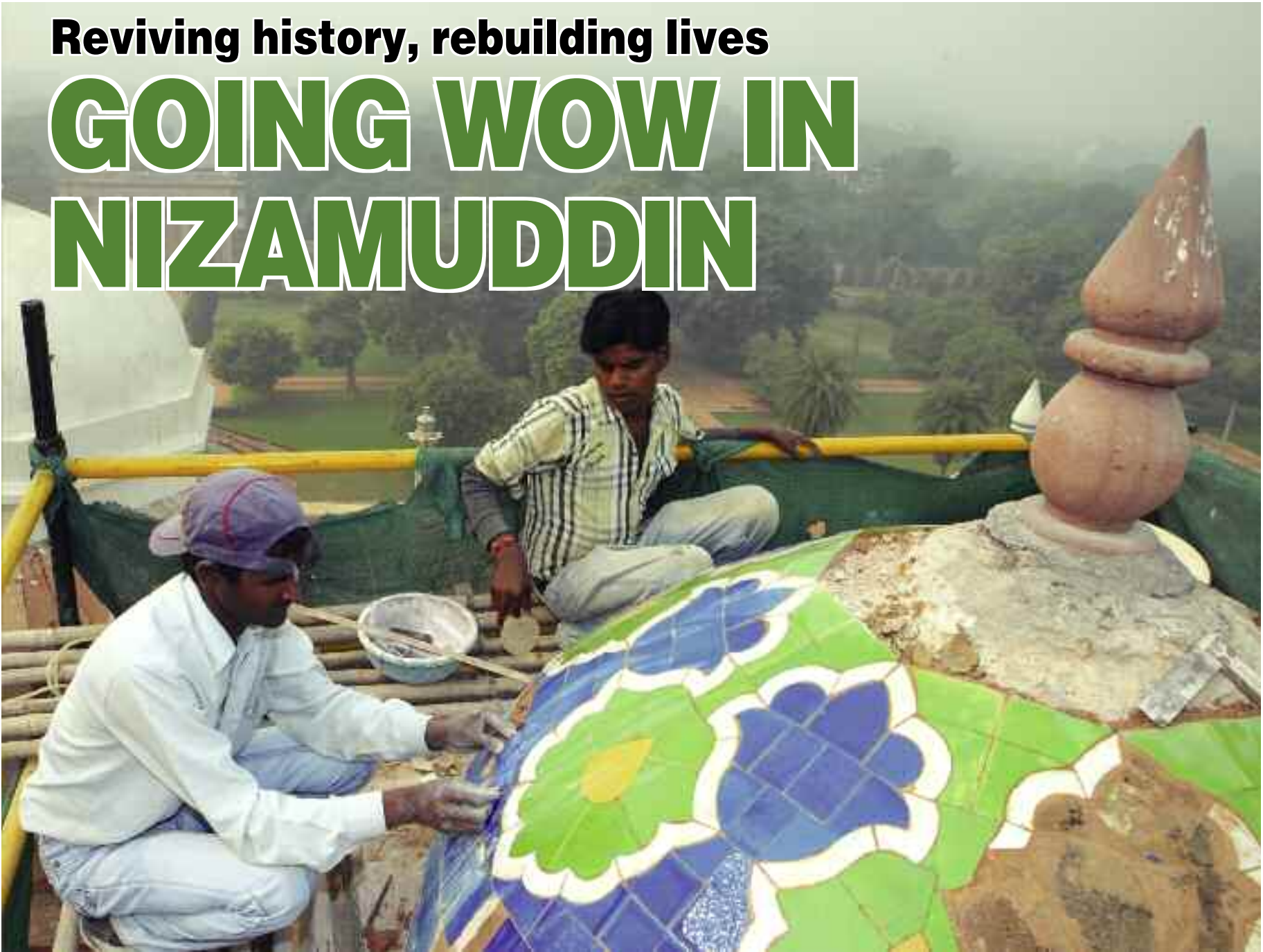


Civil Society

Reviving history, rebuilding lives

GOING WOW IN NIZAMUDDIN



'RSBY HELPS THE POOR GET HEALTHCARE'

Anil Swarup on the govt's mega insurance scheme
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COVER STORY

GOING WOW IN NIZAMUDDIN

A conservation programme in the Nizamuddin area of New Delhi is restoring monuments, but also providing livelihoods, linking people with their history and improving civic amenities.

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Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

Conservation and people

SEVERAL challenges present themselves in our cities. Among them, redevelopment is clearly the most intricate. It goes much beyond brick and mortar. It involves rediscovering culture and tradition and reaffirming identity. It means building trust. None of this money can buy – though, of course, money is needed and often in large amounts.

If our cities are to experience a revival it should be through the sophistications of an urban ethos. We need inclusion and tolerance. There should be respect for the environment. Common spaces need to be nurtured for the wholesome effect they have. Old Indian cities were defined in these ways. You could say they represented the urban values that the world now seeks. They had such systems and traditions. There is much to learn from them, much to showcase.

The Aga Khan's urban renewal initiative in the Nizamuddin area in New Delhi combines conservation with economic development. It helps the local community rediscover itself in the context of the past. So, while it brings back monuments like Humayun's tomb, it also restores livelihoods. It shows people in a crumbling inner city area how to emerge from decades of neglect and hopelessness.

Ownership is the key. Ratish Nanda and his talented team working for the Aga Khan Development Network have made the people of Nizamuddin Basti feel that they are a part of the renewal effort.

Governments aren't good at reaching out like this. They need professionals and voluntary organisations to step in. The Nizamuddin project is a great example of a successful PPP effort in which the 'private' immerses itself in the 'public' to deliver extraordinary benefits.

This month's issue also gives special attention to the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojna (RSBY), the UPA government's giant health insurance scheme for the poor. Under it some 33 million smart cards have been issued countrywide. Anil Swarup, an IAS officer, has been the driving force and has drawn on all available resources in the private sector.

Swarup is a man of action, a result-oriented officer. It is a pleasure interviewing him. But several questions remain about the quality of universal healthcare available in India. If there aren't the hospitals and doctors that large numbers of poor people need, what is the use of an insurance scheme however efficiently it may be implemented?

Just how inadequate health facilities are can be judged from the gap that VisionSpring, a social enterprise tries to fill. If you live in rural India and you happen to be poor there is little chance of being able to get a pair of spectacles. VisionSpring has a device that allows anyone to test eyes in a basic way. Lenses and frames imported from China make it possible to provide a pair of glasses on the spot for just ₹99. This is one example of the imagination and enterprise needed in healthcare.

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IN THE LIGHT

by SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Miss Lovely

Many thanks for your cover story, 'Miss Lovely makes a mark', on the wonderful films being made outside the mainstream Indian film industry. Hardly any magazine or reporter covers these developments but they are important. It is the 'fringe' element that influences the mainstream and eventually even changes it.

You can see this happening with some recent films being made in the

Hindi film industry. We do hope we get to see such films in theatres. The problem of distribution appears to be acute.

Shabnam

Where can I get to see these films which you have written about? These films are heard of but not seen.

Shaikat

Mee Seva

If e-Seva was the iPhone, Mee Seva is iPhone 5. True. The Kiran Kumar Reddy led Congress government in Andhra Pradesh has taken a good step to provide G2C services electronically through Mee Seva.

Government officials faced many challenges to make Mee Seva a success. It is a true e-governance project where the end-user is a citizen who gets services easier and faster. At last, success depends on delivering services in a stipulated time-frame. The government must bring in strong rules to ensure delivery of services within a specified time.

Balagam Rammohan

Perla forest

Shree Padre's story, 'Rocky Perla

grows a forest', is an excellent example of what determination can do. The innovative, local, successful approach has set an example for all of us. Hope others across the world will follow this example.

Shipra

I had been to the school in the mid-1990s for a youth festival. Then it was almost barren land. I can imagine how hard the teachers and students must have worked to green the area. The story will be an inspiration to many more people, schools and organizations.

Satheesha Avunje

This is a wonderful story. The people involved were very persistent in helping nature excel in an inhospitable place. I am sure that birds and other animals will soon make this a very unique ecosystem. Congratulations to the Nature Club of Perla High School.

Ken Kerkhoff

We should congratulate all the teachers, who have shown their commitment. Students of Perla High School are lucky to have such a dedicated team and a wonderful learning environment.

Dr S.G. Gopala Krishna

A real testament to how diligence pays off. As I live on an island made up of lava rock, I know what it is like to grow trees with little or no soil.

Marg Love

The school not only provided education and knowledge, it also served humanity with services of immense value. I congratulate the teachers, students and Shree Padre for their persistent efforts.

MI Zuberi from Ethiopia

Where there is a will, there will be a forest.

Vidya

What an inspiring story. It encourages me. I have planted trees along the road in my village, only to find them uprooted by somebody. Just two of about 30 trees I planted over the years have survived. Encouraged by your story, I will persist in planting trees. In this era of global warming, every tree counts.

Vivian A D Souza

ERRATA

The story, 'ReMeDi reaches your heart,' wrongly stated that Neurosynaptic Communications was awarded the Social Entrepreneur of the Year Award. Neurosynaptic was one of the finalists. The award went to Anshu Gupta of Goonj.

Editor

INTERVIEW / ANIL SWARUP 33 million smart cards

'Under RSBY poor get better

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Anil Swarup shows an RSBY card in his office in New Delhi

Civil Society News
New Delhi

FIVE years after it was launched in 2007, the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) has issued 33 million smart cards containing the biometric data of 110 million Indians who can now access healthcare in accredited hospitals across the country.

The RSBY is directed at families below the poverty line. It is designed to help the poorest of the poor withstand the economic shock of falling sick. Each card has the biometric data of all the members of a family. Together they get to spend a total of ₹30,000 a year in government and private sector hospitals.

The card is portable. It can be issued in Bihar and used in Punjab. The transactions are cashless – money gets transferred electronically from the government to insurance companies to hospitals. It is possible to have more than one card per family with the ₹30,000 split up.

Is the RSBY the answer to India's healthcare delivery problems? The answer to that is almost certainly no. Healthcare infrastructure remains seriously deficient. An insurance scheme can't compensate for missing hospitals and doctors.

But the RSBY has delivered some interesting results. For instance, it has prompted entrepreneurs to invest in low-cost hospitals for the very poor because they can now be assured of insurance companies paying up. A market mechanism

is in place.

More interestingly, it has made some government hospitals perk up. Under the RSBY, government doctors get monetary incentives. Reports from Kerala and other states are encouraging. The very poor are getting attention when they go to government hospitals because they carry the RSBY card.

The driving force behind the RSBY has been Anil Swarup, an IAS officer who is the Director-General of Labour Welfare. He has a small, spirited team. The scheme came to be launched under the Union Labour Ministry because there weren't takers in the Health Ministry.

Civil Society spoke to Swarup on the RSBY's successes and failures, his experience of launching

and a cashless system put in place attention in govt hospitals'

such a technology-centred initiative in government and where the scheme could be headed from here. Excerpts from the interview:

It is well known that India's public health infrastructure is very weak. How does a scheme like the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) work under such circumstances?

This has been a challenge. You don't have sufficient health infrastructure so even if we insure a person where does he go? The insurance companies don't come in because they don't sense business opportunities. Hospitals don't emerge because they too don't see business opportunities.

So we thought if we put money in the hands of the poorest in the form of an entitlement it could attract businesses and get hospitals going.

But this was not the original intent of the scheme. Irrespective of the lack of health infrastructure, a poor man goes somewhere to get treated when he is virtually on the deathbed. He travels maybe hundreds of miles. If you go to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), you will see that people come from far away.

A poor and sick person spends a lot of money getting treated. Health shocks result in further impoverishment. The intention of the scheme was to relieve a poor person of the financial burden of going to hospital for treatment. We were not trying to create health infrastructure. So the objective of RSBY was very limited.

We kept the scheme very low profile, consciously. We thought let's do something first on the ground, let the people perceive it, rather than announce it from the rooftops.

What has been the impact of this approach?

As the scheme evolved and money was put into the hands of poor people we discovered that stray hospitals were coming up back of beyond. We had not anticipated this development. Either smaller hospitals were adding rooms or new hospitals were coming up.

The second interesting development is that since money from the insurance companies can be given to doctors in government hospitals it has incentivised them to provide better services to the poorest patients.

One can argue and say why are doctors in government hospitals being given more money to do a job they are supposed to do in any case? Well, the incentive is working in some places. In Kerala, for example, special RSBY wards have been created in some government hospitals to look after these patients. One of the criticisms of this scheme has been that these doctors are only looking after the poorest patients in government hospitals!

If such developments pick up pace, the RSBY

could be a game changer in terms of better utilization of government facilities to treat the poor. Earlier, although everything was free, it was very difficult for a poor person to get all facilities. He ended up paying a lot of money in any case.

Some aspects of healthcare are being taken care of by RSBY. But it will not be right to say RSBY will replace the system. No. RSBY is only a small part of the whole system.

How exactly is RSBY structured?

RSBY provides an insurance cover of ₹30,000 per annum to a family of five on a floating basis. Any one family member can claim up to this amount or they can claim it together.

The premium is shared at the ratio, 75:25 between the Centre and the states. For the north-east and Jammu & Kashmir the ratio is 90:10.

'The idea was to relieve a poor person of the financial burden of going to hospital for treatment. We were not trying to create health infrastructure.'

The state government sets up an independent society called a state nodal agency that advertises for an insurance company through an open tender system. The state creates a database in the format stipulated under the RSBY and sends it to us. We run it through software to weed out internal inconsistencies.

Then this data, which is encoded, is put on a website. The insurance company that gets selected in turn selects a smart card provider who is already registered with the Quality Control Council of India. They are given a key so that they can decode the data on the website. They download the data, split it village wise and advertise the scheme in villages. On a fixed day the whole team goes to the village where the photograph of the head of the family and the biometric data are taken and embedded on the chip. The smart card is printed on the spot and handed over to the beneficiary. It's a family card so all the details of the family members are there.

So there is one card for the family?

Yes. But there is provision for a split card because there is migration. The head of the family can get the smart card split. He can carry say ₹15,000

worth of insurance and leave the rest in the other card for the family.

The smart card is provided free?

Right now it is free. We charge ₹30 as registration fee from the beneficiary for very good reasons. We feel unless he pays something he will not value the card. The amount is not an issue for them.

If someone in the family falls ill or has an accident he goes to a hospital, the thumb impression is matched with that on the chip, the hospital verifies the amount that has been used and blocks that sum.

The cost of procedures is pre-fixed. So, when hospitals get empanelled with the insurance company they have to agree to charge only the amount that we have fixed. There are already more than 1,000 procedures for which the costs have been decided.

For instance, if you need a surgery for appendicitis the hospital will pick up that code, block the amount and admit the patient. Supposing they discover that apart from appendicitis something else has to be done, that amount will be further deducted from the chip at the time of discharge and the card returned.

This data gets stored in the hard disc of the computer. Once a day the data is transferred from the hospital to the insurance company server. There is no paper involved. If the insurance company wants further details it can send a man to verify the documents.

But typically they don't because we asked early on what data they required for settlement of claims and then we digitised it. In 90 per cent of the cases, no other document is required. The money is transferred electronically to the hospital's account. The entire process is done electronically.

The Government of India (GoI) has issued a very interesting instruction – when a beneficiary gets treated in a government hospital a certain amount becomes due from the insurance company for the procedure. This money goes to a district level society called a Rogi Kalyan Samiti. Twenty-five per cent of this money can be shared by the doctors or whoever attended on the patient. That is the incentive the hospital staff get for treating a poor person.

Are private hospitals accepting low rates for procedures?

Our prices for procedures are quite low, even lower than the Central Government Health Scheme (CGHS). But hospitals are accepting the amount because of the volumes involved and since many of them have already sunk in money for the capital costs. It is just the variable cost that

Continued on page 8

Tough to set foot on Hyderabad

Forced on the road, 600 pedestrians lose their lives each

T S Sudhir
Hyderabad

THE road opposite Besant Sahney Hospital in Secunderabad was always a fine road. It even has a decent footpath whose every inch is used – by encroachers, that is.

