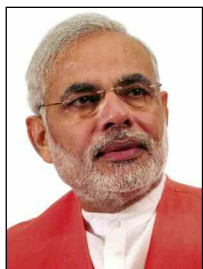


Civil Society



THE CITY WE WANT

Why an experiment in Gurgaon matters to the rest of India



TSUNAMI OF HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS

What people expect from Narendra Modi and why
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NEW LAW FOR HAWKERS

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THE CITY WE WANT

When Raahgiri is held in Gurgaon every Sunday, residents take over some of their streets to jog, run, cycle, and do the Zumba. It reflects their yearning for a different kind of city.

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH: SANDEEPA VEERAMACHANENI

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Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

Modi's mandate

IN this magazine we don't spend as much time as we perhaps should with politicians and bureaucrats. It is because we have found it more exciting to explore the India that exists beyond known centres of power.

Getting to high-fliers occupying positions of importance is difficult and often requires footwork. On the contrary, hooking up with outliers is easy and exciting because you will most probably be among the first to recognise merit in their unconventional pursuits.

It is also important for journalists to report on the weakest and most vulnerable people in society. So, we have invested our talents in telling the stories of how those who exist far beyond the bright lights of the economy face the challenges of survival.

We have been around for three general elections and several assembly elections since we set up *Civil Society* in 2003 and covered them in ways that we thought our readers would find engaging.

We had Sheila Dikshit and her RWA initiative on our second cover as she sought re-election. A month later, in November 2003, we had a cover story on 'NGOs in politics' and how activists were seeking to influence electoral outcomes. We remember interviewing Madhusudhan Mistry of the Congress on what it felt like to make the transition from activism to full-time politics.

Over the years we have watched social activists aspire to political power, only to get their fingers burned. The two worlds are different and it comes as no surprise that the stars of the social sector who contested as candidates of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) lost so badly. Voters make complex choices.

Alternative politics is a long and difficult road. The system, for sure, is flawed and averse to reform, but getting people to make ethical choices is even more challenging. Taking shortcuts only results in grief and early collapse, as we have witnessed with AAP.

Narendra Modi has won a huge mandate. The UPA government's indecision, corruption and poor performance have made it easy for him. The huge vote that he has received is also an expression of the aspirations Indians, from the very poor to the middle-class and the rich, have.

So far, the stock markets have cheered him. But the cheers that will really matter will be those of the faceless people who attended his rallies and placed their trust in him to take the country forward.

None of the key issues has gone away. The new government will have to balance equity and growth. It will have to ensure that a large minority population feels secure. This has been a landmark election, but only time will tell if it will be a turning point for the country.

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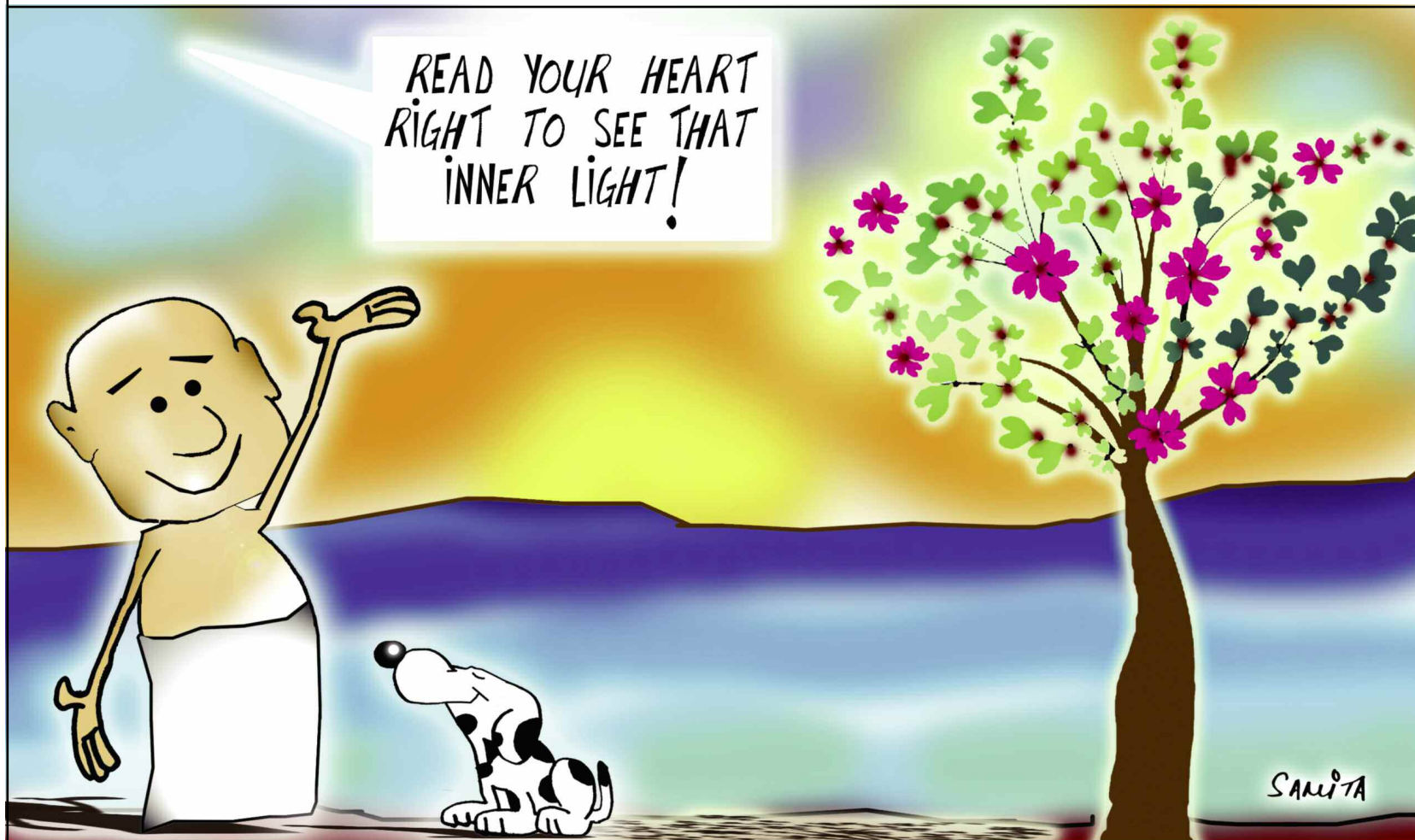
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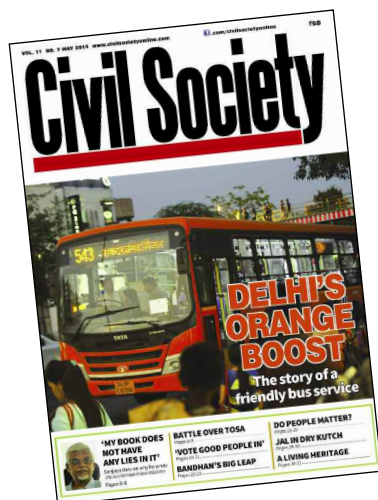
Chandigarh: The Browser.

IN THE LIGHT

by SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Orange boost

Your cover story, 'Delhi's Orange Boost,' is a fine example of safe, inexpensive public transport. DIMTS has used technology and training most effectively to improve efficiency. It has worked with great dedication. For the first time, Delhi has a bus service that people can use without fear. I think many cities would like to copy this model so please propagate your article.

Sushant Varma

The story highlights a fine example of an effective Private-Public-Partnership. While the government has authority, the private sector has efficiency and innovation. DIMTS has done a very good job by working with the government to run the Orange bus service. Perhaps women could also be trained as bus drivers and conductors.

Shweta Grewal

Baru's book

Your interview with Sanjaya Baru on his book, *The Accidental Prime Minister* was an eye opener. For the first time we came to know that Baru was actually reluctant to write this book. But it is good he wrote it because we now know how the Prime Minister's Office functions.

Pradip Lal

I have not read Dr Baru's book. I have no wish to read it either. But I have read the reports, a few reviews and excerpts and have a fair idea of what it is all about. Dr Baru, as the media adviser to the PM, had no standing, access or authority, I am sorry to say, to write an insider's insight into governance. The global slowdown after 2008, the PM's deft handling of the

crisis and so on find no mention in the book, it seems.

Uttam Sengupta

Congratulations for the excellent interview with Sanjaya Baru. The book is so well-written and full of information. It is an insider's account of how the government was run. Please keep writing Mr Baru and tell us more.

Shrikant

In memoriam

Sunil, General Secretary of the Samajvadi Jan Parishad, died at the age of 53 in Delhi on 21 April. At a very young age he emerged as the leader of many peasants and workers movements in Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh. As a brilliant student of economics in Delhi University, he attracted widespread admiration for initiatives like organising cycle *yatras* in remote underdeveloped parts of the country. At the age of 25 he devoted himself to full-time work among tribals in Hoshangabad district. He was editor of reputed journals like *Samyik Varta* and *Samta Era*. His articles (mostly in Hindi) appeared in many leading newspapers and journals. His writings had a special focus on evolving alternative paths of devel-

opment. His political and social life were characterised by the highest integrity and honesty. He always maintained his faith in non-violent movements even though he was jailed many times due to his participation in peaceful movements against injustice.

Bharat Dogra

Passion fruit

Shree Padre's article, 'Passion a delight for Idukki couple,' narrating the experiences of the couple in passion fruit processing, will definitely draw the attention of farmers and entrepreneurs towards the commercial value of passion fruit cultivation and processing.

C. Thamban

Errata

In our May cover story, 'Delhi gets an Orange boost,' Sanjiv Sahai, CEO of DIMTS was quoted as saying that Blueline owners were responding to a 'perverse infrastructure.' What he actually said was: 'Blueline owners were responding to a perverse incentive structure.' The error is regretted. Editor.

Letters should be sent to response@civilsocietyonline.com

TSUNAMI OF HOPES

Civil Society News

New Delhi

SOME time ago we spent a week with street vendors to understand their concerns about big retail chains coming into India. To our surprise, we found them talking about finance, branding, customer loyalty and innovation. There were among them those who understood the difference between a proprietorship and a partnership. They were just street vendors with small stalls, but they liked to be treated as entrepreneurs in their own right.

Narendra Modi's surge to power has come atop a tsunami of diverse hopes and aspirations. People have voted in no small measure for equal access to opportunities. They have voted for development and basic amenities. They have chosen what they perceive as decisive leadership. On the other hand, they have voted out the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) for bad governance and lack of vision. And, interestingly, they have found not much merit in the promise of clean politics made by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

Ours is an India defined by two decades of economic reforms and the spread of empowering technologies like the mobile phone, Internet and satellite TV. It is also a country of young people eager to embrace the world. Story after story that we have done in this magazine has shown that what Indians want most is to get on with their lives. Substantial numbers of very poor and marginalised people still need interventions to bring them out of hunger and deprivation. But the numbers of those in sight of middle-class status are sizeable and they are impatient to acquire education and skills, open bank accounts, travel, own property. They want to live with dignity. They cut across community and caste and many of them don't place much store by either.

The rights-based approach of the Congress helped create a level playing field of sorts. It is significant that many laws passed under the UPA government have made it possible for people to now demand what is their due. But the UPA failed to provide the avenues for aspirations to be fulfilled. In the absence of opportunities, and because of growing disparities in lifestyles, empowerment came to be seen as the equivalent of vote-catching dole. It didn't seem to lead anywhere.

A poor tribal family in Jharkhand once told us that, thanks to the rural job guarantee scheme (MNREGA), they didn't need to work on construction sites in Kolkata anymore. By staying on their small landholding the year round, they could in fact grow two crops and sometimes three. It was an improvement, but it wasn't enough because they wanted their children to learn English and live a different life.

Modi's wide appeal is based on his rise from humble beginnings and the perception that he can deliver a better life for people like himself. Millions of Indians who have voted for him have never visited Gujarat, but they believe he has been successful there. He is the epitome of vigour. His body lan-



Narendra Modi's promise of good governance and development for all attracted voters cutting across caste and religion

guage is of a doer and his speeches are inspiring. People are ready to give him a chance when he says he can fix what is broke in the system.

Modi has said he will provide jobs, roads, power, water, healthcare and education. The Ganga will be cleaned. He has also said he will stamp out corruption. But how will his government go about achieving these things? Will the government be captive to the private sector, as many fear? Will it browbeat minorities or be inclusive and put them at ease? Will its decisions be friendly to the environment? Will farmers unfairly lose their land to factories? Will the poor be pushed out of the way as cities are reshaped?

The test for the Modi government is not its agenda, but how it will be implemented so that all sections of a diverse country benefit. There will be a need to infuse forward-looking expertise in government by putting in place bureaucrats and qualified persons who are responsive and mission-oriented. Much will also depend on the states and how they perform.

Modi will also have to build his bridges with civil society groups. The past decade has seen them being successful agents of change and providers of last-mile solutions. Governments have come to depend on the energy and inventiveness of NGOs working in health, education and the environment.

Jayaprakash Narayan, founder of Loksatta, a new party born out of a civil society initiative and committed to reform in politics, says the Modi government has its work cut out for it. Its mandate is based on the four promises of economic growth, job creation and 'India First'. It will need to get down to business quickly.

The priorities, as Narayan sees them, are power distribution, transport infrastructure, flexible labour laws, quality education and skills, a national health service, better urban governance, direct transfer of resources to the third tier of government, anti-corruption measures, police reform and much more on a very long list.



Narendra Modi and L.K. Advani in New Delhi shortly after the BJP's

AND ASPIRATIONS

LAKSHMAN ANAND

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Women want basic amenities, jobs and safety

Narayan says the Congress sought to project a “false dichotomy” between pro-poor policies and pro-growth ones and as a result suffered its worst electoral defeat ever.

“The UPA paid lip sympathy to anti-poverty strategies and relied solely on short-term freebies. People, especially the poor, saw through this cynical

game,” explains Narayan. “Jobless growth, poor quality of education, appalling infrastructure – all these are recipes for disaster.” In addition, there was corruption and a high degree of centralisation, which angered people.

“On the other side, Modi offered a fresh approach and gave hope. The electoral result was inevitable,”

rights-based laws were voiced in feeble, apologetic terms that drowned in the dissatisfaction with poor implementation and rampant corruption,” says Roy. “The truth is that one part of the UPA did not see these as achievements. The UPA, therefore, should not be surprised when it does not receive support from even its own core constituency.”

Roy questions Modi’s development model saying that it cannot be separated from the corporate dream of jobless growth and exploitation of resources. She says Modi has used the word development as a smokescreen to tap into dissatisfaction with the UPA.

“The marketing trick of using large, vague, and overarching definitions to hide real intent has been in practice since the India Shining campaign of 2004,” argues Roy. “There was great dissatisfaction with the NDA alliance, and the shine did not last longer than the campaign. This time, the danger is that dissatisfaction with the UPA, and the government it gave us in the last few years, might be interpreted as an endorsement of what BJP campaign managers have packaged as the Modi Model.”

Anupam Mishra of the Gandhi Peace Foundation (GPF) says the Gujarat or the Modi Model essentially means promoting industrial investment. In return for money that comes in, the country provides cheap natural resources. The test for development should be whether the Modi Model is sustainable and inclusive.

“Modi has promised to clean the Ganga. But first a minimum flow is needed in the river. So, he must tell us what is going to be done about the dams sanc-

Continued on page 8

LAKSHMAN ANAND



victory march

The test for the Modi govt is not its agenda, but how it will be implemented so that all sections of a diverse country benefit. There will be a need to infuse forward-looking expertise in govt.

explains Narayan.

Aruna Roy of the MKSS, who was a member of Sonia Gandhi’s National Advisory Council (NAC), says, “The UPA has always traded off on a schizophrenic dialectic. That is one reason why they used the slogan of growth with a humane face.”

By the end of UPA 2, unable to meet corporate expectations of growth, the government “stopped paying any more lip service to its social agenda”. In its election campaign the ideological content of what the UPA was supposed to have stood for was missing.

“Its achievements in enacting a series of landmark

So, what really happened to

THE rapid rise and fall of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is the other dramatic story of this election season. In December, AAP was on top of the world with a substantial mandate in the Delhi Assembly. Just five months later in May it was decimated as it tried to be a national political player.

AAP's star candidates were defeated. Many of the party's leaders, including its supremo, Arvind Kejriwal, either came close to forfeiting their deposits or actually did so. The defeated included well-known social activists like Medha Patkar and first-timers from the corporate world like Meera Sanyal and V. Balakrishnan.

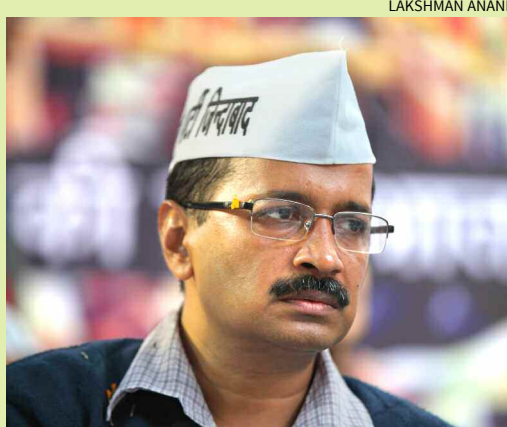
In Punjab, the party has won four Lok Sabha seats and got an estimated 20 per cent of the vote, but it didn't have deep roots in that state. The four seats seem to have come from an anti-incumbency sentiment against the Akalis and the Congress.

