping against hope that they would be sanctioned even the insultingly miserly ₹200 per month the Government of India currently gives under the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP). Some state governments add to this amount. It gives those who manage to get the sanction some dignity in their already poverty-stricken families, as an independent income is the most important entitlement for the elderly.

Most politicians are sympathetic to this demand because they are helpless too when they are petitioned by the destitute elderly in their constituencies. The Government of India's notorious BPL requirement excludes many deserving poor, and in the case of the unorganised elderly, once their working life is over, the BPL classification is like a death warrant. They no longer have even their physical

strength to help them earn and keep going.

At the multiple-day protest, their faces, their clothes, their emaciated bodies told a story of unacceptable suffering. They got absolutely basic food, and often very late; they slept on the road in the cold; were faced with a shortage of blankets; there was no tea; and there was just thin matting to sit on all day. And yet they never complained. If the food came late, they would go to sleep till it arrived and they were woken up to eat. If the dal finished they would eat plain rice. If the blankets fell short, they would share, or just manage. Their acceptance of basic deprivation is frightening. There can be only one explanation for this – they are used to it.

But they were engaged, and for some strange reason even hopeful. One woman who made friends

*Continued on page 28*



Continued from page 27

with a young Delhi-based activist would repeat her name and address her several times a day, in the hope that if the demands were accepted she would not be forgotten. In the midst of Jantar Mantar's noise, they demonstrated a quiet, steely resolve: attentive, willing to shout slogans, march, go to jail – go anywhere in search of a breakthrough. By the end of this year it has become clear that they are potentially a huge political force. The unorganised sector constitutes 94 per cent of India's workforce.

There are 100 million elderly Indians, most of whom have no social security of any kind. Only about 25 million of them get pensions, and this includes the disabled, and widows. The Government of India estimates that should the pension scheme be universalised with justified and clearly identifiable exclusions, this number will go up to about 85 million. Not getting a pension tremendously burdens the families who are unable to look after their elderly, and those who look towards old age with trepidation and fear, because they will soon face the same situation. In sheer numbers, and in the magnitude of what it means to them, pensions have a massive effect.

So what are the demands of the Pension Parishad? First, to get rid of the APL/BPL list and universalise pension entitlements with clearly defined exclusions for those who already have adequate income or wealth.

A twin demand is to peg the pension level at half of the minimum wage or ₹2,000 per month, whichever is higher. There is a range of other demands, including indexation of this pension to inflation, rationalising the definitions of single women and disabled beneficiaries, and creating a single-window system in a single ministry to administer the pensions.

In October 2012, the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) set up a task force headed by Planning Commission member Mihir Shah to examine the issue of old age pensions. The task force submitted its report on 4th March this year – the first day of the Pension Parishad's latest *dharna*. While the task force seemed to be in agreement with most of the demands of the Pension Parishad, it cited fiscal constraints to suggest that universalisation and increase in pension amounts should be brought into effect by the end of the 12th Plan period – i.e. 2017!

This five-year timeline for the two primary demands of the Pension Parishad is like a death warrant for the elderly – many of whom may not live till 2017. There were other points of contradiction in the task force report. It acknowledged for instance that pensions had not even kept pace with the already discredited poverty line, and said that pensions should be closer to ₹1,950 per month, but ended up recommending ₹500, and even that only by 2017.

The Pension Parishad was quick to absolutely reject the timeline of the task force, and it con-

veyed its views to the government. By the morning of 5th March, the Prime Minister had directed the Minister for Rural Development, Jairam Ramesh, to talk to the Pension Parishad, and come up with a framework and its components to comprehensively revamp the NSAP in five to six weeks. On the 5th evening itself, Jairam Ramesh reached an "in principle" agreement with the Pension Parishad that addressed most of the major demands, although it was agreed that the increase of the pension amount would be to ₹500 per month in the first phase beginning 2013-14.

Jairam Ramesh said he would make this announcement in Parliament on 6th March, and then come to the *dharna* at Parliament Street to announce the agreement. Eventually, he came on 7th March, having made an announcement in Parliament that left both the amount and the time-frame uncertain. The Pension Parishad welcomed

his coming to the *dharna* to talk to the people, but the Parishad said it would not accept anything short of what he had agreed to two days earlier.

The next five to six weeks will give an idea about how serious the government is. In a year that there was hardly anything for the social sector in the budget, even this interim agreement would involve an annual outlay of approximately ₹50,000 crore. There is likely to be a strong voice – like with the MGNREGA – asking where the money will come from and working hard to

scuttle the agreement. The Pension Parishad has indicated many areas for resource mobilisation, which, if acted upon, could bring about a shift, starting to have a tax to GDP ratio that is more in line with the rest of the world.

In fact, if the ICDS is strengthened, the Food Bill is enacted now, if MGNREGA is given the prioritisation it deserves, and pensions are enhanced and universalised as promised, India will for the first time provide itself with an opportunity to truly change its most horrendous social impact indicators. Money is needed, but the resources are certainly available. If only policy makers will get out of the foreign investor obsessed framework of decision making. What better time to do it in a country like India by rationalising taxes, than an election year.

The Pension Parishad has resolved to form parishads in villages and towns across the country and hold the political class to account. It is determined to make the issues of the elderly an electoral one. The Pension Parishad with people like Paswan, have promised to come back to Delhi in larger numbers, and with renewed determination if the agreement is not worked out and implemented. If this effort falters, when the elderly do come to Delhi, they will ask the Prime Minister of India to give them an answer to one simple question: "How do you suggest we go home and survive?"

And they will not go home without an answer. ■

*Nikhil Dey is a member of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan*

# Fair shops a

RAM GIDOOMAL

WESTERN visitors to India often remark on how impressive India's business scene is. They recognise how innovative and hard working the business people are, creating operations from a single room or a street-side booth. They note that many of the world's major brands have tall buildings in the cities, and have chosen to locate their finance, technology and customer service operations there.

But in the same breath, they make reference to the great poverty across the other side of the street from these gleaming buildings. To the Western eye, it's hard to comprehend seeing large numbers of people begging in the street right across from the premises of major companies.

Of course, America, Great Britain and other European countries also have their poor, and the gap between the rich and poor continues to grow the world over. With the wealthy giving themselves huge pay increases and corporations still prepared to exploit the poor, this gap will not shrink overnight.

However, companies that are prepared to follow ethical business practices can lead a change in business culture. In so doing, they will gradually start to redistribute wealth back to the poor producers who deserve to be remunerated for their work. Too often, it's the producers in the southern hemisphere who get the least money for their goods.

