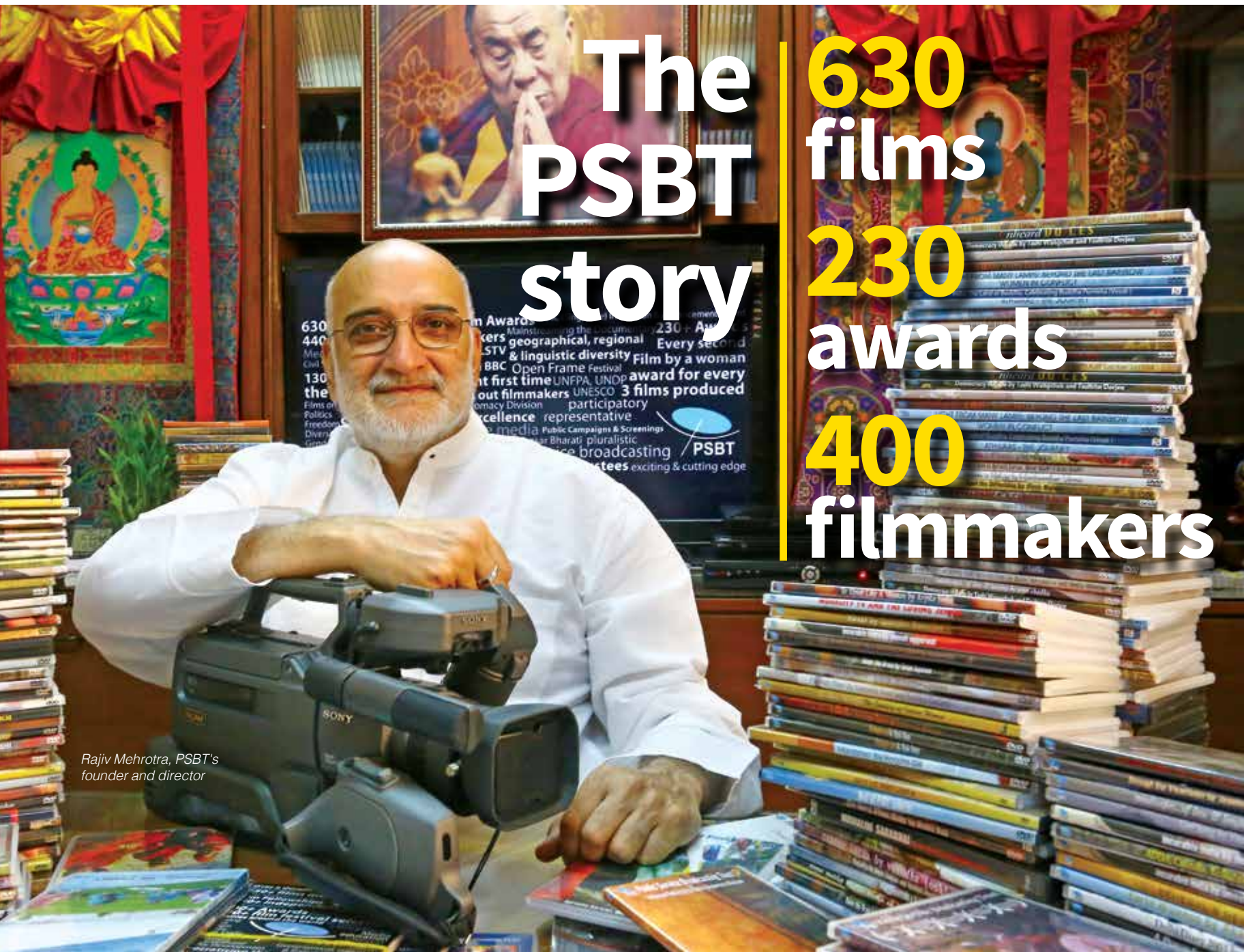


# Civil Society



## The PSBT story

630 films

230 awards

400 filmmakers

Rajiv Mehrotra, PSBT's founder and director

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## Harvesting Rain for Profit

Name: Shri Muniraj,  
Village: Muthur, Krishnagiri district, Tamil Nadu

Muniraj, a marginal farmer with seven acres of land from Muthur village of Krishnagiri district, had a greenhouse where he practiced floriculture. However, a falling water table meant that irrigation became a problem – especially during summer months even for drip irrigation.

To overcome the problem of insufficient water, Srinivasan Services Trust (SST) encouraged Muniraj to save every drop of rainwater falling on his green house. SST provided technical information and engineering support for creating a pond, next to the greenhouse, large enough to collect six lakh litres of rainwater. To prevent loss by seepage, the pond was lined with a polythene sheet and a shade net was used as cover to help arrest loss by evaporation. The pond gets filled up with 3 days of rain. The water saved in this pond is sufficient for the crop needs for one season.

**IMPACT:** Muniraj is now financially secure and earns more than ₹30,000 per month. He has built a pucca house and also bought a car. He has become an expert on rainwater harvesting and offers advice to several villages in the area.

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**COVER STORY**

## 630 films, 230 awards, 400 filmmakers

The Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) has been promoting independent cinema. In the 15 years since it was founded many of its productions have received critical acclaim.

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# Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

## In churning we trust

**F**ORWARD-looking societies invest in creative pursuits. In cinema, theatre, literature and independent journalism we find reflections of ourselves we never imagined. The more the churning, the clearer the picture becomes. It is because of this that organisations like the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT), which we have featured on our cover this month, are so important. They nurture creativity by funding small efforts and taking them to audiences. Braving difficult odds, PSBT has worked away at producing interesting small films that aspire to high cinematic standards. Awards have come, but in a system where there aren’t avenues for taking such creative offerings to the public at large, PSBT has hung around in the wings though it deserved to be in the spotlight often. A big problem has been the lack of funds. Despite its record of 15 years, PSBT has to scrounge around. Rajiv Mehrotra deserves an award for bravery in addition to all the awards for good cinema that PSBT’s films have been getting. The point is that it shouldn’t be like this. We have to find ways of letting good creative efforts access the visibility that will allow them to thrive. We should also encourage them by funding them better and more easily. Struggle often brings out the best in us, but to have to struggle endlessly against impossible odds is no fun. An organisation like PSBT plays many roles — it funds filmmakers, develops ideas, shepherds productions and brings in much needed rigour. It is a huge contribution for a small organisation to make. It deserves much more support.

In this issue we also travel to Nalgonda in Telengana to report on the work of Dr Damera Yadaiah and his team who run a special care newborn unit at the district hospital there. They have saved the life of a premature baby weighing just 650 grams. Such babies don’t usually survive and it is a significant achievement for the team, but not their only one. The unit has been saving the lives of thousands of preterm babies since 2008, two years before UNICEF began supporting the creation of such specialised units in government hospitals. Dr Yadaiah’s unit is a shining example of quality care and best practices. It shows what the public sector can do in healthcare if given the opportunity. Healthcare in the Indian context has to be inclusive if it is to be a meaningful investment in future generations. The Nalgonda District Hospital serves people who don’t have the resources to access private care. When they do so it is out of desperation and at great cost. What they spend pushes them into debt and sets them back for years to come. At the district hospital, on the other hand, treatment is free as it should be in a caring economy. The hospital changes lives in other ways too. It creates demand and raises the expectations people have of the government healthcare system. Mothers spend weeks in the special care unit with their premature babies and the experience changes their understanding of clean and healthy living.

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# Healthy India Happy India

## Himalaya's School health Initiative

Provided free health check-up for underprivileged kids

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**6** government schools



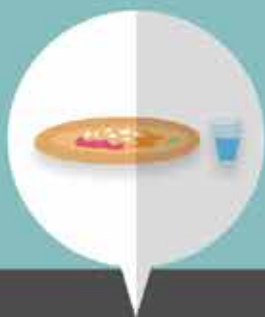
FREE



Free spectacles distributed to children with eye-sight problem

Complete health report card provided to everyone

## AREAS IDENTIFIED



POOR NUTRITION



DENTAL

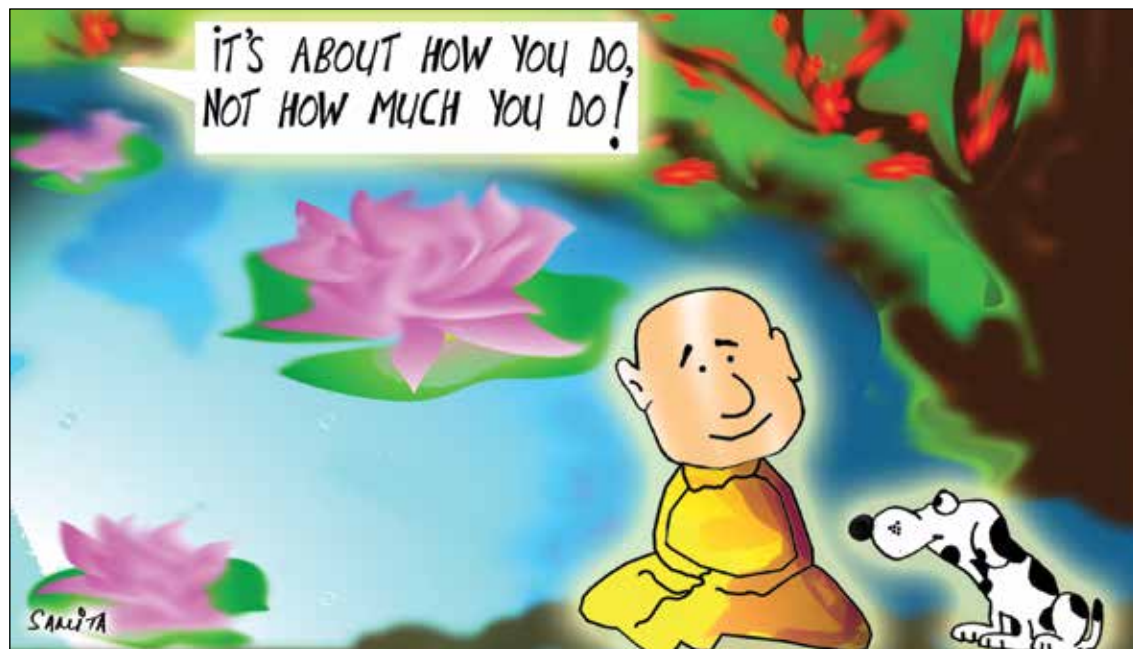


VISION PROBLEMS



## IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



see the result, get enthused and take the idea forward. The government could allocate a modest budget for each *mohalla's* restoration.

*Ritu*

### MCI revamp

I read your story, 'Doctors speak up,' with great interest. Post-liberalisation, privatisation was seen as the panacea for badly run government services. But in healthcare it has resulted in medical professionals thinking being rich is glorious. We have to change the way the medical community thinks of healthcare. It is a social good, not an economic bonanza.

*Asha Chawla*

Can we keep healthcare and education out of the grasp of the private sector? We should ensure good subsidised public healthcare systems that are accessible to all.

*Amita*

I think some private healthcare hospitals are providing state-of-the-art services. Don't criticise everyone. What we need is very good regulation.

*Amrita D'Cunha*

### Dog count

Your story, 'Delhi's dog count under way,' missed an important point. Cows and monkeys are a bigger menace on the street. Cows cause traffic jams and road accidents. Monkeys enter your home and create sheer havoc. In contrast, dogs are the victims of road accidents. When you give them food they are thankful and guard your house in return.

*Shreshtha Mathur*

Letters should be sent to  
response@civilsocietyonline.com

## LETTERS



### Kolkata heritage

Thanks for the cover story, 'Heritage showdown in Kolkata.' Heritage buildings in the city are being lost as these built spaces are not generating the required rentals that can pay for their maintenance. There are also issues related to the Urban Land (Ceiling and Regulation) Act (ULCA) that compels owners to divide their property into multiple shareholdings. Most of these buildings are in locations with high commercial value and enjoy a higher FAR (Floor Area Ratio) compared to their built-up area.

After some time, when the rental yield becomes less and the operation and maintenance costs increase, the multiple owners who inherit part of the property but don't live in it, prefer to demolish it and build a property that fully consumes the allowable FAR. Therefore, till we remove the Rent Control Act and the draconian

ULCA and instead introduce Transferable Development Rights (TDR), the city will continue to lose its heritage buildings.

*Anirban Choudhury*

Kolkata has such aristocratic and fine buildings, we should do our best to save them from destruction.