On the other hand, in states where AAP did try very hard – Delhi, Haryana, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh, particularly Varanasi – it faced serious rejection.

In Delhi it got 33 per cent of the vote. But when you break down that number the story is a sad one. Had fresh Assembly elections been held along with the Lok Sabha ones, AAP would have got just 10 seats compared to the 28 it had won in December!

So what happened? Is AAP a case of overreach? Did early success go to the heads of its leaders? Is the party a victim of the first-past-the-post system? Did big business do it in?

The margins of defeat are mostly so high that it is clear AAP couldn't convince voters that it had



Arvind Kejriwal

something new and viable to offer. Evidently, it couldn't build on the goodwill that it received in December. Its 49 days in office seems to have damaged its reputation.

AAP promised a new politics. But it resorted to all the old tricks that politicians are known for. Its leadership seemed to be in a hurry to acquire power at all costs with the means becoming subservient to the ends.

Aruna Roy of the Mazdoor Kissan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) explains AAP's predicament, saying: "To work out the relevance of the alternative in the mainstream political agenda requires time, care and energy. There should be an ability to withstand critique, criticism, difference and dissent from those who want to see the alternative defined but who may disagree on specifics. Maybe there was no patience and undue haste."

Roy believes that "there was not enough time for AAP to assimilate the value of electoral poli-

tics and the other strength it derives from non-party politics. By merely bringing in well-known activists from the other side the agenda perhaps does not get any clearer."

Jayaprakash Narayan of Loksatta says, "It is unfair to judge a reform movement harshly because its candidates are not elected in large numbers in a hostile climate."

He argues that the first-past-the-post system makes it very difficult for even third parties such as the BSP and DMK, let alone reform-seeking, ethical parties.

Loksatta itself didn't win any seats in the Andhra Assembly and Narayan considers AAP's vote share in certain pockets, like Delhi and Punjab, to be creditable.

But he also believes that AAP damaged its prospects by its desperation to grab headlines and its lack of understanding of institution-building and delivery.

"AAP certainly compounded the problem by the absence of understanding of institutions; by its extreme rhetoric categorising electoral battles as a fight between good and evil; its lack of depth in economic management and public policy which led to Luddite responses; its reckless freebies," says Narayan, who believes the process is important when setting out to reform a dysfunctional system.

AAP's stint in power in the state government in Delhi keeps coming back to haunt the party. It has cost it dearly in Karnataka where its support seems to have evaporated. All its candidates in the state lost their deposits.

V. Ravichandar, who helped AAP in Bengaluru

Continued from page 7

tioned on the Ganga. They say the Sabarmati has been revived, but the reality is that Narmada canal water has been diverted to the Sabarmati," says Mishra. "Such development is just for one or two generations. It does not serve a nation in the long term."

"In the dance of democracy," says Mishra, "the stage always remains the same. This is not the first time that slogans have been raised in the name of development. From Garibi Hatao to India Shining we have seen so many. Under the earlier NDA government many roads were built. Wasn't that development? Some were in fact named after Vajpayee. But the BJP lost the elections all the same."

In much the same way, despite the rural job guarantee scheme, the right to food and so on, the Congress was defeated this time. Once again for all that the UPA claimed to do for the poor it was voted out because people felt that there had been no development.

"So, Modi's true test will be the quality of development he sponsors. Right now he has won because his slogan was the biggest," explains Mishra.

Dileep Ranjekar of the Azim Premji Foundation agrees the UPA was voted out for poor performance. But he believes Modi will seriously try to deliver on his promises. "I am an optimist and a believer – I

'He has made this election a presidential one and assumed personal responsibility for all that he has promised. He has to show that he is personally involved in delivering on these promises.'

trust Modi means well and it is in his and his party's interest to use this opportunity to deliver results in the areas of development and governance."

But it is a long road and the government's focus must remain on 'development', which was the main plank on which it was elected. It should not try to perpetrate an ideology on the masses, says Ranjekar.

Job-creation is clearly a priority. The basics for improving the quality of life should also be urgently addressed. However, Ranjekar is concerned that when it comes to addressing issues of healthcare, water, education and environmental sustainability the government lacks expertise.

"The starting point of achieving anything is having a large pool of competent professionals who know sectors in depth and execute plans effectively. All this would involve thinking through how to create these competent professionals," he says.

Emphasising the scale of the task, Ranjekar sees

the need for five universities per state to create cadres of qualified professionals.

Vir Chopra, the producer of the iconic Munna Bhai series of films, believes Modi will have no choice but to deliver on his promises of development, anti-corruption and accountability.

"He has made this election a presidential one and assumed personal responsibility for all that he has promised. He has to show that he is personally involved in delivering on these promises," says Chopra. "He will have to show results in his early days in office because of the expectations he has raised. He cannot afford to wait."

Chopra sees the need for the Modi government to set targets and deadlines. He would like to see effective groups working on problems in the key ministries relating to development.

"An outline plan must be prepared quickly and made public as his vision of where he wants to take

AAP?

as he did Nandan Nilekani to give clean politics a boost, says: “Delhi. Delhi. Delhi. Many who loved the pre-Delhi AAP were put off by what they witnessed in 49 days of AAP and the cavalier manner in which they deserted their responsibilities to the electorate. They were not considered a mature alternative.”

Vir Chopra, producer of the Munna Bhai films and also a champion of clean politics, says: “I believe they became victims of a delusory confidence and spread themselves way too thin all over India without having any organisation. I did not see any strategy in their working. Running a political party on a national scale requires organisational skills that they simply did not display. Being well-meaning individuals is not enough to win any election.”

“The Aam Aadmi Party actually messed it up for themselves. They owed their origin to the Anna Hazare led anti-corruption movement. People identified with their message of clean government,” adds Chopra. “But their short stint in government in Delhi that ended with Kejriwal’s abrupt resignation portrayed them in poor light.”

Dileep Ranjekar of the Azim Premji Foundation thinks AAP’s achievements are not ordinary. Even in failure, its candidates have secured a significant vote share.

“Their strategies went wrong and instead of achieving what they promised, the masses saw them as anarchists who could not manage their anarchy,” says Ranjekar. “I would still consider AAP as a future effective alternative that needs to wait, strategise, focus on smaller things etc.”

India. All action by his ministries must follow this plan and milestones to be achieved must be set to an acceptable time frame. Modi should then report to the nation every quarter if possible and, if not, then at least once in six months,” says Chopra.

V. Ravichandar has been assisting governments at the state and municipal level for some years, helping them bridge the deficit they have in expertise.

“Many of the expectations raised by Modi intersect with state government territory. Ideally one would like to see a fault-line-free compact between the Centre and the states to make this *vikas* happen,” says Ravichandar. “One aspect that could aid this is the likely inter-state competitive pressures to deliver better outcomes for their people.”

“The mass aspirations for growth, jobs, better wages and the desire for decisive leadership tipped the scales for Modi,” says Ravichandar. “And his campaign was brilliantly executed with clear messaging.”

How Modi will perform in government remains to be seen. Expectations have been raised so high that he will need to deliver results even as he assumes office. The image of a successful doer can be a huge burden because people expect miracles from him. The question now is whether Modi can bring some of the magic he generated on the campaign trail to the Prime Minister’s office. ■

Saffron surprise in WB

Subir Roy
Kolkata

THE mood in Kolkata in the evening after the results for the Lok Sabha elections were announced was remarkably subdued, and the instant victory celebrations muted. The Trinamool Congress, after winning 34 out of 42 seats and beating all opinion poll forecasts, should have gone to town. If anything, the sound of crackers was higher in northwest Kolkata, a traditional support base of the BJP, compared to the rest of the city.

The obvious reason is, of course, the decision by all political parties to heed the official call to ensure that victory celebrations, often at the doorstep of the vanquished, do not get out of hand. But there are two subterranean reasons which could have played a part. One, the state’s ruling Trinamool Congress finds itself holding a pyrrhic victory. Yes, it has the numbers but they don’t deliver much. The BJP’s own tally is so overwhelming that it does not have to depend on the support of outsiders to form and run a government, thus severely limiting the role and influence of regional parties.

But there is a deeper unease which makes the future uncertain and takes away from the euphoria – the rise of the BJP. As far as the seat count goes, it has not done much by taking its total tally to two from the 2009 score of one. But the percentage share of votes tells an altogether different story. This has gone up from 6 per cent in 2009 to 17 per cent in 2014 – an over 10 per cent jump.

It is not useful to use the 2009 figures to compare the BJP’s performance with that of the Trinamool Congress as it had fought the earlier election in alliance with the Congress. So the best yardstick is the panchayat election results of last year. By this token, the Trinamool Congress has actually fallen behind – its vote share went down from 42 per cent to 39 per cent. In contrast, the BJP has gone from 3 per cent (down from 2009’s 6 per cent since it did not have the grassroots organisation that a panchayat poll requires) to 17 per cent!

What is more, in the two high-profile constituencies of Kolkata it has come second, ahead of the Left Front candidates. In the key South Kolkata (Kolkata Dakshin) constituency, which used to be Mamata Banerjee’s till she vacated it to become Chief Minister, the high-profile state BJP leader, Tathagata Roy, has lost by a margin of 1.4 lakh to the low-profile Subrata Bakshi who really keeps the seat warm for Banerjee, but Roy was ahead of the CPI(M) candidate by 16,000 votes.

The North Kolkata (Kolkata Uttar) con-

stituency was more closely fought. The Trinamool Congress’s Sudip Bandyopadhyay beat his BJP rival by 96,000 votes but the latter was ahead of the CPI(M) candidate by 51,000 votes.

One explanation is tactical. Narendra Modi, while campaigning in West Bengal, raised the issue of illegal Muslim migrants from Bangladesh. This may have caused the state’s Muslims to come out in solid numbers (they account for 25 per cent of the state’s population and its turnout at 82 per cent has been far above the national average) and vote for the Congress in middle Bengal and the Trinamool Congress in south Bengal. Retaining the Muslim vote explains the good performance of the Congress (overall, it was ahead of the Left Front with a tally of four seats) in middle Bengal.

But is the BJP’s improved performance and particularly robust show in Kolkata a harbinger of what lies ahead? Traditionally, it is Kolkata’s middle class which has shown the political way to the rest of the state. It got browned off with the Left Front long before it actually lost power.

Also, going by the current conversation in Kolkata’s sitting rooms, Banerjee and the Trinamool Congress are doing quite poorly. Not only is there little fresh investment in industry to create jobs, grassroots violence for territorial

control rages unabated in non-urban areas. Earlier, it was Trinamool versus the Left, now it is one Trinamool faction against another.

Those looking at history have more to add. In the pre-independence era, Bengal and Assam were at the heart of the communal strife and politics that ignited passions, ending with the partition of the country. It is to the credit of the Left movement that West Bengal remained more or less free from communal violence in the post-independence period. Now that Left influence is waning, those who are more pessimistic feel it is a matter of time before speaking and acting communally becomes respectable.

The increasing vote share of the BJP is also part of a wider change in the political discourse in the state.

Depoliticisation is in the air. Left versus right issues matter less and less. The Trinamool Congress acknowledged this and brought it out in the open by fielding a range of performing artistes in the parliamentary elections. All the film actors won; one singer lost. The media coverage of the campaigns of these candidates dwelt on showbiz and personal trivia that steered clear of any kind of ism. In this atmosphere, it is easy for communal gut feelings, lying dormant for long, to rise to the surface. ■

subirkroy@gmail.com

The increasing vote share of the BJP is also part of a wider change in the political discourse in West Bengal.

'Street vendors are innovative

INTERVIEW

Arbind Singh

Civil Society News
New Delhi

STREET vendors, who have long been accustomed to a life on the run from the police and municipal authorities, now have the protection of a central law that is being implemented across the country.

In markets in South Delhi, for instance, vendors are no longer being evicted at random. Street food vendors are being provided infrastructure and certification.

The credit for pushing the law through Parliament and protecting millions of livelihoods goes to the National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI).

NASVI began by organising the vendors into unions and explaining to them their rights. "It was really tough," recalls Arbind Singh, NASVI's earnest national coordinator. "We didn't know where to begin. Most NGOs in those days were working on rural development. It was also difficult to explain to street vendors, scattered all over, how a national law would improve their lives."

Finally, on 1 May, Labour Day this year, the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regularisation of Street Vending) Act came into effect.

This historic law, apart from protecting vendors from harassment, will also help to provide them social security.

Upbeat about the new law, Arbind Singh spoke to *Civil Society* on how it is bettering the lives of street vendors, resulting in a higher quality of life and helping enhance urban spaces.

What has been the immediate impact of the new law to protect the rights of street vendors?

The good part is that the law was passed on the eve of the general election, so there was talk of it. That means politicians, municipal bodies and street vendors are aware of the law. The second is that the law has not come suddenly. It's not a top-down law. People have been part of this process. There was a movement by street vendors across the country and they did struggle a lot. They were part of protests, demonstrations, submitting letters, meeting politicians and so on. People feel that the law has come about due to their struggle.

Street vendors in Mumbai and Delhi face the maximum harassment. Between the law being formulated and getting it passed, it was decided by politicians that, to mitigate the plight of street vendors in Delhi, the Home Ministry can convene a meeting of the city's three municipal bodies.

As a result of this meeting all the three municipal bodies have set up Town Vending Committees. The East Delhi Municipal Corporation has been more progressive. They even issued a letter stating that



Arbind Singh with street vendors in Delhi: 'We will ensure financial inclusion, social security and health insurance for vendors'

since registration is going on, five categories of vendors must not be disturbed. That process is on, due to the Home Ministry's intervention.

Even the South Delhi Municipal Corporation's Town Vending Committee has said that vendors must not be harassed while they do the registration. Except for the New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC), all the others are positive and taking steps. But I know we need to push things so that we get vendors registered and vending jobs become secure.

What has been the response from the states?

I am just coming from Patna. The Bihar government has given us a big project and a fund of ₹2.5 crore to implement the law in all the state's 42 towns. We will identify where street vendors should be registered, set up Town Vending Committees and have a state-level federation of vendors. We will also ensure financial inclusion, social security and extension of the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) to street vendors. If you consider where we started, this is almost unimaginable for us. It is a good change.

In Delhi we have been pushing for registration of food street vendors, regularisation, hygiene, training and so on. Our efforts were interrupted by the Delhi Assembly election and then the general election. We have got the media interested. The government is saying they will give us some resources for training of food street vendors and certification. We would also like to apply under the National Urban Livelihoods Mission for a food safety net for vendors.

Are the Delhi municipal corporations identifying spots for street vendors? Will they now be in clusters in Delhi?

Once they identify vending zones, vendors will be organised in clusters. Street vendors don't understand the dynamics of the municipal corporations. And the municipal corporations don't understand that if they create complicated processes nothing will come of it.

The NDMC suggested a simple method and I agree with them wholly. The street vendor associations will submit a list of existing vendors, then the NDMC and the police will physically verify if those vendors exist, and if they do, they will find out if, in the existing area,

and business-minded'

LAKSHMAN ANAND



See, in Bhubaneswar the municipal corporation did not build big infrastructure. First, they identified the areas for street vending. Then they wrote to the government to transfer that area to the municipal corporation. They did not invest a penny. They asked banks if they could finance simple vending zones.

Say, one vending shop costs ₹40,000. In lieu of that money, the bank can put up hoardings. The municipal corporation also provides vendors basic facilities like water, drainage, and electricity.

There is no dearth of money. In Madhya Pradesh the government has earmarked ₹10 lakh for each vending zone. If the municipal corporation wants, it can access that money. But we are not keen to build plazas. Vendors don't want to go there and neither do customers. The local Vending Association manages the zone and keeps it clean. We would recommend this.

'You cannot be here and there once the law is in place. There will be designated places. Yes, I agree the vendor will be affected, but in a positive way. The vendor will know where he can take his stall.'

In Bhubaneswar they have created 52 vending zones. Cuttack and Berhampore are also following suit. Once you do this in the state capital, other towns and cities follow.

How many vending zones have been formed in Delhi?

Well, at the last NDMC meeting we suggested that they take two decisions. One, don't harass the vendors and let them register, and second, take the most controversial area, Karol Bagh, and implement the law there. Once you succeed in Karol Bagh, the rest of Delhi will follow. We will be submitting a list of vendors in Karol Bagh to the municipal body.

There was also talk of setting up night markets in Delhi. Is that going to happen?

We have submitted plans for night bazaars but somehow no one is taking it seriously. The thing is, there are four municipal commissioners. If one of them takes a decision, we can cite that to the other commissioners. There are some very good reasons for night bazaars.

Currently, there are hawkers all over the city. Does this law affect them?

You cannot be here and there once the law is in place. There will be designated places. Yes, I agree the vendor will be affected, but in a positive way. The vendor will know where he can take his stall. Everybody wants a dedicated place, especially those who are vulnerable. Otherwise, a dominant person comes and tries to remove the vendor.

So the Town Vending Committee will manage the vending zone?

Yes. The law clearly says that to those street vendors who have been issued certificates for vending, no

other law is applicable.

So, as a vendor, if I get my stall and certificate and say, a policeman wants to remove me, saying I am blocking the path, he can't.