Shops that house a juice vendor, a tailor, a tiffin centre, a bag repair person and other sundry activities occupy the footpath along with parking space allotted for two-wheelers for visitors going to the hospital. At any given point of time, you will also find an ambulance aggressively parked on the footpath. So where do you and I walk? On the road, of course.

This road is not an exception to the rule in Hyderabad. In fact, it is the rule.

Hyderabad has 6,246 km of roads but the length of footpaths is only half that figure – 3,165 km. Roads are ideally meant to have footpaths on both sides that are at a minimum 1.8 metres wide. This is as per the Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways. The Indian Roads Congress pegs the size of footpaths at a more conservative 1.5 metres. But in Hyderabad – a car and motorbike city with 3.3 million vehicles, the fourth largest in India – if wishes were footpaths, Hyderabadis could walk.

Sample this. At least 600 vehicles are added to Hyderabad's roads every day. Only nine per cent of the city is road area as against 14 to 18 per cent in other metros. Worse, at 723 vehicles per km, Hyderabad's vehicle density is the second largest in the country. And when you add to this crush of vehicles the lack of footpaths, you realise why Hyderabad is such a pedestrian-unfriendly city.

"Pedestrians are at the mercy of speeding cars in Hyderabad. If they want to cross the road, they



A coconut vendor takes over a footpath, forcing people to walk on the road

have to raise their hands to ensure they do not get hit," admits C. V. Anand, Additional Commissioner (Traffic), Hyderabad Police.

In 2010, a citizen activist V.V. Prasad approached the Lokayukta seeking its intervention in finding a

solution to Hyderabad's missing footpaths. He focused on the one that affected him personally – the footpath on Road No. 36 in Jubilee Hills. The ploy worked and within a few weeks the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) actually

'Poor getting treatment'

Continued from page 7

they have to incur. So long as my money is more than their variable cost they will take it. But we keep revising the costs. Of course the five star hospitals have not chosen to be empanelled.

What is the extent of the rollout?

As per Planning Commission estimates there are 60 million BPL families. We have already covered about 33 million. We are supposed to do 34 million by the end of this financial year. We should be able to cross that. It is happening faster than we anticipated.

In the first year it was difficult to market the scheme. The whole concept was not understood at various levels of the bureaucracy. In government you take a decision and it is imposed. But

we did not do it that way.

So how did you do it?

We travelled like mad. Every week we went to a different state. It was very challenging. We had to explain to the states how seamless, paperless and portable RSBY would be, why it was worth considering. Initially there were apprehensions. But once everyone saw it happening on the ground, they bought it. It's quite an interesting sight to see smart cards actually printed and handed over in a village.

This is perhaps the first scheme that gives choice to the beneficiary. He decides which hospital he wants to go to. Out of 12,000 empanelled hospitals, 4,000 are public hospitals. It is huge empowerment. Today people going from Bihar to Punjab get this benefit. When I explained this, some of the Chief Ministers bought it a once.

In Chhattisgarh they have universalized RSBY. The Government of India pays only for BPL and cer-

tain other categories. For others, the state government pays the premium because they find value in the scheme. Similarly, Meghalaya has decided to universalize the RSBY. Anyone can apply except income-tax payees and government servants.

We marketed the scheme to hospitals, insurance companies and smart card providers. Governments were the most difficult customers.

Insurance companies had never gone to rural areas and issued smart cards. I told them, you will get premiums at one position across the table otherwise you have to go to each individual. Your transaction costs will come down. We had to speak their language.

The credit goes to the entire team. The RSBY smart card is going to be used for the Public Distribution System (PDS) in Kerala. In Chhattisgarh, in two districts it is being used for the PDS and it has demonstrated that it saves nearly 40 per cent of the subsidy.

footpaths

year in accidents

P. ANIL KUMAR



though it is mandatory under building regulations to earmark 40 per cent of plot area for parking, most builders gobble the footpaths instead.

Even the 3,165 km of footpath that Hyderabad has is not pedestrian-friendly. This is the reason why as many as 600 deaths occur every year due to accidents involving pedestrians. In fact, 45 per cent of road fatalities in Hyderabad are pedestrians because they are fighting an unequal battle for road space with motorists.

The thumb rule is that for every 100 km of road in a city, you should also have 100 km of walkways, which could either be footpaths or medians with a row of trees where people can walk. Srinivas Murthy of the Hyderabad Architectural and Design Foundation points out that in most cities in India with the exception of Lutyens Delhi, the engineering design of roads is not done in an efficient manner.

"There is little or no coordination with the sewage, power, communication and other utility departments as a result of which the walkways are encroached upon by these services in the form of electricity poles and telephone boxes besides, of course, the regular informal sector. It is not possible to walk with such impediments," says Murthy.

Road widening without a thought to how it snatches the pedestrians' right to walk has been done in most parts of the city. Take, for example, the stretch leading to the hi-tech city in Madhapur in the IT area of Hyderabad. A decade ago, there was a service lane that was used by pedestrians and cyclists. With an increase in traffic, the roads here have been widened so much that both the service road and the row of trees have disappeared. They are either now part of the road or have become parking lots. It is the pedestrian who suffers. Pedestrians are marginalised in the planning process and are left to walk on busy roads at their own risk.

City planners have given no thought to the concept of Right of Way (ROW) which takes into account the distance between two properties on a road. "In Lutyens Delhi, even if the distance between two bungalows is say 300 feet, the road may only be 100 feet because that is all that is required. The rest of the 200 feet is used for walkways and medians and also leaves space to widen

the road should the need arise. But in Hyderabad where we do not have huge ROW, it has been fully consumed in most areas leading to further demolition and acquisition of property to create more road space," says Murthy.

Speak to officers in the GHMC and they point to the political sensitivity involved in removing unauthorised occupants of footpaths. At a recent conference on traffic management, Andhra Pradesh Municipal Administration minister M. Maheedhar Reddy offered some filmy tips to officers involved in removing encroachments. "Switch off your cellphones," he said. "It will not take two seconds to switch off the phone using one finger. After your work is over, switch on the mobile. Even if the minister asks you why you switched off the mobile on duty, say the battery was off," he suggested.

While such advice gets applause from the *aam aadmi* at a gathering, the fact is that citizens are also to blame for the insensitivity shown to the pedestrian. Estimates are that 70 per cent of citizens are involved in encroaching on footpaths. They convert footpaths into private gardens or transform the basement into a commercial establishment and use the footpaths to park their vehicles. The administration is another culprit as the fetish to widen roads is invariably at the cost of footpaths.

Fortunately for Hyderabad, the International Biodiversity Conference in October led to 40 km of footpath being developed in the weeks leading to the conference. "To take forward the good work done during the conference, we now want the government to develop a policy framework on pedestrian design as in Delhi," says Majid Hussain, Mayor of Hyderabad.

The GHMC now plans to construct model footpaths on a pilot basis along five roads in different parts of Hyderabad. These 100 km long modern footpaths will have a common duct to take all telecom and Internet cables underneath and will cost ₹30 crores.

The long-term plan is to develop footpaths and traffic signals in all the five zones of Hyderabad city to ensure pedestrian safety. The cost to the exchequer – ₹50 to ₹100 crores for each zone.

While that is a small price to pay to make Hyderabad a city that cares, the question is whether the administration will walk the talk. ■

laid a footpath one kilometer long on this stretch.

However, the improvement in the walkability index of Jubilee Hills was short-lived. Very soon shops encroached on the freshly laid footpath and used it as a parking area. Citizen activists say

So you are saying you have the biometric data of 33 million people?

No, 110 million people. Thirty-three million is the number of cards. And it is foolproof. Of the 33 million smart cards not a single one has been issued to the wrong person. It's a huge statement in India.

When the smart card is issued in the village a government official goes along. He is called the field key officer. He is issued a smart card, which carries his biometric data. He certifies that the man standing in front of the laptop is the one whose name is appearing on the laptop. Signals from his card travel to the card of the beneficiary. Only then does this card become valid.

So I know who has verified the beneficiary. It is irrefutable since only he can use the card because of his biometric identification. There was a misdemeanor in just one case and we caught it. The advantage of this smart card is that it does not require real time connectivity at the backend.

Even if I am not connected I will be verified.

How do you ensure quality healthcare is provided?

First, the hospitals can't charge more because the procedure costs are fixed. But they can charge for something they have not done. Some of them have been doing this and we have been catching them. But we handle it.

We have an interesting mechanism of running the entire data that comes in through 40 triggers. We have data on how many beds a hospital has. We have had cases where more persons have been admitted than the number of beds.

Then say you have a hysterectomy done by a gynaecologist. But the hospital does not have a gynaecologist. Now this does not imply that there is a fraud. But then the hospital has to explain where did they get the gynaecologist?

This has been possible under RSBY because data flows electronically. We have removed from our

list more than 270 hospitals so far. So we take quick action. But it is a cat and mouse game. To say there are no frauds under RSBY is wrong.

If the holder of an RSBY card has a complaint how is it addressed?

We have a very robust online mechanism for redressing grievances. Anyone can register on the website. We have a district grievance mechanism, a state level grievance committee and a national level grievance committee. We have a full-fledged system. It is on our website.

Have grievances come in?

Oh yes. Most of the grievances are about the delay in settlement of claims from hospitals. Earlier we did not have a robust mechanism of ensuring claims were settled on time. Now we take pride in the fact that 98 per cent of claims from hospitals are settled in 30 days. ■

People's manifesto for 2014

Bharat Dogra
New Delhi

NEARLY 56 people's organisations came together for five days from 26 to 30 November in Delhi to talk and exchange views. Their objective was to draw up a people's manifesto on crucial issues and pending legislations.

This Jan Sansad or People's Assembly passed resolutions and eventually prepared a manifesto that is likely to be useful in the countdown to the Lok Sabha elections scheduled for 2014.

"Concerned citizens have been increasingly disturbed by the fact that in some important respects the country has been moving away from basic constitutional values instead of steadily moving forward to realise these values," says Nikhil Dey of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), one of the main organisers of the Jan Sansad.

The ideals of the Constitution have not been realised. In politics we have equality but in our social and economic life we continue to have inequality, as predicted by Dr BR Ambedkar, father of the Indian Constitution.

A pledge was taken by participants to protect the values enshrined in the Constitution at the beginning of the Jan Sansad.

The people's manifesto released by the Jan Sansad included a wide range of issues – legislation on the Lokpal and Lokayukta, the Citizens' Grievances Redressal Bill and the Whistle Blowers Protection Bill. The manifesto asks for police reforms, electoral reforms, health and education initiatives, community rights on natural resources, a law on displacement and land acquisition, food security, a boost for agriculture and protection of the rights of Dalits, Adivasis and women.

Several noted women activists and volunteers took part in the Jan Sansad. While seminars provided detailed information on the injustices women face in India and the growing violence against them, the Jan Sansad was also a testimony to the other side of Indian women and their growing assertiveness on public issues.

The manifesto included curbing violence against women, sexuality rights, women's health rights, their political participation including reservation, and the rights of women at work.

Noted activist Kamla Bhasin said democracy within the family has to take place to curb violence against women. Social norms and myths need to be changed to give women more status in society and more rights.

Annie Raja, General Secretary of the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) said that even the right of millions of baby girls to be born is taken away in the form of female foeticide. Can there be a more glaring violation of the Constitutional right to life and to equality, she asked?

Aruna Roy, a coordinator and spokesperson of the Jan Sansad said that the meetings were valuable not just for the demands articulated but as a process where people's organizations engage and learn from each other, including strategies, meth-

Weavers ask for govt help

Bharat Dogra
New Delhi

IT rained a lot, the tents were soggy but the weather did not dampen the determination of handloom weavers protesting against the unfair policies of the Union government at Jantar Mantar.

Mohan Ram, the founder of a federation of handloom weavers in Andhra Pradesh called the Rashtra Cheneta Jana Samakhya and the main organiser of the protest said that handloom weavers were passing through a period of acute crisis. "We want to link up this protest in Delhi with district-level and village-level efforts to solve the problems of handloom weavers. But this issue does not affect weavers alone. The livelihood of millions of people and the protection of invaluable skills are at stake." His federation has a membership of around 20,000 weavers, he said.

"The Handloom Reservation Act is not being implemented properly. Yarn supply is inadequate and budgetary allocation for handlooms has declined very significantly as a share of the total budget for the textile sector. Important schemes for helping handloom workers have been launched but these languish due to lack of proper budgetary support," said Mohan Ram.

Chimtikimdi Vijaylakshmi, a weaver from Prakasham district of Andhra Pradesh, says that she has seen a rapid decline in the working conditions and opportunities for handloom weavers in recent times. "I have come all the way to Delhi to demand that the government should implement policies which can save our work and provide us a dignified livelihood in our ancestral skill of weaving."

M. Ram Babu from Gumulkundi Kosampet village in Tiruvellur district of Tamil Nadu said, "Our earnings are not increasing while

ods and campaigns. "There is a need for broader unity and yet there is also a need to understand why different movements follow different strategies. In a democracy there will be a plurality of strategies. We should understand this and even welcome it, of course within the broad framework of our commitment to non-violence and to constitutional values."

Representatives of political parties attended the Jan Sansad from time to time. The Left parties were better represented, but there were also MPs from the Congress, the BJP and other political parties.

Whether the issues raised by the Jan Sansad will



LAKSHMAN ANAND

the prices of everything else are rising. So the question is how to survive? I've come to Delhi to demand that yarn and zari are supplied properly and the reservation law for the handloom sector is implemented."

Dusamaneemdir, a weaver from Karimnagar district of Andhra Pradesh, said handlooms should not be subjected to unfair competition from powerlooms as they have every right to survive.

Ahsan Ali Ansari, a weaver from Varanasi, said that weaving and embroidery are collapsing due to computer-aided designs and machines from Japan and China. Ahsan said, "The big trader can still earn by selling saris, but the weaver is deprived of work. And if weavers lose work and skills are not passed on to the next generation then, of course, one day the entire craft will collapse." He said the government should provide them social security.

Mohan Ram said the government should implement the Handloom Reservation Act, increase the budget for welfare and regularly supply yarn to weavers through the National Handloom Development Corporation. ■

be included in the manifestoes of political parties is an open question.

The Jan Sansad emphasised that the pre-legislation process should be made much more transparent so that people are better informed about legislation which is coming up.

P.V. Rajagopal of Ekta Parishad spoke about the discrimination and humiliation suffered by the transgender community while Dr Jena spoke about the insults suffered by sex workers. Wilson Baijwara speaking on behalf of *safai karamcharies* expressed deep regret at the continuing tendency of people to discriminate against them. ■



Anshu Gupta in his workplace surrounded by materials

What a few old clothes can do

Anshu Gupta on Goonj as a social enterprise

Arjun Sen
New Delhi

ANSHU Gupta is an entrepreneur like any other. He identified a major consumer need, found an efficient way to meet it and went on to create a sustainable and scalable business that generates profits year after year. But with a small difference: the profits don't accrue to him or his business but to millions of the rural poor in India.

His consumers, the really destitute, buy his products – refurbished clothes and garments. They pay with the only currency they have – their ability to work. And that work brings about rural development. It creates valuable economic infrastructure such as roads, bridges, wells, cleaner water bodies and forests. All this happens from discarded clothes that people in cities donate to Anshu's social enterprise, Goonj.

Starting in 1998 with 67 discarded clothes that he and his wife, Meenakshi, collected in their own home, Goonj, has built up a "trash-based, not cash-based parallel economy," says Anshu.

This year Anshu Gupta won the Social Entrepreneur of the Year India Award instituted

by the Schwab Foundation For Social Entrepreneurship and the Jubilant Bhartia Foundation.

In fact in 2012 Goonj achieved major global fame. The National Aeronautics & Space Agency (NASA) and the US State Department chose it for 'Game Changing Innovation' after a worldwide search and selection process while the Global Development Network (GDN) awarded it the Japanese first prize for the 'Most Innovative Development Project'.