*Sanjib Addy*

Heritage and old buildings definitely need to be protected just the way London, Paris and Rome have gone about doing it. In those cities modern structures and historical buildings are preserved with equal attention and care.

*Rita Chaudhuri*

Let us first identify the buildings to be preserved and then start

conservation by priority. Funding is a long-pending question.

*Chandra Banerjee*

I know of a residential house that was built over 1917-1920. It had a colonial interior with stained glass doors and red flooring. Some people moved into one of the flats and changed the interiors completely, converting it into a 'modern' flat. It was so sad to see all its character lost.

*Naureen*

Kolkata is a hidden beauty. It has a lovely river, heritage and a largely liberal society. It needs a dedicated government and active citizenry for restoration. Let's begin with a small area as a model, maybe just one *mohalla* — the easiest one — and then expand the idea. Citizens will

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# ‘GOVT HAS ASKED FOR ADVICE

## RS Sharma on the issues before TRAI

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

**A**RE net neutrality and discriminatory pricing of data on the Internet on their way back into the news?

Last year, the Save The Internet campaign succeeded in mobilising public opinion against Facebook’s Free Basics, saying it sought to exercise a stranglehold on access to the Internet.

Before that happened, the Reddit community took on Airtel Zero, which offered free access but charged hefty fees from Internet businesses like Flipkart for directing traffic to them. Such was the outcry among Internet users that Airtel Zero’s customers walked away.

At risk, the campaigners argued, was Internet freedom. If telecom companies became distributors, as has happened in television, they would control choice and the Internet would cease to be free space where people go where they please. In India especially, the Internet serves as a driver of empowerment and information. Excessive corporate control would be the beginning of the end of that role.

In February the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) ruled against discriminatory pricing of data or telecom companies making access to websites selectively free to drive traffic to chosen destinations.

But five months later, the telecom companies are back, insisting that they have a case and asking to be heard again. Simultaneously, the government is now drafting a policy on net neutrality and has sought the advice of TRAI.

The man in the middle of these developments has been the TRAI Chairman, R.S. Sharma, a former IAS officer of the Jharkhand cadre with impeccable credentials. Excerpts from an interview with *Civil Society* at the TRAI office in New Delhi:

**Do we have a definition of net neutrality or are we still working towards it? What is the exact position?**

When this issue of zero rating came up, we asked that it be held back. Then came Free Basics. Facebook is not our regulated entity. Reliance Communications is, so we asked them to kindly hold it back. They were nice enough and agreed. We then decided to have a consultation on whether this kind of situation should be permitted or not.

We had three issues in that consultation. We did not use the words net neutrality at that time. The issues were, first, whether a telecom service provider should be allowed to charge differently on the basis



R.S. Sharma: ‘Telcos must be agnostic to the content’

of source, destination and content.

We also asked another question: whether we can have a telco-agnostic model where we could have subsidised or free data. Let’s say the government wants to promote a health website. Suppose we want to have a 108-type of situation where you can call without being charged.

Third, we asked if it would be possible to have such a model where the consumer is not being charged.

**So this is the free-data platform.**

This is the free-data platform. It was the third question in that consultation paper we brought out. Then, in our order, we decided differential pricing, which we called discriminatory pricing, should not be permitted.

Subsequently, the term net neutrality came up. We did not want to get into that debate because TRAI’s domain is tariff. So you can say, in a loose sense, we tackled net neutrality from a tariff perspective.

My broad understanding is that net neutrality has five components: the first three are source, destination and content, which we have dealt with. The other two issues, which are not really tariff-related and which we did not cover, are speed and

**‘People talk of transparency. In my view, if there is one word which distinguishes TRAI as a regulator, it is transparency.’**

throttle — you can speed up certain traffic and you can throttle certain traffic.

**You mean, you slow down some websites and speed up some others?**

Yes. The Government of India (GoI) referred the matter to us about three months ago. TRAI works broadly in three ways: first, we provide recommendations on the basis of advice being asked for by the government; second, we provide suo moto advice; third, we deal with tariff issues. There are other functions as well.

# ON NET NEUTRALITY'

AJIT KRISHNA



**'We need to have more involvement of common people. Consultation should not be dominated by sector experts.'**

**activists are saying is that the Internet should remain neutral space and it needs to remain a free market. Your tariff order seemed to endorse that. Do you think that is one possible definition of net neutrality?**

The tariff order is accompanied by an explanatory memorandum. It provides all the reasons — technological, economic and social — as to why discriminatory tariffs should not be allowed. It touches on many aspects of the Internet being unique, of being a leveraging tool for our development and growth and why it should be the way it is.

**Rajiv Chandrashekhar (an independent MP) has accused you of relying on slogans and ignoring facts, data and economics.**

Well, Mr Chandrashekhar is free to have his views. Look, we can't say we are the best in the world. We can't say we are a storehouse of all relevant knowledge. He is right to the extent that every organisation, and certainly TRAI that regulates a space that is rapidly changing, needs to keep updating its knowledge, repositories and capabilities.

**What are the dangers of zero rating in relation to a developing country like ours?**

Let us not call it zero rating. It may be a specific instance of differential or discriminatory pricing. What it means is that if you can zero rate access to a particular website you can infinity rate another website.

Let's take an example. Many telcos have now been given a licence to run payment banks. A telco could say that if you went to its website it would zero rate you so that you would not have to pay anything for the transaction that you do or the data that you spend. But if you went to the website of India Post — which has also been given a licence for banking — the telco would charge you 20 times that value. Then, effectively, what the telco would be doing is killing the India Post website or application. India Post is not a service provider and does not have a pipe of its own.

This is one instance of how traffic can be directed to particular content and affect business strategies.

Our view, which has been articulated in that regulation and memorandum, is that pipe and content must be kept separate. Telcos or pipe providers must be agnostic to the content.

**You have said that when it comes to intranet you have nothing to say because it's an intranet. But surely it's not the same thing as an intranet in an office. It's an intranet of a fairly large business so surely....**

There are many business strategies. For example, I come from Jharkhand. We created a statewide area network that enabled government officers in Jharkhand to use IP telephony and access websites of the Jharkhand intranet. BSNL is the service provider. It is basically an arrangement between an organisation and BSNL and I cannot apply difference in pricing here. What we are saying is that if you are not going on to the Internet, if you are providing communication services within a closed electronic communication network, this should not come within the (purview) of regulation.

**Even though it could mean an entire state as in this case?**

Sure, if it is the state government's service which is being provided.

**In the functioning of the regulator, commercial entities that have more strength, sophistication and expertise seem to have had disproportionate say compared to consumers. For ordinary people, the way the regulator functions is opaque. Is there room for democratising this space?**

I think this is an interesting question. People talk of transparency. In my view, if there is one word which distinguishes TRAI as a regulator, it is transparency.

**That is today.**

No, even earlier. Let me tell you this whole issue of consultation papers....

**But who comes for the consultation?**

That depends on who takes interest. One of the things I have experienced in my administrative life is that we need to have more involvement of common people in the whole process. Consultation should not be dominated by sector experts.

Telecom today has one billion customers. Unfortunately, the customer's complaint is typically a small-value complaint. But there is a large number of complaints. So how do you evolve a quick system where you can provide justice to consumers even at those small values? This is a tricky question.

Take an over-billing issue. It could be a small sum but where do I go? Currently, I go to the telecom company. If I am dissatisfied with their response they have their own appellate staff. You need to have an ombudsman or some other independent agency to handle that.

**Can't TRAI do it?**

No, TRAI is debarred. We do not deal with individual complaints nor can our appellate body, TDSAT. It deals with a group of consumers. The (individual) consumer can go to the consumer court, but there too there are ambiguities. Filing the affidavit before the consumer court might cost more than the value of the complaint itself. So I think that a lot needs to be done in the area of grievance redress.

We have already written to the government, four to five years back, to have an ombudsman and create an institution to redress consumer grievances. ■

So, the government has asked us to basically provide comprehensive advice on net neutrality. Therefore, we have issued a pre-consultative paper on it. We are now having a large consultation on net neutrality. The first consultation was not on the advice of the government. It was on tariff.

**Is this meant to lead to a definition of net neutrality?**

Yes, hopefully. This will also lead to a lot of clarity because I think the government is interested in bringing out a national policy. Since they have asked us for advice I presume the purpose is to figure out a broad policy perspective on net neutrality for the country as a whole.

We have done pre-consultation because we feel this is a very critical issue for our country and, therefore, we thought we should not leave out any aspects.

A consultative paper keeps asking questions. We wanted to be very comprehensive in terms of asking questions. Therefore, we added another stage of pre-consultation in which we thought we would call in the experts and take their views.

**A lot of campaigning has taken place. There is the Save the Internet campaign. By and large, what**

MEDICAL MIRACLE AT NALGONDA

# How a district hospital saved a baby weighing 650 grammes

Civil Society News  
Nalgonda (Telangana)

MAMATHA arrived at the Nalgonda District Hospital atop the fuel tank of her uncle's motorcycle. She weighed just 650 grammes. She had been wrapped in a small sheet of cellophane and put in some kind of a folder.

Her mother at that time was fighting for her own life after the premature delivery in the 28th week of her pregnancy. She had high blood pressure and was bleeding.

The doctors at the small private hospital where the delivery had taken place felt they could save the mother, but not the premature baby. In a district town like Nalgonda, a baby weighing just 650 grammes had virtually no chance of survival.

Nevertheless, the baby wasn't dead either. So, her uncle took her from one hospital to the next, transporting her as best as he could — on the fuel tank of his motorcycle. He was turned away the first time by the Nalgonda District Hospital because rules at government hospitals say babies less than 1 kg, who are very premature, can't be admitted. But when the uncle returned to the government facility and pleaded for a second time, having done the rounds of private hospitals, it was decided to take the baby in — if for no other reason than to give her a place to die.

That was on 30 December 2015. Six months later, Mamatha (very recently rechristened Rishita by her parents) is a healthy 2.3 kg. She is growing normally and her responses are just the way they should be.

In her dramatic survival is the script of the persistent efforts of the doctors and nurses of the Special Care Newborn Unit (SCNU) of the Nalgonda District Hospital as they went about saving the life of a baby who had been given up as

dead even before she was born.

It was Mamatha's destiny that she landed in the care of a medical team whose members shared a rare chemistry of purpose, professional values and great expertise. Her survival is proof of what government hospitals with public-spirited doctors can achieve. Very small babies like Mamatha have been saved, but only in tertiary hospitals. In a district hospital it is a rare feat.

Mamatha's parents are poor and live with a larger family on just two acres of agricultural land. The

mother's name is also Mamatha, which is why the baby has now been renamed Rishita. The father is Shankar. They often work as farm labour. Mamatha and Shankar went to a small private hospital for the delivery because government services don't reach people like them in distant parts of Nalgonda district. They spent ₹60,000 on the delivery — money which had been saved and borrowed. By contrast, the excellent

care mother and baby received for five months at the district hospital cost them nothing and saved the baby's life in impossible circumstances.

## MODERN, EFFICIENT

The SCNU at the Nalgonda District Hospital is led by Dr Damera Yadaiah. At 52 he has spent almost 20 years in the government healthcare system and is as safe a pair of hands as you can get. A fit-looking man with a calm manner, Dr Yadaiah exudes experience and personal confidence. He is also passionate about serving ordinary folk who can't pay fat bills in private hospitals.

Dr Yadaiah has put together a modern and efficient SCNU. He has been evangelical about benchmarking it with the best in the private sector. To him medicine is about serving society and it is this spirit that rubs off on his young team as well.

### THE TEAM

- Dr Damera Yadaiah
- Dr A.V. Sreenivasa Rao
- Dr Khader Jeelani
- Dr Prabhakar Reddy
- Dr Juberia Tabassum
- Dr Vasundhara
- Dr Ambedkar



Dr Damera Yadaiah and other doctors with the mother and baby,

Though in a government hospital, Mamatha received the level of treatment she would have got at the best of private hospitals. For instance, as she arrived, she was given an injection of caffeine citrate to help her breathe. Mamatha was also administered what is called parental nutrition. This involves intravenously providing nutrients like glucose, lipids, dietary minerals and amino acids.

"Such care is expensive and usually given only in tertiary hospitals and corporate hospitals. But we gave the same care in our unit," says Dr Yadaiah.

Mamatha was also put on CPAP, which stands for Continuous Positive Airways Pressure and helps the breathing of the baby. It is an alternative to a ventilator for which a tube has to be inserted. CPAP requires just two nasal prongs of half an inch.