I have been interested in ethical business for many years now, and it's something I have tried to support in both my businesses and my personal consumer behaviour.

From my perspective, it is, therefore, wonderful to see that there are now a number of examples of ethical businesses and business practices that benefit all parties. The Co-operative Group is one example and Traidcraft is another, for which I was appointed chairman in September 2011. More recently, an initiative called Shop for Change has emerged, which Traidcraft has partnered with through our charity Traidcraft Exchange.

Shop for Change Fair Trade, supported by International Resources for Fairer Trade (IRFT) from India and Traidcraft Exchange from the UK, aims to support and empower poor farmers and artisans in India by bringing their goods to the mass market.

You may be aware that Shop for Change introduced the first fair trade label to India, when it brought fair trade cotton to the fashion world. The first Indian fair trade certified products (T-shirts and high-end women's wear) went on sale in early 2010 and can now be found in more than 60 retail outlets across India.

Then, in September 2012, Shop for Change started to pioneer the production and distribution of attractively-priced fair trade food hampers for special occasions, which is a very exciting development.

I got to meet up with Shop for Change when I

# bonanza for the small farmer



India's domestic market is a huge opportunity for small producers

visited India in September 2012, as part of my induction as Chairman of Traidcraft. (During that visit, I visited Kerala, Mumbai, Goa, Delhi and Jaipur.)

In Mumbai, I met the Shop for Change COO, Jaishankar M. Talreja, and the directors at their offices, and heard about the success of the exclusive, gift-wrapped Diwali, Eid and Christmas hampers and how corporates were buying these and giving them away in their thousands!

As an innovative marketing concept, this really appeals to many Indians who want to make a difference amongst poorer communities.

So, last Diwali, businesses supported Shop for Change and its aim of transforming the lives of poor farming families by buying food gift hampers with unique and exotic products directly sourced from small farmer groups.

As a result, the incomes of many farming families, who normally would barely earn ₹2,500 a month, were boosted as they received 20 per cent of the price of the food hampers as a Diwali bonus, increasing their income by a minimum of 50 per cent.

The hampers themselves included products such as cashews, walnuts, wild flower honey, chamomile tea and vanilla powder and were popular with business buyers.

Looking at the figures, from Diwali sales alone Shop for Change enabled small farmer groups to sell over 11,000 food hampers carrying around 35,000 units of fair trade products, worth ₹3.5m. This generated a bonus of ₹700,000 in the process for small farmers.

By enabling corporates to buy directly from small farmer groups, Shop for Change saved buyers at least 20 per cent, which was attractive for businesses. Consequently, the corporations who bought included multinationals such as Thomas Cook, DHL, the Marriott group of hotels and Indian conglomerates like the Aditya Birla group, Axis (Bank) Mutual fund to name a few.

Post Diwali, Thomas Cook bought hampers again during Christmas and Four Seasons Hotel is now leading the way in its industry by buying fair trade honey.

Shop for Change also enabled small farmer groups to sell over ₹200,000 in January this year, via exhibitions and stalls at leading corporations and events such as Kala Ghoda in Mumbai.

Small farmer groups were able to sell under their 'own brand' as well as the premium fair trade label. Shop for Change enhanced their value proposition by designing gift boxes, recipe books



Shop for Change gift hampers were a big success

etc. and facilitating the process of market outreach through to the recovery of payment.

In return, Shop for Change earned fees from farmer groups, covered in the pricing of fair trade food hampers. These fees are moving the group towards being self-sustainable, which shows the viability of their business model.

Shop for Change has attracted celebrity supporters including Gul Panag and Parvin Dabas and aims to raise the profile of fair trade amongst consumers, retailers and big brands.

India has had a long history of association with the fair trade movement in Europe. But, on its own, exporting fair trade products to the West and promoting fair trade markets abroad is not enough to have a large-scale impact on poverty in India, because there are literally hundreds of millions of small-scale producers in the country.

What is needed is a vibrant in-country market for fair trade goods, which can enable India to help India!

By creating a domestic market for fair trade products, projects like Shop for Change are offering a new alternative to complement the export-oriented fair trade system, opening up new, fairer market opportunities for poor farmers and artisans.

From the perspective of the poorest producers who do not have the capacity to sell to export markets, being able to sell to the domestic market opens up new opportunities amongst a population of over a billion and a growing middle class.

The potential is massive. During my visit to India, it was very encouraging for me to see how the fair trade movement is becoming established, and also hearing about the challenges and successes. For example, the supply chain stretches right across Asia, to China and Nepal and the range of products is immense.

In Delhi, I visited several fair trade projects and saw different craft producers making specialist carpets and rugs. In Jaipur there was an EU-funded industrial plant that supported fair trade and was eco-friendly, using renewable energy in the industrial site.

As well as pioneering the fair trade market, Shop for Change also helped me personally on my trip. Many of you will have experienced the frustration of trying to get Internet access on the move.

Well, someone at Shop for Change lent me a connection device that gave me full Internet access during the whole of the second half of my trip.

Consequently, I have this fantastic memory of enjoying the train journey from Delhi to Jaipur, where I received excellent quality service, including good food and drinks, and was also able to access my emails and the web, connecting with business colleagues in London, Kenya and across Europe – right until I returned to Delhi Airport. It was another great example of how Shop for Change is connecting India to the world! ■



# Flawed EIAs sail through

KANCHI KOHLI

**A**CCREDITATION is the act of granting credit or recognition. It is to be preceded with a process where facts, figures and professional ethics are scrutinized so that the desired certification of competency, authority or credibility is presented. Only the best suited with the requisite track record are to find themselves in the approved list.

In India, the much talked about and well critiqued initiative wherein consultants undertaking the responsibility of carrying out Environment Impact Assessments (EIA) was initiated in 2007 under the auspices of the Quality Council of India (QCI) and the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). The reason for this was that EIAs which were formally introduced into India's environment regulatory regime in 1994, were being carried out in a shabby, incomplete way and often in a manner where facts were misrepresented. They remain the key analytical, scientific and technical documents based on which regulatory decision making rests.

The very first report of the QCI titled, 'Scheme for Accreditation of EIA Consultant Organizations,' clearly stated that, "it is crucial that the quality of EIAs being carried out are of a high order so that possible impacts on the environment of such activities can be assessed and mitigative measures could be adopted. However, the present situation is far from satisfactory, since the EIAs being developed, more often than not, do not measure up to the required quality." A statement which sounds more weighty than what the process of accreditation has turned out to be. Not as an aside, but as a matter of context, it is important to note that the QCI is an accreditation body jointly partnered by the Government of India (GoI) and Indian industry represented by the three premier industry associations, Associated Chamber of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI).