'More and more people should begin to realize that this debate about social enterprise and donation-based charity is utter bunkum,' says Anshu frankly.

Yet, Anshu is unhappy. "More and more people should begin to realize that this debate about social enterprise and donation-based charity is utter bunkum," he said frankly.

"We are always willing to learn but we are not willing to be taught how we need to make profits to be 'sustainable' and 'scalable' or how to be more efficient in the way we handle resources. This is mere jargon propagated by learned people. We are neither a charitable organization nor a social enterprise. We are an idea that the innate desire of people to help others can be converted into a sustainable, scalable and replicable enterprise."

"Give me one good reason why we should change our model as we are often told at various forums. Why?" he asked in anguish.

"Show me one temple, mosque or church that has failed for want of donations? More companies fail than donation-based NGOs. People donate out of faith and guilt. We want to channelize this into development rather than for building religious buildings," Anshu said.

Any business starts with identifying a consumer need and Anshu did that with great

Continued on page 12

Continued from page 11

insight. "Clothing is not a developmental issue. People talk of gender issues, housing, energy, food... but no one sees clothing as a major need. When we reach clothing to the poor, there is larger value addition in economic development because it frees up money that individuals would have otherwise spent on clothes for more critical needs such as food, health and education," he said.

Besides, like any other business, he is offering what consumers need. "When people donate they simply give away what they have discarded. And whatever is collected is dumped on the poor without a thought to what they really need. People sent warm clothing to victims of the tsunami."

Anshu explains that Goonj processes everything that they collect and give the poor exactly what they need against the only currency in which they can pay for – their ability to work. Not for free.

"The greatest asset poor people have is their dignity. They will die but they will not beg. So we give against work that people do for themselves, their community and by extension, the entire nation. We fill an important gap – we use discarded material to bring about development where it is stuck due to lack of financial resources. Ultimately, all development is about materials – even with money you buy materials. Now, we are not only giving clothes for development work but also infrastructural materials to build schools and office buildings," Anshu explained.

"What you see in this office except for the laptops and printers is all recycled," he said as we sat in Goonj's office and talked across the table. "As you can see there is little uniformity in the furniture – everything is collected, recycled material." Amazing.

Goonj's workshop is equally amazing. Piles of discarded clothes, utensils, toys, books, furniture, what have you, are being carefully graded into what is directly usable, what needs some repair and what needs complete recycling. Nothing is wasted. Not even a rusted pin.

From clothing materials that would be dumped as unusable Goonj conjures up a range of useful products from hygienic sanitary napkins to designer accessories. All designed by ordinary people using their own wisdom and knowledge. "No designer or consultant has ever been engaged," Anshu said.

Goonj has a dedicated team of 150 employees – mostly economically disadvantaged women. The joy on their faces is obvious. They know they are in a wonderful business where they work for themselves and for their fellow brethren.

"Yes we do need cash to meet the expenses of collecting, processing and transporting our clothes and products to poor people in rural areas. We are now going to make it mandatory for those who donate their discarded items to also donate at least ₹100 in cash to pay for the logistics. Right now 40 per cent of our annual budget of ₹3.5 crore comes from individual donations, another 50 per cent from selling our products and all kinds of sponsorships and 10 per cent from our awards," he said. ■

South India takes to



Different rambutan varieties at the Central Horticulture Experiment Station

Shree Padre
Chettalli (Karnataka)

HERE is good news for litchi lovers in India. Soon, a close family member of the litchi, the juicy and hairy rambutan, will be available almost throughout the year.

On 23 November, the Central Horticulture Experiment Station (CHES) of the Indian Institute of Horticulture Research (IIHR), Bangalore organized 'Rambutan Day' at Chettalli village in Coorg, Karnataka.

"The message we want to pass to the farming community is that rambutan is a possible candidate for those farmers who want to diversify their crops," said Dr Prakash C. Tripathi, a scientist at CHES.

Originally a native of Indonesia and Malaysia, rambutan (*Nephelium lappaceu*) is related to the litchi. Both belong to the soapberry family, *Sapindaceae*.

The edible part of the rambutan is the white pulp on a brown seed inside. It looks and tastes very similar to the litchi. However, unlike the litchi, the rind of the fruit is very hairy from where it gets its name. Rambutan means hair in Indonesian and Malay. Rambutan means hairy. Like the litchi, the rambutan's rind is reddish in colour but there is another smaller variety that is yellow outside. It is believed European traders originally brought the plant to India from Malaysia and Indonesia.

Economically valuable: "For farmers and orchard owners, rambutan cultivation offers a profitable option," said Dr Tripathi. "On one acre the farmer needs to make an initial investment of about ₹50,000. Add to that another ₹20,000 per year for six to seven years."

"But after that orchard owners can earn anything between ₹1 lakh and ₹1.5 lakhs per year for the next 30 to 40 years. While a rambutan tree begins to bear fruit from the fourth year, it takes about 10 years for fruit yield to stabilize at about 25 kg per tree per year," Dr Tripathi said.

Orchard owners in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, especially in the basins of the Pampa, Manimala and Achencoil rivers, have begun to grow the fruit encouraged by good demand from traders.

Last year, the average farm gate price of rambutan was about ₹150 a kg. In Bangalore's supermarkets it had zoomed to ₹300 to ₹600 a kg, says Dr Tripathi.

Jacob Francis, a farmer from Uppinangady in Karnataka has around 40 hectares of rambutan orchards with 25,000 plants grown over the years. Some of them have started fruiting. Last year he sold much of his yield to fruit traders in Hyderabad at around ₹200 a kg. "Next season, I am planning to market it in north India," he said.

His trees yield fruits from May to September. "This is an advantage. We get five months to market the fruit. If we extend cultivation to the higher reaches, rambutan can be made available for

the hairy Rambutan

PICTURES BY SHREE PADRE



mal temperatures, it remains marketable only for four to six days. "In temperatures below eight degrees, it can be kept for two weeks at the most," CHES scientists said.

Bats, squirrels and monkeys also pose a threat to the crop and farmers have to use nets to cover the trees during fruiting.

Dr Livingston C. Soans of Moodabidri in Dakshina Kannada district of Karnataka is said to have pioneered rambutan cultivation in India. In the 1970s he imported plants from Malaysia. Since then he has been cultivating and promoting this economically valuable cash crop.

Dr Soans' farm has a few original stocks of the grafted rambutan varieties he imported decades ago. His farm has been propagating the fruit by using the 'layering' method. "Grafting is not that successful in rambutan," Dr Soans said. In Kerala budded plants are catching on.

Although India's production is still negligible with only about 200 hectares under cultivation, the hairy fruit is increasingly catching the attention of farmers. In Kerala, for example, large-scale orchards are coming up with a private firm selling budded plants with high-voltage publicity.

The growing popularity of rambutan cultivation has, however, raised the question whether selling prices will remain high enough in future to yield sufficient returns to farmers. But Dr Soans is hopeful. "Fruit eating is on the increase among Indians. Rambutan is at present known and grown in a very small part of this vast country. It is almost unknown in north India. Hence, the market can easily absorb another twenty-fold growth in production," he said.

Francis, too, is confident about the future but with a rider. "I don't fear competition from our local producers. But if the Asian Highway becomes a reality around 2016, the possibility of Thailand and Malaysia flooding our markets cannot be ruled out. Farmers in those countries have

government support and they produce fruits of very high quality and yield," he said.

Limited research: Research on rambutan cultivars in India is still very limited. The Chettalli CHES is the only research station that is conducting any research on the cultivation of this fruit. The centre has developed an orchard of more than 50 accessions collected from various places. Planted in 1988, the plants are now at their maximum yield.

"We should develop a gene-pool of about 50 to 100 best varieties collected from all over the world. In addition, production technologies have to be evolved for different agro-climatic areas," Francis felt.

Research on varieties is being done at CHES now. "The main characteristics we are giving importance to are the easy peeling nature of the kernel from the inner seed, pulp or kernel recovery, taste and size of the fruit," said CHES scientist, Dr G. Karunakaran. According to him, the kernel of red fruits is relatively crispy and those of yellow ones are juicy. But market preferences differ from scientific tastes. Consumers prefer red fruits to yellow ones.

Selected rambutan accessions of CHES are now being experimentally cultivated in three different locations in India. These are the National Research Centre for Litchi (NRCL) at Muzaffarpur, Bihar, Mohanpur in West Bengal and Banana Research Centre, Kannara, in Kerala. "We also plan to have cultivation trials on farmers' plots in different areas soon," Dr Karunakaran said.

The Chettali research station will soon release two varieties of rambutan. The first variety, called R-27, produces fruits with red rind weighing 40 to 45 gms. The edible part is very sweet and it doesn't remain stuck to the seed. This variety harvests very early. The other variety, R-31, is yellow skinned with smaller fruits weighing just 25 gms on average. It harvests late but has very good pulp recovery at 50 per cent, Dr Tripathi said.

While Indian scientists are yet to start trials on processing the fruit, scientists in neighbouring Sri Lanka have already successfully canned and bottled rambutan, according to Agnes Fernando, Senior Scientist of Sri Lanka's Industrial Training Institute based in Colombo. ■

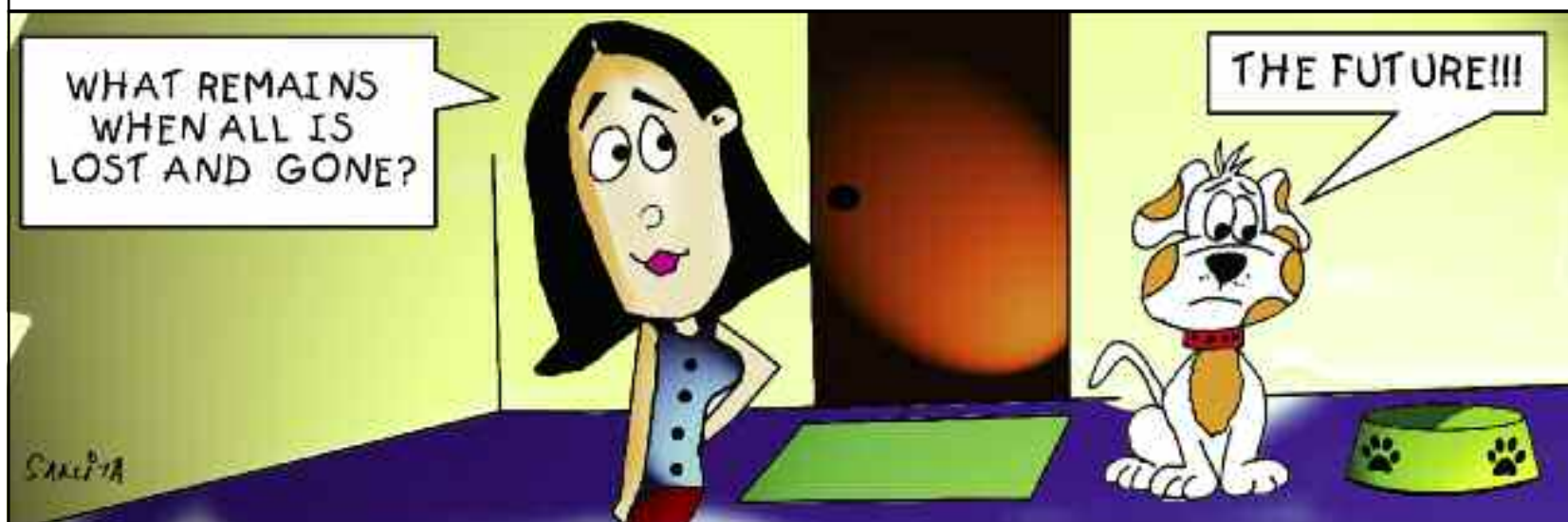
ten months – from March to December," he said.

The fruit has good export potential. Thailand, the world's largest producer, Malaysia and Indonesia export it to the US and Europe, Dr Tripathi said. But fruit yields are much higher in those countries. "It is a tropical crop. Our agro-climatic condition is not typically tropical and is sub-optimal for this fruit. So, unlike Thailand and Malaysia, we aren't getting two crops a year," he said.

Rambutan, however, has a low shelf life. In nor-

SAMITA'S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR



Celebration in Kunao

Rakesh Agrawal
Dehradun

THE villagers of Kunau in the Pauri district of Uttarakhand are jubilant. The reason is that the process of granting them forest rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, is finally underway.

The villagers had led a long *dharna* (sit-in protest), of 37 days. From 1 November, the entire village along with their animals had parked themselves in front of the forest department (*Civil Society* December issue).

Finally, the district-level committee, formed to scrutinize applications for forest rights, has accepted their claims. "On 7 December, P.S. Rana, the sub-divisional magistrate (SDM) of Yamkeshwar block informed us of the decision of the committee and the district magistrate's request to call off our strike," says Chandra Mohan Singh Negi, the convener of the *dharna* called *dera dalo, ghera dalo*.

The women see this as their own effort. They were not supported by any NGO. "This proves that we can win if we villagers fight together," says Maya Devi, 48.

Chandresh Yadav, the district magistrate of Pauri, had sent a message to the villagers of Kunao that the district-level committee had gone through all cases and approved 36 cases for rights under the FRA. "Moreover, the committee has recommended our village be declared a revenue village. Now Rajaji National Park officials cannot deprive us of basic facilities," says Negi.

Indeed, the process has begun as the district-level committee has decided to provide electricity to Kunao's primary school. The villagers are now waiting with hope in their hearts that their own homes too will get illuminated.

But, why only 36 claims when the village-level committee had approved of 48 claims? "Well, we have 48 households but 36 families since many households have more than one family once their sons got married," explained Roshani Devi, whose application claim has been accepted.

The district magistrate confirms this. "The district-level committee maintained the landholding status of the villagers as land was given to them in 1975," says Yadav.

The villagers are also keen to file for community forest rights especially for non-timber forest produce (NTFP). "Our livelihood depends on extraction of NTFP," says Man Singh Payal.

Kunao is believed to be the first village in Uttarakhand where the FRA is likely to be implemented successfully. The Kunao case is even more special since the villagers here are not Adivasis but 'other forest dwellers'. In their case they had to submit proof that they had lived here for 75 years or three generations. ■

Court order proves COVA's point

T.S. Sudhir
Hyderabad

ON 10 December, the Andhra Pradesh High Court ordered the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) to activate Area Sabhas and Ward Committees in the city and ensure they hold regular meetings. For the first time in India, proper implementation of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution that takes governance to the grassroots is being sought.

The Andhra Pradesh government had issued a landmark order directing the formation of Area Sabhas and Ward Committees in February 2010 to enable citizens' participation in civic affairs. Ward Committees also had budgetary allocations enabling them to carry out development works without having to depend on the local elected representatives.

However, Ward Committees and Area Sabhas have not met regularly and are practically defunct. It was the Confederation of Voluntary Associations (COVA) that approached the Andhra Pradesh High Court.

COVA is a national network of 500 voluntary organisations focusing on issues of social harmony, peace and justice. T. S. Sudhir spoke to Mazher Hussain, Executive Director of COVA, on the significance of the order for people's participation in governance.

What difference will the High Court's order make to our lives?

The judgment will enable better participation of the common people in matters of governance at the grassroots. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution envisage the involvement of ordinary citizens in decision-making, especially in civic issues and welfare programmes. But politicians and bureaucrats monopolise these decisions and the common man has to beg and plead. This landmark judgment will transform the grammar of governance if it is used well by civil society.

But there is very little awareness about Ward Committees and Area Sabhas. How do you overcome that?

In our writ petition, we have said that the meetings of the Area Sabhas and Ward Committees should be held regularly and according to the norms stipulated. The newspapers should mention them in the engagements columns but as everyone does not read newspapers, mobile publicity as in posters on the back of autorickshaws should be used.

Do you think politicians have a vested interest

in keeping the *aam aadmi* out?