Have police been sensitised to this law?

They know about this law. The Home Ministry had called some of them to the meeting. We also pressed for a grievance redress cell in the police commissioner's office but they said, no, we will sensitise all the DCPs instead.

A court order had been issued asking the municipal corporations to locate spaces for vendors. A private agency had been involved. Did they find suitable spots?

The agency did identify 22,000 individual spaces. But now the association will identify places and

submit a list to the municipal bodies. The police will go and verify if those places can be vending zones. This is a simple, practical method instead of getting an agency which does not know the city.

Won't more vendors be keen to pour into the city, thanks to this law?

You have to implement this law for the entire city and, if possible, the entire state. Otherwise, people will think, 'Oh, they are registering vendors in Patna so let's rush there.' This is a dynamic process, not a one-time exercise. There is, for instance, no cut-off date for vendors. Street vendors have to be regular, follow hygienic methods. You need to regulate the present vendors and set up a mechanism for future vendors where they can apply.

Since the launch of this law we have had enquiries from people who want to do vending. How do we go about it, they ask. Currently there is no mechanism. We will be pressurising every municipal corporation to set up Town Vending Committees.

Will you limit the goods that a vendor can sell?

No. Street vendors are extremely innovative and business-minded. They sense all kinds of demand from the market. To give you an example: in Hyderabad, near the lake, I came across a street vendor who was earning a livelihood by letting customers use a telescope to see the lake. Once they get their certificates, it will be easier for them to get loans from banks. We are trying to help them set up collective enterprises, like the food vendors. When we organised a street food festival in Delhi recently, we got the vendors ingredients at a cheap price from wholesalers. They were very happy with the quality.

As for myself I would like to help street vendors set up small companies, say an artisans company or a catering company for food vendors. ■

it is feasible to create it as a vending zone.

This is the simplest and clearest method. But now some people are saying we need to have joint surveys with the Town Vending Committees, municipal corporations, the police and other agencies, Resident Welfare Associations and so on. Let's not complicate the process.

We have seen experiences across India. The simplest and most transparent method is followed in Bhubaneswar. The street vendor associations give a list of vendors and the municipal body verifies them. If they are found to be there, they are registered. Bhubaneswar's is the best example in Asia.

In Madhya Pradesh, because of their system of governance, there has been some development in the municipal bodies with regard to registration of street vendors. Gwalior, for instance, now has food streets that are popular. People throng to such places. There is also the cost factor. Street food is much cheaper than eating in a restaurant.

What is the infrastructure the municipal corporations are providing to street vending zones?

Gauri's super stitch

Tanushree Gangopadhyay
Ahmedabad

RADHANPUR in Gujarat's Patan district lies in an arid region. The landscape here is grey. But the women are full of colour.

They wear bright, wonderful clothes – *ghaghro* (skirt) and *khamko* (an embroidered blouse) that liven up the drab countryside. Radhanpur is famous for its intricate traditional embroidery.

Amidst the crowd in Radhanpur is senior craftsperson Gauriben Ramabhai Bhrami, 49, who has been conferred this year's prestigious Crafts Council of India's Kamla Award for her work in development and for training several women in this beautiful art.

"I thought that 2.5 million women have won the Kamla Award when I went to receive it. I could not believe that the award was just mine," beams the gleeful, unassuming Gauriben.

During her 26 years in SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association), Gauriben has trained more than 5,000 women in her region as well as many in the SAARC countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Afghanistan. She has worked with several artisans in Mexico and South Africa.

"There is so much to learn from different regions," says the veteran artisan.

Gauriben says that the Kamla Award has been around for 40 years, and she too started her career 40 years ago. At the tender age of 10, she began embroidering her trousseau. It took her seven years to make it, she says with a laugh. "We used to wear thick woven material in those days. The coarse material took us a long time to embroider. The



Gauriben (right) at the museum of traditional attire in Radhanpur

younger generation today is faster and brilliant with design. Their work in different stitches like chain stitch and mirror work on textiles like silk, tussar, and *mashru* (bright shiny material from Patan) is really superb," says Gauriben.

She hasn't forgotten the days of drought and hardship, though. Life back then was very mobile. They migrated from one place to another for around six months to eke a livelihood. "Water was a major problem. Besides, our fields did not yield much."

It was during those hard times that Reema of SEWA arrived in Radhanpur.

"She came to our rescue. We had never seen rupee notes. Our lives were that frugal. Reemaben gave three women ₹450 for kurtas we had embroidered. The local traders never gave us more than ₹25. My husband then worked as bonded farm labour like other men from our village, earning ₹400 for the entire year beginning from Holi," says Gauriben.

During the drought years of the 1980s and 1990s, Reema was surveying the Water Board's pipeline in Radhanpur and Santalpur when she chanced upon these wonderful people. "Gauriben is our great asset.

SAMITA'S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR





We take pride in her being conferred this award. She is a born leader and was amenable to social change. She didn't marry off her daughters early," says Reema.

"Gauriben learnt fast. Ours was not classroom training. Hence she picked up new colour combinations and began understanding the market very quickly," adds Reema.

She recalled a tough situation the women were put through during their initial period of training. They received a large order to embroider kurtas with black peacocks. Using their traditional skills, the women stitched their favourite motif very beautifully in traditional colours but avoided using black. Reema had to convince them that catering to what the market wanted was of the utmost importance.

SEWA has registered a company of embroidery garment makers called SEWA Trade Facilitating Centre. Garments produced by women like Gauriben are sold under the brand name, Hansiba. "We are proud to say that more than 17,000 members from rural areas are shareholders of this company."

During those drought years, SEWA analysed Radhanpur's development pattern. Ela Bhatt, founder of SEWA, was present at a meeting with villagers. They realised that the men too had lost their jobs and should be included in SEWA's work plan.

SEWA set up a museum of local traditional artifacts and the traditionally embroidered attire of every community. The museum was named after Hansiba, a respected member of the SEWA team.

Gauriben feels that the museum has been the

best repository of samples for their art and craft, some as old as 150 years. "My mother's *khamka* is a wonderful memorial for me," says Gauriben. The youngsters take pride in their traditions and see the museum as a great vista for following the earlier patterns of embroidery and cuts.

Gauriben then recalled a traumatic experience. When she was young, her father sold her sister's *ghaghra*, which was worth around ₹5,000, to buy some gleaming utensils as a gift for her marriage.

But soon after, those utensils turned black and crumbled. "We threw them into a well and we all cried because we had lost my sister's *ghaghra*. The trader had cheated us," says Gauriben.

Does she have any dream for SEWA's company? "Yes, certainly," she responds. "I would like to have at least one shop selling Hansiba garments in every town and city in India. Sales will increase and our women will earn ₹10,000 per month. At present we earn ₹7,000. We will be able to give more work to our women and the youngsters," says Gauriben.

Traditional artisans like Gauriben worry about changing trends. People are, for instance, switching

to wearing polyester garments.

"Cotton fabrics are going through a crisis. I have been trying to educate people against wearing polyester. It is bad for our health and will affect our income. We should innovate with our traditional, natural fabrics," she says.

Life has certainly changed for people here since SEWA first stepped in.

Men now purchase cattle and other animals. Women are busy dairying and doing embroidery. Men have given up bonded labour and have started stalls. Some work as labour in the construction industry.

"Our children study and get into jobs of all kinds. Since the last 10 years, the youth are getting trained in computers. This has upgraded their skills. They now earn thousands of rupees," says Gauriben.

"I don't really want to remember the tough time we had collecting water during those drought years. Everything is changing. The young will never need to carry water on their heads for six km. This is what we have achieved through hard work, creativity and collectivity," she adds. ■

Aga Khan Rural Support Programme India

JOB: CHIEF OPERATIONS OFFICER (COO)

Established in 1984, the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme India (AKRSP-I) is a non-profit, organisation working to organise and empower rural communities and marginalized groups, particularly women, through natural resource management interventions in the three states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. The impact on livelihoods of rural communities over a quarter of a century has been long lasting and successful. Through this work we have been able to proactively influence government policies and programmes both at State and National level. On the basis of these activities, and in order to expand our work geographically and thematically over the next 10 years, AKRSP-I wishes to strengthen its management systems and capacity across its geographies.

We are looking for a dynamic and committed professional for the position of **CHIEF OPERATIONS OFFICER (COO)**.

Location: Ahmedabad, Gujarat

Education: A postgraduate degree in management, natural sciences or social sciences

Experience: Professional development experience or keen to work in development sector at grass root level with at least 5 years experience in a strategic leadership role and overall more than 10 years management experience.

Age: 40-45 ages

Salary: Negotiable to attract the right candidate

Skills Required:

- A strong profile of applying various development approaches including policy influencing, community development & facilitation, and innovative programming.
- To enjoy managing people and systems, bringing a strategic, long-range perspective to AKRSP-I own institutional development.
- Have experience and skills in dealing with senior government officials/donors at the state and national levels.
- Willing to partner with a dynamic CEO, high-profile board, and strong staff to help take AKRSP-I to the next level.
- **Values:** A strong belief in the values governing civil society, especially principles of community-led development, inclusiveness, and sensitivity to the needs of marginalised people, including women and gender issues.

The Job Role:

- To provide strategic leadership to programme development and management, improving AKRSP-I's systems, processes, and learning to ensure that it remains a force for innovation and quality in rural development.
- To expand the programme to the new geographies, test new ideas and approaches, strengthen partnerships with NGOs, develop effective monitoring systems with the use of technology and work with the CEO to influence practices and policies of the government at state and national level, and explore innovative engagements with the private sector.
- To bring well-grounded analytical understanding of rural development issues in India; a strong commitment to community-led approaches and sensitivity to the needs and concerns of marginalised people; innovative and solution-focussed thinking; high levels of energy, productivity and quality output; and strong processes of team building and management.

Interested candidates can apply at hr@akrspi.org within 10 days.

‘My songs always deal with

Remo Fernandes, the activist singer, on Goa, music and AAP

Abhinandita Mathur
Panjim (Goa)

PROBABLY the best known Goan, Remo Fernandes is one of India's original indie musicians. Over the years, he has carved a niche for his music. As a young boy, he left Goa without a return ticket, wishing to acquire a European passport and settle there. But the thought of needing a visa to visit Goa made him realise where home was. He returned to make music and take it to the world. His love for Goa brought him back, but over the years what he describes as a 'little coastal paradise' began to change, not always for the better.

Three decades have passed, and the slow, heartbreaking transformation of Goa is unrelenting. According to the musician-activist, corruption is the real problem. As Goa gets increasingly 'Indianised', Goans are trying to find voices from amidst themselves to protect their paradise and create a dialogue within Goan society to re-think and question some of the choices they have made. Fernandes' is one such voice.

He spoke to *Civil Society* about his music, the Goa he grew up in, its transformation, problems in the political scenario and why he supports the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

Where did you grow up? Was there music in your growing-up years?

I grew up in Panjim, Goa. It was a Goa where there was a lot of the arts. In every home there would be some instrument or the other. Even in the humblest home there would be an earthen drum. Everyone in the society I grew up in sang, played, wrote, drew, embroidered or cooked very well. But no one thought of such things as professions or money making things. These were like side gifts that God or Mother Nature gave you. You also sang, drew ... but you were a doctor, engineer or a housewife who also played the piano.

How and when did you decide to become a professional musician?

Given the environment we were in, my parents always made me feel that music was a fantastic passion to have. One did not even think of it as a profession. For that, when they asked me to choose, I chose architecture. So I was all set to be like so many people I knew, including my childhood hero, Lousier Miranda, Mario Miranda's first cousin, a brilliant architect but a much better singer. Goa waited to hear him sing. My father was an industrialist who owned the Goldspot factory after the Portuguese left. He also played the Portuguese guitar. So they got together in the evenings and sang. Nobody was a 'musician' and everybody was.

Though I did finish the architecture course,



Remo Fernandes at home in Goa

somewhere midway it became clear, why should I be an architect if it was to be my fourth love after music, drawing and writing? So I decided I would earn my living only doing things I loved doing the most. This was around the age of 17-18. This happened perhaps also because of the youth we met here from Europe whom we broadly call hippies. But it was a new movement, a different way of thinking, being able to think out of the box.

You left for Europe after finishing studies. Tell us about that experience.

After finishing architecture I took off for a backpacking trip all across Europe for two years and three months. The first year was fascinating as I was seeing everything for the first time. In the second year there was a wonderful familiarity seeing the seasons come, people's behaviour. By the third cycle, I started feeling, ok, I have seen it all...

When I went I didn't know if I would come back. In fact, I started the process to acquire a European passport and then a thought struck me that in order to go to Goa I would need a visa! So the thought of needing a visa to come home made me realise where home was.

After I came back, I made a plan for myself and decided to pursue music professionally.

Was it hard to become a professional musician?

The first year I started to play in a 5-star hotel. I was a bit of an embarrassment to my parents. I was a trained architect, returned from Europe, and had become a hotel singer. The nosy people whose business it wasn't, started commenting. You know, it's always about what the other one is doing. I was composing my own songs since the age of 14 but the hotel was not a real outlet for original music.

You managed to successfully create and establish your own style that has been appreciated and accepted by people. As a musician, you have evolved over the years. Do you feel any pressure to stick to your initial style?

People from record companies do expect you to stick to the style of your last success. They all say they want "something different" but try and give them that, and their musically challenged brains blow a fuse. "Your last album was a hit, so give us more of the same, we don't want to alienate your fan base," they'll say. However, I've never repeated my previous successes. After my English pop hits like "Bombay City" I went into Hindi pop with "Oh Meri Munni". After this became a hit, I switched tracks completely, and did an album of mantras. And so on. I didn't choose to get into music in order to succumb to anyone's pressures.

What kind of music do you like to listen to?

I listen to literally all kinds, depending on the mood and the situation. My only requirement is that the music should be inspired and should have soul.

What are you currently working on?

I have long dreamed of starting a new website with an online store where I could put up all my music, past, present and future, for pay and download. It was finally completed three days ago, and is now open to the public: www.remofernandes.com.

To coincide with the website launch, I've re-recorded my very first album, *Goan Crazy*. The original was recorded on a four-track cassette Portastudio, which made a lot of track bouncing and locking a must, piling up the hiss and distortion. The end result left me quite unhappy, and even though the album instantaneously became the highest selling Goan album ever, I've always dreamed of leaving those songs behind in better quality. I've named the new version *Still Goan Crazy 2014*.

Have you been politically active in the past or been involved with activism?

My songs have always dealt with the realities of life. And one of the realities which affects all of us, whether we want it or not, is politics. The way our country is kept starving, filthy and backward, while

reality'

our rulers siphon off trillions to Switzerland and openly refuse to bring it back, is something which is doing more harm to India in one day than a thousand Kasabs put together could in 100 years. So, yes, I have been an activist through my songs since the early 1980s.

The past government and current political system have failed us, the people are angry and there is a need for change. Do you see AAP playing an important role in defining that change?

Do you see anyone else?

While people feel the need for change, do you think they are ready for the idealism AAP stands for?

We should ask this question to our farmers and their families who commit suicide out of debt and starvation. To the mother who waits in queues in a government hospital while her baby dies in her arms. To the brilliant child who will never be educated or have an equal opportunity in our country. Idealism? Look inward? Bear the cost? They have been bearing the cost of our apathy, and our governments' corruption, for 66 years! But to us they don't really exist. We, the educated, sit and ponder whether we can look inward, be the change, bear the cost... Ooo, and it upsets our comfortable little self-absorbed lives.

Goa is transforming. What, according to you, are the biggest challenges facing the people and administration here today?

Change is not a bad thing. It can also happen for the better. There is one, and only one challenge to be tackled in Goa and in the whole of India: wiping out corruption. If we do that, everything else will fall into place.

I remember when Goans heard about the first minister here being corrupt. People were embarrassed to talk about it. They would speak about it in hushed voices at parties: "Do you know so-and-so has taken money from that industrialist?" And the reaction would be: "What? He? It can't be!" Because these ministers were also part of the same society, they had suddenly become politicians. The transformation has been slow and for the worse.

You have stated that music remains your priority. However, one can be aware and politically active without being a full-time politician. What role do you see yourself playing in future?

Yes, but one cannot be a politician without being a full-time politician. Or a musician without being a full-time musician. If I decide to do something, I've got to give it my 100 per cent, or not do it at all. As a musician, I have always written socially engaged songs, and I have fought for causes by focusing on them through music, videos, interviews, and so on. Some of my efforts have had immediate results in concrete ways, some in long-term ways, and some not at all. I shall continue to use music and music videos the way I always have. I don't need to actually belong to a political party in order to do that. ■



Shyama Bai and Manju Devi (centre). Both sarpanches received the Women's Political Empowerment Day Award.

Women leaders honoured

Bharat Dogra
New Delhi

SHYAMA Bai, sarpanch of Posta Gram Panchayat in Sidhi District of Madhya Pradesh, has improved drinking water facilities in her area and started many development activities. Yet that wasn't the reason she won this year's Women's Political Empowerment Day Award, given every year by the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS) in New Delhi.

Shyama was selected because she went beyond her routine duties as sarpanch. She put a stop to alcoholism and domestic violence against women. She mobilised women so effectively that violence came down drastically.