"I didn't think this baby would survive," says Dr Yadaiah as we talk in his office over *idlis* and *vadas*. "So I kept CPAP for another baby. It costs ₹7,000 to ₹8,000 to administer and I didn't want to waste resources. But the other baby succumbed and at the same time this baby was recovering, which came to me as a shock. It was purely a miracle."

By the fourth day, these intensive measures had begun to yield results. When Dr Yadaiah went to see the baby she held his finger firmly, which made him intuitively feel that she was going to survive. It was now important to go all out to save her.





State of the art facilities



Kangaroo mother care: babies born with low birth weight are held by their mothers close to the chest

Mamatha, who now weighs 2.3 kg

V LBW SURVIVORS SCNU, NALGONDIT					
NAME	GA	BIRTH WEIGHT	LOS	EPIC DAYS	DISCHARGE WEIGHT
B/O MAMATHA	28 wks	650gms	145	55	2.350 kg
B/O RAMADEVI	28 wks	900gms	62	40	1.700 kg
B/O DHANAMMA	28 wks	790gms	51	30	1.600 kg
B/O YASMEEN-I	30 wks	980gms	80	60	1.580 kg
B/O YASMEEN-II	30 wks	1000gms	80	63	1.920 kg
B/O RENUKA	31 wks	1090gms	69	40	1.900 kg
B/O VENNELA	33 wks	1100gms	45	20	1.680 kg
B/O SUNITHA	32 wks	1100gms	32	15	1.700 kg
B/O RAJITHA	33 wks	1120gms	55	30	1.660 kg
B/O RAMANA	33 wks	1120gms	44	20	1.470 kg
B/O NAGAMANI	30 wks	1150gms	44	27	1.440 kg
B/O SALMA-II	28 wks	350gms	73	27	1.440 kg

A list of premature babies who were saved

anticipating problems and responding immediately without any delay,” recalls Dr Yadaiah.

After 15 days, the doctors were really hopeful. But there were other complex challenges ahead. For instance, it was important to start feeding the baby from the mouth. Mother’s milk would have to be given, but pre-term babies can’t suckle. So milk was taken from the mother and put by tube directly into the baby’s stomach.

“We gave her mother’s milk, one millilitre every two hours. We gradually increased the amount of mother’s milk. After 40 days of feeding her through a tube, we started to feed her mother’s milk with a spoon and she also started accepting the spoon. The tube goes directly into the stomach but feeding from the mouth establishes gut flora and useful bacteria. From the spoon we graduated to a cup and finally after three months to breastfeeding.”

A serious difficulty the doctors faced was to get the family interested in Mamatha. She was a girl child and unwanted. A poor family didn’t want the burden of a sick girl child.

After her uncle had left her at the district hospital on the night she was born, the family came to see her only after 17 days. The mother didn’t return for a week after seeing her for the first time.

This presented a different kind of challenge for the doctors. A baby’s health is dependent on contact with the mother and the physical and emotional bonding between them. Also, since the mother was subconsciously rejecting the baby, she wasn’t lactating enough.

### COLLECTING MOTHER’S MILK

Mamatha’s nutrition had to come from mother’s

*Continued on page 10*

“In the first four days, I never had hope and felt they had unnecessarily admitted her. But then she held my finger, and with so much strength, that I was surprised. It was clear to me then that she would survive. I called my unit members and told them that we needed to support this baby in a big way. We have 20 babies and four nurses for each shift. So one nurse takes care of five babies. I told the nurses, do whatever you want, but one nurse will always be by this baby. This helped us in



Dr Damera Yadaiah

**In 2010, when UNICEF began supporting hospitals to set up SCNUs, Nalgonda already had one with 12 beds, the first in the country among government hospitals.**

milk. Faced with this situation, Dr Yadaiah began collecting milk from other mothers who were in the maternity ward of the hospital and producing surplus milk.

“I brainstormed with my team on what to do. If we gave powder milk there was the risk of losing the baby. As a solution we decided to opt for donor milk. But collecting it meant persuading other mothers. We go on rounds daily at 9 am in the maternity ward. I used to carry stainless steel boxes in my apron. I spoke to a few mothers who had given birth to babies very recently and told them that there was a baby who needed mother’s milk because her biological mother was failing to give milk. I requested them to give milk after their babies were done with breastfeeding each morning,” says Yadaiah.

It was the first time that Dr Yadaiah had done something like this. He used to take a nurse along who would help collect the milk. The milk would be put in containers with the donor’s name. Precautions were taken to check for hepatitis and HIV. But the mothers were kind and became involved in saving Mamatha, asking about her progress as the days went by.

Mother’s milk can last for six to seven hours without refrigeration. Dr Yadaiah has begun working on a plan for collecting what he calls “express mother’s milk” from branches of the Nalgonda District Hospital. The plan is to put the donor milk in containers and hand them over to bus drivers who will in turn hand them over to volunteers from the hospital.

Dr Yadaiah also had the tough task of convincing the mother that Mamatha would grow up normal and healthy. He showed her pictures of Babasaheb Ambedkar, Winston Churchill, Picasso and others and he explained that they were all born premature and underweight, but went on to be successful people. If Mamatha’s mother now holds her proudly it is because of all these efforts, which went much beyond medical interventions that are made in an ICU for pre-term babies.

### FIXING THE RETINA

The medical challenges in themselves were complex.

Premature babies have to be screened for vision problems after 25 or 30 days. It is called retinopathy of prematurity or ROP, a disease in which abnormal blood vessels grow on the retina, causing it to detach and resulting in blindness.

Dr Yadaiah’s unit has an ophthalmologist who found a problem with Mamatha’s vision and there was a danger of her losing her eyesight if an intervention wasn’t done immediately. It was worrisome that Mamatha would live but be blind.

Dr Yadaiah consulted his friend, Dr Mereky Srinivas of Fernandez Hospital (See *Civil Society* Sept-Oct 2012) in Hyderabad who introduced him to Dr Subhadra Jallali of the L.V. Prasad Eye Institute. Dr Jallali drove down to Nalgonda with her laser equipment and an assistant. She spent five hours removing the abnormal blood vessels in



There are 14 well trained nurses

Mamatha’s retina. Later, a second round of treatment was needed and for this Mamatha was taken to the L.V. Prasad Eye Institute in Hyderabad by car. Dr Jallali has said that Mamatha’s vision will be 80 per cent normal.

A baby’s development depends on connecting with the outside world. These connections happen while in the womb. But premature babies are born far too early to have this experience. For Mamatha a ‘sound spa’ was sourced from the US by one of the team members. It produces natural sounds like wind, rain, flowing water, thunder and so on. These sounds would be played for Mamatha and she began responding to them.

As Mamatha stabilised it was time to put her through kangaroo mother care. Mothers keep their babies on their chests like kangaroos do. It ensures the baby is warm and the constant physical contact promotes bonding and a feeling of security, which are essential to the baby’s growth. Initially, Mamatha received kangaroo mother care in the ICU itself. Later she and her mother were shifted to the kangaroo mother care ward where mothers and infants occupy two rows of beds.

### A STONECUTTER’S SON

Dr Yadaiah comes from a poor rural family in Nalgonda district. His father was a stonecutter. Dr Yadaiah and his siblings went to a village school some five kilometres from their home. They all went on to acquire higher education and have done well for themselves. Dr Yadaiah gained admission to the Gandhi Medical College in Hyderabad where he did his MBBS. He got a postgraduate degree in childcare from Nilofer Hospital.

He joined government service in 1998 and found himself posted in Nalgonda. In 2008 he suggested the setting up of a neonatal intensive care unit at the district hospital and with the help of his superiors got some funds from the district collector.

In 2010, when UNICEF began supporting hospitals to set up special units for saving newborns, Nalgonda already had one with 12 beds, the first in the country among government hospitals. UNICEF upgraded it to 20 beds in 2012 and provided better equipment. It is now funded under the National Rural Health Mission and has 14 nurses trained in tertiary care.

The Nalgonda District Hospital was also the first government hospital in the country to have retina screening for premature babies, kangaroo mother care and CPAP.

“Between 2008 and 2012 we discharged 3,000 plus babies. Post 2012 we have discharged 4,500 plus. So, overall the number of babies discharged goes up to 7,500 plus,” says Dr Yadaiah.

Initially, they would not take in babies weighing less than 2 kg. But they kept caring for smaller and smaller babies as the SCNU’s expertise grew. Finally there was Mamatha at just 650 grammes.

Nalgonda is a district known for poverty, water shortage and lack of infrastructure. Fluorosis is a serious problem in the district. In contrast, the SCNU that Dr Yadaiah and his team run is an island of excellence. The doctors and nurses are all products of government institutions and come from low-income families. Thanks to their efforts, Mamatha, the premature baby of very poor farm labourers, could get treatment and care that was state-of-the-art. ■

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# ‘Donors, auditors cleared us’

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

THE government has cancelled the registration of the Sabrang Trust under the Foreign Contributions Registration Act (FCRA), citing six violations. It has accused Teesta Setalvad and Javed Anand, founders and co-trustees of the Sabrang Trust, of misusing foreign funds for buying personal items and made public a long and graphic list of items.

Civil Society put questions to Setalvad and Anand on the allegations against them. Here is their rejoinder.

**You have been accused of diverting ₹12 lakh from foreign sources for personal use. A string of items are listed. How could such expenses take place using the Sabrang Trust’s money?**

The allegation is that because ₹12 lakh has been paid towards expenses incurred through our personal credit cards, therefore all such payments “shall be treated to have been used for personal gain”.

This is a ridiculous allegation. Let’s take a simple example — Javed Anand goes to a bookshop, buys books for the Sabrang Trust, pays cash and is subsequently reimbursed by the Trust. Alternatively, Javed Anand pays for the books with his personal credit card and the Trust reimburses him as per an invoice for the books purchase. It is ridiculous to maintain, as the MHA/FCRA cancellation order does, that since Javed Anand paid for the books through his personal credit card, it “shall be treated to have been used for personal gain”.

The Sabrang Trust has provided copies of all our monthly credit card statements along with books of account, worksheets and monthly bank statements as evidence that the Trust was charged only for those expense items which were related to activities and objects of the Trust. The allegation is therefore baseless and mindless.

**Do you think it was correct to mix personal expenditure and official expenditure in this manner?**

When we are living in a world where some countries are striving to do away with cash payments altogether, it is a curious proposition that merely using the same credit cards for personal and official expenditure per se amounts to mixing up the two types of expenditure. The Sabrang Trust has never had a credit card in its name. We doubt whether any credit card authority ever issues such cards in the name of trusts or companies because, if anything, such cards would be open to misuse. The only relevant issue should be whether personal expenses are charged to the Trust or not.

**Your donors would have examined your accounts during this period. Did they raise any objections? Who were your auditors?**

Our agreements with donors had a clause requiring the Sabrang Trust to maintain records for a specified

period during which time the donor had the right to inspect them. There are known cases of donors, in fact, exercising this right when they had reason to suspect or believed there was misuse of funds.

In the case of the Sabrang Trust, however, at no point did any of the donors raise any objections or ask to inspect the Trust’s accounts. The agreements with different donors stipulated filing of ‘Activities



Javed Anand and Teesta Setalvad in their cramped workspace

Reports’ along with ‘Financial Reports’/ ‘Utilisation Certificates’ signed by a chartered accountant and the same were provided to them.

More important, the Trust’s accounts are audited every year as per statutory requirements. The auditors of the Sabrang Trust are D.M. Sathe & Co., Chartered Accountants. The firm has been conducting statutory audits for four decades and, to the best of our knowledge, has never been found wanting by the relevant authorities. As may be seen from the annual Audit Reports, there was never any adverse remark from the auditors.

In fact, in April 2014, the Gujarat police called for the auditor’s response to specific questions in connection with allegations by the police about diversion of funds by us. The trustees fully co-operated with the auditors in the ‘re-verification’ of the accounts of the Sabrang Trust. After this, the detailed auditor’s report to the Gujarat police, among other things, stated: “On the basis of information and explanation received and the documents examined by us we do not find any expenses of personal nature (charged to the Trust).”

**Among the charges is one of shared infrastructure. What exactly is the position?**

Any reasonable person would agree that to carry out a major project running for several years you would need office space, furniture, equipment and staff. The Sabrang Trust did not have any of these.

So the trustees had the option of hiring or buying all of this, which is an expensive proposition. Or, they could cut costs by a sharing arrangement with some other organisation.

The trustees found that such an arrangement with Sabrang Communications was economical and the trust would not need to worry about what to do with furniture it had bought or staff it had hired once the three-year project was over. The trustees therefore chose to enter into such an expense-sharing agreement with Sabrang Communications.