Let us take the example of say a gas connection or old age pensions. It should be decided at the level of the area sabha, not by the MLA or corporator of the area. But it does not work that way. Then, there is also the middleman syndrome where minor political functionaries do the wheeling and dealing. They are usually flunkies of politicians so that the leaders do not get their hands dirty. A study on the common minimum programme of the Andhra Pradesh government conducted by research scholars of the University of Hyderabad found widespread unhappiness over the role played by middlemen. It is the people who should decide who should get what.

Do you think citizens also don't like to get involved? May be the attitude is that my work should get done and I do not care about the rest.

Yes, public social responsibility is at a premium. It is what I call the '*mera, meri jeb, mera baccha*' attitude (Me, my purse, my child). What we have to instill is a spirit of selective assertion on specific subjects. This won't be a mass uprising or a revolution but if people can stress their demands effectively, the purpose would be served.

Will the politician get marginalised if the Area Sabhas or Ward Committees get more powers?

A change is needed in the political culture of our country. At present, there is no political competition. Once a person wins the election, the other candidates fall off the radar. The winner has a monopoly even if he has won the election by a few hundred votes while the others are squeezed out. What the High Court judgment will do is to encourage the Opposition parties to get the people to voice their demands because it will also help them in the next election. Conflict is the essence of a functioning democracy while violence is not. If we do not stand up for conflict, we will open the doors to oppression.

What are the lessons for other states in India from what has taken place in Andhra Pradesh?

Since Andhra Pradesh issued its order in February 2010, many other states also have issued similar government orders. But most of them have been on paper and are very diluted versions of the Andhra order. In Gujarat, for instance, very few powers have been given to the Area Sabhas. Civil society can play a big role. In Hyderabad, we have formed groups of 15 to 20 concerned citizens in each locality who walk around the area and identify problems that can be discussed at the meetings. That is an effective way of identifying and solving problems. ■

'We want 1m active citizens'

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Ratna Viswanathan: the focus is on health, education, disability and livelihoods

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

VOLUNTEERING for a cause has been steadily becoming more popular in India. Companies encourage it as a part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) and individuals feel motivated to come forward to give their time and do their bit. But the numbers are still modest though the need is great.

VSO India, the local arm of VSO International, is planning to encourage people to come forward in substantially bigger numbers. It has set itself the ambitious target of enlisting 100,000 national volunteers and one million active citizens by 2017.

It is a tall order but Ratna Viswanathan, 49, the recently appointed executive director of VSO India, believes it can be done if the strategies are right. *Civil Society* spoke to Viswanathan about her plans and how she hopes to make them successful.

In which states do you work and what is your focus?

We work on four core themes: health, education, disability and livelihoods and we have gender and governance mainstreamed through all these four themes.

Traditionally we have been working in five states – Jharkand, West Bengal, Orissa, Delhi and Rajasthan. We are planning to expand to 10 states including Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka.

How do you propose to enlist so many volunteers?

We hope by 2017 to have at least a million active citizens who are aware, and engaged and want to

make a difference. We believe volunteering is all about being an active citizen. Anything you do within your community, your living space or work space to make something better for other people living around you counts. It could be something small like picking up garbage lying on the road and throwing it in the bin or volunteering to work on development programmes long-term.

'Volunteering is all about being an active citizen. Anything you do within your living space or work space to make something better for other people counts.'

We don't want to concentrate just on young people. We want to engage with professional people who have retired from service – from industry, from government and so on. They would be perfect mentors for young people.

But we are engaging extensively with young people because by 2025 the age of the average Indian is going to be 29 years. So it makes a whole lot of sense for us. We look at it as an investment.

Also by volunteers I don't just mean people we will put into programmes, I mean anybody who is volunteering. For example, we support organisations and schools that work on the Right to

Education through volunteers. So we are enlisting that many volunteers.

What are the volunteering opportunities you are offering to citizens?

Basically we need people in the four core areas that we work in. We get requests for volunteers every day. We also get requests from people saying that they want to volunteer. So we try to match their skills, experience and exposure. The non-experienced volunteers are mostly youngsters just out of college or youth wanting to do something. There we don't look for experience.

But where it is serious professional volunteering we need at least four years of experience in whatever field they worked in so that there is value to be derived for both parties. At the moment we are working with 40 to 42 grassroots partners and we are planning to grow. If you move into more states obviously the number of partners you work with increases.

We don't do unpaid volunteering. Our volunteers get paid a stipend to cover their living costs.

What response have you had from volunteers?

When you are not exposed to something there is a romantic air about it. When you actually hit ground zero and see the mosquitoes, the drains, the heat and the communities you need to work and live in, sometimes it really scares people off. So there is a need to be able to manage expectations when people volunteer. We have these stringent volunteering orientation trainings in India and abroad to orient volunteers towards the fact that yes it is romantic but this is actually where you will be going.

We get volunteers, even before they come here, to speak to the partner they will be with and the programme manager. Then there is a fair understanding of what to expect in terms of work and ground reality. Volunteering is not an easy job. You could create a lot of damage if you didn't have the capacity to deal with the area you are volunteering in and the sensitivity.

Corporate Social Responsibility isn't just about taking kids out or painting a school. You would probably need to spend a little time understanding the kids who come to that school. Do they get there at all, what kind of teaching is given to them? Painting the school is a fun activity but is it really CSR? I don't think so. I think, especially when corporate India comes to volunteer, there is a need to understand what is really happening on the ground.

What has been your experience of working in India compared to other countries.

Many more people are coming forward to volunteer. There is a difference with other countries because in India we have to take care of the basics – water, electricity, education, homes. In other countries even if you have no income the State supports you. So the lens on volunteering is quite different. ■



At Humayun's tomb water flows with gravity through sloping channels

Unique conservation effort revives

GOING WOW IN

Civil Society News
New Delhi

A few hundred metres from the crazy traffic in the Nizamuddin area on Mathura Road emblems of Delhi's heritage have been coming to life. It is a revival with many facets: in architecture, design, music, craftsmanship, gardens, water systems, urban planning, colours and cuisine.

Monuments have been restored with rare passion and creative skills. Old landscapes have been rediscovered. Structures lost to decades of neglect are visible once again, their perfections intact. Indigenous species of trees have been brought back in thousands.

An evening of qawwali music in the courtyard of the Chausath Khamba in the

Nizamuddin Basti proves to be magical. A visit to the garden tomb of the Mughal Emperor Humayun is dizzying for all the detail in design and structure that restoration has put back in place.

Humayun's tomb belongs in the tradition of being laid to rest in a garden paradise. Babur, the first Mughal emperor, began the tradition. Humayun's tomb, commissioned in 1562 by his widow, turned out to be much grander than the Bagh-e-Babur in Kabul.

But far beyond what one can touch, see and smell, the restoration also explores the bigger zone of a mystical paradigm: the renewal of identity and spirit.

The Nizamuddin Basti, or settlement, is where Hindustani culture began. So, this is much more than an archaeological restoration. It is a rebirth in an origi-



monuments and people's lives

NIZAMUDDIN

nal cradle – a wow moment. Circumstances don't often conspire to such perfection.

The dargah or shrine of the Sufi saint, Hazrat Nizamuddin, is in the Nizamuddin Basti. His favourite disciple was Amir Khusrau, the qawwali exponent and originator of Khari Boli, the Hindi we speak today. He, too, is buried here. So is the legendary poet Mirza Ghalib.

Delhi's only surviving stepwell, the Nizamuddin Baoli, built in 1321-22 is adjacent to the dargah. The crumbling buildings surrounding the baoli and waste disposed of by pilgrims have dirtied its waters. But the waters continue to be replenished mysteriously by underground springs!

The Nizamuddin Basti sits on 700 years of such significant and captivating history and includes the largest collection of valuable Islamic buildings in India.

The basti's exclusion from Lutyen's Delhi and its current poverty and decaying infrastructure make it difficult to believe that it had a glorious past. But the basti was once the original urban heart of Delhi with an evolved secular tradition and tolerance of different cultures. As a trading centre it was prosperous too.

Reviving the Nizamuddin Basti, therefore, is a task that has much contemporary relevance. The inclusive and inter-cultural values associated with the basti in its heyday are even more relevant now. Also, the strategic midwifery that delivers new civic facilities in the basti could be the inspiration for overcoming similar challenges in the old quarters of other Indian cities.

The present conservation and urban revival effort is led by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), which works through its arms, the Aga Khan

LAKSHMAN ANAND



The interiors of Humayun's tomb – lime punning on the walls and restored lattice work have an immediate impact



The ceiling of Humayun's tomb

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Rajpal Singh, chief engineer, with Attar Singh (wearing glasses) and other traditional stone craftsmen



The restored facade of Isa Khan's tomb

Foundation (AKF) and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC).

A memorandum of understanding was signed in 2007 involving the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) and the Central Public Works Department (CPWD). A subsequent MoU was signed with the Delhi Development Authority (DDA).

There are multiple buy-ins at various levels. For instance, the personal involvement of the local municipal councillor, Farhad Suri, has been invaluable.

The project gets financial support from the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, Sir Ratan

Tata Trust, Ford Foundation, US Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, World Monuments Fund, German Embassy and HUDCO.

Earlier, in 1997, the Aga Khan had funded the restoration of the gardens around Humayun's tomb as a gift to India on the 50th anniversary of its Independence.

But the current project is envisaged to run much deeper. It is an urban renewal initiative, which goes beyond architecture. It includes the Nizamuddin Basti in the belief that conservation should generate livelihoods and make meaning-

LAKSHMAN ANAND



LAKSHMAN ANAND



The making of glazed tiles meant getting the blue colour just right

LAKSHMAN ANAND

‘We looked for projects in Hyderabad and Agra and came back here because of the possibility of linking conservation with major socio-economic development.’



A pillar recreated

LAKSHMAN ANAND



ful improvements in the way ordinary folks live. It is not enough to bring back monuments. The community must be involved.

Says Ratish Nanda, project director, “The restoration of the gardens at Humayun’s tomb was seen as a successful PPP venture. But His Highness the Aga Khan wasn’t satisfied because people hadn’t benefitted.”

“We looked for projects in Hyderabad and Agra and came back here because of the possibility of linking conservation with major socio-economic development. Its central location helps us create a visible model,” says Nanda.

“We see conservation as a tool. It is not an end in itself,” he explains.

Nanda is supported by a multidisciplinary team of 172 people. He trained as an architect in Delhi and grew up in the city next to monuments without knowing their significance.

Inspired by a professor of his, he began looking at history and archaeology more closely. Now he is acknowledged as an expert with his own approach to restoration. He has worked on the restoration of the Bagh-e-Babur in Kabul.

But restoration draws on team effort, especially a project as complex as this one. Many hearts and minds have to be in unison. Nanda leads a pool of talented and highly qualified people who hang together because they share a mission though they come from different backgrounds.

The core team has Rajpal Singh, Jyotsna Lal, Guntej Bhushan, Sangeeta Bais, Shveta Mathur, Deeti Ray, Archana Saad Akhtar, Aftab Jalia and Somak Ghosh.

Over five years the benefits from the project have been many. It has provided employment, better health care and schooling. Homes have been renovated, some streets paved afresh and parks reclaimed for the use of the community.

The project has taken the basti from abject despair and decay to hope – though much remains to be done and it continues to be an urban hell for the families residing in small rooms in buildings built close together. Some of the lanes between buildings are barely wide enough for one person.

Recently, in the last week of November, the Apni Basti Mela, or fair, held over three days, brought residents out in large numbers in a carnival mood. Importantly, it was held in a park that used to be overrun by drug peddlers and criminals. So, some things have changed forever and the residents realize this.

For the city of Delhi as a whole the project has provided 152 acres of open green space, which is invaluable in the face of ever-increasing congestion. Interestingly, 41 acres have been taken back from other users and given to the ASI. Getting back land is normally an impossible task in any urban setting.

“This entire area is all gardens. Humayun’s tomb is contiguous to Purana Qilla, the Delhi Zoo, Sundar Nursery and the Millenium Park,” says Nanda. “This area, right in the middle of Delhi, would be bigger than Central Park. You can create a 1,500 acre city park if you make pedestrian connections and transport linkages.”



The Nizamuddin Baoli where 18 families were persuaded to leave their crumbling homes

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Shveta Mathur of the urban planning unit at one of the homes where repairs are being undertaken

HUGE CHALLENGES: It was with Humayun's tomb and other monuments and the adjacent Sundar Nursery that the project began.

The challenges here were huge because Nanda, as project director, set out to raise the bar for what needed to be done. It was to be a restoration in the truest sense with materials and techniques similar to those used when the monuments were originally built.

It was decided to use lime mortar instead of cement for repairs. All colours for the patterns and designs were to be from natural dyes. Craftsmen were flown in from Uzbekistan to teach the art of making tiles.

A search was launched for Indian craftsmen who could do traditional work in stone. They were identified in their villages and brought to Delhi to recreate pieces of the structures that needed to be replaced.

It was also important to find stone that matched the original – not just in

colour, but in grain and texture too. So, stone pieces had to be sourced from Rajasthan. Occasionally, the stone was found in the most unlikely of places. For instance, during the Commonwealth Games, when pavements were being dug up in Delhi, some of the discarded stones were perfect for the floor of the apron of Humayun's tomb!

Creating a single piece of lattice can take weeks and months. Each stone is unique. Sizes vary, sometimes by very little. It means first getting the thickness of the stone slab right and then chiselling it to make it even. After that comes creation of the design, which, when there is lattice work involved, has to be the same on both sides.

The goal in conservation is to match a known original. In stonework a craftsman is often working on two planes and then creating fine ridges and curves. Detail and precision are required.

The project has so far generated some 100,000 man-days at Humayun's tomb alone, which means that around 2,000 traditional craftsmen have been given employment. This is a signal achievement because it has created a demand for vanishing skills.

Attar Singh is one such craftsman. He is in his fifties and comes from Dolpur in Rajasthan. He does some of

the really fine work at the project site.

Attar Singh is eager to explain some of the finer challenges of his craft. "It requires flexibility and precision because no two designs are the same," he says.

He learnt from a master craftsman and has taught others, but the market for such work doesn't exist. "My son doesn't want to be a stone craftsman. He is studying to be a teacher in the village. It is like that with most of our children."

SENSE OF WONDER: Restoration succeeds when it brings back the original splendour of the monument. "It must be such that the visitor is overwhelmed. We have to bring the 'wow' factor back," says Nanda.

At Humayun's tomb and the nearby tomb of Isa Khan the areas around



The municipal school has been made more attractive and attendance has gone up

have been restored to enhance the presence of the monuments.

At Humayun's tomb, revival of the gardens in the earlier phase was crucial. Together with the gardens, water channels were restored. The slope of the channels allows the water to flow with gravity. It is a fine sight and water has a pleasing effect.

The outside and inside of the tomb have been worked on extensively with lime mortar replacing the cement clumsily used for repairs earlier.

"We have removed one million kilos of cement concrete from the roof of Humayun's tomb and restored 200,000 square feet of lime plaster," says Nanda.

And what happened to the one million kilos of cement concrete? Well, it went into building the peripheral road in Sundar Nursery. So, there was zero garbage.

Removing concrete from a monument is a delicate task. Cut too deep and the monument gets damaged. So, the project team sought international expertise. One of the proposals was to create very precise incisions with a diamond-edged tool. But just making the incision would cost ₹86 lakhs. Instead, it was decided to employ traditional craftsmen using hand tools. The final bill: just ₹5 lakhs!

Lime mortar was used traditionally before cement became popular. It works better because it breathes – allowing moisture to escape continuously over the years. Cement does the opposite: it locks in the moisture, which then damages the structure.

But it is lime punning that truly enhances the look of a monument. Lime punning is a thin coat of about one millimetre thickness consisting of lime, marble dust and other natural additives such as egg white.

The result is a smooth and pearly surface that brightens the inside of the tomb and offsets the colours in the designs on the ceiling. The effect is dramatic in the Humayun tomb, Isa Khan tomb and the Sundar Burj.