As a tribal woman, Shyama overcame a lot of hardship to emerge as a panchayat leader. She had to sell her goats to raise money to contest for the post of sarpanch. When the panchayat seat was no longer reserved for women, she still won because of the support base she had created by working for the people.

Manju Devi, sarpanch of Sirka East Gram Panchayat in Ramgarh district of Jharkhand, has been closely involved with other elected representatives and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in speeding up development in her panchayat area. Her priorities are nutrition, sanitation and improving the green cover in and around villages.

Both Shyama and Manju proudly accepted their Women's Political Empowerment Day Award. Nearly 150 women panchayat representatives from 20 states participated in the two-day conference organised by ISS over 24-25 April. ISS has been observing this day since 1999 to celebrate reservations for women in panchayati raj institutions.

This year, the focus of the annual conference was on 'Women, Panchayats and the Right to Food.'

Louis George Arsenault, Country Representative of UNICEF, commended certain clauses of the National Food Security Act. These were the provi-

sion for subsidised food and nutritional security to the people and specific entitlements for women and the poorest of the poor. He described the recognition given to the eldest woman under this Act as the head of the household as "revolutionary" and "a way forward."

He also said that UNICEF, as a key partner, supports the Government of India's efforts to address high rates of malnutrition in the country through the Right to Food Act.

Rebecca Tavares, representative of the UN Women's office in India, congratulated women panchayat leaders for not only being numerically the largest in the world (10 to 15 million) but also for their role as "change agents."

She said panchayati raj institutions and their representatives have the potential to address malnutrition and hunger through better vigilance and monitoring mechanisms. It is incumbent on the panchayats to prioritise issues like child marriage, female infanticide, sanitation, toilets in schools and ration cards, she added.

Dr George Mathew, Chairman of ISS, made the introductory remarks and Dr Ash Narain Roy, Director, ISS, gave the welcome address.

Nikhil Dey of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) emphasised two slogans: 'Resist the injustice of empty stomachs and packed godowns,' and 'Remove the dividing line of APL/BPL. Provide ration and pension to all.'

He said that these have been the key concerns of the recent movement to reduce hunger and deprivation. Interacting with women panchayat leaders, he shared information about the key provisions of the food security law and encouraged them to contribute to its proper implementation.

The women panchayat leaders said they would be keen to ensure implementation of the food security law but they complained bitterly about the poor implementation of existing laws for helping the poor. ■

Latha's sports movement



R SAMUEL

Running a 'wheelchair train' to strengthen muscles

Jency Samuel
Chennai

ON the basketball court of Chennai's Nehru Stadium, Vel Murugan throws up a ball. It touches the hoop and bounces back. He catches it deftly and throws it to his partner, Dinesh. Each manoeuvres his sports wheelchair parallel to the other's, then they diverge, perform a graceful swirl and head back to the hoop. They keep practising netting the ball.

Murugan, a college student, and Dinesh, employed in a print services company, are part of Chennai Eagles, a team of wheelchair basketball players formed in February. It is a collaborative initiative between Choice International, UK, and Yes We Too Can, Chennai.

Yes We Too Can is a movement that promotes sports among the differently-abled. It was started in 2011 by Madhavi Latha, a differently-abled corporate leader, who got the idea when she won three gold medals at the 11th National Paralympic Swimming Championships. She wanted other differently-abled people to experience the same euphoria. "It's not about winning, but about the joy of enjoying a physical sport," says an exuberant Latha.

Belonging to Sathupalli in Andhra Pradesh, where awareness about vaccination was low, Latha was affected by polio before she turned a year old. A bright student, she completed her schooling in her village. She had 80 per cent disability and was carried to school by relatives. But she could not attend college owing to lack of disabled-friendly infrastructure. Yet, brimming with confidence, she graduated through distance education and then garnered more qualifications, including anti-money laundering specialisation and an MBA.

After stints in a bank and an insurance company, Latha moved to the more challenging corporate world. She joined Scope International where she is



R SAMUEL

Chennai Eagles team members practising

now Associate Vice-President.

She was doing fine until she developed post-polio syndrome, and began to experience extreme fatigue and muscular weakness. It led to several complications and her spine was affected. Doctors told her that she would not live beyond a year without spinal surgery.

Desperate, she approached a physiotherapist, Ananda Jothi, who suggested hydrotherapy. However, the swimming instructors she met were unsure how to coach a differently-abled person. But, backed by supportive parents, Latha entered the pool with confidence. She learnt to swim on her own and soon her health improved considerably.

Hearing about a corporate sporting competition, she signed up for the swimming event. No one took her seriously until she was at the pool. The organisers were concerned as no differently-abled person had ever participated. Her enthusiasm won them over. "Concerned about my safety, they sent two pilots, one to swim ahead of me and another behind me," she laughs. She completed the race and won the Most Encouraging Sportsperson award. "I had excelled in studies and co-curricular activities in school and won many prizes. Then, at the age of 40, I saw myself as a sports person," she comments happily.

She soon realised that she had to create public awareness first in order to involve other differently-abled people in sports. There were non-profit organisations working for their social uplift and employment. But there was none to initiate them into sports.

Latha began to conduct sessions for swimming coaches, training them to teach the differently-abled. She gave presentations in educational institutions, industrial bodies and various fora. Her own experience was proof of how swimming could improve not only health but also the self-esteem of the differently-abled. She exhorted industries to design cost-effective assistive devices and pool hoists, which enable the differently-abled to access the pool easily. Her passionate pleas were rewarded when IIT-Chennai built a pool with a ramp and the prototype of a hoist.

In 2011 she learnt that the 11th National Paralympics Meet was being held in Maharashtra. She was surprised to find just four participants from Tamil Nadu. When she received her medals, she says, she could not help thinking, "If I, in my forties, feel so elated participating in sports and winning, how exciting it would be for children." The seed for Yes We Too Can was sown in that moment.

She borrowed Obama's election slogan, 'Yes We Can', and added 'too' to indicate the differently-abled. She got into full swing, encouraging differently-abled people to take up swimming. Those who saw the benefits brought in more people. R. Shanthi, a government employee, recounted how she brought in three of her colleagues and other acquaintances.

The movement gathered momentum. For further impact, Latha decided to hold the 12th National Paralympics Meet in Chennai in 2012. To facilitate this, she set up the Paralympic Swimming Association of Tamil Nadu (PSATN). The Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu gave use of the aquatic complex and IIT provided free accommodation for about 500 people. More than 1,000 volunteers from her office, Scope, pitched in.

To reach out to people, PSATN organised a state-level meet in 2013, prior to the 13th national meet in Bengaluru. Government departments helped them identify 45 differently-abled people from rural areas for three-week intensive coaching in Trichy.

These efforts bore fruit. From no participation by Tamil Nadu in 2010 to 26 medals in 2013 was a great achievement.

'Aspiration within your limitation' is the motto of Uthira Ramachandran, an enthusiastic participant. Eleven-year-old Mayuri Ramakrishnan, who began swimming for health reasons, is more inspired after winning three medals in each meet, says mother Padmavathy.

Choice International sought out Latha for collaboration, bringing in coaches to train Chennai Eagles players. Now basketball is also a passion for the group. "Sports builds the self-confidence of the differently-abled. It's the best way to mainstream them," points out Latha, who feels it is her duty to inspire them. ■

PICTURES BY LAKSHMAN ANAND



Patients can compete with each other

Video games that heal

Shayak Majumder
New Delhi

As the game began, Rogelio Aliganga sat up in his wheelchair with rapt attention. The goal is to slice and blast the most number of crates that appear on the screen with the wireless controller in your hand. Aliganga's injured back is not making it any easier for him. Only a few months earlier, he couldn't even lift his hands, much less move them in a swishing motion. All of that doesn't matter anymore. For now, all his will is set on destroying those crates.

After quite a few misses, Aliganga finally manages to hit his target. His face lights up and he bellows a victorious "Yes!" The overwhelming sense of victory shines clearly in his eyes.

This is the effect the Indian Spinal Injuries Centre's (ISIC) new virtual reality therapy is having on its patients. By using simple motion-based video games, ISIC is making the rehabilitation process faster, more effective and a lot more fun. ISIC, a premier spinal cord injuries treatment and rehabilitation centre in Delhi, is a trusted provider of medical care, rehabilitation, research, education and advocacy since 1983.

ISIC is using Nintendo Wii, which is a wireless kinetic movement-based video game system, to accelerate the recuperation of patients suffering from spinal injuries.

Aliganga is from the Philippines. He was posted in Rajasthan as an engineer. A workplace accident resulted in fracturing of his back and thighs. "I was immediately flown to Delhi, to be treated in ISIC," he said. After surgery this January, he stayed on as a

resident patient at ISIC.

"The left side of my torso was completely numb for quite a long time," said Aliganga. Along with other rehabilitation therapies, he has been taking the virtual reality therapy for over four months now. "I can feel my body getting better with time. I prefer the video game therapy because it doesn't feel like a therapy at all. It's fun and effective."

Aliganga can now sit in his wheelchair without a body brace and his wrists function to the fullest.

Dr Chita Kataria, working at ISIC for 15 years, is head of the department of the rehabilitation centre and overlooks a variety of rehabilitation services provided by ISIC. "We provide a wide range of services – from yoga and ayurvedic massages to hydrotherapy. The virtual reality therapy is new. It's just five months old," she said.

Leading the way to the video game room, Kataria said, "The virtual therapy room is upstairs, just above the physiotherapy massage area." In the physiotherapy ward, patients were being given massages and being exercised by physiotherapists. The same look was on all their faces, as if the massage was a bitter pill that had to be swallowed. Though the therapists engaged them in conversation, there was a lack of drive in doing the exercises among the patients.

But in the virtual reality room, the atmosphere was completely different. Two wheelchair-bound patients were battling it out in the video game, as a few others awaited their turn to play. Whenever a player won, the onlookers would cheer and clap. It didn't seem like a hospital ward at all.

"The video games also affect the patient's mental condition. When a patient is engrossed in the game, the mind also prepares him to be physically active," said Kataria. "The games help develop a greater sense of confidence and empowerment."

The new therapy has proven to be faster and more efficient in yielding results. "Even though it's early, we can still claim that the video game therapy results in speedy recovery," said Kataria.

"It is also a time-saver for therapists," said Dr

Kataria. "Once the patients are familiarised with how to turn on the system and play, you don't need a therapist to accompany them anymore. The patients can come and play by themselves."

The system is minimal. It consists of a TV screen, the Wii console, wireless hand-held controllers and a footpad. To play a game, a game CD has to be inserted into the console. Once a game is selected, the player can play and control gaming movements through the wireless controller.

A patient can choose from a vast range of games. He can choose to play a quick round of table tennis, or he may just shoot footballs to score goals. A player can choose to play solo or against another player.

The footpad is a small platform device, on which the player can stand and play balancing games. "The games push the player to use the kinetic movements of his body. It's just like playing on the field," said Kataria. "It helps in increasing mobility, hand-eye coordination and strengthening muscles."

"Patients experience an improvement in trunk control, limb use, balance, mobility, and gross and fine motor movement. Many elderly patients also felt that their balance had improved," said Kataria.

The patients enjoy it and keep coming back for more. "Who doesn't like video games?" asks Kundan, as he dodges balls flying at him, balancing himself on the footpad. "The games might seem a little hard at first, but as you keep on playing, you get better."

Earlier, Kundan's spinal injury stopped him from lifting the controller with his hands. "They had to tape bandages on my hand to ensure the controller didn't fall out." But today, it is hard to stop him from scoring. "I have gotten so good at the game that I even beat my therapists," claims Kundan.

"The level of difficulty keeps on increasing as the player progresses," said Kataria. "The Wii system also stores score database, which helps us keep a tab on the overall progress of each patient."

According to Major HPS Ahluwalia, Director, ISIC, the effectiveness of the Wii system lies in the fact that it makes the player feel like he is on the field itself. "It has a tremendous positive effect on the patient's psyche. It also allows more

patients to get the same treatment in a very short span of time," added Ahluwalia.

"We keep the gaming system available for patients even after office hours. So the patients can access the therapy any time they want. Our aim is to provide as much exercise to the patients as possible," said Ahluwalia.

Kataria pointed out, "The entire system is cheap. At only ₹3 lakh, this costs us less than many other therapy systems." Each hour-long session costs about ₹350.

"The Nintendo Wii gaming system is also available in the market. We suggest to our patients that they get one so that they can engage themselves in the therapy sitting in their homes," said Kataria.

ISIC is trying to avail of more games for the therapy, which involves a wider range of patients. "We are going to get more games which are designed for children. For now, we are looking at increasing our game gallery," said Kataria. ■



Major HPS Ahluwalia

THE CITY WE WANT

Why an experiment in Gurgaon matters to the rest of India

Shayak Majumder
Gurgaon

GURGAON has come to be known for its soaring buildings, shopping malls and roads overrun by cars. But since winter last year, its residents have been experimenting with taking over a few of their busy streets on Sunday mornings to walk, run, cycle, do yoga or dance the Zumba.

It is an idea that has caught on and spread fast. At the Galleria Market, Ansal Plaza in Palam Vihar and on a stretch of DLF Phase 5, motorised vehicles are kept out as residents mill around.

Interestingly, these are mostly people from well-to-do families that own at least one car if not two or three. Six days of the week they prefer to drive to even nearby destinations. But come Sunday, they seem to slip easily into Raahgiri mode.

Raahgiri translates roughly into 'do what you like on the street'. It is modelled on the Ciclovía festival in Bogota where a takeover of the streets by people who cycle was encouraged with the intention of signalling inclusion and giving the majority, mostly poorer citizens, their rights.

Gurgaon is not quite there yet. The rich hold sway even when it comes to Raahgiri. You won't find the poor being part of it even though they represent one-third of Gurgaon's population who cycle or walk to work each day. But social activists, working behind the scenes to make Raahgiri possible, say the fledgling movement signals a change in perspective.

Residents of Gurgaon have not only begun questioning the dominance of cars and the way the roads have been designed, but also how the entire city has been built, its escalating air pollution, lack of public transport, water shortages and gated residential enclaves.

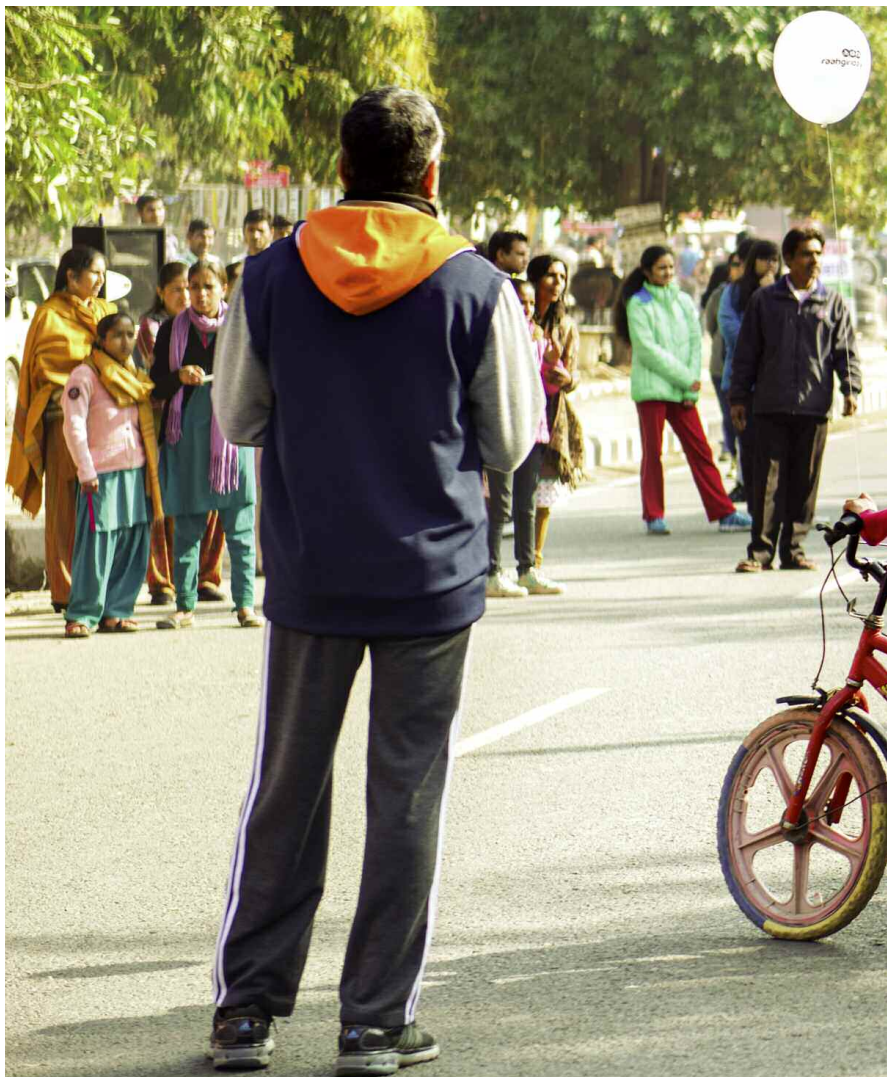
Raahgiri has made residents who use cars think about road accidents, in which at least 500 people died in Gurgaon last year – more than one recorded death per day. It has also prompted them to re-imagine Gurgaon and learn from other cities in the world – such as Bogota, New York, Copenhagen, London and Istanbul.