Because we are both trustees of the Sabrang Trust and directors of Sabrang Communications, we refrained from taking any part in this decision which was arrived at by the three other trustees of the Sabrang Trust. This fact is recorded in the resolutions passed by the trustees from time to time, true copies of which were provided to the MHA and FCRA authorities. The Sabrang Trust never paid a rupee as rent for the shared space; it only reimbursed Sabrang Communications on a monthly basis according to the resolutions passed by the trustees of the Sabrang Trust pertaining to shared expenses.

**What exactly is the role that the Sabrang Trust plays? How is it differentiated from Communalism Combat and Citizens for Justice and Peace?**

The Sabrang Trust’s primary activity over the years has been running an innovative educational programme — KHOJ: Education for a Plural India — in schools in Mumbai and elsewhere in Maharashtra.

In recognition of the merit of this programme, Teesta, the project director, was appointed a Member of the Union government’s CABE (Central Advisory Board of Education) for many years. The KHOJ project was also funded by the HRD Ministry for three years (2011-2014). In addition, the Sabrang Trust also executed a major Ford Foundation-funded project for Conflict Resolution and Peace Building between 2009 and 2013.

We are founder-trustees (along with seven others) of Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP). Formed in April 2002 in the backdrop of the communal carnage in Gujarat, the primary activity of CJP has been providing free legal aid to the survivors-witnesses of the mass crimes in Gujarat. It has also intervened and mobilised resources for relief and rehabilitation of victims of terrorist activities in Mumbai, Gujarat and Kashmir. CJP is today nationally and internationally recognised for its legal interventions, having resulted in the (unprecedented for India) convictions of the perpetrators of the 2002 communal violence in Gujarat.

**What is the future of the Sabrang Trust?**

The trust will challenge the MHA order cancelling its FCRA registration. Despite all attempts to silence us, the KHOJ programme of the Sabrang Trust is ongoing and will continue with or without foreign contributions, just as CJP’s legal intervention activity continues despite all hurdles, including politically motivated cases against us. ■

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# Nothing beats a suranga

Shree Padre  
Kasargod

**C**HALIYA Kunhambu, 64, is standing on a road, 30 km away from Kasargod, the district's headquarters. If he could connect all the *surangas* he has dug in 50 years, he would reach Kasargod walking underground all the way!

Kunhambu has dug not less than 1,000 *surangas*. With an average length of 60 *kolu* (a *kolu* is 2.5 feet), he has dug 45 km.

Imagine digging a cave in hard laterite soil, that too for 45 km. It's a record unlikely to be broken — because India has probably less than half-a-dozen *suranga* diggers left.

A *suranga* is a traditional water harvesting structure of Kasargod district — a man-made cave for water that can be dug only in a particular type of laterite soil that's not very hard and not too soft.

Generally, a *suranga* is dug across a hill with a gentle gradient. When the 'cave' intercepts the water table, water starts flowing into it. You get pure water round the year, and you don't need a booster pump.

The biggest advantage of a *suranga* is that it is possible to dig it in the upper reaches of a hill where no other water harvesting structure like a tank or an open well is possible or affordable. A poor farm labourer with some courage and commonsense can dig a *suranga* in a couple of months, working one or two hours in the evening — without affecting his livelihood elsewhere.

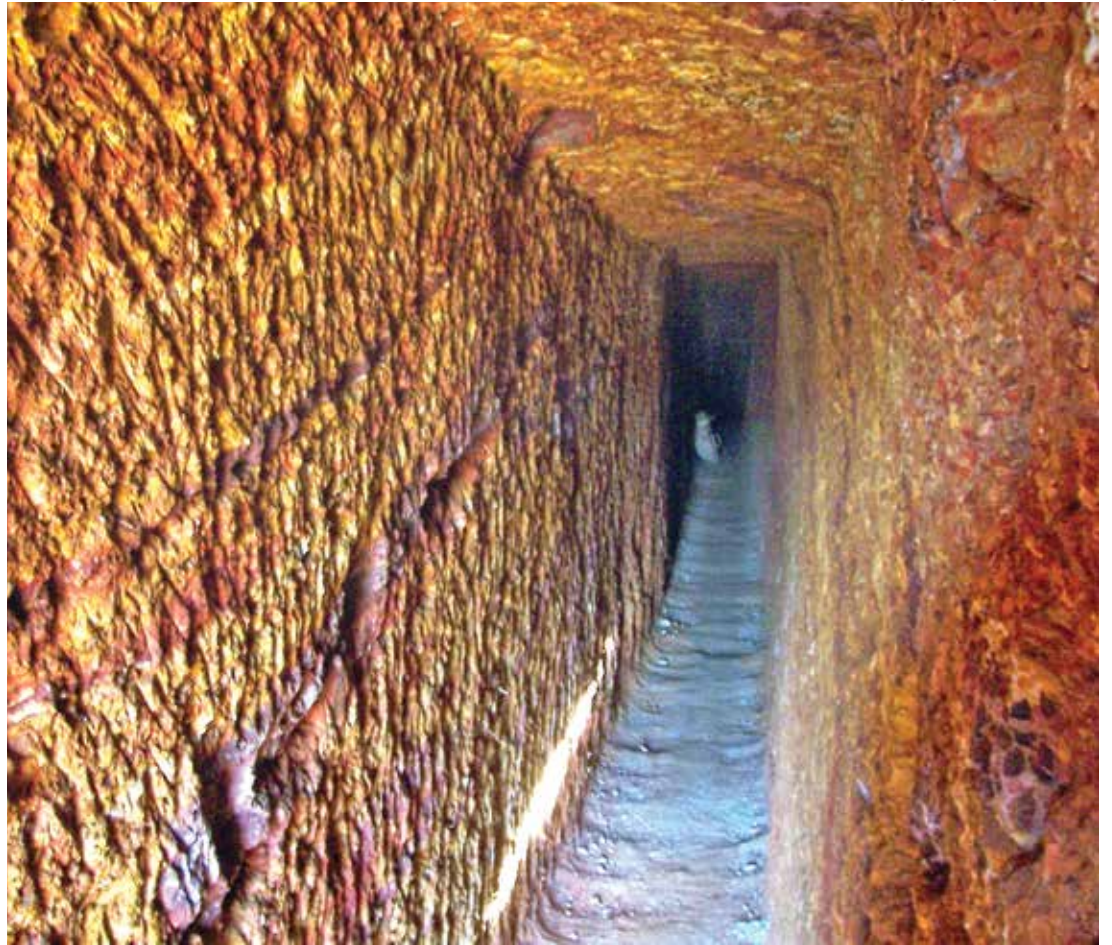
Not much is known about the history of the *suranga* in Kasargod. It resembles the *qanats* of Iran and Afghanistan, and is similar to the *karez*. Very few *surangas* are dug today. Kasargod has a few. But *suranga* diggers like Kunhambu are a rarity. Knowledge of this traditional water structure is vanishing fast.

## FAMILY TRADITION

Kunhambu was 14 when he was initiated into *suranga* work by Kannan, his 72-year-old uncle. The boy liked the work and understood its finer aspects in two years. Since then, Kunhambu has been digging *surangas* without a break.

In 1968, when Kunhambu started work, the contract rate for one *kolu* was ₹6. Now the rate is anything between ₹1,000 to ₹1,500. Kunhambu charges between ₹1,000 to ₹1,300 for the first 50 *kolus*.

Generally, depending on length, *surangas* are dug by a team of two or four people on contract. For digging upto 40-50 *kolus*, two people suffice. But, as the length increases, work becomes more labour-intensive since the soil that has been dug out has to be removed. It is emptied into a rubber basket and



View of a *suranga*: It is a manmade cave for water



Kunhambu, one of India's last *suranga* diggers

pulled out from an opening in the *suranga*.

In a day, Kunhambu and his assistant are able to dig about three *kolus*. "On an average we dig over two *kolus* per day. We work long hours, from 8.30 am to 6.30 pm. If the soil is very hard we have to be content with digging only one *kolu* a day," he says.

*Suranga* digging is done after the monsoon recedes, from mid-October until May. But Kunhambu digs *surangas* in the rainy season too if the hill consists of very hard laterite soil and its walls are unlikely to collapse.

At times he strikes water at just 10-15 *kolu*. The farthest he recalls having dug is 230 *kolu* — a neat 575 feet. His village, erstwhile Bedadka (now bifurcated into two villages), has an estimated 3,000 *surangas*, according to Kunhambu. He probably dug 500 of them.

Using his vast experience, Kunhambu is now divining water for dug wells and even borewells. He

is summoned to various spots for water divining. But he doesn't use the implements that other water diviners use such as the Y fork or pendulum. "In the past I used to take a water-level indicator to measure the slope. Now, I go empty-handed," he says. Thanks to his accuracy in water divining and *suranga* digging, his failure rate in *surangas*, he says, is minimal.

## DYING PROFESSION

Half a century ago, when Kunhambu joined this field of work, there were many

*suranga* digging teams in these areas. "There was a team from Paika, one from Madhur and another team of Muslims. They would go from house to house, asking whether their services were required. My village itself had around 20-25 teams then," he recalls.

But the rise of the borewell led to the downfall of the *suranga*. Only around 25 *surangas* have been dug in the past several years. Balakrishnan, 55, a neighbour who used to dig *surangas*, has quit the work. Out of about 20 people who learnt the skills by assisting him, only one or two are continuing. "It's hard work and doesn't suit everyone. You need patience, boldness and judgement. Some of the young diggers who trained under me have become drivers or run small businesses," he says.

*Suranga* digging is hard, solitary work and risky. There is the danger of the *suranga* walls collapsing during digging. There are also incidents of diggers

getting entangled inside the cave and deaths too, though rare.

“One has to be very alert to avoid danger,” explains Kunhambu. “It is an intricate job with many dos and don’ts. In about a couple of metres of actual digging area, soil doesn’t collapse as it has support. The precursor of any soil-slide, if you are very attentive, is the distinct sound of a mass of soil breaking nearby.”

**PERENNIAL WATER**

Kunhambu always returns to see the old *surangas* he has dug. When he digs long *surangas*, he reduces their height by digging the last few metres in a sitting position. He has, to his credit, completed many *surangas* other diggers have abandoned halfway due to fear or a dispute.

Bandadka and Kuththikol, two adjacent villages, are a classic model for use of *surangas* today. “No other water harvesting structure gives you this clean perennial running water,” says Kunhambu. The water that oozes from the interior of the hill through the *suranga* is directed outside in a pipe and collected in a tank. In fact, it is a 24/7 supply of clean drinking water without any pump dependent on fuel.

For hundreds of households, the *suranga* is the only potable water source. In these two villages, *suranga* water is also used for irrigating a few homestead trees like coconut, banana and so on.

“Another notable feature of our villages is that we have open wells with a *suranga* inside,” points out Ratheesh, Kunhambu’s son.

When the owner of a well feels that the water in it is inadequate, he gets a *suranga* dug from the inside wall of the well. Such *surangas* are generally dug in a sitting position to save labour. In fact, this is an even more labour-intensive task than digging a hillside since the soil has to be lifted out of the well.

“Surface water has dried up. Open wells dry up fast too. Our village boasted of thousands of traditional *surangas* but now borewells outnumber them,” he says regretfully.

Kunhambu, a God-fearing man, has dynamism, optimism and vision. Wherever he digs *surangas*, he keeps the welfare of the landowner in mind too. He has never abandoned any *suranga* halfway because of a dispute.

“When I dig some *surangas*, I can’t go very far because of poisonous gases. You can’t get enough

oxygen. So I have to stop work. But there are instances when I can resume work the next year and finish it.”

Though Kunhambu deserves a national award, he has not achieved recognition even at state level. The local media began writing about him after a team



Kunhambu digging a *suranga*

**The water that oozes from the interior of the hill through the *suranga* is directed outside through a pipe and collected in a tank.**

from the UK that was conducting research on *surangas* met him three years ago.

Dr Darren Crook and Sudhir Tripathi, both from the University of Hertfordshire, spent an entire day interviewing Kunhambu in 2013. Before leaving, they asked if he would be willing to go to the UK. He quipped: “If you take care of my visa, travel and all other expenses, why not?”

The visit by the UK study team roused interest among Malayalam journalists. In the past two years, a few reports on Kunhambu’s saga of *suranga* digging have seen the light of day in Kerala dailies.