Punning also has to be red to match the original sandstone of the building. In this case powdered brick is used.

DIGGING UP THE EVIDENCE: Excavations have led to some major changes. For instance, at Isa Khan's tomb it was discovered that four feet of mud had piled up, covering the base of the tomb and leaving only the upper portions of the arches in the inner wall showing.

Finally, 12,000 cubic metres of mud were removed to reveal an original layout in which gardens sloped away from the tomb as a tiered draining board for



Health facilities for women and children



Amir Ahmed, a local boy, now earns a living as a history tour guide

'We see conservation as a tool

LAKSHMAN ANAND

Civil Society News
New Delhi

ON a stone bench in the beautiful gardens of Humayun's tomb, Ratish Nanda, project director of the Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative, spoke at length to *Civil Society*. Edited excerpts from the interview:

What is your vision of conservation?

I passionately believe that conservation can solve a lot of India's problems. It can promote employment and communal harmony. There is also a huge economic potential from tourism for the government and local communities that live around historical sites.

Conservation in India needs to be craft based rather than engineering based which is what the principal difference is. The ASI is recognizing this difference. There is an attempt to create a new national policy for conservation.

For us the underlying theme is that conservation is a tool for development. Quite apart from the quality of life and the crafts approach, what is important is that conservation needs to be multidisciplinary.

We are really fortunate to have a multidisciplinary team. We have got craftsmen, engineers, architects, archaeologists, historians, structural engineers, designers and, of course, health, education and urban planning experts. So this project has given us the opportunity to create a model.

What is the significance of this conservation project for Delhi?

Our monuments have lost the 'wow' factor. So now when people go into Isa Khan's tomb or Sunderwala Burj I wait for their first reaction and it is always 'wow' or something similar. We see conservation as a tool. It is not an end in itself. I think conservation needs to be much more incentive based and not penalty based.

It is very critical to have land available. A monument needs its breathing space. The ASI now has 45 acres more. We have been able to piece together a land parcel. This will be there in perpetuity and enjoyed by millions of people across generations. The project got back land the government had lost. This entire area is all gardens. Humayun's tomb is contiguous to Purana Qilla, the Delhi Zoo, Sundar Nursery and the Millennium Park.



Ratish Nanda at Isa Khan's tomb

collecting rainwater. The apron of the tomb similarly sloped towards the gardens with spouts serving as points from which the rainwater could flow out.

With the mud removed, Isa's tomb has been transformed. Lemon trees have been planted in the sloping gardens. When they reach their full size they will be at eye level for someone standing on the apron of the tomb.

SIMPLE MOVES: Sometimes effective renovations are simple moves based on how the contemporary eye visualises space and necessity. At the Chausath Khamba, a big wall divided it from its own forecourt beyond which was the Urs Mahal. The wall was removed and a spacious courtyard emerged. It is here that music festivals are held.

Mirza Ghalib's grave is next to the Chausath Khamba. There was metal fencing between the grave and the road alongside. It was a jail-like ambience not befitting an historical site. The AKDN also wanted to hold mushairas or poetry sessions in honour of Ghalib at the grave. It was a great idea but a better atmosphere was needed. So, the severe metal grills were replaced with delicate stone lattice work which serves to keep out noise as well.

The Chausath Khamba is the tomb of Mirza Aziz Kokaltash. It is built entirely of marble with 64 marble pillars supporting 25 marble domes.

It is going through extensive renovation. Each stone in the roof is being removed, repaired, documented and replaced. As in the case of other monuments, earlier repairs using cement had caused extensive damage.

In the original construction of the Chausath Khamba, iron clamps were used to hold the stones together. With the cement used for early repair work trapping moisture in the structure, those iron clamps had been rusting. They are now being replaced with stainless steel clamps.

SUNDAR NURSERY: Sundar Nursery is being redeveloped to be a unique destination where nature lovers can go to learn more about plants and trees. There are some 13,000 parks in Delhi but not one offers this opportunity.

A survey done in 2007 showed that there were 1,800 trees with 146 species of plants and trees in Sundar Nursery. Since then 20,000 plants of more than 300 tree species have been introduced. Sundar Nursery has 27 rare species of trees not found in Delhi or the rest of India.

The emphasis, however, is on species native to Delhi. A special microhabitat zone – meant to serve as a microcosm of Delhi's original landscape – spread across 12 acres within Sunder Nursery hosts over 92 species.

Sundar Nursery is being developed with a central axis. At one end is Humayun's tomb at the other the Azimganj Sarai. It will have the form of a Persian garden with smaller water channels leading into a bigger water body.

An amphitheatre is being built and a location created for flower shows. In addition there will be revenue from a restaurant.

NIZAMUDDIN BASTI: In Nizamuddin Basti AKDN faces its chosen test of making conservation work for the social and economic uplift of people.

It hasn't been easy because it means reaching out and establishing trust. Finally, people have to believe that things will work for them. They have to be part of the solution.

A truly big challenge for AKDN was to get 18 families to relocate from their crumbling homes atop the Nizamuddin Baoli.

The wall of the baoli had collapsed and needed to be urgently repaired and for this the families had to move out for good.

It took Shveta Mathur of the urban renewal unit months of talking to the

not an end'

If there were somebody really visionary in India this area right in the middle of Delhi would be bigger than Central Park. You can create a 1,500 acre city park if you can make pedestrian connections and transport linkages.

It is of significance to the country. Potentially the whole park could be a World Heritage site.

What are the key takeaways for other cities and urban planners from this project?

In keeping with international standards we have got the community involved. Conservation and development are going hand in hand. Almost 50 per cent of our staff is involved in community development. So we are creating an oasis and improving the life of the local community. If conservators and urban planners are going to take any lessons back, then it is that there is a model process for any conservation project that must be followed. You must document the building, understand its significance and involve craftsmen. Secondly, a monument is not isolated from its setting. We have put in 20,000 trees. For us environmental concerns are as important as heritage.

This work has been done under a PPP. How have you made it succeed?

It all stems from the Aga Khan's philosophy that governments can't do this alone. I think that led to us signing a single MoU with all the government agencies involved, which was the smartest thing we did. We decided till we have everybody signing the same piece of paper we are not going to go ahead.

The complexities are enormous but we found surprising support from government agencies once the initial scepticism was overcome. We were able to demonstrate success with the garden restoration work. With the municipality it was the school. The councillor was very supportive. Once it was established that we were here to work in partnership with government and not at cross-purposes we never had to shut down work for long periods of time.

It was more challenging to work with the community. There are over 20 NGOs working in the Nizamuddin Basti. We needed a major outreach programme. We went to people's houses rather than waiting for them to come to us.

families to finally get them to relocate to a resettlement colony.

"At first they wouldn't let us into their homes. There was a narrow passage where they would stop us," recalls Mathur.

But patience and gentle persuasion prevailed. Dealing with the government required as much persistence because it had to provide the land where the families could be resettled.

Finally, each family got just 12.5 square metres to build a house in a peripheral area of Delhi! But they moved on.

A topographical survey of the basti met with stiff resistance.

Seven principal streets were identified for improvement. These were the most densely used streets since they were entry points into the basti and led to important spiritual and heritage sites.

"Infrastructure was the turning point. Once residents saw street lights, roads and drains they got very interested," says Mathur.

AKDN refurbishes homes by providing 40 per cent of the cost in the form of materials. If the head of a household is a woman, assistance is increased to 60 per cent. Around 95 houses have been repaired. A door-to-door garbage collection system has been started.

Public toilets have also been made. Families pay ₹30 for a monthly card. For single use, ₹2 is charged. A local self-help group (SHG), the Rehmat Nigraani Samooh, keeps the facility clean. A second toilet complex with bathing facilities is coming up.

"You know, we were always embarrassed about our neighbourhood. It was so dirty. My children used to say let's go live somewhere else. Now we feel proud of our basti. Truthfully, we did not know each other. We got to meet thanks to AKDN," says Zahida who has lived in Nizamuddin Basti for 30 years and is now

I think our biggest success is that we have been able to constitute a decision-making process. So there is an ASI committee that comes here on a monthly basis and has a meeting.

How crucial is a team and how have you chosen yours?

Our full time staff is 172. I have learnt a lot from them. It would have been unmanageable without people sharing the same passion. We have created projects around people including the community in running a gymnasium or like the housing improvement programme or toilets. The commitment is crazy. We are more of a cooperative, a partnership. We have senior retired people from government agencies. They are nameless but at the end of their careers they have found an opportunity to do real good. I think almost 90 per cent of our people are out there because they see it as a lifetime opportunity.

How much has the global experience counted? For instance you worked in Kabul. Uzbek craftsmen were brought here to teach tile making.

That was only possible because of our worldwide network. To understand these buildings one has to go to their roots. So that is what has taken me through the Islamic world. It is important to stick to global standards.

If we were not one of the leading conservation players in the world we would not have been allowed by the politics of conservation to undertake this work, especially when we come in and remove cement layers and put back original layers.

This project is rooted in the Indian context but conforming to international norms. They wouldn't be able to do this anywhere in the world because of costs and scale. This building suffered a century of damage. Over here our craftspeople are still affordable and plenty.

How financially sustainable is the project?

Financial sustainability is very easily done. We are a not for profit PPP which essentially means we don't want a single penny back. But if we get the right agreement in place we would create the right infrastructure to generate the finances to keep all the programmes going in perpetuity. Right now we are subsidising the toilets with about ₹20,000 per month. We will create SHGs to become more NGO oriented. But our critical issue with financial sustainability is at Sundar Nursery. We will need a lot more money than presently allotted to us. We would want to put in the facilities required to generate revenue through restaurants, kiosks, tickets. We have done an Ernst and Young study on that. In Kabul, Bagh-e-Babur last year made a \$150,000 profit. ■

a health worker with AKDN.

The municipal primary school has undergone a transformation. The walls have coloured tiles depicting nature. The school has incorporated Building as Learning Aid (BALA) techniques to make learning fun for children. There are rows of low blackboards for children to scribble on. Drinking water has also been placed low so that children can access it. There are measurement charts on the walls and floors. There are toilets and unbreakable glass windows.

Enrolment has shot up to 633 children, says Haider Rizwi, the education coordinator. A Vidyalaya Kalyan Samiti was started as an interface between parents and teachers. The problem was that the school had no system in place. There was no assembly or timetable.

"My 26-year-old son went from Class 1 to Class 5 without learning a thing," says the elderly Jamila. "But my grandchildren are very smart. They know English, numbers, everything."

AKDN assessed the health needs of residents with the community health department of AIIMS. Unsurprisingly, pregnant women and children emerged as the most vulnerable group. A path lab was set up where 32 types of tests are carried out and 55,000 have been done till date.

Forty local women have been trained as health workers or Sehat Sahelis. Each looks after 40 homes. They report to a Sehat Appa who in turn reports to the doctor or public health specialist.

Previously around 82 people used to approach the polyclinic every day. That number has doubled to 150 people. "Sehat Sahelis now report fewer maternal deaths and less malnourishment. Women are taken to hospitals for delivery," says Dr Simran Wadhawan, a specialist in public health who supervises the outreach. Every health worker explains what foods to eat. ■

Business

□ Enterprise

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Spectacles for just ₹99

VisionSpring helps rural India see



VisionSpring's India chief, Keerti Pradhan, explaining the use of the I-Test device to a Vision Entrepreneur

Arjun Sen
Karnal (Haryana)

MANURAM, 60, can't believe his eyes. A tailor, he is back at work and can see every stitch he makes, just when he thought he was going blind and would have to give up the only job he knows to do. In fact, all he needed was a pair of spectacles.

On 5 December, VisionSpring, a non-profit based in New York organized an eye camp in his village, Kamalpur, 18 km from Karnal in Haryana. Manuram got his eyes tested and bought a pair of specs for just ₹99.

Manuram's vision has declined over the years. The quality of his work suffered and he began losing customers. He thought his blurred eyesight was an act of God. He didn't think it worth his while to travel to Karnal and get his vision checked.

Tests at the eye camp in Kamalpur revealed that Manuram was suffering from age-related vision impairment leading to loss of near vision that could be easily corrected with a pair of reading lenses.

"Manuram is a typical case in India where nearly 200 million people suffer from vision impairment due to refractory error that can be corrected by a pair of inexpensive eyeglasses. About 50 per cent of such people suffer from myopia while the rest can't see well because of poor near vision," explains Keerti Bhushan Pradhan, country director of VisionSpring and its global advisor.

"The tragedy is that only about 20 million – mostly affluent urban folk – have glasses while the rest don't. There is a strong retail structure for the relatively rich urban population but the needs of the poor are not that well attended," says Kevin Hassey, VisionSpring's global CEO.

If tailors, carpenters, blacksmiths, cobblers, artisans and drivers can't see properly their livelihood suffers and they slide into poverty. Farmers, too, need good vision otherwise they won't be able to identify pests attacking their crops or price points on pesticide covers, explains Pradhan.



A farmer checks out glasses before purchase. VisionSpring's global CEO, Kevin Hassey, is picking up another pair.

Also, more and more rural folk are using banking facilities and mobile phones and there are many mobile apps being invented specifically for them for which good vision is essential.

"We focus primarily on reading glasses as correcting near vision has the greatest economic impact on poverty and income generation," said Pradhan. "We have simple reading glasses and bifocals with plastic lenses. We also sell photochromatic eye glasses with glass lenses," he said.

VisionSpring has introduced a hand-held testing device called the I-Test Vision Screen invented in Norway that instantly checks eyes. The device is an easily portable, foldable headset made of lightweight plastic and weighing only 186 grams. The instrument is of limited use for a complete test for refractive error but excellent for a simple and quick assessment of vision.

"For more complicated cases we refer the patient to a VisionSpring Optical Shop or a partner eye hospital. But this device is accurate for 80 per cent of the refractive error cases we come across in rural areas," said Pradhan. At eye camps and in hospitals, the traditional and more detailed method of checking eyes, which people are more familiar with, is used.

Eyeglasses are sourced at low prices from contract manufacturers in China according to VisionSpring's designs. The idea is to reach the rural market with affordable products and sell large volumes at low margins to recover costs.

So VisionSpring has adopted a bottom of the pyramid approach to create a sustainable business model and address the three problems of awareness, accessibility and affordability.

PROBLEM AND SOLUTION: Dr Jordan Kassalow, an American eye doctor and public health expert, started VisionSpring. While working on a rare parasitic eye disease called River Blindness in Congo, he stumbled on the amazing fact that 80 per cent of the people who came to him for treatment needed only a pair of specs.

To tackle this problem, Dr Kassalow decided to train villagers especially women to become Vision Entrepreneurs. They would test vision impairment and sell corrective lenses to villagers. The Vision



The outreach manager uses the I-Test

Entrepreneurs would work with organizations that already had extensive outreach programmes in rural areas.

Today VisionSpring operates in 20 countries in the developing world including Central America, Africa and Southeast Asia. It expects to end 2012 with global sales of 300,000 pairs of glasses.

"We have ambitious goals in India," says Hassey. Pradhan aims to sell 100,000 pairs this year and reach a sales target of one million pairs within the next three to five years.

HUB AND SPOKE: To become a Vision Entrepreneur, a villager needs to invest ₹15,000 to earn around ₹7,500 a month. He or she will undergo a three-day training programme and be given a kit bag containing I-Test and a few models of eyeglasses. Then their job is to go door to door in villages, test and measure eyes and sell specs for not more than ₹100.

"This not only creates employment for the entrepreneurs but also solves the problem of reach," said Pradhan.

Apart from managing Vision Entrepreneurs on their own, the non-profit partners other organizations working in rural areas to train and equip Vision Entrepreneurs at their own cost. VisionSpring only sells affordable eyeglasses to such partners.

VisionSpring has already roped in ITC e-Choupal,

L.V. Prasad Eye Institute, Nidan, PSI India, Sakar Foundation, Vedanta Resources, Village Welfare Society, Villgro and Vision 2020.