In January and February 2012, two articles in *Civil Society* magazine had attempted to break down this process by first highlighting the range of concerns which researchers, NGOs and activists working on this issue have had ever since this accreditation scheme was announced in 2007 which is when MoEF had through the Right to Information denied any participation in. These concerns questioned the fact that the agency

authorizing consultants was entirely backed by industry associations representing the interests of project developers who in turn are the ones funding EIAs. It also reiterated the fundamental argument that the accreditation process does not

land up in courts as legal challenges. The consultants who did the EIAs for POSCO's steel plant and port in Jagatsinghpur or Vedanta's bauxite mining in Niyamgiri or OPG's 300 MW thermal power plant in Bhadrashwar are far removed from the realities that have followed the flawed presentation of facts in their EIA reports.

More so the QCI process has not bothered to reflect on whether their list of consultants and their EIA reports have any link to the sites of conflict where questioning the regulatory mishaps has been an issue of critical enquiry.

On 5th March this year, the MoEF uploaded on its website another updated list of 150 consultants who are now on the accredited list. The National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI) which, amongst many other projects, has been criticised for the flawed information in its EIA for the Koodankulam nuclear plant, finds itself nested in the list from the very beginning. Back in 2007 when groups and individuals had pointed out the

lacunae in the QCI process they had brought out a list of EIA consultants with the project where the EIAs were not up to standard and NEERI was there with its list of flawed EIAs. Koodankulam, as we all know, is presently marred with discontent for the last several years and conflict had heightened in 2012. The contents of the EIA have been questioned from the time when the public hearing first took place.

One can list the many other big and small consultants who are today party to the rising social conflicts in India by churning out EIA reports for projects that have a deeply flawed siting. But will that serve any purpose? The deeper question is around the conscious efforts to depoliticize accreditation processes like that of the QCI or even the very act of EIA making. Even as those involved in these processes might think of their task as being one of doing their bit and not being party to the final decision-making on these projects, their 'tick-marking' of a particular consultant with a marred history cannot be dislocated from the socio-political realities of where their accreditation has a bearing. A faulty consultant will continue to manufacture EIAs for project authorities so that they justify approvals and by this the act of EIA making will become a conduit to whatever decision gets taken around the project. This time the QCI will not question the consultant's ethics but credit it with recognition. ■



EIA consultants are hired to ensure approvals for projects are acquired

**The QCI process has not bothered to reflect on whether their list of consultants and their EIA reports have any link to the sites of conflict.**

check the issue whereby consultants are hired not just to carry out EIAs but also ensure that approvals are acquired. With this the EIA consultants prepare the "best" reports based on which an environment clearance can be procured.

The second part of this two-part article was related to the fact that the EIAs carried out by the bodies already accredited are deeply questionable both on content and the fact that many of these are linked to areas where deep social and environmental conflicts are visible in the country today.

The QCI process has completely sanitized itself from the reality that shoddy EIAs which misrepresent local realities and baseline information often get raised during mandatory public hearings or

# Living

- Books
- Eco-tourism
- Film
- Theatre
- Ayurveda

## Magic Men of Mayong

*An ancient tradition fights oblivion*

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

THE 'magical' place is only a 40-km drive from Guwahati, but few youngsters in the capital city of Assam, hooked as they are to the fictional tales of Harry Potter and his Hogwarts School of Wizardry, have any idea of its existence.

Mayong – the name is believed to have originated from the word *maya* (illusion) – is a cluster of villages located on the banks of the Brahmaputra in Morigaon district. It is famed and feared as a land where "sorcerers and magicians" have held sway for centuries. Well, to be precise, the sway of the conjurers ended several decades ago, but the legacy lives on, crying for wider attention but palpably at ease with its anonymity. Should the magic and mystery of Mayong be allowed to disappear in the mist of time in the absence of scientific upkeep?

Unmissable signs of Mayong's past are strewn all around – in rock inscriptions, in wall engravings, in the idols of Hindu deities, and the incantations written on manuscripts that have been stored for generations in households all across Mayong. But tourists who drive past this place on the way to Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, home to the one-horned rhino, rarely, if ever, stop by to explore these remnants of the past.

It is, therefore, significant that film critic-turned-filmmaker Utpal Borpujari decided to take a rare detour on one of his many trips to his native city. His sojourn has yielded a 53-minute documentary film, *Mayong: Myth/Reality*, which delves into the ancient secrets of these practitioners of the *tantra* school of Hinduism. The film had its first public screening at the India International Centre in New Delhi on March 11.

"I am an engineering graduate," says Borpujari. "I strongly feel that the myth of Mayong needs to be unravelled from a scientific point of view. I am not an expert on occultism, so this film is only a document that is meant to be a record of what I saw and encountered. It is for those with greater understanding of this domain to go deeper into it,



The 40th 'King' of Mayong Tarani Kanta Singha in a still from the film

decipher it and preserve it for posterity."

The knowledge that has driven the tantric practitioners of Mayong over the centuries is locked away in thousands of manuscripts handwritten in varied scripts, both on paper and birch-bark (locally called *sanchi paat*). A lack of proper and scientific preservation of the manuscripts is leading to slow destruction of a unique heritage. There is much disinformation in circulation about Mayong. Borpujari says: "People are wary of visiting the place because of its association with 'dark' practices."

Mayong is still a predominantly rural outpost and still has a traditional king, who is the 40th in the line of descendants of the Kachari tribe rulers. A passage in Borpujari's film is devoted to the king, Tarani Kanta Singha, a pale shadow of regal-

ity. His wife exhorts him to don the ceremonial attire. "A king should look like a king," she says. When Singha does get into his royal guise, he only embodies the fading glory of Mayong.

It has a community of 100-odd magicians, but many of them, as the film reveals, are compelled to work as farm hands or masons to make a living. Time seems to have stood still here for too long, leaving the locals in a rather precarious socio-economic condition.

But attempts are being made to bring Mayong back into the limelight. A museum has been set up here to house some of the manuscripts. While these are being preserved with care, there are many more that are in need of urgent attention.

*Continued on page 32*



Continued from page 31

"Almost every home in Mayong has inherited texts on magic from their ancestors," says Borpujari, who is based in New Delhi.

"Many of these manuscripts have been stolen over the years; some others have been destroyed by the people of Mayong themselves to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands," he adds. "There is a need for the Assam government to step in and rescue these historical texts from further damage."



Utpal Borpujari (seated second from left) during the shoot

But not all the secrets, the filmmaker points out, are in a handwritten form. "Many of the magic spells have been passed down orally from generation to generation," he says. "Some of the current practitioners are cagey about sharing them with strangers."