Gurgaon has a long history, but the new Gurgaon of shopping malls and office buildings and soaring apartment blocks has come about only in the past decade. Real estate developers backed by politicians have called the shots. There has been almost no regulation.

The population of Gurgaon has gone from 0.6 million in 2008 to 0.8 million in 2011. Its per capita income is higher than the rest of the national capital region and the third highest in India, just after Chandigarh and Mumbai.

Prosperity has come from garment manufacturing units, a car factory and automobile ancillary units, call centres, malls, super specialty hospitals and, of course, real estate transactions.

But it is not as though everyone earns enough to live well. A large number of people in Gurgaon live in slums. They make more by way of wages than they



COVER

SANDEEPA VEERAMACHENI



*Raahgiri scenes outside
DLF Galleria*

would elsewhere, but it is only enough for basics.

Raahgiri prompts the well-off to think about the poor and ask whether the type of development Gurgaon represents is sustainable or at all desirable. Is Gurgaon, with its forbidding design and inequalities, the kind of city India should want?

THE BEGINNINGS: The Raahgiri idea can be traced to Embarq India, a non-profit affiliated to the World Resources Institute in Washington, which helps cities opt for sustainable transport. Embarq connected with I Am Gurgaon, a voluntary group, and resident welfare associations (RWAs). Gurgaon-based companies later came forward as sponsors.

Embarq has helped draft India's National Urban Transport Policy (NUTP), an enlightened document that underlines the importance of providing road space to non-motorised transport. The policy gives priority to cycles and pedestrians. It envisages creating dedicated cycle tracks that would have cycle parking slots, drinking water and resting stations. Pedestrian paths would be free of encroachments. Innovatively designed road crossings would ensure accident-free access. The NUTP also talks of setting up zones free of cars.

"The problem with Gurgaon is that it is designed for motor vehicle users," says Amit Bhatt, an urban transport consultant with Embarq India. "Streets are built in the form of highways. By design, drivers are encouraged to move at a speed of 80 kmph. Eventually, they will drive at 100 kmph. Now, a cycle, which moves at 10 kmph, can never keep up and so friction is created between the two types of vehicles which results in accidents."

Retrofitting the noble directives of the NUTP in Gurgaon is a formidable challenge but Embarq India decided to try.

In 2010, it submitted an Integrated Mobility Plan (IMP) to the Haryana Urban Development Authority (HUDA). The plan contained a detailed design of a 120 km interconnected cycle track that could be built on Gurgaon's existing roads. The estimated cost was reasonable.

"The design for the cycle track is simple and really not that hard to implement," says Sarika Panda, an urban planner with Embarq and one of its key designers. "Clear indicators would stop motorised vehicles from entering cycle lanes. Every signal would have tabletop crossings which would facilitate cyclists as well as pedestrians to cross the road."

According to Panda, one km of cycle track would cost about a third of the price of widening a road. "You need around ₹4 lakh to build a cycle track for one km. Therefore, to build the proposed 120 km track, you only need to spend ₹5 crore."

The IMP also gave space to non-motorised traffic and emphasised good public transport.

"Even though HUDA accepted the plan, it didn't show any interest in actually implementing it," says Panda. "Unfortunately, when it finally started getting interested, the HUDA administrator, Praveen Kumar, was transferred and he



Gurgaon's crowded streets: A tractor fights for space with cars and buses

became the new Commissioner of the Municipal Corporation of Gurgaon (MCG)." So Embarq started from scratch by canvassing with the new HUDA administrator, PC Meena.

Bhatt points out that in India 140,000 deaths due to road accidents take place every year. Twenty per cent of these deaths are in cities. And 70 per cent of the people who die are pedestrians and cyclists.

"If you look at how road safety is addressed in India, you will find that a lot of stress is laid on using seatbelts and helmets, and avoiding drinking and driving," says Bhatt. "Sure, this is effective in saving the 30 per cent who are using cars,



Sarika Panda, Amit Bhatt and Latika Thukral (from left to right) on a Raahgiri morning

but what about the 70 per cent who are outside those cars?”

Bhatt believes the problem lies in the lack of proper infrastructure. “The data we received from the municipal corporation and urban development authorities clearly showed that only 20 per cent of footpaths was available for use in Gurgaon. And there wasn’t a single cycle track in the city.”

Embarq India approached the administration with the data. “They said that this is the age of expressways and double flyovers and everyone tends to drive a car. It was clear that there was a real disconnect,” says Bhatt.

EDUCATING CITIZENS: So Embarq turned to Gurgaon’s residents instead. It began creating awareness about the need for safer infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists. In January 2013, it organised a workshop on non-motorised transport at the Epicentre in Gurgaon. It attracted 50 participants, including representatives of the Ministry of Urban Development, Gurgaon Police, companies, RWAs and schools.

“We were surprised to see that the people who took part were open to our propositions. At the end of the event, a lot of interest was generated in favour of doing something. But nobody was clear on what was to be done,” says Bhatt.

Among the participants was Rajesh Jain, director of Conscient, a real estate venture which also owns the Heritage School in Sector 62 of Gurgaon. Jain says, “We decided to involve our students. We asked them to go out and prepare a detailed traffic survey of Gurgaon.”

The students took up the task with gusto. Guided by their teachers, they visited traffic crossings and recorded traffic density and movement of vehicles. They also visited households with the question: “Is Gurgaon cycle-able or not?” Based on the information they gathered, they prepared a report.

In May 2013, the Heritage School organised a cycle rally. About 200 children and their parents cycled to the office of the Deputy Commissioner (DC), saying, “We are the citizens of tomorrow. We don’t want the city as it stands.” The children submitted their traffic report to the DC.

Praveen Kumar, at the time Administrator, HUDA, and Alok Mittal, Commissioner of Gurgaon Police, also took part in the cycle rally.

“Praveen Kumar and Alok Mittal cycled with the schoolchildren to the DC’s office. It showed that a lot of people wanted change,” says Bhatt. “It was clear that

‘The data we received from the municipal corporation and urban development authorities clearly showed that only 20 per cent of footpaths was available for use in Gurgaon.’

pedestrians find space? This event was necessary to give streets back to citizens and promote non-motorised transport.”

On each Raahgiri Day, the police ensure that all Raahgiri routes are free of vehicles from 7 am to 12 noon. A vehicle trying to pass through that area is guided to a detour.

Another hurdle was to get permission from the owners of stores in the DLF Galleria market. “The Shopowners’ Association refused to allow us to block the roads on Sundays. They argued that most of their customers arrived by car and since Sunday is a holiday it is an important day for sales,” says Bhatt.

The organisers met representatives of the shopowners’ association regularly and sensitised them, citing the success of Ciclovía. “After long rounds of discussion, they finally agreed. Interestingly, the shops now record substantially higher sales during Raahgiri,” says Bhatt happily.

Raahgiri is in its ninth month now. “Around 10,000 people attended the first Raahgiri. The numbers kept increasing every Sunday. At one point, we had 25,000 participants on a single day,” says Bhatt.

Bhatt disagrees that it is only the well-off from gated communities who are taking part. Children from the slums of Chhattarpur and Sikanderpur are also joining in, he says.

“Our visual surveys showed that about 40 per cent of visitors are from Chhattarpur and Sikanderpur. If you look at the Zumba classes, the first three or four rows are filled with children from these areas,” says Bhatt. “We went to slums and invited the children to Raahgiri. We explained why it was important to come.”

One of Raahgiri’s most important goals is to bring children on to the streets. “Nowadays, children go from the safe enclosures of their homes to their classrooms and back. They are never really on the streets. I believe that everything in Raahgiri was driven by the interests of the children,” says Jain.

Raahgiri has also promoted interaction between the police and citizens. “People who generally don’t come to a police station get to meet me or other police officers at Raahgiri. We talk and exchange notes. These interactions are invaluable,” says Mittal.

Mittal is a sincere, outgoing officer. As Police Commissioner he has won the trust of citizens. He believes in working with and learning from voluntary

we needed to do something bigger to attract more people.”

Jain says, “The children calling on the DC created a buzz. In a way, it was the genesis of Raahgiri.”

“Inspired by Bogota’s Ciclovía, we thought of holding a Raahgiri Day in Gurgaon,” says Bhatt. “Just like in Bogota, we decided that every Sunday some parts of the city would be cordoned off from motorised vehicles. Those streets would be given to the people to do whatever they wanted.”

HELPING HANDS: Collaboration between NGOs, residents, schools and the police ensured that Raahgiri Day became a reality. I Am Gurgaon, Pedal Yatri and Duplays joined hands with Embarq India and the Heritage School. For the event to be a success, the NGOs realised it was essential to get the police on board. Luckily, Mittal, as Commissioner of Police, was one of their biggest supporters.

“When I was approached with the idea of Raahgiri, my first reaction was to say yes,” recalls Mittal. “I liked the idea of reclaiming the streets for residents. Nowadays, a lot of motor vehicles are plying on the road. There is no space left for any more vehicles, so how will cyclists or

groups. He says, "We made a conscious effort to connect with various NGOs and civil society groups. Our experience has been very good. In fact, we have set up a cell in our office that prepares a list of such groups. We have also publicly stated that the Gurgaon Police would like to work with any NGO which approaches us with a good project."

As Raahgiri's popularity has grown, there appears to be competition among officials to own it. Praveen Kumar, as MCG Commissioner, recently announced that he would manage Raahgiri through the MCG and exclude voluntary groups.

This led to protest from residents and the MCG's councillors who accused him of acting without consulting anyone. Raahgiri without the enthusiastic popular participation would be lacking in spirit, it is pointed out.

But Bhatt of Embarq is not unhappy. Increasing the reach of Raahgiri would be impossible without the support of a municipal body, he says. He welcomes its sense of ownership.

"If you look at Ciclovía in Bogota, it would not have been possible without the support of the Department of Parks and Recreation," he says. "As long as the cause and connection with citizens are not lost, this is an appreciable move. We only have to make sure this doesn't turn into just another departmental event of MCG."

CYCLING CITY: One outcome of Embarq's workshop and Raahgiri is that there are at least a few car-users now inspired to cycle and walk. Manas Fuloria, the CEO of Nagarro, a software company in Gurgaon, rides his cycle to work once a week. His company is a sponsor of Raahgiri and he represents, in many ways, the new-age CEO.

"I love cycling, but I can't help feeling like a target on wheels whenever I venture out on my bike," says Fuloria. "The drivers of big cars behave like they own the road. They flex their muscles and elbow out all weaker vehicles and pedestrians."

"When I take my cycle to work, I call my wife the minute I reach my office. She worries for my safety. The time I take to cycle to office is nearly the same as travelling by car. If I face a traffic jam, I simply take my bike up on the footpath and take a shortcut," says Fuloria.

Police Commissioner Mittal, too, walks to office once a week. "A lot of people have told me that they try to walk to nearby markets. Some of the brave ones say that they are going to office once a week by public transport or on cycle," he says.

"Recently, I was in Singapore. I saw that the city has very good walkways and an excellent system to facilitate road crossing. As a pedestrian, you feel like walking. But in Gurgaon, even if you want to, you are discouraged, because you feel a little unsafe," says Mittal.

Gurgaon's citizens are keen that road infrastructure be designed, keeping pedestrians and cyclists in mind. "When a road is repaired, invariably only its central part is resurfaced. The two sides are left dusty and uneven. Cyclists have to adhere to these sides to avoid bigger vehicles. It is very risky. These empty spaces could be easily transformed into dedicated cycle lanes," says Jasbir Singh, director of Pedal Yatri, a co-organiser of Raahgiri Day. Pedal Yatri is a community of cyclists in Gurgaon who regularly organise cycle trips.

No thought goes into designing pavements either. "Pavements are placed at least one or two feet higher than the road. Elderly people and small children find it difficult to climb walkways every time they go out on the street," says Singh. "Pavements are riddled with huge HUDA signboards in the middle. Pedestrians have to get down from the footpath on to the road, pass the signboard and then



Alok Mittal: 'We have made a conscious effort to connect with civil society groups'

'Raahgiri has promoted interaction between the police and citizens. People who generally don't come to a police station get to meet me there.'

mount the footpath again. This is simply bad planning."

According to Panda, HUDA never envisaged a city where people would walk. The pavements were kept high because, when roads are resurfaced, their level keeps rising!

"When I asked them about the high pavements, they said the road would finally reach the level of the pavement over time," says Panda.

"What we need are urban streets that will cater to all categories of road users," says Bhatt. "The speed of vehicles should be restricted to 50 kmph. Footpaths need to be easily accessible and connected. This is the type of course correction we need in terms of road design."

Citizens are critical of the Haryana government and DLF building a 16-lane freeway and a Rapid Metro on concrete pillars.

"They spent ₹16,000 crore on the Rapid Metro to connect a stretch of four km. This is ridiculous. With that budget, we could have developed a BRT system for all of Gurgaon," says Panda.

Gurgaon is a city shaped by builders, each led by his own vision. As a result, localities are not connected. "The residential communities are located far from commercial zones and market areas. Walking between them is not possible and cycling is not yet safe. So, in a way, we are forced to drive cars to ply between these zones. This needs to change," says Lalita Thukral of I Am Gurgaon.

"Look at DLF's 16-lane freeway," says Thukral. "No arrangements have been made for a cycle lane. There will be a junction near Sikanderpur, but there is no way that a pedestrian or a cyclist can cross the freeway. I believe it is very

risky and will make the area prone to accidents."

Thukral and others in I Am Gurgaon are passionate about turning Gurgaon into a more inclusive and sensitive city. A former banker, Thukral has invested personal time and money in bringing about change. There have been long hours spent in meeting local officials and getting them to see things differently. Sadly, there has been more failure than success.

Officers come and go, and canvassing for change is like playing a game of snakes and ladders. You never know when you will have to start from scratch.

POLITICAL WILL: The most important piece missing in the jigsaw is political will. Great cities have great mayors. In Gurgaon, the municipal body has only recently been elected. The mayor and his deputies lack administrative experience, have little political influence and no real vision for Gurgaon.

"In India, a mayor has no power at all," laments Bhatt. "Cities in India are largely governed through states. And states have little or no interest in urban areas. They look at the villages and rural areas as their vote banks."

"We found that the transition from a rural political economy to an urban political economy happens when you reach a threshold of 70 per cent urbanisation. India is only about one-third urbanised. We will take another 30 to 40 years to reach 70 per cent. So, either we wait, or we can work something out," says Bhatt.

"Latin America is about 80 to 85 per cent urbanised. Turkey is almost 70 per cent urbanised. If you look at Turkey's development, it is because mayors are becoming more powerful there," explains Bhatt.

"What is the city that we want? Well, I want a city where a car driver slows down or stops to let a pedestrian cross the road," says Fuloria. "Very few Indian drivers actually stop. And when they do, they smile at the pedestrian who smiles back at them. To me, it's an amazing example of a humane connection." ■

BUSINESS

ENTERPRISE | CSR | ICT | GREEN TECH

Smartbin for smart homes

Greentechlife makes composting easier

Shayak Majumder
New Delhi

SMARTBIN, as the name suggests, is a smart kitchen wastebin which converts everyday food waste into organic fertilisers or compost. From the outside, it may look like any ordinary garbage bin. But its crafty design and mechanism make it an effective domestic compost-producing device.

Contrary to other composting practices, the Smartbin produces high-yielding chemical-free fertiliser in a fast, clean, odour-free manner. It is designed and distributed by Bengaluru-based Greentechlife, run by innovator and avid gardener Arijit Mitra.

Mitra, who started Greentechlife on 15 August, 2009, had no experience of composting or gardening. "I come from a background of BPOs and marketing," says Mitra. He worked in Delhi and Mumbai, before shifting to Bengaluru in 2007.

"I was getting fed up with the life I was leading. I wanted to do something that pleased my soul," says Mitra. Then he came across the acclaimed BBC documentary, *Home*, on YouTube. "The documentary showed how the human race is threatening the ecological balance on Earth," says Mitra. "I realised that if I don't do anything about it from my side, my son, who is four years old, might not have a safe Earth to grow on."

Mitra started researching food crops grown all



Arijit Mitra: 'I wanted to do something that pleased my soul'



It was the Smart Garden that seeded the idea of Smartbin

over the world. He found out that food is consumed by someone who is sitting far from where the crops are produced. "I wanted to reduce this distance. If we grow our own food, it would help take the pressure off the soil in the farmlands. And hence I came up with Greentechlife, which provides organic farming solutions. Smartbin is our bestselling product so far."

According to Mitra, food waste accounts for 60 per cent of household waste. Smartbin allows customers to keep that away from landfills easily. It doesn't use dustbin liners or garbage bags, therefore decreasing the amount of plastic going into landfills.

"Even though Smartbins are very effective in converting your daily food garbage into productive compost and have proven worthy in keeping waste away from landfills, it must be noted that Smartbin was not initially designed to be a waste management solution," points out Mitra.

Smartbin was initially developed to provide a solution to Mitra's first creation – Smart Garden. "Greentechlife's first offering, the Smart Garden, was a specially designed terrace garden. It is a mod-

Continued on page 24

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ular organic terrace garden that helps a gardener grow food without using pesticides," says Mitra.