"We are now talking to 30 more partners such as Sahaj who have 56,000 rural community service centres and Novartis' Arogya Parivar. Contracts should get signed over the next couple of months," Pradhan said. But there is high risk in this approach. At any point the partner may opt out or stop selling VisionSpring glasses. "We therefore need more reliable channels," said Pradhan who has an MBA in healthcare from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and has worked with the renowned Aravind Hospital.

To quickly achieve greater reach on their own, VisionSpring has developed a hub-and-spoke model that makes its work financially sustainable through cross subsidization.

According to this arrangement a store is set up in a city or the district headquarters and a mobile van does the rounds of surrounding villages. The city store sells premium products including global brands such as Ray Ban and Bausch and Lomb while the outreach mobile van sells glasses to villagers at prices starting from ₹99. So the city store subsidises the rural outreach programme.

The outreach van targets one particular rural area each day and typically covers about 300 such areas in a year. Each hub has an outreach manager who does all the planning. Once a week he meets the sarpanch of a village and gets his permission to set up camp for one day in the local community hall or any other suitable spot. He then informs the sarpanches of four or five villages around the camp site that a VisionSpring free eye testing and glass sales camp will be set up on a particular date.

Karnal in Haryana is VisionSpring's first such model. The response at the camp at Kamalpur village was quite impressive. It began at 10 am and by noon as many as 78 people had signed up for getting their eyes tested. "By the time we finish at around 4 pm, on an average we will get about 100 people. A few sign up, then go off to attend to their tasks and don't turn up but 90 per cent do," says H.V.N. Raj, Associate Director (India) and head of the Karnal hub-and-spoke distribution channel.

"On an average out of the 100 people who come, about 40 would need corrective lenses and at least 25 will actually buy our glasses," said Pradhan.

A camp requires around four people to run it. There is a driver who doubles up as a salesman once the temporary sales point is set up at the camp, a trained optometrist who sets up a full-fledged traditional eye testing centre in the community hall or school, the outreach manager who doubles up as an optometrist using the portable I-Test Vision Screener and another salesman who runs the temporary sales counter.

Apart from the mobile van outreach mechanism, the hub at Karnal also has a tie-up with Arpana, a private multispecialty charitable hospital run by professional doctors. VisionSpring has a permanent outlet here for attending to surgical cases and for selling eyeglasses to those who need them.

"The mobile camps offer eyeglasses for correcting near or far vision. For more complicated cases, especially those that need surgery, such as for cataract, we refer them to Arpana's hospital so that mobile camps can provide a one-stop eye healthcare delivery point," Pradhan explained. ■

‘Workplaces are more sensitive to disability’

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Rita Soni: Nasscom Foundation’s focus is on employment and technology for the disabled

Vidya Viswanathan
New Delhi

THE Nasscom Foundation has been energetic in getting people with disability employed. It has been holding job fairs, working with NGOs in skill development and talking to the government about the policy changes required to give a boost to employment opportunities for the disabled.

Rita Soni, CEO of Nasscom Foundation, is an engineer by qualification. She worked with General Electric for six years, returned to college and then decided to move to the non-profit sector. She worked with the Ford Foundation and the America India Foundation started by President Bill Clinton during the Gujarat earthquake rehabilitation process. Soni was also head of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) at YES bank before she joined the Nasscom Foundation.

Soni spoke to *Civil Society* at her office in Delhi on the Nasscom Foundation’s role in creating employment and friendlier workplaces for the disabled. Excerpts from the interview:

How has your journey in the non-profit sector in India been?

The realization dawned on me that everything that I had learned about development was very American and Western. I felt that resources and solutions would come from the West and it was just a question of implementation. But after coming here my eyes opened. Solutions are getting figured out in India and resources can be raised too. Another thing that got highlighted for me

was the importance of the private sector.

My assignment at the Nasscom Foundation connects all the dots for me. The Nasscom Foundation, started 12 years ago, now works mostly with the non-profit sector. Its focus is on how technology can help non-profits use their funding better. Quick heal, for example, is a Nasscom member company. It sells anti-virus software to NGOs at a discount. Considering that IT is a \$100 billion industry it is already having an impact.

Disability is a deep dive and so are volunteering, strategic donations such as software or computers and the emerging space of impact sourcing – hiring people who have not had access to employment before. It could be a BPO company in rural Uttarakhand or a mainstream company like Aegis that is locating itself in tier three towns and hiring people with disabilities.

What are the areas you are focusing on at Nasscom Foundation especially disability?

Nasscom has an agenda of diversity inclusion that includes gender diversity, intergenerational diversity, intercultural diversity and disability. Our work in disability focuses on employment of people with disability and the role that technology can play to make society more disability friendly. For example, it could be screen readers or making websites structured for accessibility or having alternate text for images. We have been working with the Wadhvani Foundation on this initiative.

Last year we organised job fairs and advocacy campaigns to sensitise industry and governments. In employability we act as a middleman.

There are many NGOs and organizations that work on capacity building – on soft skills. We also work with VRCs (Vocational Rehabilitation Centres) and special employment exchanges. We then go to industry and talk about getting these candidates employed. With companies we are having open dialogues behind closed doors with senior management. People are getting more sensitive and they are beginning to ask questions like – what are the things that need to be done to make a workplace amiable to someone who is disabled? We are only working with physical disabilities although we would like to work with mental disabilities and some of our member companies have worked with the Special Olympics.

Our companies are able to put physical infrastructure in place. For example, elevators which are disabled friendly and other facilities. The conversation is now getting more nuanced. We are talking about creating affinity groups. You hire a person with disability into a department and an affinity group facilitates a discussion about experiences. Everything is not going to be perfect when a disabled person walks into your office. We tell them that if you go to the home of a person who is disabled it is not perfect. We tell them to be committed to being sensitive and look into issues as they encounter them.

How do you deal with the reaction of other employees?

We do sensitization, especially with the company’s human resources department. Our approach is to sensitise the trainers. Mindtree has always been inclusive, so also Aegis. Microsoft products are all accessible but in terms of hiring they have not been so proactive. But we are having conversations with them about hiring. Other companies are getting started.

How are you involved with the government?

Last year we were invited by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and the Ministry of Labour to examine employment of the disabled for the Five Year Plan. We were asked to look at what policy changes were needed to make workplaces more open. As expected, civil society organizations talked about quotas. They asked for three per cent reservation. We, along with many industry bodies, said it would be great if we thought three per cent reservation is working but actually it is not. So why apply it to industry?

We talked about vocational training, accessibility tools like state-of-the-art wheelchairs and subsidies for these. We also talked about supporting the medium and small-scale industries sector that makes accessibility tools, and facilitate their participation. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has also asked us to examine an ineffective policy – that if a company employs a disabled person, the government compensates a similar amount to the company. According to that policy, 400 disabled people are employed and that is terrible.

We said transport, physical modifications, sensitive workshops and accessibility tools are what we need to focus on. A company spends on these. This is what needs to be compensated. Also, it is very difficult to get disability certificates and very humiliating. So we have made policy recommendations on these. ■

Insights

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White Paper is a black mark

PARINEETA DANDEKAR & HIMANSHU THAKKAR

PRITHVIRAJ Chavan was brought in as Chief Minister of Maharashtra due to his honest image. He seemed to be on the right track when he declared in early May 2012, following allegations of serious corruption in the Maharashtra Water Resources Department (MWRD), that a White Paper would be brought out. The resignation of NCP's Ajit Pawar from the post of Deputy Chief Minister, following allegations that he was majorly responsible for Maharashtra's Irrigation Scam since he held the post of WRD minister from 1999 to 2009, also reinforced the Chief Minister's reputation.

But now that image is in tatters. On 29 November, the White Paper came out, six months late. The document was completely disappointing. Most media reports called it a whitewash. Then a week later Ajit Pawar was reinstated based on that whitewashed paper.

Eventually on 17 December, the state government bowed to pressure and decided to appoint a special investigation team (SIT) under Dr Madhav Chitale to investigate the Irrigation Scam. The choice of Madhav Chitale is inappropriate. He has no track record of having an independent, unbiased or objective outlook when it comes to dams and the role of the establishment in such projects.

The White Paper is available on the MWRD website (www.mahawrd.org) in Marathi. That it entirely fails in its mandate of addressing the major issues plaguing the MWRD is not a surprise since the White Paper has been prepared by a guilty party, namely the MWRD under the leadership of WRD minister Sunil Tatkare, who belongs to the NCP.

The White Paper is in two parts. The first is of 129 pages and titled, 'Progress of Irrigation in



The quality of construction of the Gosikhurd dam project in the Vidarbha region has been found to be very poor

Maharashtra and its Future Roadmap'. The second part of 794 pages is about details of selected projects. It is not even a White Paper in technical terms as there has been no public consultation process before finalising it.

Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan first announced that a White Paper would be published on 4 May 2012, amidst huge, substantiated corruption charges levelled against the MWRD, Water Resources Minister Sunil Tatkare and the Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar by civil society, top officials from the Water Resources Department and a plethora of government appointed committee reports.

The central issue here was corruption which manifested itself in various forms: colossal,

unjustified cost escalations, favouring contractors against WRD's own guidelines, formation of a cartel by contractors, post-bid negotiations which have been banned by the Central Vigilance Commission, blatant violation of laws, violation of Governors Directives to name a few. This was the context in which a White Paper was demanded.

But the actual White Paper has simply not made any mention of the most crucial issues! It is a status paper at best, which goes on and on, regurgitating contested data, known to be untrue from previous official reports. It denies any wrongdoing. The level of brazenness is mind blowing. The most charitable explanation is that the WRD is behaving like an

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ostrich; another realistic explanation is that the White Paper is just a vehicle to bring Ajit Pawar back to his powerful seat of Deputy Chief Minister and whitewash the Irrigation Scam.

A quick reading of the White Paper shows that the MWRD is an extremely top heavy institution with no mechanism for participation or accountability. The section on Economic Aspects, one of the most important parts of the paper, is just one page long. It says in passing that the remaining costs of current tendered work in five irrigation development corporations – Maharashtra Krishan Valley Development Corporation (MKVDC), Vidarbha Irrigation Development Corporation (VIDC), Godavari Marathwada Irrigation Development Corporation (GMIDC), Konkan Irrigation Development Corporation (KIDC) and Tapi Irrigation Development Corporation (TIDC) – is ₹29,500 crores.

One of the key issues in this whole chapter was the lack of an increase in irrigated area for a decade while over ₹75,000 crores were spent. Even the Chief Minister and the state's Economic Survey highlighted this. The White Paper instead of accepting this reality, just makes unjustifiable claims that the irrigation potential created or utilised has gone up by five per cent to 28 per cent in these 10 years. These are hollow claims since the WRD does not have any reliable system in place to analyse this. It refused to put such a system in place though urged by the Water and Irrigation Commission in 1999. It has very conveniently included wells in its irrigated area, and has also blamed water intensive crops and non-irrigation water uses for the low irrigation created. It is the WRD itself which has intentionally done this despite its negative impact on over 50 per cent of the population dependant on agriculture.

Unjustified, mindboggling cost escalation has been one of the most crucial aspects highlighted by civil society, government appointed committees and political parties in the Opposition. For example, the cost of the Kondhane Dam went up from the tender stage cost of ₹56.14 crores to ₹614 crores, a 10- fold rise in 33 days flat! The cost of the Kalu Dam went up by 127 per cent, the Shai Dam by 406 per cent and the Balganga Dam by 149 per cent. All these projects went to the same contractor, namely FA Construction or FA Enterprises.

The White Paper laments that the main reason for cost and time overruns are due to delays in forest, environment and wildlife clearances and rehabilitation and resettlement of displaced people. It even says: "Following demands from people's representatives and in order to save time, WRD enters into private negotiations with landholders, buys some land and starts with work on priority".

Now this is entirely illegal! According to the Forest Conservation Act and the Forest Rights Act, no work can start even on non-forested land without first obtaining a Forest Clearance for the

entire project. The WRD has been routinely starting work illegally, inviting tenders, issuing work orders, illegally giving huge mobilisation advances. And while this is being done, no rehabilitation and resettlement plan is available.

In many cases like in the Balganga Dam in Raigad, the Kalu Dam in Thane and the Lower Painganga Dam in Yavatmal, Forest Clearances were not even sought years after actual work began! The Balganga Dam is 90 per cent complete without either a Forest Clearance or initiation of rehabilitation and resettlement. Interestingly, the White Paper Part II, talks only about selected dams. It does not mention the Balganga Dam at all despite its huge cost escalations, corruption charges and media attention.

For the Gosi Khurd Project in Vidarbha, for which the cost escalated to more than ₹13,300 crores from its estimated cost in 1982, the White

Mendhegiri Committee Reports have exposed rampant corruption, formation of cartels, contractor favouritism, and severely bad quality of work. The Mendhegiri Committee Report of 2009 actually recommended demolishing 23 kms of the left bank canal for its extremely poor quality of construction. The White Paper, however, does not say a single word about these reports or action taken against the engineers and bureaucrats involved.

It has been alleged by Chief Engineer Vijay Pandhare as well as political parties in the Opposition that MWRD has been changing the scope and design of projects based on the contractor's whims causing huge losses to the State Exchequer.

For example, in the case of the Purna Barrage in Vidarbha, the Chief Engineer from Amravati sent a letter to the CWC that the Central Design Organisation (CDO) does not have the requisite

experience to make the design. WAPCOS was asked to draw up the design. In the meantime, the WRD floated tenders on incomplete designs and spent ₹156 crores against ₹190 crores tender cost! The WAPCOS design received after this expenditure put the project cost at ₹638 crores, making it unviable. But by then MWRD had already spent ₹156 crores on a flawed design! The White Paper does not mention this.

The White Paper states that the schedule of rates used by Maharashtra are the lowest in the country, trying to justify cost escalations. However, the Vadnere Committee Report has shown that the MWRD does not respect this schedule of rates and makes payments to the contractor according to prevailing market rates which are many times

higher than the rates in the schedule. Even while the M.K. Kulkarni Committee Report (2009) on projects in the Godavari Basin exposed corruption of more than ₹2,000 crores, no action was taken against WRD officials or contractors. As expected, the White Paper keeps resolutely mum on charges about poor quality of work which is posing dangers to the downstream population.

Even with all the limitations that he may have, Prithviraj Chavan has certainly lost his halo. Maharashtra has also lost an opportunity to clean up the corrupt WRD. The loss for the people of Maharashtra is much greater, particularly in this year of drought when Jayakwadi and Ujani, the state's two largest dams are almost empty. As five PILs against the Irrigation Scam come up for hearing, Ajit Pawar has been hurriedly sworn in as minister only to insulate him from any consequences. Charges against a minister have to pass the Department of Home Affairs, now with the NCP.

The black paper brought out by the BJP notwithstanding, the political opposition in Maharashtra is seriously compromised on this issue with BJP President Nitin Gadkari and his army of contractors themselves involved in the scandal. ■

Parineeta Dandekar and Himanshu Thakkar, South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People (www.sandrp.in)



Corruption in irrigation projects hurts the farmer

Maharashtra has lost an opportunity to clean up the corrupt WRD. The loss in a year of drought when two dams are almost empty is even greater.

Paper states that the Project Affected People are demanding compensation according to Sections 18 and 28 of the Land Acquisition Act which will lead to an additional burden of ₹915 crores.

This exposes the double standards of WRD. It is free to escalate costs to contractors based on the market price, it can escalate its own ETP cost (Establishment, Tools and Plans) every year, but it does not agree to pay compensation and rehabilitate the affected population as per legal provisions!

In the same Gosi Khurd, the CAG Report of 2011, the Vadnere Committee Report and

Who needs a CCI?

KANCHI KOHLI

ONE of the most controversial proposals debated in the last quarter of 2012 was the setting up of a National Investment Board (NIB) for India. The idea, mooted by Finance Minister P. Chidambaram in mid-September, was about establishing an empowered body to clear large infrastructure projects of over ₹1,000 crore which were delayed due to lack of decisions within the government machinery. This proposal, emanating from the Department of Expenditure, Ministry of Finance, was subsequently circulated in the form of a draft cabinet note to various ministries.