Barring stray efforts by strong-willed researchers to study the history of Mayong and make sense of its mystical traditions, the 'treasures' that lie here have remained largely neglected. "Mayong is grappling with oblivion despite its unique place in Assam's history," says Borpujari. The National Mission for Manuscripts, a division of the Union Ministry of Culture, has now undertaken a project with the Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra, Guwahati, to preserve the Mayong manuscripts. Moreover, both the department of archaeology and the Assam tourism ministry have woken up to the potential of the place.

The filmmaker did a random survey in Guwahati on July 15, 2011, the day of the release of the last Harry Potter film, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*. Youngsters emerging from the movie theatre waxed eloquent about the power of the film, but were completely stumped when asked whether they knew where or what Mayong was.

The survey, which provides the prelude to *Mayong: Myth/Reality*, serves to highlight how little awareness there is of the local culture that is still deeply rooted in the ethos of a place

only an hour away from Guwahati.

The core of the film, apart from highlighting the beauty of the landscape in which Mayong sits pretty, is devoted to bringing out the challenges that confront the people of a part of Assam that is still firmly tethered to the past even as the present swirls all around it.

For the film and its maker, the primary source of information about the traditions of the Mayong magicians, variously described as master tantrics, witch doctors, faith healers,

herbal medicine men and mere performers – is Lokendra Hazarika, a local schoolteacher who knows every nook and cranny of Mayong. No wonder the film describes him as "a one-stop information centre". Old-timers and current practitioners of magic reveal details of Mayong's hoary traditions by sharing their own reminiscences as well as their skills.

One *bez* (witch doctor), Tilak Hazarika, who refuses to speak about voodoo tricks, puts up a show that is as logic-defying as irrefutable. He chants mantras, casts a spell and sticks a bell-metal platter to the back of a man sitting upright, defying the law of gravity. Says Borpujari: "These men are very secretive. Many of them refused to reveal anything on camera. But off-camera, they talked freely."

Historically, Assam has had a reputation as a hub of black magic. Even Sir Edward Albert Gait's *A History of Assam*, published in 1906 and cited upfront in *Mayong: Myth/Reality*, refers to the dread the sorcerers of this region aroused in the rest of India. Several Mughal texts, too, talk about the mystics of Assam and their powers, which a general of Emperor Aurangzeb discovered to his consternation when he led an army against the Ahoms in the mid 17th century. He was routed in battle.

The onslaught of time has, however, pushed Mayong off the map. His film, Borpujari hopes, will help, if only in a small way, to bring the magic of the place back into focus. ■

# Shreyas the

## *A place that truly blends into the landscape*

Susheela Nair  
Bangalore

AFTER a bumpy ride it was a welcome relief to step into the lush coconut plantations of Shreyas, a boutique retreat in Nelamangala on the outskirts of Bangalore. A pillared path led us to a tastefully decorated living room, filled with fine portraits of Buddha from Sri Lanka, paintings by Jatin Das, deep sofas, a well-stocked library and urns brimming with water and rose petals.

We were ushered in with a drink of tender coconut juice. The infinity pool glistened in the sunlight near the luxurious cottages. Beautiful artifacts aesthetically placed in every nook and corner of the landscape caught our eye everywhere. A Balinese depiction of the Ramayana crafted from a single block of wood in the garden captured our attention. The profusion of marigold petals, jasmine and incense everywhere enhanced the Zen-like ambience, injecting fragrance into this tranquil oasis. Thickets of bamboo and frangipani lined every walkway. Water bodies filled with lotus and clusters of bougainvillea added splashes of colour. Strolling down a cobblestone pathway we reached the amphitheatre and pillared yoga pavilion.

Sprawled over 25 acres of whispering palms, Shreyas is the brainchild of ex-investment banker Pawan Malik, who chucked his high profile, edgy world of finance to direct his energies on discovering his true self.

Shreyas in Sanskrit means, 'all round excellence'



The ozonated swimming pool



# natural way to chill

SUSHEELA NAIR



A cosy, tented cottage

and this retreat epitomizes the new haven of rejuvenation. There are guided meditation and yoga sessions, sessions of rejuvenation massage, stress management and wellness, all aimed at assisting you maintain a more balanced life. Guests have to adhere to the no alcohol and no meat lifestyle.

Shreyas believes in detoxifying the spirit as much as the body. This retreat is the perfect place to relax, unwind and 'find yourself.'

Rightly captioned as a 'journey of self-discovery' it is one of the few retreats where you can forget all the stress of day-to-day life and rediscover the simple pleasures that life can offer.

The recreational facilities include an extensive library of fiction

and self-help books, a fully stocked home theatre, a heated and ozonated lap pool, an outdoor jacuzzi, indoor steam rooms, a gym and practicing nets for cricket buffs. There is also BOLA, the professional bowling machine, broadband connection for internet junkies, and for fitness freaks there is a two-km walking and jogging track that meanders through the lush green landscape. It provides an ample and ideal opportunity to reconnect with nature.

The three poolside cottages overlook the signature antique-pillared entrance, infinity pool and the central courtyard of the retreat. The three-bedroom cottage and eight-tented cottages overlook the gardens.

Surrounded by swaying coconut palms, our tent is really an all-concrete structure except for the roof. The interiors are uncluttered with spartan amenities. The furnishings are minimal but tastefully decorated in creams and browns.

There is no TV, instant coffee, room service menu and unnecessary flourishes.

The spacious bathroom opens to a private courtyard which has a pebble strewn garden, a water body covered with rose petals, frangipani and birds of paradise in bloom. One can relax in the cane chairs in the portico and listen to the sounds of silence interrupted occasionally by the chirping of birds.

After lunch, we embarked on a guided tour of the resort's massive organic garden, fruit orchards,

greenhouse and landscaped gardens. The scent of aromatic herbs wafted the air as we strolled in the garden. All the vegetables and the herbs used in the kitchen come from Shreyas's kitchen gardens. The guests are served homegrown and hand-picked vegetables. Identifying the varied herbs was a learning experience for us.

At night, Shreyas is a lot more peaceful because the pleasant lighting lends the place a certain serenity. The candlelit dinner under a canopy of stars was memorable. The evenings are magical with hurricane lamps and paper lanterns lining the swimming pool. Every night the table is set with fresh flowers and candles and placed in different parts of the property.