This led to a couple of milestones for Kunhambu. Bidar in Karnataka has many silted *karezes*. The local community was not sure whether they could be revived and how to go about it. There was no expert who understood the structures.

V. Govindan Kutty, an assistant professor of geology from Palakkad and a researcher, had visited Bidar and studied these *karezes*. He came to know about Kunhambu. On his suggestion, the district administration invited Kunhambu to Bidar.

Govindan Kutty took Kunhambu to a seminar in Bidar on “Glory that was Bidar” to share his experiences as a *suranga* practitioner. Kunhambu, after studying the structures in Bidar, presented his plans to revive the *karezes*. Govindan Kutty translated his presentation.

Subsequently, with the help of an NGO, the local administration has successfully begun reviving the *karezes*.

“Kunhambu Ettan (brother) encouraged us and gave confidence to the district administration, researchers and local labour that the *karez* or *suranga-bavi* of Bidar can be restored. He also guided and supervised the labour on-site in cleaning the distribution channel. This led to smooth execution of the subsequent debris removal work,” says Govindan Kutty.

Vinay Malge, convener of Team Yuva that actively participated in reviving the *suranga-bavi*, was very impressed by Kunhambu. “The opening from which he started the excavation of the Bidar *karez* was small and congested. He dug the whole channel literally sitting on his knees,” recalls Vinay. “His passion was infectious. He hummed songs while working. He was absolutely fearless inside the tunnel. In that narrow and low tunnel where it was even difficult to turn around he worked coolly like a snake lurking around.”

Kasargod has an estimated 8,000 *surangas*. Many of them continue to quench the thirst of poor families and parched lands. Kunhambu, a historic achiever, is probably the last authority who can speak on this vanishing traditional skill of digging *surangas*. It is time his achievement is recognised, and his experiences and skills are documented in multimedia format. ■

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**Samita’s World**

by SAMITA RATHOR



# Kolkata tries machines for sewers, but it is not easy

Subir Roy  
Kolkata

**H**IRING people to enter sewers and clean them has been made illegal but, in an old mega city like Kolkata, replacing people with machines isn't quite so simple.

The Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) continues to have 250 men on its rolls to enter sewers when machines cannot get the job done without some experienced human intervention.

The reason is that Kolkata's sewers date back to 1875, when the city was just the third one in the world to have an elaborate underground drainage system.

Over time, as the city grew and because of lack of maintenance, the sewers silted up and now machines alone are not good enough to end the logjam below.

Today, according to Nilangshu Bhusan Basu, principal chief engineer, KMC, there are around 180 km of brick sewers in the stomach of the city, much like the large and small intestines within us. Of these, around 88 km are categorised as "so-called man-entry sewers", meaning with a diameter of more than a metre.

Originally, Kolkata's brick sewers used to be flushed with water from the Hooghly during high tide. But, over time, as with many of the good practices inherited by the city from the British era, this stopped, even as the over-ground traffic load, population and the "impervious" paved surface (which does not allow natural seepage) grew.

Siltation slowly diminished the capacity of the elaborate drainage system that earlier served the core areas of the city so well and Kolkata became known across the country for massive waterlogging during the heavy monsoon.

The final stage of a deteriorating sewer is collapse and such collapses increased at an "alarming rate between 1980 and 2006". Major repairs were essential and the KMC drew up a rehabilitation plan, with the help of the World Bank, in four phases covering mechanical desilting and rehabilitation of man-entry and non-man entry sewers.

The first phase, covering 26 km and costing ₹500 crore, with assistance from the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, commenced in 2008 and has been completed after much delay. Subsequent phases cover both man- entry and non man-entry sewers and other conduit sewers.

How was the work done? Basu says, "Wherever possible, desilting was conducted by means of a high pressure jetting machine and a high volume suction machine." The operative phrase is "wherever possible". In many places, silt had accumulated for decades and hardened. There, the mechanised

approach did not work and the job had to be done by "chisels and jackhammers". So you cannot do without a manual role (leaving aside operating a machine) entirely!

In 2012 the Safai Karamchari Andolan and others filed a petition in the Supreme Court asking for the Centre and the states to strictly enforce the 1993 Act prohibiting the employment of manual scavengers.



**'Manual cleaning still takes place, mainly through labour employed by contractors.'**

The Act did precious little to alter things on the ground and since 2003, when the Andolan had filed a writ petition pointing this out, the Supreme Court began monitoring and issuing directives.

In 2013, Parliament passed the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act which specifically brought under its purview persons engaged in sewer cleaning. The Act says that no local authority or agency shall "engage or employ, either directly or indirectly, any person for hazardous cleaning of a sewer or septic tank". It asks local authorities to employ modern technology for cleaning sewers.

In its 2014 order disposing of the petition, the Supreme Court directed that "entering sewer lines without safety gear should be made a crime even in an emergency situation. For each such death compensation of ₹10 lakh should be given to the family of the deceased." Additionally, the court ordered that families of all who have died in sewerage work since 1993 be identified and ₹10 lakh be paid to those dependent on them.

What is the situation in the KMC? A senior official in charge of drainage says, "We have virtually stopped manual desilting. Manual deployment is

now done to run machines. All these machines are run by outsourcers as there has been no recruitment in this regard in the last 15 years." There are now only 250 departmental staff engaged in this operation. They typically go into the sewers only when a bucket machine gets stuck.

In keeping with the court directive to use modern technology, the KMC has bought and is deploying a number of machines: 15 bucket machines, 16 jet-cum-suction machines, 30 manhole desilting machines, five open *nullah* desilting machines and two blow-vacuum machines. Fifteen more bucket machines are being ordered. Affirms Dr Basu, "Manual cleaning has been stopped post the Supreme Court order. Now there is only 5 per cent of manual cleaning and that too for open drains by the departmental staff."

A somewhat different picture emerges in a conversation with Mrityunjay Chakraborty, a KMC councillor and member of the CPI(M). His take is, "Manual cleaning still takes place, mainly through labour employed by contractors. I would not say that thereby KMC has shut its eyes to the issue. It is trying to stop the practice. It has stopped manual cleaning up to 70 per cent. Pre-monsoon cleaning of sewers is usually done through contractors. But machine use is partial and in my own area last year boys cleaned up sewers. Manual cleaning is done both by regular KMC employees and those engaged under the 100 days' work programme which is the urban counterpart of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme."

Kalyan Manna, 34, currently works under the 100 days programme, under which once a person has completed 100 days' work at a stretch, he is 'rested' for a few days. Under this programme, he earns ₹100 a day. He has been working as a contractor's labourer for 10 years. Occasionally, he gets to work as contract labour for the Armed Forces Command Hospital in the city where he earns ₹350 a day. He is unmarried and has studied up to Class 10.

His sense is that mechanisation has only just begun and hardly any precautions are taken when he goes down a sewer, except that the manhole is kept open for some time before he enters to let any accumulated gas escape.

Umesh Das, 40, is a permanent employee of the KMC since 1997, enjoying benefits such as provident fund that come with a regular job. He is married with three children who are all in school. He has always been with the drainage department. Now that machines have arrived, he goes down a sewer only during an emergency when desilting work in a pit stops because the silt is hard as stone and requires chiselling. ■





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## PSBT's quiet stardom

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Saibal Chatterjee  
New Delhi

**R**AJIV Mehrotra, Managing Trustee, Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT), is a media all-rounder. Radio, television, filmmaking and writing — he has done it all.

He was only nine years old when he went behind a mic to host a children's show on All India Radio, Calcutta. Before he was out of his teens, he worked with broadcasting icon Melville de Mellow.

At Columbia University, where Mehrotra obtained an MFA in film direction, he was tutored by Czech director Milos Forman.

He went on to host 700 episodes of *In Conversation*, the longest-running talk show on public television in India. It brought him face to face with some of the world's greatest contemporary thought leaders.

There aren't too many people in this country who have seen the media evolve from quite as up close as him.

For the past 16 years, Mehrotra, as PSBT's commissioning producer, has been tapping his experience and versatility to propel the mission of creating an inclusive platform for independent and diverse documentary films in a country where fresh, alternative media voices have been pushed into a corner.

A few years ago, Mehrotra tried to revive *In Conversation* on a private television channel. He did four or five episodes but it did not work. An image consultant was called in and he was told that he needed a makeover. Mehrotra chose to bail out. He wasn't going to play the game by rules he didn't believe in.

He has been equally unbending in the way he has steered PSBT. He has kept the trust afloat for over a decade and a half in the face of many challenges, fighting tooth and nail not to let external pressures throw him off his path.

"PSBT," says Mehrotra, "is committed solely to the cause of independent documentary filmmakers and is not driven by any agenda related to profit or propaganda."

PSBT's guiding principle, he asserts, is to bring to

the fore stories that need to be told, promote diversity of voices in the independent documentary space and highlight issues and themes that do not find their way into the advertising-dependent mainstream media.

PSBT was created with the support of Prasar Bharati and Doordarshan. The national broadcaster not only helps financially, it also provides PSBT a weekly platform to telecast its films.

"The Prasar Bharati CEO (Jawhar Sircar) is on our board of trustees," says Mehrotra. "So everything that PSBT does is completely transparent." The board, chaired by veteran filmmaker Adoor Gopalakrishnan, includes luminaries like Shyam Benegal, Fali S. Nariman, Sharmila Tagore and Kiran Karnik.

### FREE SPIRIT

As the stranglehold of corporate entities increases on cinema, and both the message and the messenger are constantly manipulated to serve the needs of the market and the state, the battle to ensure greater visibility for independent documentaries has only gotten more arduous.

Since its inception in 2000, PSBT has been helping filmmakers across the country document reality in all its diversity: a mission that is now up against mounting odds.

But Mehrotra, an award-winning documentary filmmaker himself, hasn't given up the fight. If anything, he has redoubled his efforts to further the PSBT cause and extend its life.

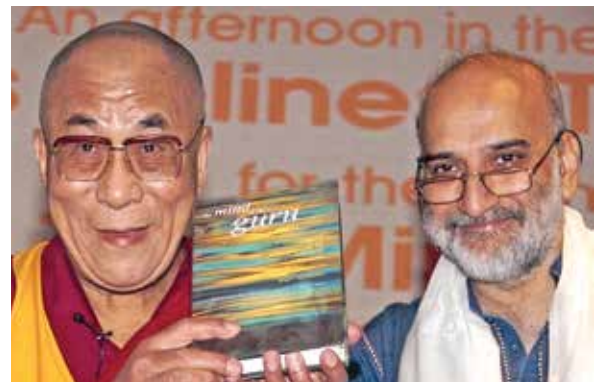
"Our production budgets are modest," says Mehrotra. "As a result, filmmakers have to cut corners, which tells on the technical quality of a film."

PSBT's revenue generation is limited. Mehrotra points to the fact that the government retains 60 per cent of the royalty of a film. Any money that is made by Doordarshan goes into the Consolidated Fund of India and cannot be ploughed back into film production. PSBT has thus far survived solely on five-year grants handed out by the government. The current tranche is on its last legs.

"We share the rest of the royalty that accrues from



The PSBT team: Ashok Kumar Dhawan, Rajiv Mehrotra, Sandeep



Rajiv Mehrotra with his guru, the Dalai Lama

a film with the filmmaker. We, therefore, do not have enough money to promote our films aggressively," he says.

"I've been suggesting," says Mehrotra, "that PSBT be given a bigger sum of money to begin with, which can be progressively reduced until it is down to nil in the 10th year. If we do not become self-sustaining by then, we will wind up and leave it to others."

PSBT has so far supported and mentored more than 630 films, scooping up over 230 awards at home and abroad. Most important, the trust has helped over 400 first-time filmmakers cut their teeth in the profession.

PSBT now has 45 National Awards in its kitty. "Over the last year alone, our work has been selected at more than 200 film festivals, travelling from Thiruvananthapuram to Kuala Lumpur, Pakistan

AJIT KRISHNA



Bhatt, Ridhima Mehra, Tulika Srivastava, Jyoti Rawat, Anjali S and Santha Jayakrishnan

*Hunt*, Ruchi Shrivastava and Sumit Khanna's *The Man Who Dwarfed the Mountains*, and Gaurav Saxena's *Until Space Remains: The Dalai Lama and India*.

While many impediments still remain, not the least of which are limited budgets and the resultant dependence on low-end technology, Mehrotra's persistence has been crowned with many successes that have gone beyond just awards and festival selections.

A UNESCO report has lauded PSBT for offering "an innovative model for developing a shared public culture of broadcasting focused on diversity, accuracy, impartiality and marginalised audiences".