The Finance Minister's logic behind the NIB seemed to be based on the notion that for a range of reasons including land acquisition, environmental and forest clearances, several large and economically important projects were delayed and were thereby hampering the economic growth of the country.

A Cabinet Committee on Investment (CCI), similar to an NIB, is now in the pipeline. It will accord single window approval to mega projects over ₹1,000 crores if timelines are not adhered to. It is claimed that all the concerns of the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) were responded to.

But earlier Jayanthi Natarajan, the Union Minister of Environment and Forests (MoEF), had objected to the setting up of such a body. In a very strongly worded letter to the Prime Minister on 8 October 2012, Natarajan had opposed any move like an NIB which would allow bypassing of approvals administered by the MoEF. Apart from emphasising the importance of environment and forest clearances, the letter raised pertinent questions on basic parliamentary functioning and procedure. For instance, if any decision of the MoEF is overruled by such a body, who will answer for this in Parliament?

Natarajan emphasised that domain knowledge is important to decide whether a project is environmentally feasible or not or if forest land can be given for mining, industry or related infrastructure. The environment minister also raised a critical question on the overriding of a minister's authority and substituting it by another one. The letter said, "When the Minister of a Ministry, acting upon the expert advice of officers, takes a decision, there is absolutely no justification for an NIB to assume his/her authority, nor will the NIB, have the competence to do so."

The letter also went on to say that there is a distinct conflict of interest between the objective of a body promoting investment (like a Cabinet Committee on Investments) and the MoEF's man-



Jayanthi Natarajan

date which is to "protect the integrity of the environment, to ensure that our forests and wildlife, and by extension, forest dwellers are protected." This is despite the fact that "hard decisions" have to be taken to balance environment and development.

There is much more in this letter which asserts that it is critical for the process of environment and forest clearances to be duly followed and upheld. But the letter also refuted that delays are due to granting of green clearances. Natarajan's letter emphatically stated that there has not been any hindrance in granting clearances to projects by the ministry but many of them have not taken off or been commissioned. Therefore the problem is "not regulatory, but implementational."

Following this letter the MoEF issued a press release which stated that in the last 32 years since the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, till 2012, a total area of 11,44,861 hectares of forest land has been diverted. It also revealed glorious figures that from 13 July 2011 to 12 July 2012 the ministry has accorded environmental clearance under the EIA Notification 2006, to 209 projects in the sectors of industry (steel and cement), thermal power, river valley and hydro-electric, coal and non-coal mining and National Highways. It was the MoEF's way of establishing that the processes within the ministry are not roadblocks to economic growth.

The letter attempted to knock a nail in the idea

of a body to fast track investments by stating that nuanced decisions around environment and forest clearances are required to "balance the interest of different stakeholders, conservation, local people's livelihoods and economic growth." "When decisions discount these interests", says the letter, "it leads to disputes and intervention by the courts and appellate authorities" which is not good for building investor confidence.

But the irony also lies in the fact that while the MoEF in its letter recognised the problems of such decisions, there are approvals granted by the MoEF to high impact projects based on poor assessments.

Projects like POSCO and Vedanta in Odisha; mining and industrial projects by the Jindals in Chhattisgarh; ports and thermal power plants by the Adani group in Gujarat have all got their approvals from the MoEF. Widespread litigation, local unrest, showcase notices highlighting violations and destruction as well as recommendations from the MoEF's own committees has not influenced the push to approve these projects or condone the illegalities.

It is important to emphasise that the decision to grant forest clearance to the Mahan coal block in Madhya Pradesh came a month after the environment minister's letter to the PM. This, when the MoEF's own Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) had recommended against this project. There is also news that the K. Roy Paul committee on POSCO has submitted its report following the order of the National Green Tribunal to review the project and forest clearance rejection. Vedanta's bauxite mining in Niyamgiri is on the verge of being decided upon in the Supreme Court.

What is the future of India's ecological spaces and the social implications of decisions taken far from the site of upheaval? It is pertinent to emphasise the contents of Jayanthi Natarajan's letter to the PM to reiterate the reasons the MoEF was set up in the first place so that the environmental imperative stands ground. But it is also critical to state that the procedures for environment and forest clearances were not envisaged and designed to ascertain trade-offs.

It was to take decisions on projects based on the nature and extent of environmental and social impacts and not rely on logic based on aspects of national security and economic growth. Doing this defies the very spirit of these laws.

If the MoEF does not speak for the environment and local communities which ministry will? ■

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Gonds cope with changing times

PURUSHOTTAM LAL



CHARKHA

Shiv Singh Anchla donated land to his Gond community

SHIV Singh Anchla, a retired teacher and one of the most respected villagers of Damkasa Gram Panchayat, Block Durgkondal in Kanker district of Chhattisgarh has donated five acres of his land to his Gond tribal community. They now grow rare herbs, plants and trees on it.

Tribal communities, which constitute one-third of the state's population, share a unique relationship with their natural environment. Today, their inimitable cultural heritage is fading due to rapid development.

Shiv Singh Anchla understands the past and can anticipate the future. Not only has he donated his land, he also roams around Gond villages to spread awareness. He alerts tribal communities to threats they could face and he shares ideas with the younger generation to ensure they inherit the wisdom of their forefathers.

He understands that to save Gond heritage, be it natural or cultural, tribal communities moving

ahead towards development have to come together and hold on to that ancestral hook.

For example, in tribal culture every community is expected to protect one rare tree and animal. If someone from that community kills the animal or harms the tree, he is bound to be punished by the community itself. This way the natural balance is maintained.

Shiv Singh Anchla's efforts and their symbiotic relationship with tribal heritage have motivated communities to conserve and sustain their legacy. The dense forest cover of this region spread over a vast expanse enriched with immense mineral wealth is a testimony to their success. Despite its close proximity to the main road, the forests stand unharmed. And in return, the forests help these indigenous communities sustain their socio-economic and cultural lives.

Since time immemorial, tribal communities have lived isolated lives under the thick canopy of trees.

They feel protected in the forests. Jungles have helped them lead a simple life till date. Most of their requirements like wood for building purposes, resin, gum, dyes, firewood, herbal medicines, fodder for cattle, mahua flowers, sal and tendu leaves, edible roots, tubers, bamboo and wild fruits are fulfilled by forests.

The Gond tribe here depends on farming for their other needs. Besides their main crop, paddy, they grow corn, tilhan, madiya etc. But as they ventured late into agriculture, Gonds lack knowledge of irrigation and hence have a surface relationship with agriculture.

At present, every member of the tribal community as per the Forest Rights Act is allowed to cut as much wood for commercial purposes as he or she can carry easily on the shoulder at one go. This wood, along with other products, is sold in the weekly market organized by nearby villages. In these markets the old barter system still prevails. So villagers exchange rice for spices and other things.

If someone tries to violate the law and harm the forests or if villagers face threats from the wood mafia, Forest Committees constituted by villagers, brings these instances to the notice of forest officials. They now have support from the forest department. This was not the case in the past.

The advent of development in these interior villages has started taking over the lives of tribal communities, driving them in a positive direction. Tribal communities are now well aware of panchayats and are taking advantage of various schemes. Anganwadi kendras, primary and secondary schools are providing education to young tribal children placing them on the path to progress. Communication facilities have also reached these remote areas. Today, tribals own mobile phones. Families have become smaller. "We have started realizing the benefits of having two or three children," said Sahdev Gaud, one of the villagers.

Issues like health, transport and safe drinking water have not been sorted out as yet but people have faith that soon they will have access to these facilities. ■

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Gandhi's spirit in tatters

Koormavatara is a film about looking within

Saibal Chatterjee
Thiruvananthapuram

GIRISH Kasaravalli's new film *Koormavatara* (The Tortoise, An Incarnation) reflects two distinct realities – one absolutely apparent, the other not so obvious. Each is as relevant as the other in the context of the world that we live in as consumers and cineastes.

On the thematic level, the film examines the relevance – or the lack of it – of Gandhian values in a consumerist society in which greed and opportunism are rife. The *Koormavatara* storyline, adapted from a novel by Kum Veerabhadrappa, is simple enough and the plight of its aged protagonist is easy to understand and empathize with.

In a far more tangential way, *Koormavatara* articulates the concerns of all those who are alarmed at the profligate manner in which the new India is chasing a paradigm of development that might be morally and physically unsustainable in the long run.

Like his alter ego on the screen, Kasaravalli, 62, a writer-director who has steadfastly resisted dilution of his socially relevant vision as a cinematic storyteller, belongs to an endangered category.

His tribe may have dwindled to barely a handful of practitioners but he carries on regardless, firm in his faith in the ability of the medium to sustain itself, independent of the pecuniary principles of commercial moviemaking. "My brushes with Bollywood-style filmmaking have never been happy," he says. "So I have stayed away."

The central character of *Koormavatara* is Anand



Shikaripura Krishnamurthy, centre, plays Anand Rao in *Koormavatara*

The *Koormavatara* storyline, adapted from a novel by Kum Veerabhadrappa, is simple and the plight of its aged protagonist is easy to empathize with.

Rao, an unassuming government official on the verge of superannuation. His life is thrown into a vortex that is beyond his control when he is offered the chance to play Mahatma Gandhi in a television series.

Anand Rao does bear a resemblance to the iconic historical figure, but can a man who has never faced a camera before pull off the role? But that, as it transpires, turns out to be the least of his problems. Parallels begin to emerge between his life and the story of the Mahatma and he increasingly finds himself falling short.

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As fame and money come Anand Rao's way, the ageing common man confronts a series of uncommon moral challenges as people around him – including his immediate family and close acquaintances – begin to view him through a new prism. But Anand Rao, on his part, stays true to his own self – it is his life that undergoes a drastic transformation. The consequences of the changes that occur push him to the edge of despair.

"*Koormavatara* is not really about Mahatma Gandhi," asserts Kasaravalli in the course of a conversation in Thiruvananthapuram, on the sidelines of the 17th International Film Festival of Kerala. "It is about the place that his ideals still ought to have in our lives. The film is about an individual struggling to come to terms with



A still from the film



Girish Kasaravalli

his inner failings and the dynamics of a changing world."

The metaphor of the title is drawn from the myth of the incarnation of a tortoise that Lord Vishnu assumed to save the world from annihilation. Kasaravalli explains the context: "The tortoise's shell had cracked under the load of the sins of humanity. The question that *Koormavatara* asks is: will Mahatma Gandhi, too, meet much the same fate as his ideals are weighed down by a nation that seems to have lost the fundamental moorings that it was born with over six decades ago?"

Koormavatara had its international premiere in the Contemporary World Cinema section of the 2012 Toronto International Film Festival before travelling to several other leading cinema showcases. The film's gently idealistic soul conceals a deep sense of anguish at the way events have panned out in this country over the past two decades.

To stretch the point that the film makes,

Koormavatara is also an angular comment on Kasaravalli's constant eschewal of commercial filmmaking in an environment where numbers seem to matter more than quality. For those in the know, the beauty of his work stems from the uncompromised purity of his approach to the art and craft of filmmaking.

One of India's most celebrated directors, Kasaravalli has made 14 films, all in his native Kannada language, in a career spanning three and a half decades. Always a creative pacesetter who has followed his own inner voice, he is a four-time winner of the National Award for the best film of the year.

Kasaravalli won his first Golden Lotus for his maiden film, *Ghatashraddha*, in 1977. He followed that up with triumphs in 1986 (*Tabarana Katha*), 1997 (*Thaayi Saheba*) and 2001 (*Dweepa*). But neither awards nor material rewards have impacted his impulses as a filmmaker.

He has continued to follow his own path despite the many challenges that have dotted the journey. Besides the above mentioned films, Kasaravalli has directed such masterpieces as *Bannada Vesha*, *Mane* (his only film that used actors from the Hindi movie industry, Naseeruddin Shah and Deepti Naval), *Haseena*, *Gulabi Talkies* and *Naayi Neralu* (In the Shadow of the Dog). Each film that he has made has been a blow on behalf of his unwavering artistic credo.

It is, therefore, no surprise that he has finally authored a cinematic essay that addresses the convenient and constant manipulation of the Father of the Nation by an India that has moved miles away from the socio-economic values that underpinned Gandhian philosophy.

"We have adopted the external trappings of the Gandhian philosophy – khadi, et al – but chosen to neglect its essence," says the director.

For the role of the retiring civil servant plucked out of anonymity to essay the role of one of the 20th century's most towering personalities, Kasaravalli chose a non-professional who was every bit the part.

Shikaripura Krishnamurthy, who plays Anand Rao in *Koormavatara*, is an erstwhile professor of Sanskrit. He brings organic authenticity to the inner conflict of a man at odds with the world.

The parting statement that Anand Rao makes in the film sums up his agony as much as it captures his integrity. Refusing to complete the assignment, he declares that he has the moral right to play Mahatma Gandhi. Kasaravalli asks: "Would any actor show such honesty in real life?"

As a filmmaker chronicling crucial aspects of a nation in flux, how does Kasaravalli see the mining scams that Karnataka has witnessed of late? "I am definitely concerned, but if I ever make a film on the subject, I will probe the reasons why this is happening rather than focus on what is happening. I am interested in understanding what it is that drives the politics of greed and financial overreach at the individual level," he says. ■

Tonle Sap's unique water world

Cambodia's lake shrinks and expands on its own

Susheela Nair

Phnom Penh (Cambodia)

DRIFTING down Cambodia's Tonle Sap Lake, past floating, stilted villages and observing life on water, is an amazing experience. The lake is a veritable feast of interesting sights. There are a myriad activities taking place here like fishing and shrimp fisheries as well as seasonal agricultural activities like rice planting and harvesting, making fish paste, duck farming and even cricket catching. We cruised past floating fishing villages that had their own schools, hospitals and incredible crocodile farms! We went through small floating towns – shops, community halls, schools and playgrounds all floating on their own raft.

We stumbled upon entire villages with a cluster of stilted houses and floating settlements of houses on rafts. People here live in wooden boats and bamboo rafts on which facilities for everyday life are erected. We found houses, small sheds, vegetable patches, chicken coups and pig-pens all erected on bamboo raft base. House movements on the lake correspond with water levels. The boats are moored in the lake during the dry season and are moved inland as the waters rise during the wet season.

Tonle Sap brims with life – alligators, dozens of fish, poisonous snakes, etc. It is home to thousands of people. Surging forward, we went past mini market boats laden with everything from cans of Coke to fresh produce and a floating pen holding several fat pigs. Our guide pointed to a floating Catholic Church, a modest blue painted



A floating school on Tonle Sap Lake

building. We saw a school and a huge floating gym with a basketball court and a soccer field. Babies are washed in the muddy, stinking water. Several floating gardens are anchored to the bottom of the lake and some houses flaunt bright tropical plants.

We stopped at a floating café, museum and gift store. The museum has on display live crocodiles, large river fish – a mainstay of the Cambodian diet – and eel traps created over centuries. Exotic items for sale include crocodile skin and bottles of Vietnamese rice liquor with small pythons and scorpions inside. You can buy beer and ice cream as well.

Located in the centre of Cambodia, Tonle Sap is one of the most unique geographical wonders of the world. It is a lake-river system with the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia. In local parlance, Tonle Sap means large freshwater river since it's both a commercially important river system and an immense lake connecting Siem Reap in the north with Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh in the south. Tonle Sap is quite literally 'the beating heart of Cambodia.'

Tonle Sap plays a significant role in Cambodian life. Nearly a quarter of Cambodia's population resides in or around the waterway either in stilted villages along its banks or in floating villages within the lake.

Even before our boat docked, we were besieged by boats that carried mothers clutching babies. They begged for money. There were also children wrapped in snakes for photo-ops. Chum, our guide, explained, "The villagers are mainly Vietnamese refugees from wars. Many ethnic Vietnamese have migrated to Cambodia over the last 500 to 1000 years. There are other displaced people from the Cambodian hills. They live in floating villages scattered around the lake eking out a living by fishing, begging and selling souvenirs to tourists."