**Eco friendly activities:** Shreyas is an environment friendly retreat. Care has been taken to retain the original landscape and natural beauty of the place. The architecture of the buildings harmonise seamlessly with the natural environment. Rainwater harvesting, solar heating, Ayurvedic and medicinal herb plantations, organic waste disposal and organic farming ensure an all-round focus on being honestly green.

Locally sourced low-embedded energy materials were used while constructing the building and its surroundings. Storm water management and water conservation have been implemented as well. The retreat's closeness to nature is discernible in minutely significant ways like the use of coasters made of natural fibres, bamboo cane and beads, and the use of coconut-palm leaf in napkin rings and table décor. The guestbook is made of wood and recycled paper. All the bathrooms are stocked with local organic body products.

Forty varieties of trees as well as shrubs, herbs, medicinal and aquatic plants have been planted. The eco-system was restored from its former monoculture plantation of coconut. Herbs for restorative healing and plants used in Indian folk medicine were planted on 15 acres dedicated to organic farming.

**Voluntourism initiatives:** Giving back while on vacation, known as 'voluntourism,' is practiced in this resort. Shreyas takes its community service programmes very seriously and has initiated a number of community development projects. These include rainwater harvesting for village houses, helping with building an orphanage, school library construction, compound wall construction at a school, among others.

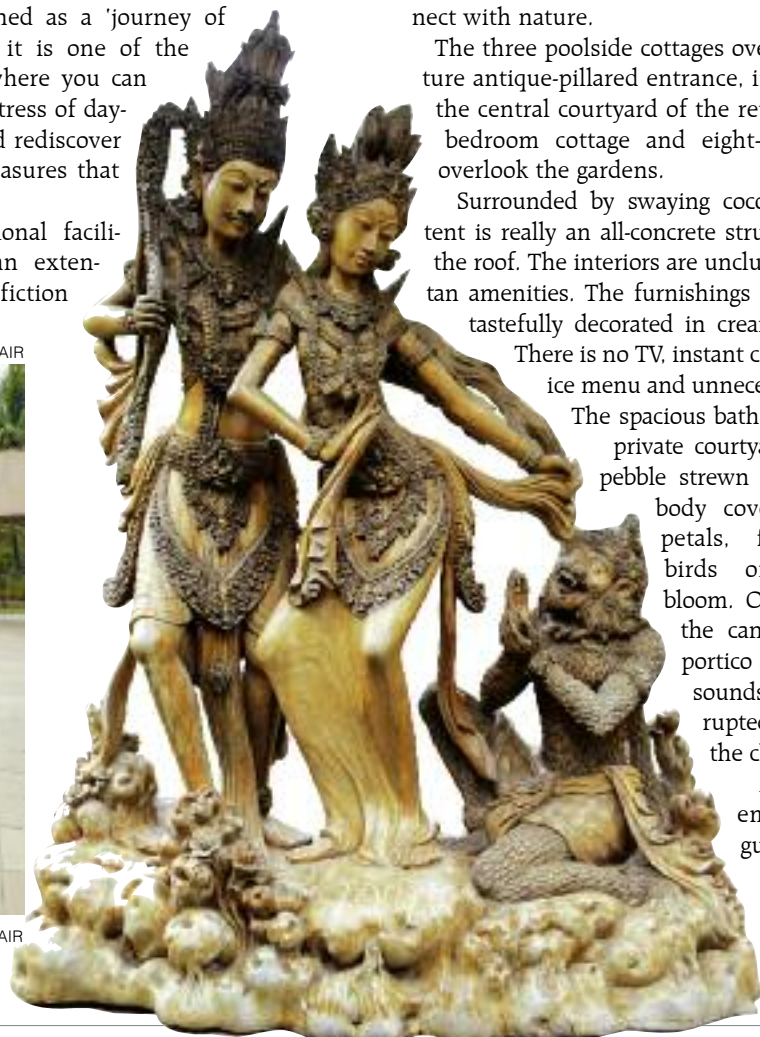
Community work includes activities such as preparing and serving a meal to children at the village school. Guests are encouraged to volunteer in the three-acre organic vegetable and herb gardens and give a little back to Nature. They can also try their skills at watering, weeding, sowing, picking and rediscover the forgotten pleasure of getting their hands and feet dirty. Saplings are provided to guests for planting in the nearby village. ■

## FACT FILE

**Address:** Shreyas Retreat, Santoshina Farm, Gollahalli Gate, Nelamangala -562 123.

**Distance:** Shreyas Retreat is a one-hour drive from Bangalore City Centre (45km) and 50 km to the Bangalore International Airport.

**Email:** balaji@shreyasretreat.com  
**Tel:** 080 - 2773 7102



SUSHEELA NAIR

SUSHEELA NAIR



## Investing in people



**BUSINESS & COMMUNITY**

Pushpa Sundar  
Sage

₹ 895

**P**USHPA Sundar is an authority on philanthropy and the social responsibility of Indian companies. In this book, Sundar traces the evolution of CSR in India.

The book looks at three phases of Indian industry – the first, Merchants to Multinationals, goes back to the origins of Indian industry in 1850, tracing the different communities involved, and the transition from charity to philanthropy which was led by the Parsis and Gujaratis. Eventually, this led to collective philanthropy with the formation of various chambers of commerce.

The era of corporate philanthropy – from 1941 to 1960 – was undoubtedly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy. It resulted in the emergence of the 'Golden Donors' – the Tatas, the Birlas, Lala Shri Ram, the Chettiers, Lalbhais and Bajaj.

CSR, as we understand it today, emerged in

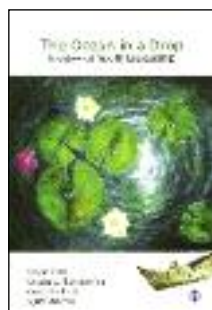
the early 1990s with liberalization and globalization. Sundar's last chapter looks into the future of business-community engagement for mutual benefit.

In the old days industry was expected to just create wealth through production and services. Today, business is expected to produce goods in an ethical manner, benefit its supply chain, be eco-friendly and work for disadvantaged communities.

The question often raised is: should business be expected to make up for the government's inefficiencies? In a way, that debate is over with the government mandating companies to spend a certain sum on CSR. The activities identified for CSR range from reducing infant mortality, promoting education to eradicating hunger and poverty. Activists point out industry has benefitted from subsidies and it is pay back time. Anyway, more wealth in the hands of the poor creates more customers for industry.