The various Smart Garden modules were priced between ₹20,680 and ₹67,800. "Even after availing of a module of such a high price, I discovered that the customers run a high maintenance cost, buying good compost to use in the garden which comes at around ₹120 for a one-kg packet," says Mitra. "This bothered me. I didn't want my customers to spend so much after buying a Smart Garden."

Mitra started researching on effective and cheap ways of producing compost in the home. "I studied a lot of composting methods, I spoke to experts from all over the world on Skype," says Mitra. "Finally, after one-and-a-half years of designing one prototype after another, I came up with the Smartbin."

He was inspired by the Japanese method of fermenting. "In Japan, they ferment their food waste and turn it into compost. The Smartbin works in a similar manner," says Mitra.

The Smartbin was launched on 26 January, 2013, as a supplement to Smart Gardens, but it soon gathered popularity as a standalone device that yields high-quality compost which can be used in any organic garden.

A Smartbin start-up kit is priced at ₹1,695 and includes two 20-litre Smartbins, two lids, two strainers, two taps and fittings and three packs of Bio Bloom microbes.

Using a Smartbin is easy. "It is to be used like a kitchen bin, where you put in all your food waste," says Mitra. "The only difference is, after you put in the waste, you press it down using any plate or bowl, to remove air gaps from in between." After the waste is pressed down, the user has to sprinkle a teaspoon of Bio Bloom microbes, which stops the food from rotting and converts it into a sort of pickle.

The Bio Bloom microbes are also provided by Greentechlife. The three packets of Bio Bloom would last a family of four for three to four months. "The Bio Bloom is developed from the bran which is produced after rice or wheat is polished. The bran, in itself, is a good source of microbes," says Mitra.

When the bin is full, it is kept aside for around four weeks to finish pickling. During this period, the second bin can be used to keep storing food waste. The pickle in the first bin is to be layered with dry compost, sealed and left for composting. Says Mitra, "The first time, you would have to buy the dry compost from any gardening store but afterwards you can easily use the compost you had prepared earlier in your Smartbin."

"After four weeks of composting, you will have amazing compost, which acts as a great planting media," says Mitra. The tap on the bins can be used to collect liquid waste, which is termed Smart Brew by Mitra. "The Smart Brew is an excellent growth stimulator. We have come across cases where customers have said that Smart Brew results in more lush and greener vegetation," says Mitra. "We have

also received feedback which says that Smart Brew has magically caused a plant to flower for the first time after five years."

"Smart Brew is also effective in unclogging drain pipes and sewage lines," says Mitra.

Mitra has sold around 500 Smartbins so far. More than his sales, he takes pride in his after-sales services. Greentechlife boasts of free lifetime support and assistance, and delivers. Mitra has created a Facebook community for Smartbin users. If you are a Smartbin user, you can post any query any time to the community. Mitra takes out time every day to answer all the posted queries.

"Most of our customers are first-time composters. They don't have much idea of composting or organic farming and take to it out of pure passion. So I would get queries from someone who has used it for a few days, as well as from someone who has been using it for a few months," says Mitra.

Mitra's BPO background has made him a smart marketer. "Instead of driving sales by forcing my product on people, I would rather sell a few Smartbins and help those customers successfully grow food on their own," he says.

Mitra relies on word of mouth and Facebook ads as his marketing strategies. "Initially, I would only be able to sell 10 bins in a month. But now, I am happy to say that I get at least three calls every day from customers who are looking for distributorship

or bulk order."

He has a small team of five employees that runs Greentechlife. He trains and instructs the employees personally. "While big corporates tell their employees that the customer is God, I tell my employees, Don't treat a customer as God, but as a human being," says Mitra. "This ensures that you are genuinely out there to help the customer and not trying to get a sale out of him."

"So far, I have invested ₹60 lakh in all my products, research and development. Frankly, I am nowhere near making any profit. I am still borrowing money from here and there. But, I am happy doing what I do. My family supports me. What else can I ask for?" says Mitra.

Greentechlife is going through a major expansion phase. "Our warehouse in Bengaluru is almost ready. I have appointed a senior customer care executive, who answers around 40 calls a day. If the calls exceed 50 per day, I will appoint one more executive," says Mitra.

He is looking at developing a working strategy which would enable his employees to work from home. "I realise that each employee wastes valuable time and money commuting to and from office. I want to save that time and money by encouraging them to work from home," says Mitra. "I know coming up with such a working module will be hard and something never done before. But, I like to do things which are out of the box and this is my next challenge." ■



'Most of our customers are first-time composters. They don't have much idea of composting or organic farming.'



JAYPORE

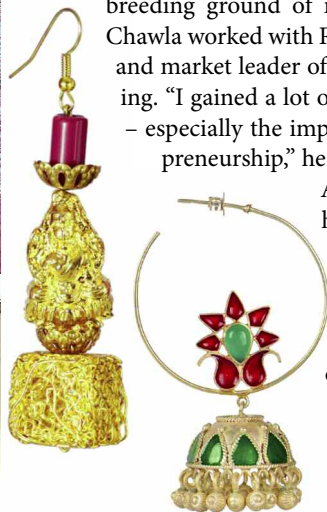
Arjun Sen
New Delhi

THE Dongria Kondh tribe of Odisha is well known for its long struggle that eventually prevented UK mining giant Vedanta Resources from digging for bauxite on the tribe's sacred Niyamgiri Hill. However, few people know that Dongria Kondh women produce beautiful handwoven cotton shawls with embroidery depicting their *dongars* (hills) and fields.

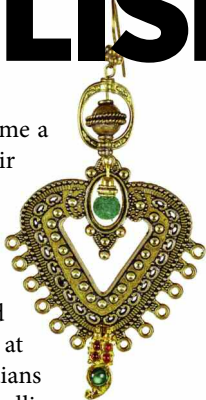
LAKSHMAN ANAND



Puneet Chawla, one of Jaypore's founders and its CEO



IS STYLISH



The Dongria weave had become a vanishing art form, with their products rarely selling outside the community. However, an online retailer, Jaypore.com, has made it possible for Dongria embroidered saris and shawls to sell in global markets at what would appear to most Indians to be exorbitant prices. The dwindling community of Dongria Kondh weavers is delighted.

“Jaypore has provided an excellent platform for designers and craftspersons to reach Indian and global markets. This is helping the revival of art forms like Dongria embroidery, Bomkai sarees and the extremely rare, sensuous and comfortable Dhalapathar textiles,” says designer Gunjan Jain, who recently curated Jaypore’s second collection of apparel based on the vanishing art forms of Odisha.

“We focus on languishing art forms. Our products are the outcome of the story behind the art form,” says Shilpa Sharma, one of the four co-founders of Jaypore and the key person behind the sourcing of products. “Our marketing is entirely based on social media. We market through Facebook, Pinterest, Google+, blogs and so on where we focus on storytelling.”

Jaypore.com sells high quality Indian crafts – apparel, jewelry, home textiles, home decor and accessories – sourced from traditional Indian artisans. Founded by Aarti Jaswani Ubhi, her husband, Deep, Puneet Chawla and Shilpa Sharma, Jaypore was launched in August 2012 as an iPad application. In October it became a US-only website and in January 2013, it was launched in India and the rest of the world.

“We broke even in eight months, in August 2013. So far, we have been able to sell and ship our prod-

ucts to some 35 countries. The list is growing every day although India is our primary market,” says Chawla, CEO of Jaypore.

Chawla, 31, is a software engineer from Delhi. He started his career with one of India’s first e-commerce ventures, Naukri.com. Son of a businessman, entrepreneurship was a natural choice though his first love is photography, he says with a smile. After working for about four years in Naukri.com and Jeevansathi.com, he relocated to Bengaluru, the breeding ground of new age entrepreneurs. Chawla worked with Redbus.com, the pioneer and market leader of online bus ticket booking. “I gained a lot of great experience there – especially the importance of frugal entrepreneurship,” he says.

After eight months or so he was back in Delhi for a brief stint with Exclusively.in – one of the first websites to ship Indian products designed by celebrity fashion designers such as Tarun Tahiliani, Sabyasachi and others to the US market.

Deep is a pioneer of dotcom businesses in India. He launched Burrp.com in Mumbai, and restaurant guide Zomato.com. Sometime in 2007-2008, he met Chawla and wanted to recruit him. But Chawla wasn’t keen to shift to Mumbai. The two, however,

became good friends. “Deep had an apartment in Defence Colony and whenever he came down to Delhi we used to hang out together in the evenings. The idea of Jaypore came from these discussions and Deep became a mentor. He introduced me to his wife, Aarti, our creative head, and also to Shilpa who heads product and design,” says Chawla.

The idea of shipping Indian craft and artisanal products to the US had been on his mind ever since his stint with Exclusively.in. But he had a slightly different approach. “I am basically a backpacker and I love to go on long walks along village trails with my camera,” says Chawla. “I could never associate myself with celebrity fashion designers. I identified more with the kind of products that Fab India sells.”

“I met Shilpa in 2011 at around 8 am at a hotel in Delhi. Within five minutes I knew we were going to work together,” recalls Chawla. Sharma had by then spent 12 years with Fab India and another five years as a crafts and lifestyle consultant. She had developed her own network of weavers, craftspersons and designers who worked with Indian traditional handicrafts artisans. It was a perfect fit.

“We got investment on Day 1. Apart from Aarti and me, we had an angel investor, Harish Chawla. Jaypore was seeded in November-December 2011,” recalls Chawla. Sharma and her team got down to working on products and design and by August 2012 Jaypore was ready to hit the market.

“I used my network to find curators who work with craft communities, individual artisans, weavers etc. Our products and designs are entirely collaborative. Our curators, who are usually trained designers from NIFT, NID, Pearl Institute of

Fashion Design and IICD (Indian Institute of Crafts and Design), reach out to the artisans and produce collections that we sell,” explains Sharma.

Gunjan, for example, is a graduate of Pearl and her business, Gunjan Textile Designer, runs a studio called Vriksh. The Odisha collection has been curated by Vriksh.

“We decided to target the upper end of the market. If a person is willing to buy an Apple product he or she would not mind paying for high quality premium products. So we focus on selling our best products and rare art forms with contemporary designs. Buying a sari for ₹1,500 online without actually seeing and feeling the product is a huge leap of faith,” says Chawla. “Most of our products are expensive and priced upwards of ₹3,000 to ₹4,000, as compared to Flipkart and other e-retailers who sell at an average price of about ₹1,500.”

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Shilpa Sharma sources products

Jaypore realised that Indian traditional handicraft techniques have not evolved in terms of design. “So we focus on giving artisans inputs on global design aesthetics and what sells in today’s markets. Popularity is measurable so we share that information with the artisans. And loyal customers bring in more customers,” outlines Chawla.

This business model is proving beneficial to artisans. “Jaypore understands value and offers very flexible and reasonable prices,” comments Hemendra Kumar of Women Weave, a collective founded by Sally Holkar which has organised more than 200 women *khadi* weavers in Maheshwar (near Indore) and Bindori (near Jabalpur) in Madhya Pradesh.

Jaypore’s efforts are helping to stop migration of artisans to low-paying manual work, say Gunjan and Kumar.

Recently, Jaypore placed a large order with artisans trained by Handloom School – an initiative of Women Weave. “The younger generation of weavers is not interested in sticking to their craft because of lack of markets and remunerative prices. That is why we started Handloom School. This order from Jaypore will encourage our students a lot,” said Kumar. ■

INSIGHTS

OPINION | ANALYSIS | RESEARCH | IDEAS

The other voters...

ANSHU MESHACK

SPENDING a staggering ₹3,426 crore to elect 543 representatives in the world's largest democratic exercise makes for international news, what with 540 million voters casting their ballots in 930,000 polling stations across India.

But when a group of 60 people with narrow eyes and of stocky build quietly turned up at a polling booth in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for the very first time, the historical moment was lost in the melee that was the 16th Lok Sabha elections.

But then, the Shompen are no ordinary voters. This community of 229 people of Mongoloid descent living in the reserve forests of the Great Nicobar Island is believed to be one of the last surviving stone-age tribes in the world. First contacted by outsiders in the 19th century, this is the first general election in which they were issued Photo Identity Cards declaring them Indian citizens.

After the last general election in 2009, about 100 million voters became newly eligible to vote. The Election Commission, to its credit, systematically encouraged people to participate in the elections, resulting in a record 66.4 per cent voter turnout, the highest ever in Indian history. The world has been watching what *The New York Times* referred to as, "an inspiring celebration of universal adult suffrage".

What did not create ripples were instances of those who protested at their inability to participate. The Ladakhi students studying away from their homes in Leh and Kargil districts are a case in point. Poor education standards back home compel them to study in places like Jammu and Chandigarh, but the snow-blocked roads prevented them from returning home to cast their votes. Over 10,000 such students were unable to vote, and their request for special polling booths in Jammu fell on deaf ears.

Also lost in the din were the voices of those who chose to stay away, refusing to participate as a mark of protest. The absence of roads and bridges led about 6,000 villagers in Udham Singh Nagar district in Uttarakhand to boycott polls, expressing disappointment with the state government's inability to build basic infrastructure for the people.

Chingam, a tiny village of 54 voters in the southernmost district of Nicobar, boycotted the elections, citing lack of basic facilities like water and roads. The Dongria Kondh tribe in Odisha, who continue to oppose British mining company Vedanta's open-cast mine, boycotted the polls in protest against the harassment they face for opposing the powerful industrial lobby favouring the mines.

The people of Salmara on Majuli Island, Assam, decided to protest against the lack of development and the long-standing need for a permanent solu-

tion to floods and erosion by the Brahmaputra river. Several villages in the mountainous districts of Kullu and Lahaul-Spiti also boycotted the elections for want of road connectivity and bridges. The list of demands is as elementary as it is long.

The complexity of the situation makes any solution a challenging task. At the northern end of the

mental right to choose their elected leaders? The answers lie in the basic dynamics that underpin the democratic process – the expectations of the voter and the elected leader.

Boycotts and low voter turnout point to disillusionment with the political process, whatever the immediate triggers. Ironically, the protesters often



The absence of roads and bridges led about 6,000 villagers in Udham Singh Nagar district in Uttarakhand to boycott polls since the state had not built infrastructure.

country, the picturesque but troubled state of Jammu & Kashmir is one such example. The three socio-culturally diverse parts of the state showed a contrast in citizen engagement, with Srinagar recording a dismal 26 per cent turnout, as yet another general election passed without resolving the Kashmir issue. Jammu recorded a 68 per cent turnout and Ladakh 65 per cent. In a state sharply divided on ethnic lines, any common decision is likely to adversely affect one section of the people while appeasing another.

What causes citizens in a democracy to use this form of protest, denying themselves their funda-

find themselves trapped between the devil and the deep sea, shunned by the winning party that does not attribute its victory to the 'non-voters', and spurned by the losing candidate who blames them for his loss. A no-win situation for the largest democracy in the world.

Other factors only add to the complexity. This election has seen the biggest cache of liquor, drugs and cash being seized during any election so far. The *New York Times* report was quick to point out: "Lurking behind the feel-good spectacle is the reality that India's elections are awash in illegal cash, serious violence and dirty tricks."

With the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments devolving power to the grassroots, the scope of elections has widened from 4,000 elected positions to nearly three million. The voter is therefore wooed expansively, first during panchayat elections, then Assembly elections and finally the general election. Ethnic identity, often a primary factor in politically mobilising the masses, is no longer adequate to keep voters loyal. With candidates permitted to spend up to ₹70 lakh on election expenses, the fiercely competitive race sees political leaders

Continued on next page

Mahan's coal shadow

KANCHI KOHLI

MAHAN has the proud reputation of being one of the oldest sal forests in India. That may soon become history. Coal, the black gold, has been discovered under its lustrous trees. Mahan, in Singrauli district of Madhya Pradesh, is now at the heart of the ongoing controversy about forest people, forestland and what lies beneath. In energy and mining books, Mahan is recognised as a 'coal block' and everything else that the forest stands to lose is considered less significant for the country's decision makers today.

The coal underneath this segment of the forest is to be mined by Mahan Coal Ltd., a joint venture of two corporate giants, Essar and Hindalco. The thermal power plants of both these companies were allowed to come up despite assured coal linkages. Ironically, coal in this particular block is available only for the next 14 years. Mining will fell 512,780 trees, as per records. With coal availability only for a short span, it is most logical that both the companies will seek to expand their mining area on the grounds that their power projects continue to remain viable.

These were critical reasons why back in 2011, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) Forest Advisory Committee had disapproved of the diversion of this forestland for coal mining. The then Environment Minister, Jairam Ramesh, put on record the pressures he faced from the Union Ministry of Coal, and forwarded this proposal to an 'empowered' Group of Ministers (GoM) headed by Pranab Mukherjee, now President of India. The ex-minister's note records in detail that this forest patch should be a 'no-go' for coal mining and that the ministry's advisory was against sacrificing this rich forest for a mere 14-year mining plan.

But a lot transpired between July 2011 and February 2014, which is when the then Environment Minister, Veerappa Moily, signed off 967.65 hectares of this forest in favour of Mahan Coal Ltd. The Mahan coal block received its Stage 2 permission for forest diversion from the MoEF on 12 February 2014. During this period, doubts continued to be raised around the diversion of this coal block.