A snake wrapped around a child

WATER WONDER: Connected to the Mekong River the Tonle Sap is part of a unique hydrological phenomenon unheard of in any part of the world. The lake expands and shrinks dramatically with the change in seasons. At the height of the wet season, the lake could expand to more than 7,400 sq miles and provide half of Cambodia's water supply.

Tonle Sap is unique for two reasons: its flow changes direction twice a year, and the lake expands and shrinks with the seasons. From November to May, Cambodia's dry season, the Tonle Sap drains into the Mekong river at Phnom Penh. As this cycle is so vital to the livelihoods of many Cambodians, the nation celebrates the reversal of the river with a grand water festival, the Bonn Om Tuk, during which people from all over Cambodia converge in Phnom Penh for an exciting boat race!

During the monsoon season, however, the Tonle Sap river, which connects the lake with the

Mekong river, reverses its flow. Water is pushed up from the Mekong into the lake, increasing its area and depth, flooding nearby fields and forests. The floodplain becomes a great breeding ground for fish. This pulsating ecosystem with its large floodplain, rich biodiversity, high annual sediment and nutrient fluxes from the Mekong makes Tonle Sap one of the most productive inland fisheries in the world, supporting over a million people and providing over 75 per cent of Cambodia's protein intake. At the end of the rainy season, the flow reverses and the fish are carried downstream. The reversal of the Tonle Sap river's flow also acts as a safety valve and prevents flooding further downstream.

The monsoon causes the lake to fill and spill into the surrounding floodplains. The waters engulf forests and support a thriving underwater ecosystem which is the mainstay of the local economy. Incidentally, scientists are apprehensive about the building of high dams and other changed hydrological parameters in South China and Laos. They believe that this would threaten the strength and volume of the reverse flow into Tonle Sap, which in turn, could decrease nesting, breeding, spawning, and feeding habitats in the floodplains and adversely affect fish productivity and overall biodiversity.

There are several villages that make up this fishing community of around 3,000. They relocate their homes seasonally as and when the water levels of the lake swell and recede with the annual monsoon. A part of the lake was designated a UNESCO biosphere in 1997. This ecological hotspot sustains a large human population, more than 200 species of fish and a variety of animal species. During the dry season birdwatchers descend on the Bird Sanctuary at the Prek Toal core area of the reserve that plays host to rare and globally endangered water birds. ■

Signs of good health

Dr G. G. GANGADHARAN

GREEN CURES



ACCORDING to Ayurveda, one is in an ideal state of health when one's body, sense organs, mind and spirit are in tune with each other. So health and wellness may be considered synonymous.

Ayurveda delves into the purpose of life - why one has taken birth, what are the different levels of experience and what is the ultimate purpose of existence in this world.

Wellness can be generally divided into two regimens. The first is the daily routine or the human life cycle from birth to death through the changing physiological conditions of the person in infancy, in youth, in middle-age and in old age. The second is the seasonal routine.

DAILY ROUTINE

Infancy is divided into three stages:

- Ksheeraad: the first 6 months to 1 year when the baby is fed only on breast milk.
- Ksheera-annaada: the next 1 year (1 to 2 years) when the baby is fed both mother's milk and solid food in equal quantity or an appropriate ratio.
- Annaada: the second year onwards when the baby is fed entirely on solid foods.

Youth – the growing or regenerative phase

- Up to 15 years: adolescence.
- 15 to 45 years: prime youth.
- Middle age: 45 to 70 years.
- Old age: 70 to 100 years.

SEASONAL ROUTINE

There are six seasons in a year which can be divided into two categories.

The first is Visarga kaala which is health-promoting, bulk-promoting and agni (digestive fire) promoting, and is the energy giving part of the year. The moon predominates and the sun is subdued due to the climatic situation which in turn depends on the earth's cosmic constellation. These seasons include Varsha, Sharath and Hemanta.

The other three seasons – Shishira, Vasanta and Grishma – are predominantly solar and are bulk reducing, agni reducing, tiring and energy draining. This period is known as Adhaana-kaala. At this time, the body loses its energy. It is not capable of digesting heavy food or of toiling and is prone to being sedentary. Wellness programmes for individuals have to be devised bearing in mind the typical nature of these two groups of ritus.

Ayurveda enlists 15 signs and symptoms that can be observed by an individual him/herself to

know whether one is in a state of perfect health.

The first five are related to the digestive system:

- Ahaarakaanksha – timely appetite, desire for food, proper digestion.
- Svadanam vipaaka – digestion with proper secretion of digestive juices without any difficulty, no gastritis, no gas, no acidity, no heaviness.
- Purisha (stool) – proper bowel movement once in the morning and once in the evening ideally.
- Mootra – elimination of urine at intervals without retention, pain, burning sensation or micturation.
- This is not being noticed properly. It is the elimination of gas from the gastrointestinal tract without any foul smell, sound or rumbling.

The next five are the sense organs:

- Eyes – being able to see sukshma and sthula objects, bright and dark aspects and distinguish length and distance without pain, strain or burning sensation or redness and watery eyes.
- Nose – should be able to smell all things up to a certain limit.
- Ears – proper recognition of all the various sounds.
- Skin – should recognize and distinguish softness, hardness, hot, cold, rough, smooth or a total of 20 indriya-gunas by touching and feeling objects.
- Tongue – should be able to recognize and distinguish all six tastes through the taste buds.
- Manah sukhatvam – if the mind is at peace then the person is in perfect health. It is a state by which one is able to forget one's body, say while in a state of dhyana. If there is an ailment or pain in any part of the body, that part will be alert to the mind and will hinder dhyana, preventing one from being at peace with oneself.
- Bala – Each one has his natural strength which is subjective and in consonance with his/her age. If it is optimum, that is a sign of good health. This bala may be an acquired one. By consuming the right rasayana, one can step up one's health.
- Varnalaabham is an important Ayurvedic attribute of health. It is the understanding of the health of a person's skin. The glow, lustre, suppleness, smoothness, reflective colour – dark or fair or wheat complexioned – and natural pigmentation are all manifestations of a person's health.
- Sleep – at night without any difficulty, effort or breaks. We say that one should go to bed and sleep.
- Waking up at the right time at dawn.

Thus in Ayurveda the concept of health is very well explained. It takes into consideration a wide range of factors. Ayurveda highlights what is to be done if there is deviation from the healthy track. ■

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WONDER PLANT

Nifty Paatala

THE concept of shamana chikitsa in Ayurveda has often been cited as being equivalent to palliative care. However, shamana chikitsa is one step ahead of palliative care because shamana can be used as the principal treatment for common ailments or as a supplementary treatment for chronic ailments.

Various herbal remedies, food habits and physical exercises have been listed under seven types of shamana therapies. Amongst these, dashamoola, a popular herbal Ayurvedic formula is considered the best shamana remedy. Dashamoola is a combination formula of 10 herbals that can ease a wide range of health problems especially of vata and kapha origin. Dashamoola is used as a nerve tonic and as a strong stimulant. It is recommended for cardiac ailments, general debility, respiratory problems, pneumonia, anaemia, etc.

And out of the ten herbals used in dashamoola, Paatala is the prime tree!

Two species of the genus *Stereospermum* namely *Stereospermum suaveolens* and *colais* belonging to the family Bignoniaceae come under the Paatala terminology. There is also hectic trading of Paatalas especially for their root bark, generally in the name of Paarul mool. It is considered a sacred tree in Hinduism. In the Indian astrological calendar, the tree is seen as Lord Ravi and represents the zodiac sign Simha.

Paatalas are medium-size evergreen trees with conical or ovoid canopy growing to a height of 10 to 20 metres. The bark is grey with yellowish blaze. The tender parts are bluish-violet in colour. Seeds are many, with membranous wings arranged on a central, woody septum. Flowering and fruiting can be seen either from November to February or May to July.

Location: In India *Stereospermum suaveolens* are found in the moist deciduous forests of Maharashtra and the Himalayan tracts up to 1,300 metres above sea level. It is rarely planted in peninsular India. *S. colais* is reportedly found throughout India. However, it is common in peninsular India usually in dry and moist deciduous forests, rocky areas and among boulders.

Properties: Paatalas are used in the treatment of intermittent fevers, inflammatory affectations of the chest, the brain, dropsy and dyspepsia. The bark of this tree is reported to possess curative properties against anaemia, stomach ache and cough. The tree's root bark is a constituent of Dashamoola and is used as a cardiac tonic and cooling agent. It has carminative and diuretic properties and is used to arrest diarrhoea and bleeding. In the Siddha system of medicine, Paatala is quoted as an aphrodisiac. Flowers mixed with honey





are given to stop hiccups. Being a shamana drug, normally it is used in combination with other medicines.

Gardening: Paatalas are very hardy and do not suffer in the heat or drought. They do not demand any special soil or topography and therefore can be planted in any locality. They are fast growing trees and are reportedly fire resistant. The dark green tree with its lustrous foliage and compact, pyramidal crown brings beauty to the garden. Its exquisitely sweet scented flowers spread perfume. Straight solitary poles with compact conical canopies make it a wonderful lawn specimen. Unlike sacred trees like Bael, Ashwatha, etc., there are no restrictions for Pataalas and they can be planted in homestead gardens as attractive house plants. Just 10 Paatalas in an acre of lawn can enhance the look of your garden. If you like your garden to look a little wild Pataalas would be a good choice. Also, Pataalas provide good shade.

Pataalas are propagated only through seeds. Fruits mature from March to May or from June to July. Fruits are plucked when half-ripe and then dried in the sun. Don't wait for the fruit to dry on the tree because the thin papery, winged seeds will slide down and disperse even if there is little dehiscing at the end of the pods leaving only the middle septa. The reported viability of seeds is one year. Ripe, viable seeds are soaked in warm water overnight and are dibbled and covered by a thin layer of soil in raised mother beds. The best season for sowing is from April to June. Germination starts after 15 days and continues for another 15 days. Seventy to eighty per cent of germination can be expected. Five cm-old seedlings can be transplanted to the containers and one-year-old seedlings can be planted in the main field.

SELF-HELP

For hiccups: A handful of Pataala flowers mixed with honey are given to stop hiccups.

For diarrhoea: The stem bark of the Pataala is carefully separated from the woody part, cut into small pieces sun-dried and pulverized using a grinder. One teaspoon of this powder is boiled in a cup of water for five minutes and the decoction is taken twice a day to control diarrhoea. ■

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LOOK GOOD

Home remedy

WE often rush to buy medicines at the first sign of a cough, cold or upset stomach. But if we grow an herbal garden on our terrace, lawn or verandah we can use those helpful plants to cure some common ailments. An insect bite is irritating but it can be soothed with gentle tulsi leaves. So can a sore throat. It takes a little time to make your home remedy but it is worth the trouble. They say if Nature has given us illnesses she has also given us remedies. So for every illness there is a cure out there – in the plant, the herb, the root, perhaps in ourselves.

Here are a few tips for common ailments which we may face:

- Pimples: Take the powder of ocimum basilicum, euphorbia hirta, aclypha indica and achyranthes aspera in equal proportions. Make a paste using warm water or unboiled cow's milk. Apply on pimples and leave on for two hours.
- Anaemia: Make a powder of the whole plant of Borravia diffusa. Take one tablespoon with honey at night.
- Sore throat: A pinch of Shunti with a teaspoon of honey soothes an irritated throat.
- Mouth ulcer: The powdered leaves of solanum

nigrum should be eaten with ghee and rice balls a few times

- Constipation: Take Triphala choornam with warm water.
- Loose motions: Make a powder of jaiphal and take one pinch with buttermilk.
- Insect bite: Combine acaplypha indica, arugumpul, haldi and tulsi leaves. Crush into powder. Make a paste of tulsi leaves and apply over insect bite.
- Burns: Apply potato powder mixed with honey to the burn.
- Toothache: Distil tulsi oil and coleus aromatics. Dab cotton in the oil and place on the aching tooth.
- Gas/Indigestion: Take one teaspoon Ashtachoomam (Eight Spice powder) with hot water or buttermilk before food or whenever discomfort due to gas is felt.
- Fatigue: Take one tablespoon of Ashwagandha powder boiled in 60 ml. of milk at bedtime.
- Congestion of the chest: Take one teaspoon of Thrikatu Choornam boiled in 60 ml. of milk in the morning and evening. ■

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ORGANIC CHEF

Salad & Soup

KOSUMBARI

Ingredients:

Green gram dal
Grated coconut
Coriander leaves
Curry leaves
Lemon Juice
Oil
Mustard
Green chilli
Salt

Method: Soak the green gram dal in water for two hours and strain the water. Add coconut, coriander leaves, curry leaves, lemon juice and salt and season with mustard and chilli.

This is a highly nutritious preparation. Since soaked grams are used it serves as a salad and is one of the dishes prepared during festivals. It aids digestion and serves as pitta shamaka.

SIHI PONGAL

Ingredients:

Rice: 100 gm
Green gram dal: 100 gm
Jaggery: 100 gm
Grated coconut: half cup
Cardamom: 3-4

Cashew nuts: A few
Raisins: A few
Ghee: 2 tablespoons
Water: 1 cup

Method: Cook the rice, green gram dal and grated coconut together. Simultaneously prepare the jaggery syrup, and add the cooked ingredients to it. Add ghee, roasted cashew nuts, raisins and cardamom powder.

This is a highly nutritious preparation.

BARLEY SOUP

Ingredients:

Barley grains: 25 gm
Spinach: 6 gm
Broccoli: 6 gm
Lettuce: 6 gm
Cabbage: 6 gm
Water: Sufficient quantity
Rock salt: Sufficient quantity

Method: First steam the barley and then mash it. To this base, add the vegetables and boil. Add salt to taste. Then sauté the mixture with spring onions, ginger and garlic flakes in ghee.
Serve. ■

Dr Rekha R, RMO, IAIM Health Care Centre, Bangalore

PRODUCTS

LAKSHMAN ANAND

WARM WOOLLIES

ANKURI, a women's cooperative based in Dehradun, knits sweaters, scarves, caps, stoles and socks of all shapes and sizes. There is a range of colours and designs. Some are rather fashionable and could compete with fashionable factory made knitwear available in cities.

The woollies are hand knitted by village women in rural Garhwal, Uttarakhand. Ankuri or the Agency for Non Konventional Urban Rural Initiatives was founded by Rachna Dushyant Singh, an avid designer-knitter herself. "Ankuri is into employment generation and village welfare," explains Rachna's young son, Manoviraj. "We wanted to create livelihoods for women using skills which they already had. And knitting comes almost naturally to them."

Ankuri is currently providing an income to around 100 women in 50 to 60 villages. "Currently you could say we are a small cottage industry," says Manoviraj.



For orders contact: Ankuri, 290/11 Vasant Vihar, Dehradun, Uttaranchal.
Email: mail@ankuri.org, rachnadushyant@hotmail.com
Phone: 09810138721, 011-2462716

LAKSHMAN ANAND



NEEM COMB

DHARMENDER Kumar manufactures combs made from neem wood. He claims his combs arrest hair fall and curb dandruff. "Plastic combs are made with dangerous chemicals. My combs are medicinal. They are anti-fungal and anti-allergic," he says. The neem wood has been certified by the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests. The combs aren't poky and go through your hair smoothly. If you aren't happy with the comb you can return it within 10 days. Each comb costs ₹100.

Kumar also manufactures a range of antique clocks, calendars, compasses, sand timers and other quaint bric-a-brac. These are mostly exported to Western countries or bought by companies to be given away as gifts.

"Manufacturing these products is our traditional profession," says Kumar. "We are the third generation of Kumars involved in this business. It provides an income to 28 members of my family." The clocks are made of metal and wood and cost between ₹1,500 to ₹3,000. There is a guarantee of five years.

Contact: Dharmender, Kumar Industries, 62 A Vishwakarma Park, Near Shakarpur Police Station, Delhi-110092