The turn of the century has seen some companies move away from charity to deeper engagement with communities. While a few large companies have been spending more than two per cent on CSR, sectors like the construction industry lag behind. Who is going to ensure implementation? In rural India, companies need to interact with panchayats and district administrations to ensure their projects to improve health or education take off. This may be far trickier than drawing up business plans. ■

## The diffident generation?



**THE OCEAN IN A DROP**  
**Inside-out youth leadership**

Ashraf Patel, Meenu Venkateshwaran, Kamini Prakash & Arjun Shekhar  
Sage

₹ 375

**B**Y 2020 we will be the youngest nation in the world ruled by one of the oldest cabinets in the world, write the authors of this book. Only 6.3 per cent of MPs in the current Lok Sabha are between 25 to 40 years old.

Yet it wasn't always so. In the first Lok Sabha young people constituted 26 per cent and in the second Lok Sabha, 32 per cent. They joined the freedom struggle wholeheartedly even sacrificing their lives.

After Independence, youth disengaged from politics. There have been sporadic attempts to shake the political system, the Naxalites of the 1970s or perhaps the Jayaprakash movement. But, by and large, the youth has stayed away.

The book, written by members of Pravah, an NGO which works for youth development, believes that society has legitimized only four spaces for young people – family, friends, education/careers and leisure. Since liberalization of the economy in the 1990s, young people have become more absorbed in their careers.

But things have changed in the past decade. The print media has declined. The Internet and TV have democratized information. This has had deep impact on the young. For one, TV and the Internet have a more raw emotional appeal than print. Responses by youth are also more emotional. Witness the upsurge of youth at the anti-corruption rally, argue the authors.

Youth are often told to 'do their bit' for society, a bit of a boring homily. So, they volunteer for causes. The authors introduce the idea of an alternative 5th Space that helps youth understand themselves, build meaningful relationships and impact society. There are plenty of examples in the book of such free falling spaces. Undoubtedly, youth once again need to be at the forefront of nation building. But they need to think and understand issues and injustices and then react. The 5th Space could help them respond meaningfully by merging their emotional quotient with intelligence quotient. ■

# The female

## Art steps in to sensitise society

**Kavita Charanji**  
New Delhi

**F**ROM 8th March, International Women's Day, 14 artists filled the spaces of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) with paintings on child marriage, female foeticide, the girl child, maternal mortality, domestic violence and health. These are burning issues which India confronts. And they all have to do with the shabby way our society treats women.

Pritam Priyalochan from Jajpur district, Odisha, says his mixed media work, 'Beauty and the Beast', originated from an incident he witnessed while travelling on Delhi's Metro from Green Park to Laxmi Nagar. "I saw a woman in her wedding finery. Many lustful male eyes were on her. When she disembarked at Laxmi Nagar, the men followed her. I wanted to convey the message that beauty is never free from the beastly gaze of men and that women are not safe even in public spaces."

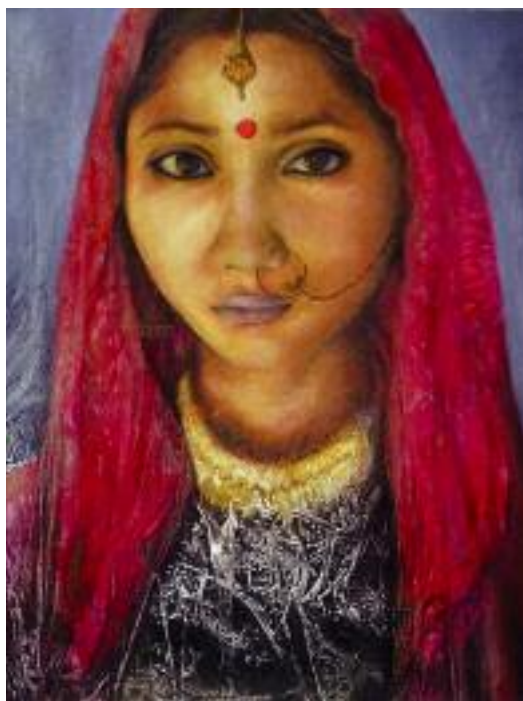
The male mindset also surfaces in Pallavi Singh's work, 'The Way You See'. The imagery is of Bollywood 'item girls' and deities at the back of



Soft Meat – Moumita Ghosh



# canvas



Am No One's Property – Bijaylaxmi Rana

autorickshaws, on the same page. "I wanted to see the working of the male psyche and the way men stereotype women," says Pallavi.

Bijoyalaxmi Rana's painting of a beautiful young girl titled, 'I Am No One's Property' was a grim reminder that child marriage is a major reason for India having the highest maternal mortal-



Mother World – Nirakar Chowdhury



The Way You See – Pallavi Singh

ity rate in the world.

'Soft Meat' by Moumita Ghosh was more subtle. She painted a woman inside a pressure cooker to depict the immense stress women face trying to live up to society's unrealistic and often cruel expectations.

But the exhibition wasn't only about harsh reality. The 20 paintings also carried messages of hope. In 'Mother World', a female foetus enters a world of beauty, love and joy but also of cruelty and oppression. The balance between the two extremes is slanted towards joy rather than danger.

Likewise in his three-part series, artist Stefan Prakash Eicher uses the coin as a metaphor to underline the equal value of men and women. In one of his works, 'Khap Panchayat', we see an easy camaraderie between men and women on charpoys at a khap panchayat – a picture unthinkable in the India of today.

"I look at the question of value, imagine a world where women and men are valued equally like two sides of the same coin – different but equal."

says Eicher, who is of Canadian-German origin.

Art for Change Foundation and Global Health Advocates are firm believers in the power of art to catalyse social change.

Art for Change Foundation, formed in 2007, consists of a group of socially conscious artists. They have organised exhibitions on social themes ranging from women's issues to religious violence, to the disparity between rich and poor. But their art is always balanced by exhibits devoted to hope and optimism.

Since 2002, GHA India has been mobilising communities and stakeholders on health and poverty issues. The NGO's focus areas are tuberculosis control and HIV. GHA now works actively on women's health – maternal health, child survival and a secure adolescence for girls.

"We believe that we can contribute to the cause of women's health by addressing it from a cultural perspective, be it through engagement with artists, folk singers, puppeteers and artisans from various communities. The arts are a mirror to society. What you see in a painting or craft will tell you how you look. If we look at mirrors and don't do something to rearrange our faces, then there is something seriously wrong with us," says John.

Along with more conventional interventions such as the creation of grassroots awareness, legislation and education, GHA India has partnered with artists over the years to publicise its social messages.