Jayanthi Natarajan who was the Environment

Minister between Ramesh and Moily's tenures, had in October 2012 stated on record that the coal block was being granted conditional approval only because the GoM had insisted. Many of the conditions sought to be fulfilled should have been the basis to decide whether or not the Mahan forest could be dug up for coal.

Far away from this paperwork lies Singrauli where the forests of Mahan thrive within its social con-



The Mahan forest

struct. As per the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) document of the coal mine, there are 54 villages within the 10-km radius of the coal block which are officially considered the impacted area in such assessment exercises. As per the 2001 census, we are talking about a population of 59,202 out of which 18,995 are from Scheduled Tribe communities such as Baiga, Gond, Khairwar and Panika.

Many of the affected people have come together to form the Mahan Sangharsh Samiti (MSS) and assert their right to continue accessing these forests. They are resisting the mining operation. Some of their demands seek basic adherence to the due process of law. But, more fundamentally, they are opposing being directly displaced or living next to a messy mine. Many of them have seen forest areas not too far away transform into open cast mines since the 1980s and understand the everyday conditions and risks under which people live.

For MSS, their basic constitutional and legal rights have been violated. They have come forward (including in a joint press conference with the for-

mer Minister of Tribal Affairs) to say that the gram sabha (village assembly) through which the process of recognition of forest rights was to be initiated was forged back in March 2013.

MSS has claimed that only 184 people at this special gram sabha initially signed the resolution and the register was closed. When they sought information through the Right to Information (RTI) law later, the signature count was up to 1,125 people, some of whom say MSS members are not even alive. This is a clear violation of the requirements of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA) and the condition on which the final approval is to be granted for forest diversion under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980.

Was this rush to clear off Mahan expected? And despite the conditions not being fulfilled? It is clear that Mahan was one of the projects that have been closely monitored by the empowered GoM and the special Cabinet Committee on Investments (CCI).

On 15 January the Ministry of Coal sent a letter to 61 companies to which coal blocks have been allotted but mining has not started for a range of reasons. One of the reasons was, no grant of environment or forest clear-

ance from the MoEF. If companies could not furnish reasons or clearances by 5 February, their coal blocks would be de-allocated. In cases such as Mahan where first stage forest diversion approvals were available, they needed to submit details of their Stage 2 approval from the MoEF by 5.30 pm on 12 February. It is a no-brainer then, that Mahan's approval is dated 12 February.

Today, the orders of the state government for final forest diversion are pending, following the hasty approval by the MoEF. The district collector of Singrauli has been quoted in the media as saying that there was "some discrepancy in the signatures" in the earlier gram sabha and an inquiry has been instituted. It is very likely that a fresh gram sabha will now be held after the general election is over. Mahan Coal is also yet to sign its final mining lease with the state government.

Till then, it is a tightrope walk for Mahan's tribals. Their environment might well change from a green forest to a black coal mine. ■

The author is an independent researcher and writer

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outdoing themselves with pre-election 'gifts'. The association of elections with cash and alcohol is undeniable.

The average size of a parliamentary constituency has gone up to 1.5 million voters. Parties are estimated to have spent ₹30,500 crore in this election. The infusion of money into the political process is seen as an investment with very high returns – a

five-year window of opportunity to grow one's personal assets. The vicious cycle plays itself out when only those with funds of their own are able to gain entry into the political game in the first place.

Demographically speaking, India is a rural nation, with the urban population pegged at about 31 per cent. Studies have shown that, with a rise in migration, non-agricultural income and better connectivity, the India-Bharat divide is beginning to

blur. Economic growth and corruption are the most important concerns influencing voters in rural and urban India and access to government services remains a distant dream. As aspirations for a better life grow and India becomes a younger nation, the demographic dividend will play a greater role in shaping India and how it is governed. It is time elected leaders read the writing on the wall. ■

Charkha Features

The Himalayan threat

HIMANSHU THAKKAR

LAST June, Uttarakhand was shaken by the worst Himalayan flood disaster witnessed in the entire Indian Himalayan region. While there is no doubt that the trigger for this disaster was the untimely and unseasonal rain, the way in which this rain became a massive disaster had a lot to do with how we have been treating the Himalayas. It's a pity that we still do not have a comprehensive report of this massive tragedy to tell us what happened during this period, who played what role and what lessons we can learn from this experience.

One of the relatively positive steps taken in the aftermath of the disaster came from the Supreme Court. On 13 August 2013, a bench of the apex court directed the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) to set up a committee to investigate the role of under-construction and completed hydropower projects in the Uttarakhand disaster. One would have expected our regulatory system to automatically comply. Alas, this was not the case. Realising this, some of us wrote to the MoEF on 20 July 2013 to carry out such an investigation. But, again, the MoEF played deaf and blind to such letters.

The committee mandated by the Supreme Court was set up through an MoEF order dated 16 October 2013. The MoEF submitted its report on 16 April this year.

The committee's report, signed by 11 members, is clear that construction and operation of hydropower projects played a significant role in the disaster. The committee has made detailed recommendations which include dropping at least 23 hydropower projects and changing the parameters of some others. The committee also suggested how post-disaster rehabilitation should be carried out. We have, so far, no policy or regulation for it.

While the Supreme Court is looking into the recommendations of the committee, the MoEF, instead of setting up a credible body to ensure timely and proper implementation of the committee's recommendations, has asked the court to appoint yet another committee on the flimsy ground that the Central Water Commission (CWC) and the Central Electricity Authority (CEA) have submitted a separate report advocating more hydropower projects!

The functioning of the MoEF continues to strengthen the impression that it is working like a lobby for projects rather than as an independent environmental regulator. We hope the apex court sees through this.

Let us turn our attention to hydropower projects in the Himalayas. The Indian stretch of the Himalayan region already has an operating large

hydropower capacity of 17,561 MW. This capacity has leaped by 68 per cent. In the last decade the growth rate of national hydro capacity was much lower at 40 per cent.

If you look at CEA's list of under-construction hydropower projects in India, you will find that 90 per cent of projects and 95 per cent of under-construction capacity is from the Himalayan region. Already 14,210 MW of hydropower capacity is under construction. In fact, CEA has now planned to add an unbelievable 65,000 MW capacity in 10 years (2017 to 2027) between the 13th and 14th Five Year Plans.



Hydropower projects did exacerbate Uttarakhand's flood disaster in June 2013

Meanwhile, the Expert Appraisal Committee of the MoEF on River Valley Projects has been clearing projects at breakneck speed with an almost zero rejection rate. Between April 2007 and December 2013, this committee recommended final environment clearance to 18,030.5 MW capacity, most of which has not entered the implementation stage. Moreover, this committee has recommended 1st Stage Environment Clearance (what is technically called Terms of Reference Clearance) for a capacity of an unimaginable 57,702 MW in the same period. This is indicative of the spate of hydropower projects that we are likely to see in the coming years. Here, again, an overwhelming majority of these cleared projects are in the Himalayan region.

What does all this mean for the Himalayas, their people, rivers, forests, their rich biodiversity? We have not even fully studied the biodiversity of the area. The Himalayas are very landslide-prone, flood-prone, geologically fragile and seismically active. The Himalayas are also the water tower of much of India (and Asia). We could be putting that water security at risk and increasing flood risks for the plains. The Uttarakhand disaster and changing climate have added new unknowns to this equation.

We all know how poor our project-specific and river basin-wise cumulative social and environmental impact assessments are. We know how compromised and flawed our appraisals and regulations are. We know how non-existent our compliance system is. The increasing judicial interventions are indicators of these failures. But court orders cannot replace

institutions or make our governance more democratic or accountable. The polity needs to fundamentally change, and we are still far away from that change.

The new government has an opportunity to start afresh, but available indicators do not provide such hope. While the UPA's failure is visible in what happened before, during, and after the Uttarakhand disaster, the BJP hasn't shown a different approach. In fact, Narendra Modi, while campaigning, said that Northeast India is heaven for hydropower development. He seems to have no idea about the brewing anger over such projects in Assam and other Northeastern states.

That anger is manifest most clearly in the fact that India's largest capacity under-construction hydropower project, namely the 2000 MW Lower Subansiri HEP has remained stalled for the last 29 months after spending over ₹5,000 crore. The NDA also has Inter Linking of Rivers (ILR) on its agenda. Perhaps we have forgotten why the NDA lost the 2004 parliamentary elections. The arrogant and mindless pursuit of projects like the ILR and launching of a 50,000 MW hydropower campaign by the then NDA government played a role in sowing the seeds of people's anger against that government.

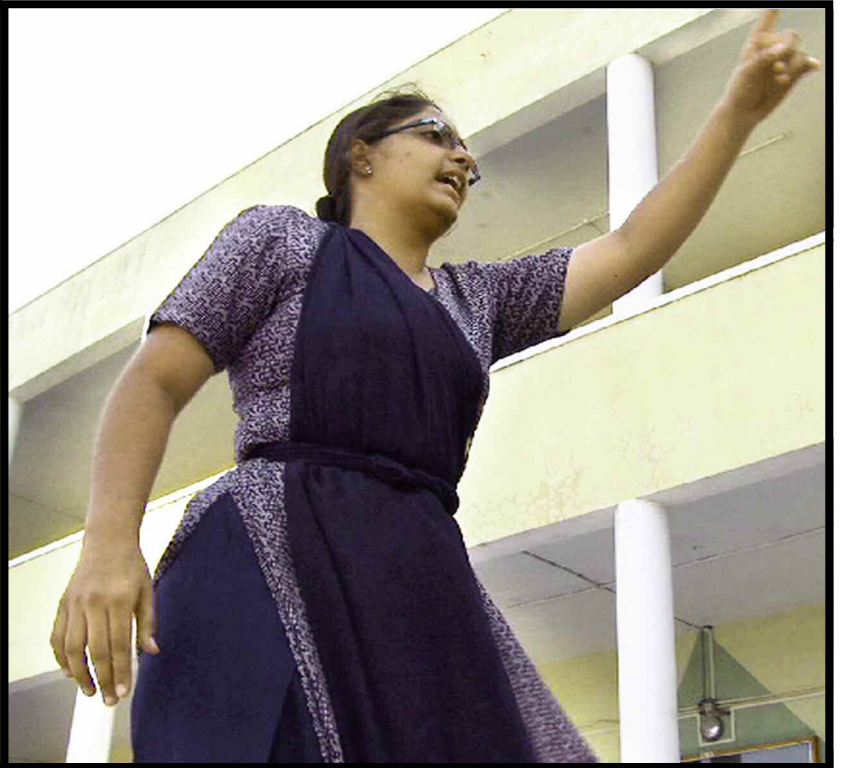
In this context we also need to understand whether these hydropower projects actually fulfil the promises and propaganda with which they are espoused. In fact, our analysis shows that the benefits are far below the claims made and that the impacts and costs are far higher than the projections. The disaster shows that hydropower projects are also at huge risk in these regions. Due to the June 2013 flood disaster, a large number of hydropower projects were damaged. Generation from large hydro projects alone dropped by 3,730 million units. In monetary terms, this would mean a generation loss of ₹1,119 crore alone, assuming a conservative tariff of ₹3 per unit. The loss in the subsequent year and from small hydro projects would be additional.

It is nobody's case that no hydropower projects should be built in the Himalayas or that no roads, townships, tourism and other infrastructure be made there. But we need to study the impact of these massive interventions along with all other available options in a participatory way.

It is in this context that the ongoing Supreme Court case on Uttarakhand provides a glimmer of hope. It is not just hydropower projects or other infrastructure projects in Uttarakhand or other Himalayan states that will need to take guidance from the outcome of this case. It could provide guidance for all kinds of interventions all across the Indian Himalayas. Our Himalayan neighbours can also learn from this process. Let us end on that hopeful note here! ■ *Himanshu Thakkar (ht.sandrp@gmail.com)*



Pooja Chopra, Miss India 2009, posing for a photograph



Women are often caught between tradition and modernity

Women in a man's world

Film on the aspirations of contrasting women

Saibal Chatterjee
New Delhi

A much-hyped annual beauty pageant and a secretive Hindu extremist women's training camp are worlds so far apart from each other that they could well be on separate planets.

But have a closer look, as Indian-Canadian filmmaker Nisha Pahuja's remarkable documentary *The World Before Her* does, and a startling connection emerges from behind a wall of fascinating contrasts.

The compulsions that drive the two sets of girls may on the face of it be completely dissimilar, but both groups are bound by a strong obsession with finding their feet in a rapidly changing India.

Pahuja's thought-provoking film juxtaposes the two highly regimented, fiercely guarded spaces with a clear purpose: to grasp the meaning of women's empowerment in a nation where the levers of social control are firmly in the hands of men.

The film homes in on the divergent worlds of 19-year-old Miss India contestant Ruhi Singh and feisty Durga Vahini camp leader Prachi Trivedi in order to capture the collision of contradictory impulses playing out against the backdrop of a never ending tradition-versus-modernity conflict.



Nisha Pahuja, director of *The World Before Her*

The World Before Her creates compelling portraits of women caught in a flux that is not in their control and yet fighting against all odds to be heard and heeded.

Pahuja strings together different voices in a manner that is completely non-judgmental and refreshingly clear-headed. The audience is free to draw its

own conclusions.

"There is," says the director, "no wrong or right answer in this case. One thing I have realised over the course of making films is this: ultimately the work, once it is finished, does not belong to the maker. Rather, it has a life of its own and people will and should engage with it as they feel."

Diction expert Sabira Merchant, the most prominent voice of the beauty pageant in the film, likens the rigorous Miss India bootcamp to a manufacturing unit where girls are polished like diamonds.

The film constantly underscores the grey areas in the debate. Hindu right-wing outfits see the Miss India pageant as an overt and culturally corrupt celebration of Westernization.

One Miss India aspirant asserts that she will always be an Indian at heart no matter what she wears and how she talks. The girl also hails the opportunity the contest has given her to turn "from a person to a personality".

Says Pahuja: "We can argue that in a fundamental way that young girl is being exploited, but we also have to recognise that for her it's an experience that in the immediate gives her a tremendous amount of confidence and pride."

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Continued from page 29

At the very outset, the film points out that the beauty industry is one of the few domains in India in which women have parity with men here. But it also amplifies voices that protest, if only faintly, the indignities that inevitably accompany the market-driven objectification of women.

The most important question that *The World Before Her* poses is: are these women that are seeking to break free from imposed gender roles only ending up embracing new shackles devised by militant patriarchy on the one hand and narrow corporate interests on the other?

For Jaipur girl Ruhi and others of her ilk, the Miss India tiara is an obvious symbol of liberation, a ticket to a whole new world of opportunities. She has supportive parents who want her to get ahead in life. But can becoming Miss India give Ruhi everything that her heart desires or is she walking into another trap?

"I learned not to belittle or minimise the significance of the (Miss India contestants') feelings in spite of the bigger picture or my own biases," says Pahuja. "I think for me there was a mental shift and I began to see pageants and women's rights in general in a much broader context."

For Prachi, daughter of a Hindu supremacist, the "movement" spearheaded by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad is a much-needed means to counter all perceived threats to her religion and culture.

But it is obvious that this unapologetic 'Durga', too, is a victim of the very system she so stoutly defends.

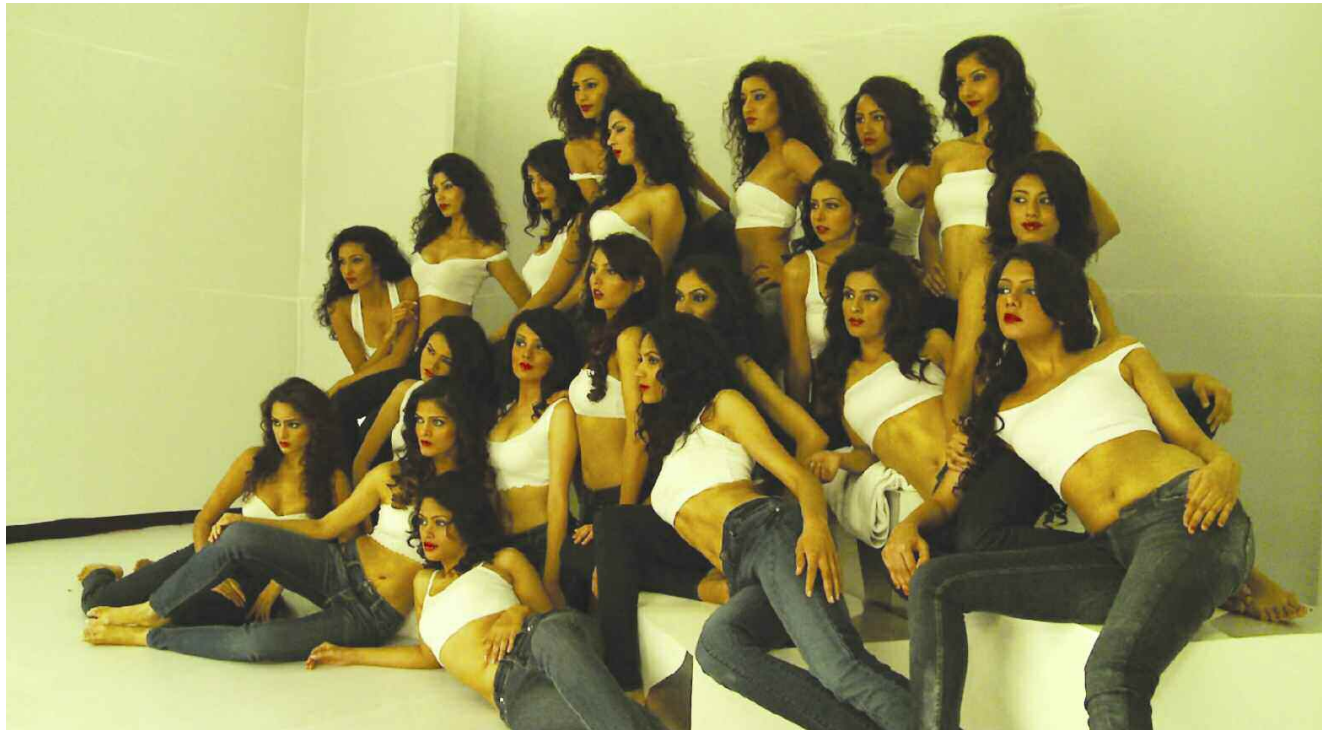
Both beliefs – one serves an exploitative beauty industry, the other upholds a false notion of cultural purity – are obviously and deeply flawed. They are probably more enervating than empowering.