PSBT films have a weekly slot on Doordarshan, a window on NDTV has been revived, and selected documentaries from its library are now also being premiered on the Epic Channel. "We have delivered 52 films a year to Doordarshan since 2001. We haven't ever missed a single slot in all these years," says Mehrotra.

"We have had significant success in the matter of delivering quality, but we haven't yet had the kind of impact that we expected because of the limited reach of our films," he admits.

"We would have also liked to achieve wider international exposure. Technically, PSBT films are low-end. We use technology that went out of vogue over a decade ago: DVC Pro 50 when the rest of the world is using high-definition and 4K," Mehrotra admits.

## PIONEER AND MENTOR

PSBT operates out of a basement office in New Delhi's East Nizamuddin. Much like the man who heads the operation, it has an understated but purposeful air about it. For independent documentary filmmakers across India, especially those that are seeking to start out, this is the go-to address.

"There is no entity like PSBT in this country," says filmmaker Sidharth Srinivasan, who recently made a documentary produced by Mehrotra, *Bahurupiya*. "Its budgets may be low, but PSBT commissions films by genuinely independent first-time directors."

"What is most impressive is the amazing diversity of themes that the PSBT films tackle," says Srinivasan. "Each film that they commission is a unique beast." In a country seduced by the familiar and the formulaic, that is no mean feat.

Mehrotra admits that in the initial years, filmmakers would approach PSBT with themes that they thought were in favour. "Over the years, we have tried to dispel that and encourage a wider range of ideas and approaches," he says.

Says Mehrotra: "I would like to believe that PSBT has played a key role in energising the independent documentary space in India by unleashing 400-plus new filmmakers into the profession."

"Two-thirds of the films commissioned by PSBT have been made by first-timers and starting out filmmakers," he adds. "So we are adding some value to independent documentary cinema. Our funding is evenly spread across the country although we do not have any zonal quotas."

PSBT's slate covers a wide range of subjects and styles. The films deal with freedom, gender, environment, conflict, sexuality, livelihood, arts and crafts, globalisation, urbanscapes, culture and tradition, among other themes.



Pranab Mukherjee and Arun Jaitley honour Rajiv Mehrotra and PSBT

and Nepal to Oberhausen and Rotterdam, among other places," Mehrotra points out.

He adds: "These films won 28 awards (in the past year). Three of our films were selected in the Indian Panorama — Benegal's *New Cinema* (Iram Ghufuran), *What the Field Remembers* (Subasri Krishna) and *Jai Ho* (Umesh Aggarwal). A record 14 films were selected at the Mumbai International

Film Festival in January..."

At this year's International Documentary and Short Film Festival of Kerala held in the second week of June, PSBT had seven films — Avadhoot Khanolkar's *Bade TV Wala*, Sidharth Srinivasan's *Bahurupiya*, Rajdeep Paul's *Mrinal Sen — An Era in Cinema*, Nandan Kudhyadi's *Srinivasa Ramanujan: The Mathematician and his Legacy*, Biju Toppo's *The*

# COVER



*Vertical City is about Mumbai's 'dystopic architecture'*

*A Body That Will Speak is on perceptions of image*

*A still from Mindscapes...of Love and Longing*

At one end of the spectrum are experimental films such as Vipin Vijay's *Vishaparvam*, a video essay that explores layers of images through dialogues with a toxicologist, a convict, a traditional healer and a herpetologist; Ranjan Palit's *In Camera*, which probes the cameraman's art and craft from a personal standpoint; and Avijit Mukul Kishore's *Vertical City*, a visual take on Mumbai's 'dystopic architecture'.

At the other end are activist films like Kavita Bahl and Nandan Saxena's *Candles in the Wind*, about the widows of farmers in Punjab who have committed suicide; Subasri Krishnan's *What the Field Remembers*, which revisits the site of the 1983 Nellie massacre; and Biju Toppo's *The Hunt*, which investigates gross human rights violations in the Maoist areas of Jharkhand, Odisha and Chhattisgarh.

In between, of course, there is a host of other genres of documentaries represented by films like Akanksha Joshi's *Earth Witness*, in which four ordinary people reflect upon climate change and how it affects their lives and livelihoods; Diya Banerjee's *The Hope Doctors*, set in two hospitals that experiment with laughter as therapy; and Harjant Gill's *Roots of Love*, which, through interactions with six men ranging from 14 to 86, documents the changing significance of hair and the turban among Sikhs.

PSBT also provides a platform for the exploration of personal spaces as in Sukanya Sen and Pawas Bisht's *A Body That Will Speak*, which follows four women — a filmmaker, a university student, an entrepreneur and a radio jockey — in a bid to understand how body image plays out in daily lives; and Sridhar Rangayan's *Purple Skies*, which probes the lives of lesbians in India.

Given the many successes that PSBT has registered, the brain behind the trust should have been going to town with his achievements. But pretty much like his workspace, his work isn't easy to spot from the outside. But enter the PSBT office — it is run by just a handful of people and isn't exactly a beehive of activity — and you know that this not-for-profit isn't just another funding agency for documentaries.

PSBT has created "an independent, participatory, pluralistic and democratic" platform aimed at empowering documentary filmmakers to think out-of-the-box and pursue alternative modes of expression.

The profit-seeking corporate media and sanitised



*Rajiv Mehrotra with citations: Over the years PSBT has won a number of prestigious awards*

government-mandated information channels are off-limits for stories that address ticklish themes and raise uncomfortable questions. PSBT steps in to fill the breach.

"Ours has been a successful model," says Mehrotra. "We've mentored new filmmakers and given them a platform for self-expression and capturing India's diversity."

Those in the know, of course, need no reminder: they are fully aware of the impact of PSBT's work. As Mehrotra sees this writer off at the end of the interview, he insists that the focus of the write-up should not be on him alone. "This success story has been built in unison with talented filmmakers from around the country. They are just as important. As a Buddhist, I would recommend the Middle

Path," he says.

It is indeed the Middle Path that Mehrotra treads that has enabled PSBT to achieve many of its goals. Not all of them, by his own admission, are great films. But they have all been fired by a spirit of freedom and enquiry.

"That is what we believe in. We let filmmakers experiment without being bogged down by the fear of failure," says Mehrotra. "We've built in a failure rate. We encourage filmmakers to take risks because even if they fail it isn't the end of the world. Only by taking risks can they expand their boundaries."

"We do not mind if a film does not shape up well," says Mehrotra. "We give suggestions through a mentoring process, but we refrain from giving negative feedback to a filmmaker."



*In Camera probes the cameraman's art and craft*

*Earth Witness is about the impact of climate change*

*The Hope Doctors explores laughter as therapy*

AJIT KRISHNA



*Wind*: “With the budgets that PSBT provides, you cannot do justice to a film, especially if you have to shoot at multiple locations and travel there more than once.”

“Today, filmmaking has moved to the digital domain, so the footage has to be graded. Costs of production have gone up but the budgets have stagnated. We had to dig into our own pockets to complete *Candles in the Wind*,” says Bahl.

“The PSBT model now works primarily for new filmmakers who are looking for a break,” she says. “For them the low budgets might not be such a big problem.”

But all the problems notwithstanding, PSBT soldiers on, driven by a combination of passion and enterprise. “Our model works because our filmmakers make films that they are passionate about. So there is always something in them,” he says. “We are the only ones who sanction budgets without demanding bank guarantees. Our model is based on trust.”

While PSBT’s films have travelled around the globe, Mehrotra has himself been to only one festival – INPUT 2015 Tokyo, where debutante Priya Thuvassery’s *The Sacred Glass Bowl*, which explores the rules of chastity and virginity applied to women in Indian society, was screened. “We are cash-strapped and so cannot afford trips to film festivals,” he says.

That PSBT’s films have, to date, won 230-plus national and international awards, besides earning over 1,300 film festival selections across the world, is a measure of the efficacy of its quality control processes.

Every September, PSBT also hosts the annual Open Frame Film Festival and Forum, where it showcases its own films besides presenting a selection of titles from INPUT (INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC TELEVISION). The weeklong event includes professional and student workshops and panel discussions and colloquiums.

With its films, PSBT has been successfully cutting through the clutter and cacophony created by private television channels and government-controlled information avenues and opening out into a space where the spirit of unfettered creative expression informs documentary filmmaking. The result has been an incredible output of films.

Says veteran documentary maker Arun Chadha, who has thus far made three films for PSBT: “They are a great ally for filmmakers who want to explore themes that others are not interested in touching.

Conventional producers back only safe and tested ideas.”

In 2011, Chadha made the National Award-winning *Mindscapes... of Love and Longing* for PSBT. The film deals with the sexual needs of the physically challenged. “I met a few producers who rejected the idea outright. They felt it would be difficult to pull off. But not PSBT,” the filmmaker says.

All the filmmakers that PSBT has collaborated with are independent. No production companies or middlepersons are involved in its projects. Two-thirds of the filmmakers have been first-timers, while 50 per cent of the projects PSBT has funded have been helmed by women.

The latest in the long line of award-winning PSBT films is *The Man Who Dwarfed the Mountains*, which was adjudged the best environment film by National Awards jury this year. This was PSBT’s 45th National Award and Mehrotra’s 28th.

Directed by Ruchi Shrivastava and Sumit Khanna, *The Man Who Dwarfed the Mountains* celebrates the spirit and philosophy of environmentalist Chandi Prasad Bhatt, one of the pioneers of the Chipko movement.

“PSBT has won an award every two films,” says Mehrotra. “Our films have been lauded by professional juries around the world.”

The accolades notwithstanding, survival hasn’t been easy for PSBT, which depends solely on a government grant. “Up to 75 per cent of our budgets are spent directly on film production, five per cent on dissemination and 15 per cent on operating costs,” says Mehrotra.

“We work at 12-15 per cent margin,” says the trust’s managing trustee and commissioning editor. “Most NGOs operate at 30 per cent.”

Srinivasan, whose feature film in 2010, *Pairon Talle* germinated when he was working on *An Outpost of Delhi*, a PSBT-produced documentary on the indiscriminate urbanisation on the fringes of the Delhi, believes that the work that Mehrotra and his team are doing is absolutely vital in the Indian context.

He says: “One wishes that they had greater resources and bigger budgets, but who else is commissioning independent documentaries today as a form of self-expression?”

PSBT’s films are probably still not seen as widely as they deserve to be. Nor probably is its voice heard as loudly as it should be. But the sheer volume of its output has definitely widened the horizons for independent documentaries in India. ■

Even in the case of filmmakers who are “dishonest” and misuse the budgets allocated to them, PSBT does not get into a confrontation. “We do not touch them again,” says Mehrotra.

“We have a full-fledged mentoring process. We vet proposals, scripts, rough cuts, revised rough cuts and finished films. But we do not impose our views on the filmmakers. We encourage divergent views to emerge. We let the filmmakers take the final call,” says Mehrotra.