Now in a year long campaign, GHA India has tied up with the Ministry of Culture's seven Zonal Cultural Centres to bring women's health issues to the fore. The objective is to address deep seated cultural beliefs and practices that impact women's health adversely. These include early marriage of girls, lack of reproductive rights, preference for male children and unequal access to health and education. ■



# Food for thought

Dr G. G. GANGADHARAN

## GREEN CURES



A popular saying is: You are what you eat. The food we eat ultimately assumes three forms. Two of these forms are nutrients and the third is excreta. The two nutrient parts are known as gross (sthula) and subtle (suksma). The gross becomes the tissue element

through a seven-layer metabolic process. The subtle part becomes the mind. And hence the above adage.

To be in calm within, Ayurveda says food of sattvika quality should be consumed regularly. The holy Gita defines sattvika food as:

Foods which promote life, vitality, strength, health, happiness and satisfaction, and which are succulent, unctuous, nourishing and pleasing to the heart are dear to the pious.

The science of yoga says, when the element of vata in the body is vitiated, the mind also gets vitiated. So the foods that vitiate vata are to be avoided. According to Ayurvedic advice we should consume all six tastes everyday with the predominance of sweet (madhura-rasa) so that our daily meal is balanced.

This means that carbohydrates, which are predominantly sweet in taste, should constitute a major share of our food intake compared to sour, salt, bitter, astringent and spicy tastes, which should be consumed in smaller proportions. Their presence is necessary for the balanced physiological functions of the body.

Food which is easily digestible and which is not a burden on the digestive process is said to be the best food. Cow's ghee is predominantly sweet (madhura-rasa-pradhana) and is helpful for proper digestion when consumed in a small quantity with hot food.

The seasons also have a say in the matter of our diet. Winter and summer are diagonally opposite to each other in their effect on the digestive process. Summer makes the system weak. Digestion is stronger in winter. The quantity and constitution of food advisable also varies accordingly. We advise heavy foods for winter and light/semi-solid foods for summer. In winter, we can afford to eat more and heavier foods than we should in summer.

**SEASONAL DIET:** Ayurveda divides the year into six seasons (ritus). Each season needs to be compensated by a particular rasa as shown below:

- Hemantha and Shishira (Winter): Amla and Lavana
- Vasantha (Spring): Katu, Tikta and Kasaya

- Greeshma (Summer): Madhura, Amla and Lavana
- Varsha (Rainy): Amla and Lavana

The following are some examples of incompatible foods:

Food may be good but taken in the wrong combination it affects health and can cause many chronic metabolic disorders. Our traditional knowledge identifies as many as 18 types of food combinations which are incompatible.

### THESE ARE:

- Milk is incompatible with kulattha (horsegram) – rasavirudha
- Panasa fruit with fish – gunavirudha
- Boiled curds – viryavirudha
- Mixture of matsya and dadhi – kalpanavirudha
- Mixture of equal quantities of honey and ghee – matravirudha
- Water of alkaline regions – desavirudha
- Partaking flour made into a thick solution with water at night – kalavirudha
- Yavaka (small variety of barley) – bhojanakalavirudha

Many times the modern science of nutrition doesn't recognize this incompatibility factor and consequently we end up consuming milkshake with citrus fruit, fish processed with milk products, re-heated foods etc. all the time. These cause accumulation of toxins in the body.

Ayurveda says re-heated food is slow poison. If we adhere to the traditional way of eating as prescribed for the changing seasons, cooking the day's meal afresh every day and not storing cooked food in the refrigerator and re-heating it subsequently, many of the metabolic disorders we suffer from can be prevented.

Recent studies on metabolism reinforce the Ayurveda theory that digestion doesn't culminate in the gut, but devolves through the tissues and ultimately becomes the energy for the body without producing any waste products which accumulate in the tissues as bad fats and other toxins.

There is an old saying that says: A person who eats once is a Yogi (ascetic), he who eats twice is a Bhogi (reveler) and the person who eats thrice is a Rogi (patient).

What this implies is that a person who doesn't exert himself physically in his daily occupation should not eat as we eat functionally these days. If, at 11 am, we eat sumptuous food which is nutritious, easily digestible and has all the six rasas, it is sufficient for the day. The evening meal can be warm milk and fruits. This is the ideal regimen for longevity for a healthy person with no morbidity. ■



vaidya.ganga@rhlht.org

## WONDER PLANT

# Brainy Brahmi

THE herb Brahmi (Centella asiatica) is one of the original medicines of Ayurveda. It was well-known and used by the great sages who gave it a most appropriate name – brahmi means knowledge.

Charaka, Ayurveda's third legendary physician who identified the seasons and the time of day when a particular plant's medicinal powers achieve their maximum potency, states that the true value of Brahmi lies in its outstanding performance against senile decay and loss of memory, and its capacity for enhancing verbal articulation.

Brahmi, a plant from the Umbelliferae family, is the Sanskrit name for the Indian pennywort. It has medicinal value in boosting memory. It is also very effective in curing kidney problems. The leaves of this plant resemble the structure of the human brain and its veins look like nerves that also resemble the human kidney.

Therefore, the ancients thought they could use this plant for curing mental disorders and kidney problems. The leaves and slender stem of this plant contain active flavonoid ingredients like Brahminoside, Asiatic acid, Asiaticoside, Modecassic acid and Modecassoide.

In Indian culture, the plant Brahmi refers to the goddess of knowledge and wisdom, Saraswati. Brahmi is an important food for yogis and improves meditation. A cup of brahmi tea taken with honey before meditation is a great aid. It helps to awaken the crown chakra at the top of the head (sahasrara), and balance the right and left hemispheres of the brain.

Brahmi is one of the best herbs for balancing and rejuvenating pitta, and at the same time strongly reducing kapha. It can reduce vata if taken in the proper dose or with other anti-vata herbs like ashwagandha.

### LOCATION

This herbaceous plant is distributed across south and southeast Asia in countries like India, Sri Lanka, China, Indonesia and Malaysia. It can also be found in South Africa and Madagascar. In tropical India, Brahmi is seen mainly in the south along wet evergreen forest.

### PROPERTIES

In Ayurveda, this herb is said to help boost memory. Traditionally, healers used this plant to treat different types of diseases including psoriasis, cold, fever, diarrhoea, hepatitis, stomach ulcers, epilepsy, scleroderma, insomnia, cancer, gastrointestinal problems and asth-



ma. Brahmi is also used to improve mental clarity, enhance memory and reduce mental fatigue.

## GARDENING

Brahmi requires open sunlight and a sufficient supply of water to grow. Its bright green coloured leaves depend on an adequate supply of water. This plant can be grown in terrace gardens by providing it good organic compost.

Brahmi is mostly propagated with cuttings taken from runners of the mother plant. The old matured plant which spreads on the surface of the soil produces lots of root nodules which, when they touch the ground, tend to grow into a new plant. These root nodules can be separated from the mother plant with a sharp blade, removed from the site and taken for bagging.