The World Before Her emphasises that but without seeking to serve up anything as the absolute truth. In fact, Pahuja says of Prachi: "She is extraordinary, and in part it is because of what she teaches us about human nature on so many levels – not just the immediate and familial."

The World Before Her was four years in the making. "Getting inside the camp took nearly two years," Pahuja records in her production notes.

She adds: "They had never before given a camera crew access. Somehow, through luck and chance and Prachi's guidance, I made the right connections, went through the right doors, and perhaps most importantly avoided the right people!"

Despite the tightrope walk that the filming was, the troubles have clearly been worth it. The depiction of real women driven solely by hate and fear fanned by intense indoctrination is as stark and



Training for the Miss India contest is rigorous



Graduation day for girls of the Durga Vahini

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scary as it is timely.

One articulate girl at the training camp claims she has no qualms about not having "Muslim friends". The nonchalance with which she makes that statement is chilling.

The World Before Her was initially meant to focus only on the beauty pageant as an interesting way to look at the new India. During the research, two crucial stories emerged and changed the script.

One was about Pooja Chopra, winner of the 2009 Miss India title who would have been killed at birth had her mother not resisted her husband's diabolical move and walked out on him.

The other centred on Prachi's complex life. "After I met them I knew we had to try and do justice to the complexity of their lives," says Pahuja.

Merchant says, "There are two Indias." For Pahuja, there are "many Indias" and "they are doing battle with each other now, just as they always have".

In the past year and a half, *The World Before Her* has travelled to film festivals around the world, scooping up awards and accolades.

Pahuja has now launched a kickstarter funding campaign to take the film across India. "This is not a commercial project," she says. "The idea is to engage with people around the country."

The film will open in multiplexes in five or six major Indian cities on 6 June, but that is only one small part of the distribution strategy. "We are

working with women's groups to take *The World Before Her* across India," says the filmmaker.

Says Pahuja: "Most documentary filmmakers have one goal – that by sharing their films they can effect some kind of change. Every now and then we get lucky. We find a story that captures the zeitgeist and has potential to become a lightning rod for discussion, introspection and real change. That's what we have with *The World Before Her*."

Even as women from different backgrounds stake their claim in a modern India grappling with dramatic social and economic transformations, the pressures on them appear to be getting increasingly pernicious.

"In some ways what hangs in the balance is not just the future of women in this country but the very future of the country itself – for how can democracy flourish in a place so obsessed with sons that it aborts 750,000 girls every year?"

The World Before Her may appear dark and distressing, but it isn't entirely without hope. "Profound change can only happen slowly and it is futile to hate or judge," says Pahuja.

Beauty queen-turned-actress Pooja Chopra would have fallen prey to female infanticide but for her mother, Neera. The two women will be travelling with the film and interacting with audiences as *The World Before Her* reaches out across India with its cautionary message. ■

Bhagoria's marriage festival

Susheela Nair
Sondhwa (MP)

WE cruised past tiny Bhil hamlets as our vehicle set off on a dusty road from the MTDC (Madhya Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation) accommodation in Sondhwa to the Bhagoria Festival taking place in Jhabua and Alirajpur districts of the state. The red blossoms of the *palash* were a welcome contrast to the arid, undulating landscape of the region. On the way, we saw vehicles ferrying numerous tribes from the Bhil and Bhilala communities to the *haats*.

With the advent of spring, villages here come alive with the Bhagoria festival which is celebrated seven days prior to Holi. This festival, which sanctions community-approved elopement, is marked by love, gaiety, colour, music, dance, drunken revelry and boisterous merriment.

The word Bhagoria originates from the word *bhaag* which in Hindi means to run. According to popular belief, the origin of the word can also be traced to deities Parvati (Gauri) and Shiva (Bhav). The combination of the two words, Bhav and Gauri became Bhagoria.

There are many more stories about how this word and festival originated. It is said that the king of the state of Bhagore near Jhabua breached the trust of a neighbouring king who then attacked Bhagore and vanquished it. The victorious king proclaimed to his subjects that they could grab whatever they desired from Bhagore. As a result, the soldiers kidnapped all the women at a *haat*. The civilians followed in their footsteps. Since then the tradition of holding the yearly Bhagoria Haat has evolved and is now an intrinsic part of Bhil tradition.

The *haat* is akin to a mass *swayamvar* or marriage market where young boys and girls are encouraged to elope after choosing their partners. During the festival the prospective groom smears *gulaal* or coloured powder, on the face of the girl he wishes to marry in the presence of the entire village community. An exchange of *paan* also signals a declaration of love. If the girl is willing to accept her suitor as her husband, she reciprocates by applying *gulaal* on his face. The duo immediately flee into the forest or hide at a friend's or relative's place and inform their parents after spending some time together.

After hearing from them, the parents fetch the couple. Negotiations follow and a mutual agreement is reached on how much bride price will be paid by the boy's family. The couple is then welcomed from their romantic adventure to a life of blessed matrimony. The marriage ceremony between the two lovers becomes compulsory after eloping. Neither of them can refuse to tie the knot. In case the girl does not approve of the boy's move, she wipes the *gulaal* off her face and runs away!

We saw young boys and girls, dressed in their best, strolling into the fairground in anticipation of finding soulmates. The tribal girls were attired in vibrant, colourful *lehengas* with *odhnis* and decked in chunky silver jewellery from head to toe. Often, girls from one area wore clothes and ornaments of a similar design.



Tribal girls wear their best jewellery and clothes



A young tribal girl evaluates the bachelors



Boys too dress in colourful shirts and scarves



A Bhil tribal playing the flute

The men, clad in bright clothes and turbans, wooed the girls. There was frenzied activity everywhere. It was a delight to watch them dance and sway. The music was rhythmic. We could hear the pulsating beat of the *maandhal*, the clash of cymbals and the resonating *dhol*. We could sense the bashfulness of the girls blushing behind their *odhnis* and the brimming delight of the Bhil boys as they wooed the girls by playing the flute. Marriageable men stood out with colourful loops on their earrings. Some of them were dancing, carrying the Morlia puppet as a sign of bachelorhood.

During the Bhagoria festival the quiet atmosphere of the village gives way to the fun and excitement of a large and hectic country fair, complete with giant wheels and stalls selling everything from toys to food. We wandered around the *haat* which plays a vital role in this tribal heartland. With all the hustle and bustle around, it exudes the air of a local *mela*. Tribes from neighbouring villages trooped into the fair, lugging a variety of nature's bounty – cereals, pulses, fruits, veg-

SUSHEELA NAIR

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etables, roots, spices, poultry, cattle, shoots and so on. Shops were crowded with revellers. For food lovers, there were fried *bhajias*, piping hot *jalebis* and other tempting sweets. To beat the scorching heat there was kulfi, icecream and *baraf ka gola*. Women thronged the jewellery stalls and shops selling *bindis* and glass bangles. For the tribes who inhabit this area and live off the produce of the forests, the *haat* is a way of life. Such festivals are not only about buying and selling.

Bhagoria is celebrated before Holi and is associated with the agricultural harvest and fertility. So some people also celebrate it as an agricultural festival. It signifies the completion of the harvesting season. If the crops have been good, the festival assumes an additional air of gaiety. Girls and women are allowed to accompany their family members for this particular *haat*. So they come clad in their best attire to celebrate the occasion. The festival has also traditionally been a venue for mediation and for settling old disputes. With the administration keeping a tight vigil, no major brawls have taken place.

There has been a decline in the traditional, cultural and social importance of the festival. Many reasons have been cited. Currently, with exposure to education and city life, some youth of the Bhil tribes are averse to the old tradition of choosing their life partner at the Bhagoria festival. They feel that community-approved elopement is not a dignified way of getting married.

They are apprehensive that eloping with a girl might make them the subject of ridicule among their educated peers. The urban youth come to the *haat* to enjoy themselves and to flirt. The Bhagoria ritual itself has undergone changes. Earlier, traditionally, a man simply made off with the woman of his choice. But now the woman's consent is required. The Bhagoria festival is slowly dying, but it still attracts a large number of youth. ■

FACT FILE

Getting there: Jhabua is a four-hour drive from Maheshwar. Maheshwar is 91 km from Indore which is the nearest airport.

Accommodation: Check with the MP Tourism website (www.mptourism.com) for dates and temporary accommodation relating to the Bhagoria festival. Normally the festival is celebrated a week before Holi.

THE recent Lok Sabha election has been all about the failure of local governance.

People in cities, small towns and villages complained bitterly on television about the absence of *bijli, sadak, paani*. This isn't a new trend. Every election is becoming a report card of the decrepit municipality or panchayat. The *aam aadmi* doesn't want to discuss national issues like foreign policy or GDP growth. Who will give me *bijli, sadak, paani* and maybe *rozgar* is the big question.

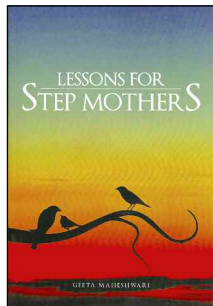
Most towns and cities are sunk in filth. There is garbage everywhere, open drains, slums and crumbling buildings.

So Prasanna K. Mohanty's book, *Cities and Public Policy*, is very timely. An IAS officer, he has rich hands-on experience of handling urban development in Hyderabad and Visakhapatnam. He has been Commissioner of both municipalities. His book is practical, insightful and easy to read.

Mohanty rightly points out that it is urban development and the growth of new cities that will drive India's economic progress. The contribution of urban areas to GDP is expected to rise to 75 per cent by 2021. The architecture of new cities, it is now globally accepted, should be high-density, mixed-use with excel

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The marginalised mother



LESSONS FOR STEP MOTHERS

Dr Geeta Maheshwari
Partridge India
₹ 249

going to be a breeze. I didn't care if he was married earlier or that he had a 19-year-old daughter because I didn't think it mattered. But it did. It mattered a great deal," says Maheshwari candidly in her introduction to the book. The experience has left her wiser. "Now after nine years of travelling on this road, reading over a dozen stepmother guides, and venting with family and friends, I have finally figured out where and how I fit in."

Not every stepmother can arrive at even an uneasy compromise with her new family. Indian society's double standards paint the stepfather as a magnanimous man who has made the supreme sacrifice of taking on the responsibility of a wife and child who is not his own. There isn't a whole genre of books, films and soaps portraying him in bad light. But a stepmother has no such luxury. At best she is regarded as a gold digger with an agenda of her own. "Nobody understands that a woman has taken up the challenge of putting together a fractured family," says Maheshwari.

In her slim book, *Lessons for Step Mothers*, Maheshwari describes the complex dynamics at work in a step family and offers calm words of advice for those daring women who become stepmothers or are contemplating becoming one.

"Many a stepmother has come to accept society's perception of her. So she over-stretches herself to prove that she is a good mother," says Maheshwari. Meanwhile, the new family, particularly stepchildren, are often hostile, rude and obnoxious.

The stepmother is confused and lonely since she cannot share her pain with anyone for fear of the "I told you so" syndrome. She falls into 'stepmother depression'.

In the process, she becomes a nervous wreck and her remarriage is jeopardised. It is a losing battle. Somewhere the survival instinct takes over and she starts distancing herself from the family. "Every stepmother's marriage that breaks down only reinforces the myth of the wicked stepmother," explains Maheshwari.

A breakdown in marriage can be avoided if women are adequately prepared for the difficult, and often thankless job, that awaits them. Maheshwari's book contains useful chapters like 'Unpack your baggage', 'Look before you leap', 'Managing money', 'Take care of yourself', 'Vent if you must', and 'Your husband's role in your journey'.

As a stepmother herself, Maheshwari is not just a ringside observer of the tough job stepmothers try to do. Women, she points out, tend to paint a pretty picture of their new roles. The reality is otherwise, "I loved my husband and thought life with him was

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

THE choicest epithets – wicked, mean, cruel – are often flung at hapless stepmothers. Such stereotypes are reinforced by a barrage of regressive TV serials, films and epics that portray the stepmother as the scheming other woman who has dislodged a haloed biological mother from her pedestal.

Then, there are all those fairy tales about the wicked stepmother like *Cinderella* and *Snow White and the*

Seven Dwarfs. At a very tender age children get brainwashed into believing such tales are for real.

The gentle Dr Geeta Maheshwari, marriage and remarriage therapist and a stepmother herself, is treading a difficult path. She is trying to sensitise society about how tough it is to be a stepmom and giving strength to the marginalised stepmother.

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LAKSHMAN ANAND



Dr Geeta Maheshwari: 'No stepmother is bad'

The onus of making a stepmother's role successful does not devolve on the woman alone. Her husband has a crucial part to play in a step family. If he has children he should finetune his 'being in the middle' relationship with them and his new wife. He must take a stand.

"Unfortunately, most remarried men with children are less husbands and more fathers in their new marriage...children sense that dad is feeling guilty so they do start to manipulate the situation to their advantage. Any chance of these kids having a respectful relationship with their stepmother is destroyed because she is the only one who can see through their game," says Maheshwari in her concluding chapter.

Changing society's perception of stepmothers will be a long, tortuous process, she says. But there are solutions. "In this world no stepmother is bad. So we have to review our fairy tales, sensitise society to the challenges stepmothers face which is very difficult. With increasing divorce rates in the next 10 years there will be

100 times more stepmothers. You can't afford to keep this issue in the closet," says Maheshwari.

Remarriage counselling could help promote harmony in a family. Once more remarriages succeed there is the possibility that stepmothers will be perceived better and receive more support for their efforts.

Arming a current stepmother or a woman who is thinking of becoming one with knowledge about what to expect and how to negotiate murky waters is the key to creating harmony in a step family. With greater peace all around, a stepmother is not left floundering trying to prove that she is not wicked after all.

Maheshwari's book is an extremely useful one, full of advice and support for the stepmother. Crisply written, it is frank and dissects several awkward situations a stepmother is likely to face.

"After 10 years you will see happier stepmothers and realise that they are good actually. And slowly over centuries this myth will change. In the US things are already beginning to change. Many TV serials show stepmothers in a good light. That is not happening in our country. It will take time," says Maheshwari.

"There are books on dogs and cats because we accept animals as part of our society. Step moms don't even say they are stepmothers because they are afraid of society's perception of them," Maheshwari says.

More stepmothers need to step forth and say proudly that they are stepmothers. Society too must trash the mythology of the wicked stepmother. ■

Organic breakfast

BEGIN your morning with foods that are good for your mind and body. Dubdengreen, an organic food store in Delhi and Bengaluru, offers a range of breakfast cereals, jams, honey, tea, artisanal coffee and fresh bread at reasonable prices. Instead of cereals suffused with artificial flavours and preservatives, try Dubdengreen's ragi flakes, multi millet flakes, wheat flakes or cornflakes dunked in milk and sweetened with a spoon of honey. The tea comes in many flavourful herbs: lemon, ginger, cloves and cinnamon.

The store also offers spices, rice, eco friendly soaps, detergents and personal care products. You can order online as well.

Dubdengreen is an enterprise founded by Ganesh and Jayashree Joshi Eashwar, pioneers of the organic farming movement. Twenty years ago they set up an organic farm near Bengaluru. In 2003, they opened their Dubdengreen store in Delhi. ■



CONTACT: Dubdengreen, 4A Shahpur Jat Market, New Delhi-110049 Phone: 32905310, 9810131343
Email: dubdengreen@organicbounty.com
Online store: www.organicbounty.com

Threads of love

DEVOTION is a tranquil shop on a busy street in Delhi that sells pretty hand embroidered garments and furnishing. Devotion has a special soft spot for babies. It offers a range of cute frocks, towels and smooth sheets with pillow covers. There are also hand towels that look like puppets. For your bedroom you can buy bedsheet sets, both double and single, in pastel colours, embroidered by hand. Take a look too at tablemat sets, tablecloths, nightwear and towels in many sizes for adults.

Devotion is run by Arpana, a non-profit that provides health, education and livelihood services to 248 disadvantaged villages in Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and in the slum resettlement colonies of Molar Bund in New Delhi.

Devotion's products are made by Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of women. Arpana has linked the women to banks. The non-profit provides training and markets SHG products. The women now stand for elections and take part in village development. Arpana's priority is to work with the poorest. The guiding spirit behind Arpana is Param Pujya Ma. ■

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