## DRIVEN BY PASSION

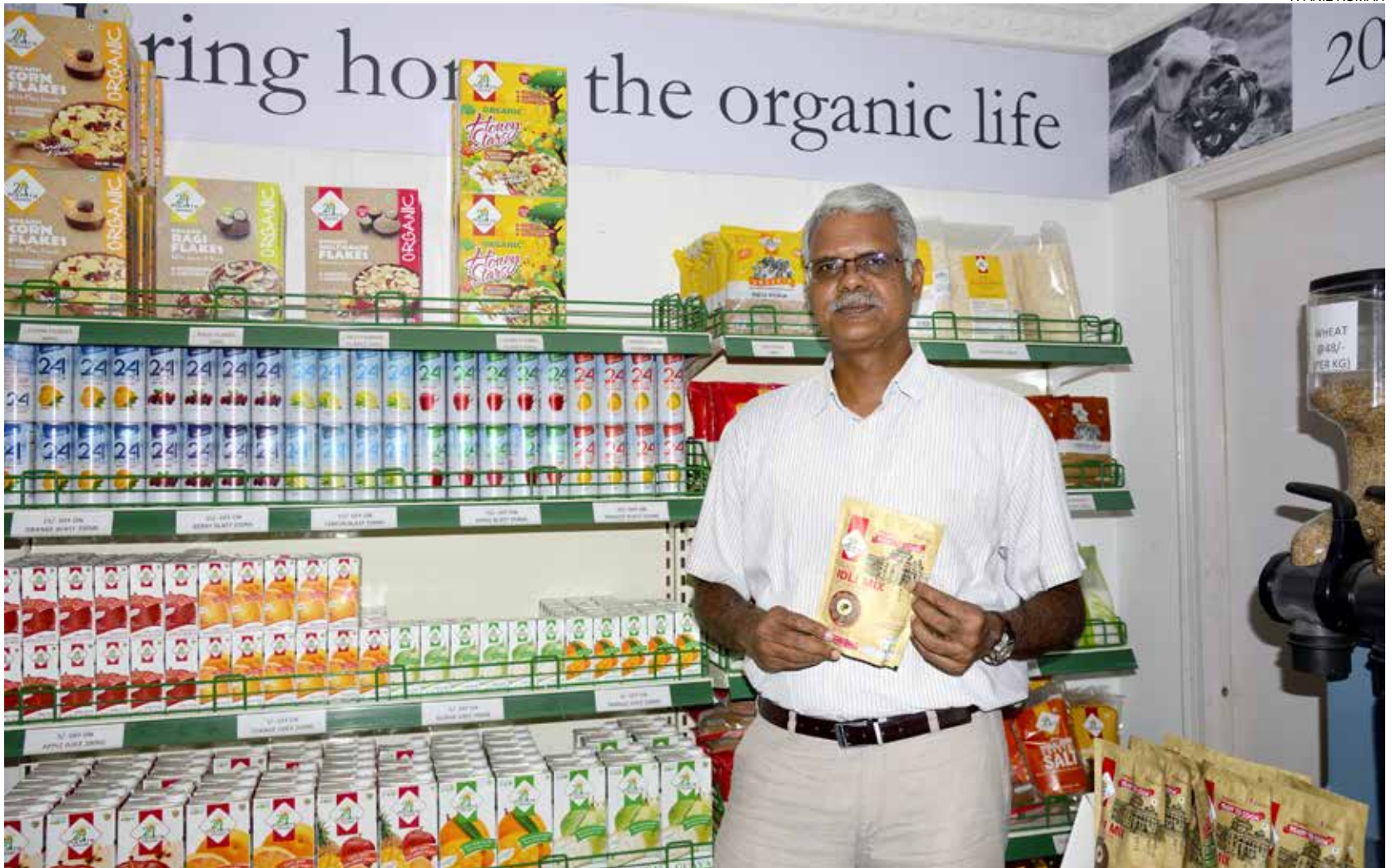
But, to some established documentary filmmakers, the PSBT model might seem a tad flawed, especially owing to the budget constraints.

Says Kavita Bahl, co-director of *Candles in the*

# BUSINESS

ENTERPRISE | CSR | ICT | GREEN TECH

P. ANIL KUMAR



Raj Seelam at a 24 Mantra Organic store in Hyderabad

## THE ORGANIC BOTTOM LINE

### Raj Seelam built a company to promote healthy eating

**Civil Society News**  
Hyderabad

LOOKING up to Raj Seelam is easy because he is all of six feet and three inches tall. But the admiration he evokes is quite another thing as he tells you about 24 Mantra Organic, his brand for chemical-free foods.

In times when farmers are committing suicide and the rural economy is in deep distress, Seelam has built an innovative and robust business in organic foods and beverages. He's changed lives and saved homes by getting farmers to move away from pesticides and fertilisers and adopt sustainable agricultural practices.

Based out of Hyderabad, 24 Mantra Organic has quite a fan following in this city. There are about a dozen 24 Mantra stores in Hyderabad. But that is just part of the story because the company has also aggressively gone national. Pick up a product in

Hyderabad and you can expect to find it in a supermarket or an independent store in most of the other big cities in the country.

In the 12 years since Seelam founded the company at least 200 products have been put into the market successfully. They range from breakfast cereals to snacks, spices, gluten-free wheat flour and traditional grains like millets. Fizzy organic fruit drinks in cans have recently been added to the list. At the store we visited at Banjara Hills there were fresh mangoes selling briskly.

The company works intensively with some 32,000 farmers in 15 states and helps them grow organic crops on 150,000 acres. For every 200 farmers there is a supervisor especially trained in organic practices.

In every way, this is a business built from the bottom up. It works directly with people in the fields because only then can it be sure it will get produce that has been grown without chemicals.

Shortcuts just won't do if you are into building

brands in the organic space. From what we can see from our first and only meeting with him at his office in Banjara Hills, Seelam is deeply invested in both the company he runs and the idea of holistic lifestyle choices like organically grown food.

For him 24 Mantra Organic is more than a business. It is a reflection of a personal choice in much the same way as customers who buy organic products always agree to pay a little more.

Much of the conviction can be seen in the processing, branding and packaging. A 24 Mantra Organic product is in touch and feel and quality no different from the products that come from long-established food and beverage companies. Ensuring a good organic product is one thing. Mainstreaming it is an achievement of quite another order.

For instance, goji avalakki is a traditional snack that comes from Mysuru. It is offered by 24 Mantra Organic in a ready mix, which is ready to be served within five minutes of being put in boiling water.

The packet lists nutritional facts, allergy warnings and the best organic certification.

Barnyard millets comes as whole grain but is parboiled so that it is easy to cook. Millets are ancient grains that are healthy to eat and, for people who are diabetic, are an alternative to rice. Somewhere in the churn of modern farming the ancient dietary values associated with millets have been forgotten. Through 24 Mantra Organic they make a return to middle-class kitchens.

It was in 2004 that Seelam launched Sresta Natural Bioproducts Ltd. Months later, the brand 24 Letter Mantra Organic was created. It was based on the ancient wisdom of the Sanskrit 'Tvam Bhumir Apo Analo, Anilo Nabha' or 'You alone are Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Ether'. The Sanskrit words added up to 24 letters and so the name, which, Seelam tells us, was given by a copywriter who had turned to spiritualism.

But, for the purpose of mass marketing, the name was complicated. Customers were often confused. So the word "letter" was dropped and the brand became 24 Mantra Organic and is now often just 24 Mantra because that is easy to figure out at first sight and longwinded explanations are not needed.

Products from 24 Mantra Organic draw on ancient wisdom about natural farming practices and nutritional values. The slick packaging, pithy instructions and easy processing serve as a bridge between the past and contemporary times.

As a business, 24 Mantra Organic easily straddles these different worlds. So does Seelam. He has a degree in agricultural science and an MBA from IIM Ahmedabad, but calls himself a farmer.

It was when his father was dying of cancer that he returned to his family's farmlands on the outskirts of Hyderabad. Before that, Seelam worked for a company selling chemical pesticides and fertilisers. As he travelled through the countryside to promote sales, he would see how pesticides and fertilisers were being used in excess by ignorant farmers who were caught in a cycle of dwindling yield and rising debt because of the cost of inputs.

"I used to see people dip vegetables in pesticides and spray indiscriminately. Even potatoes were dipped in pesticides and put in cold storage. I won't blame the farmer because ultimately he has to ensure that he earns something from what he produces. And, of course, such practices stem from a lack of knowledge," says Seelam.

"That is when I said this is what I don't want to eat and also most people wouldn't like to eat this kind of stuff. So I stopped eating a lot of things. I saw farmers go from almost no pesticides to three

rounds of pesticides. The second thing was that in the early Nineties farmer suicides were happening. I also come from a farming family. This is not right, I said to myself."

What about his family farm? Were chemicals used in excess on it as well?

"In a way, my father was an inspiration. He would use one round of pesticide for three crops and get the best yield in a 100-km radius. People would come to him for advice and seeds. I am sure he would have been a successful organic farmer, perhaps among the best, if he had lived," says Seelam.

There was a time when farming families wanted all hands on board. People took pride in working in their fields. But Seelam's generation was pushed to get an education and take up jobs. The decline in agriculture had begun in the Nineties.

Seelam's return was prompted by his father's ill-health but he was also fed up with selling pesticides and fertilisers and had a yearning to start an enterprise. He tried his hand at a couple of businesses with modest success and then came the

## Products from 24 Mantra Organic draw on ancient wisdom about natural farming practices and nutritional values.

idea of an enterprise in organic food.

Seelam travelled around for more than a year, meeting pioneers in organic farming like Bhaskar Save (See *Civil Society* issue December 2015) and Narayan Reddy. He tried to meet G. Nammalvar. He went wherever someone had done good work in organic cultivation.

"I came back with a belief that we have to marry science to organic. Yes, I think there is some science in traditional practices but it is crude science. The goal should be to use science in tune with nature and not against nature. This is my belief," Seelam explains.

Asked what impact switching to organic farming has on the lives of farmers, Seelam says their income increases by anything between 15 and 30 per cent

because of the reduced cost of inputs and the premium 24 Mantra Organic pays them. They also don't have to borrow money any longer to pay for pesticides and fertilisers.

A third gain occurs over the long term. Organic farming methods make the soil more stable and fertile, leading to greater productivity and less use of water. The natural balance of the soil is restored.

Seelam explains: "The way we build soil fertility is by applying a lot of manure and compost. We also rely on crop rotation with pulses and legumes, which fix nitrogen in soil. If crop rotation is not possible, inter-cropping helps in building soil fertility. "Wherever moisture is available we recommend the use of green manure or the growing of a leguminous crop for 40 days. It fixes nitrogen in the soil and improves carbon content. The soil is able to retain moisture for a longer time. This is the reason organic fields tend to perform better under stress situations."

Asked why 24 Mantra Organic doesn't believe in outsourcing, Seelam says, "We don't buy from outside primarily because of integrity issues. Let's say I go to a trader who says he has organic stuff, but I don't know what kind of detailing has gone into it, what kind of monitoring has gone into it. I have a brand and the consumer has belief in the brand."

What is Seelam at heart? An activist, a farmer, or a businessman?

"I would say at heart I am a farmer. I also come from a farming family. My father was a good farmer. He has been my inspiration. That's how the journey started and it's close to my heart," is Seelam's response.

He has proved to be a good businessman because he is careful about being financially sustainable. All organisations have to make a profit or a surplus because it is only then that they control their own destiny.

"Ultimately, commerce is very important. A farmer will really benefit when he is connected to commerce," says Seelam.

But 24 Mantra Organic also has a strong streak of activism at its core. "I think every business has to have a social purpose. Without that the soul is missing. Money can't be an end in itself. Consumers are looking for genuine stories. Not stories for the sake of stories," says Seelam.

In a discerning market where consumers are increasingly making ethical choices, Seelam and the team of motivated professionals he has built around him have shaped a significant presence for their company. ■



AJIT KRISHNA



Vedica team: Anuradha Das Mathur, Jesleen Lalmanawmi, Shreyasi Singh, Ruchi Mahajan, Surbhi Kapur and Stuti Govil

## Vedica's MBA is smart and female

**Kavita Charanji**  
New Delhi

EVERYTHING at Vedica is new and exciting, says bright young Ashmita Kannan, a graduate in computer science engineering from Kumaraguru College of Technology, Coimbatore. She started her career at Mu Sigma, a data analytics firm, and seemed to have made it — until she became very restless. “I realised that this was not what I wanted to do. I wanted to take time off to study, explore a variety of subjects to see where my interests lay. I wasn't interested in an MBA programme at IIM or ISB. That idea just gave me jitters,” says Kannan.

Instead she opted for an 18-month residential, postgraduate management course specifically designed for young women called the Vedica Scholars Programme. This unique multidisciplinary MBA programme, probably the first of its kind, is being offered by the Vedica Foundation and the Shri Aurobindo Centre for Arts and Communication in New Delhi.

“I went in for Vedica because it gave me a chance to look beyond the profit-centric corporate CEO mindset. There were a lot of qualities about myself which I didn't know before, like my strengths. Now, I've learnt how to handle conflict better, accept feedback and my people management skills have become much better,” says Kannan.

The corporate sector is just one avenue for Vedica students. Development professional Tania Tauro is confident the Vedica qualification will sharpen her management skills in her line of work. She's done her master's in development from the Azim Premji University and has worked in the area of public health with two NGOs, Armman and Magic Bus Foundation. “I wanted to figure out what I really wanted to do, understand management better so I could be an effective manager in the development

sector. This learning could be in the form of better impact assessment or accounting skills. But first I was taught to overcome my wariness of numbers.”

Anuradha Mathur, a media professional and entrepreneur, is Dean of the Vedica Programme. She is one of its founders. The other two founders are Pramath Raj Sinha, founder and first Dean of the Indian School of Business (ISB) and Daljeet Wadhwa, Founding Director of the Sri Aurobindo Centre for Arts and Communication.