The root nodule is then kept in a small plastic bag and watered for a few days continuously. The watered bags are kept under the shade for further growth. After a week or two of continuous watering, the nodule begins to sprout new young leaves.

Brahmi can also be propagated by seeds. The seeds are very small in size and they are germinated in a mother bed. The hard seed coats are treated with various techniques to break the seed dormancy.

## Self – help

### BRAHMI DRINK

Soak a small quantity of Brahmi leaves in water overnight. Then make into a paste with a few ground almonds, sugar-candy and milk. This is a first-rate tonic and cooling beverage, excellent for health and strength. It tones the liver and eliminates all kinds of worms in the bowels. This drink is especially useful for nervous debility. It also invigorates and improves brain-power.

### FOR DYSENTERY AND DIARRHOEA

Make a paste of a handful of Brahmi leaves and apply it to a child's navel. The dysentery and diarrhoea will be cured. ■

Rangarajan Rajaraman

## FEEL GOOD

# Flat belly

**A**round paunch is very easy to acquire. But it is unhealthy and getting rid of it is tough. Flab in the middle defies all laws of gravity. It refuses to slip away. It won't disappear in a hurry. Belly fat is stubborn. It has to be tackled from many fronts. A healthy lifestyle and exercise can give you the flat stomach you desire. According to Ayurveda, belly fat is caused by a rise in the kapha dosha.

### Here are some strategies to help you fight belly fat:

- Avoid sweets, beverages, carbohydrates and oil-rich foods. Don't eat junk food, jam or refined flour.
- 'Eat breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince and dinner like a pauper!' This common and simple quote is a great way to eat every day. Divide your meals into five or six small portions spread over the day. Eat food slowly. Take at least 20 minutes to finish your meal.
- Keep track of the food you eat and its approximate calorie value. Consume more wheat than rice. Eat green gram, horse gram, fresh vegetables, green leafy vegetables, fruits, lean meat, legumes,

fruits, nuts and whole grain in right proportions.

- Drink a cup of warm water after getting up. Drink one cup of water every hour to keep the system hydrated.
- Consume one teaspoon of honey with a glass of warm water on an empty stomach.
- Eat two fruits in the morning and in the evening.
- A belly massage on an empty stomach with Saindhava Thailam followed by steam is effective in disintegrating persistent belly fat. Wash your belly with warm water after 15 minutes.
- Boil one spoon of triphala choorna in water. Filter and take it with honey at night. It keeps your system clean and rejuvenated.
- Physical exercise can help to eliminate impurities from the physique and boost the metabolic process. Yoga, aerobics, cardio workouts, lifting weights etc can help.
- Sleep before 10 pm and wake up before 6 am. Meditate twice daily.
- Avoid a sedentary lifestyle. ■

Dr Rekha R Resident Medical Officer, IHC

## ORGANIC CHEF

# Sweet tooth

## ATIRASAM

### Ingredients:

Rice: half kg  
Jaggery: 300 gm  
Ghee: 400 ml  
Water: sufficient quantity

**Method:** Soak the rice for half an hour. Wash and then spread it on a cloth to dry. When the rice is almost dry, powder it using a mixer. Sieve the ground rice well and keep aside. Add some water to the jaggery. Boil it to make a thick syrup. To test the correct consistency of the syrup, drop a very small quantity of it in water. It should solidify immediately.

Mix the syrup with the rice flour thoroughly. Leave the mixture for eight to 12 hours. Heat ghee in a frying pan. Take a ball of the dough and flatten it to make a round shape on a smooth plantain leaf. Fry it golden brown evenly on both sides. Remove and serve.

### Properties:

- Atirasam means very tasty
- Easy to digest
- Nourishing, strengthening
- Improves weight
- Balances vata and pitta
- Increases kapha
- For children and adults
- An aphrodisiac
- Good for emaciation

## PALM SUGAR MILK



### Ingredients:

Cow's milk: 1 cup  
Palm sugar: 2 teaspoons  
Cardamom: 1  
Saffron: A few strands

**Method:** Boil the milk. Add palm sugar. Mix well till it dissolves. Remove from flame. Add powdered cardamom. Sprinkle a few saffron strands on the milk. Serve hot.

### Properties:

- Balances vata and pitta
- Milk with palm sugar does not increase kapha
- Suitable for children
- Good for throat
- It is a neutralizer
- An aphrodisiac
- Suitable for ulcers and bleeding disorders. ■

Dr Rekha R Resident Medical Officer, IHC



## PRODUCTS

### IKAT WEAVES

SURROUNDED by heaps of ikat material, Vijaylaxmi, president of the Gani Mahila Weavers Mutual Cooperative Society, smiles and says sales have been improving steadily over the years. Their society even exports ikat products to five countries, she says with pride. Ikat is a weaving and dyeing technique that produces unique geometrical patterns in many colours and shades. This weaving method is mostly done in villages of Andhra Pradesh.

Vijaylaxmi's society weaves the ikat fabric and then makes it into bedsheets, bedcovers, cushion covers, salwar-kameez suits, scarves and dupattas. You can also buy only the fabric. The colours don't run, she assures. The Andhra Pradesh government helped the women set up the cooperative, sent a master weaver to train them and pays for their travel to different states. Her cooperative has 200 women members and it has taken them 15 years to reach so far. ■



LAKSHMAN ANAND

For orders: Vijaylaxmi Ikka Fabs, Village Koyyalgudum, Mandal Choutupall, District Nalgonda, Andhra Pradesh. Phone: 09866264058, 09866085248

LAKSHMAN ANAND



### SILK SPREAD

THE success of Bihar's Bhagalpur beige silk is spawning clones in Uttar Pradesh. It has now struck roots in Benares, the hotspot of India's silk heritage. Weavers are trying their hand at making silk more in tune with current trends, says Virender Kumar, a trader who buys khadi silk from a group of 15 weavers in Benares and gets it block printed in Delhi. The fabric is light and airy, just right for Delhi's warm summers.

"Khadi silk is completely handwoven," says Virender Kumar. "But all we can do is sell the fabric. We can't design it into fashionable wear. If we do a bad job we will ruin the business. Currently, there is good demand for just plain fabric. You can use it as dress material, curtains, bedcovers or cushion covers."

The block prints have been imprinted delicately. Prices are reasonable – ₹200 per metre – and the beige colour is fast, assures Virender Kumar. ■

For bulk orders phone Virender Kumar or Sanjay Singh at 09210001783