There were several reasons why they started Vedica. They were primarily concerned that many academically bright young women were dropping out of the workforce a few years into promising careers. To create a pool of financially independent women with determination to stay the course in their careers was the starting point of Vedica. “We believe very strongly that dignity and dependence don't go hand in hand. We are quite hard-headed about indoctrinating women by saying they must have an aspiration for careers as opposed to jobs as and when it is convenient for them,” says Mathur.

The other driving reason was that the traditional ‘vanilla MBA’, as Mathur terms it, is losing some of its sheen and there was a need to embellish the core of management practice by adding the liberal arts, communication and personal growth. So Vedica students learn a gamut of liberal arts like micro and macro-economics, women's studies, development, public policy, history, philosophy, psychology and international relations. “Businesses don't operate in silo. They operate in a context and in future business, government and the community will have to work together to solve the complex problems we face,” emphasises Mathur.

Courses in communication and thinking help Vedica students develop their logical, analytical and critical thinking skills. These factor in written, oral and visual communication skills that extend to business writing, drafting reports and proposals,

presentation skills, social media engagement and public speaking.

There is emphasis on personal growth, critical for women so that they can handle conflicts and dilemmas at their workplace. “The exposure we give the women enables them to see themselves as successful despite being demure, aggressive, assertive, loud or quiet, be it in the development or corporate sectors, the government or even in the creative arts,” says Mathur.

Art appreciation and theatre workshops are juxtaposed with courses in public policy, sustainable development, impact evaluation and other subjects.

Chandrika Bahadur is president of the SDSN Association, a non-profit that hosts the Sustainable Development Solutions Network. She takes classes in sustainable development for Vedica students. “It is important for future leaders of the corporate sector to understand the world they will live in and how their choices and decisions will have an impact outside their organisations. This course is meant to give them the understanding and tools to make better choices,” she explains.

The inaugural class of Vedica scholars is to graduate December-end with certificates from The Wharton School in Foundations of Business and Business Analytics.

Their instructor is Tushar Jaruhar. He brings to the table a combination of Acturial, Six Sigma, Lean, MBA, engineering and acute strategic skills to teach three Wharton Basic Foundation courses — operations, finance and accounting.

The best thing about Vedica, he says, is that the education is broad-based. So while some have their sights on careers in Silicon Valley and quantum mechanics, others are keen to better appreciate art. Broad-based learning, feels Jaruhar, is really the crucible of education.

“This class comes here because they want to go beyond the basic MBA. I am an MBA, I did a lot of accounting, finance, strategy, marketing and operations courses. What about the influencing skills? That is not being taught anywhere in the world,” he says.

As the first batch of Vedica scholars readies to go out into the world, the question is whether they are equipped for the challenges coming their way. The Vedica team certainly thinks so. While the placement process starts, an exciting one-month ‘Shadow a Woman CEO’ programme begins in the first week of August. The young women will spend a month getting hands-on experience of working with top-rung, professional women like Anu Acharya, CEO, Mapmygenome, Gunjan Soni, CMO of Myntra, Pratibha Advani, CFO, Tata Communications, Hitu Chawla, India Head-Enterprise, Microsoft. Then there are others like Poonam Muttreja, Executive Director, Population Foundation of India, and Roxanne Hakim, Social Development Cluster Leader at the World Bank.

Shreyasi Singh, Director, Careers & Programme Development, is optimistic about placements. “Through the ‘Shadow a Woman CEO Programme’ we will encourage mentors to introduce scholars to concepts such as benchmark professionalism and code of conduct,” she says.

“If the scholars develop a great rapport with seniors in industry through our programme, they become mentors for life.” ■



# INSIGHTS

OPINION | ANALYSIS | RESEARCH | IDEAS

## DIETs key to good schools



DILEEP RANJEKAR

### BACK TO SCHOOL

ABOUT a decade ago, we had retained a management consultant to visit and evaluate a large not-for-profit organisation on several identified parameters. The organisation had excellent pedigree with a history of almost 75 years. We were keen to collaborate with them — given the fact that on a larger level, our visions were very similar.

The management consultant provided several insights into the organisation. One of the cryptic comments he made was — this organisation is like one of the older clubs in Bengaluru that boasts of Sir Winston Churchill among its early members. He said, “It has a glorious history but the current state of affairs stinks.”

This happens when professionals, organisations and institutions rely more on their erstwhile glory than the value they are currently delivering.

I remembered this recently when I was in one of the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIET) in a picturesque district of Uttarakhand. I could not stop taking pictures of the building from outside with my mobile phone camera. Even the surroundings were fairly well maintained. Everyone was gloating over the fact that the building was over 100 years old. As I entered the main hall where a science workshop was being held, I realised that the internal structure of the building needed large-scale repairs. As I toured the building, this feeling became much stronger and I enquired from a senior person from DIET who was with me. He said there was an ongoing dispute between the Archaeological Department and the Education Department on the issue of repairs of the building since it has been declared a “Heritage Building” and cannot be touched by anyone other than the Archaeological Department. I must admit that I have no real knowledge of the facts. The tragedy is that this alleged dispute is going on for some time and the building continues to deteriorate.

As a nation, we have a very poor track record of preserving thousands of heritage structures and monuments in good condition and presenting them to tourists with their full past glory. I remember having visited a sea-fort near the city of Helsinki — which had a history of less than 150 years with nothing much to see. However, it was presented to the international and domestic tourists as if they

were visiting a great monument. And we have thousands of structures that are more than 500 years old but are systematically allowed to be neglected.

What happens to physical buildings also happens to the performance of the institutions that were set up with great objectives in mind. Let me continue with the institution of the DIET for this purpose, though this is also applicable to many other institutions created in the government and non-government domain.

it was positioned as the most important academic nerve centre for school education in the district.

The functionaries to be appointed in DIETs were to be carefully chosen for possessing key competencies such as abilities for learner-centric education, counselling and mentoring teachers, designing training programmes, understanding children, pedagogy and assessment. The DIET was conceived as a well-equipped training and developed centre with necessary amenities, infrastructure and space for carrying out activities

DILEEP RANJEKAR



This DIET is housed in a heritage building that is crumbling since it can only be touched by the Archaeological Department

**What happens to physical buildings also happens to the performance of the institutions that were set up with great objectives in mind.**

Everyone in the education sector admits that DIET is probably among the most pivotal institutions in the context of teacher capacity development and quality education in schools.

DIETs were to be established in each district of India after the National Policy for Education of 1986 was adopted by Parliament. Among the key objectives of DIET were pre-service teacher education, ongoing support for teacher capacity development, research and evaluation in education related issues and monitoring learning as well as quality of education at the district level. In summary,

that were relevant for its functioning.

The current status of DIETs in close to 550 districts (out of 700 districts, only 550 have DIETs) of India is rather disappointing. They are plagued with several infirmities ranging from lack of space, low maintenance, non-availability of specified training facilities, absence of some basic resources and, above all, non-appointment of required quality and number of faculty members. Some of them lack basic facilities like water and toilets. I know of DIETs where, for the past five years, there are only

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# Behind green messaging



KANCHI KOHLI

## FINE PRINT

IS it frustrating or simply boring to see newspapers filled with 'Let's plant a tree' and 'Save the environment' ads by the government to mark World Environment Day? Once again, on 5 June this year the messaging was as simplistic as in past years. Sure, saying no to plastic, encouraging green spaces, and conserving energy and water, are crucial for the protection and preservation of nature. The ads also reach out to all those who want to do something about the environment but do not quite know where to start.

At the same time, don't we need to think beyond slogans and catchy lines so that nature itself and nature-based livelihoods are actually protected for the long term?

By the time you read this, almost a month would have passed since the world's celebration of Environment Day. The morning after, we would perhaps have all gone back to doing what we do. For those thinking of or doing their bit for the environment every day, a date like this one would just whizz past. For others, we might have done our bit for the year on that day or perhaps even that might have missed our attention.

Environmentalism is not just about individual choice. It is also about engaging in the larger politics of decision-making. It is about digging deeper into claims, and not taking at face value information that is presented.

For instance, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests did several things on World Environment Day. Social media was abuzz with not buying products that contain wild animal parts, there were photographs of tree plantation drives and a book was released on vulture conservation.

### Continued from page 25

three faculty members instead of the approved strength of 25 members. I know of DIETs where there are 13 faculty members out of which 11 are resource people in language alone. Thus, the balance of subject experts does not exist. I know of DIETs where there are no water and functional toilet facilities. I also know of DIETs that have no satisfactory facility for training or discussions.

After almost 30 years of establishing this vital institution, the government has failed to demonstrate the DIET as an institute of excellence that has the potential to radically improve the quality of education in a district. This failure is for several implementation inadequacies. Among the most critical requirement is laying down specific norms/ criteria for appointment of the DIET leader (principal) and faculty members. Currently, it is

There was also a special initiative titled: "The MoEFCC invites a selfie on the theme 'Plant a tree and create your own Oxygen Bank.'" Sounds like the ministry was in overdrive and we need not worry.

Now juxtapose this with the ministry's announcements over the preceding month — speedy approvals and creation of new jobs. The ministry has also for a while been speaking about the need for streamlining environmental laws to ensure ease of business.

The report on the ministry's achievements over 2014-16 has a dedicated section on the efforts taken to ensure businesses don't suffer delays. This document, which seeks to highlight the new initiatives of the ministry under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, showcases

**Environmentalism is not just about individual choice. It is also about engaging in the larger politics of decision-making.**

that it has granted "2,000 approvals" which "have unlocked ₹10 lakh crore of investment and 10 lakh job potential". It does not even try and say what environmental impact these projects would have and how many local livelihoods would be affected to create another set of proposed jobs.

Such claims do not reassure us that speedy approvals are not based on poor assessments and rushed decisions. A few of these might land up in court but many will go unquestioned. This is not because the rest will favour conservation and local livelihoods, but because of the sheer limitation of civil society groups to track the hundreds of approvals granted each month in New Delhi and in

being done in an ad-hoc manner. When questioned on the DIET vacancies, many education secretaries lament unavailability of qualified people. The states must have a process of developing high-calibre faculty members that builds a pipeline of competent faculty members. While appointing faculty, care must be taken to ensure balanced availability of subject matter experts.

There are, of course, exceptions. I have come across DIETs where, despite lack of infrastructure and highly inadequate number of faculty members, DIETs are doing exceptional work. Some of the principals as well as faculty members are truly inspirational and fighting lone battles in the absence of much support from the system. However, this is highly individual, independent and not institutionalised on a large scale.

Given the reality that most districts have

state capitals.

The highlights also include "increased forest cover" without a clearly defined figure on what that increase is. Ironically, one of the initiatives for forests in the same section states that the National Board for Wild Life (NBWL) has issued 400 approvals for use of wildlife areas and corridors for public infrastructure like "roads, transmission lines etc".

Now read it with a quick analysis by the New Delhi-based EIA Resource and Response Centre (ERC). Looking at the minutes of the meeting of the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) which reviews proposals for diversion of forest land for non-forest use, we learn that at a meeting on 3 May 2016, the FAC recommended 2,682 hectares of forests be made available for irrigation (1,315 ha) and other activities. No proposal placed before the committee was rejected.

How has the ministry compared the existing forests' diversion with the figures that claim that forest area has actually increased? If the latter is indeed true, why can't a comparison be released in the same manner in which all citizens are asked to file their income tax returns or companies their balance sheets? It is the crudest way of assessing forest loss, as it might never give an account of all that is lost (livelihoods, non-human species, water sources) when the FAC gives the green signal for deforestation. But for a ministry that understands ease of business and investments, this should not be a difficult task.

The upside of loving the environment is that it is never too late to begin. The downside is, and this causes deep anxiety, that perhaps it is too late.

I have no clue where we are in our understanding of the elusive environmental balance. But I know that if we are to believe in truly protecting the environment, it cannot be subservient to ambitions of economic supremacy. Each year, 5 June need not be declared Environment Day, 22 May need not be dedicated to functions commemorating biodiversity, and we need not count our forest cover every 21 March. If we decide that our mantra is 'breathe for environment' and not 'ease of business' the world will look up and take notice. ■

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approximately 1,500-2,000 schools and 4,000-10,000 teachers, neglecting the concept of the DIET is suicidal for the quality of education. In fact, the scale, resource/budget allocation and quality of DIETs have to be seriously reviewed to ensure their reach and influence on schools. DIETs also have the responsibility to work with the block and cluster resource people who directly interact with the teachers and schools. Very often, lack of funding is given as an excuse for not being able to improve the quality of DIETs.

If we are not willing to provide the necessary funding for such issues, we should stop talking of education quality. We have to match our intent with necessary resources and execution efforts — in the absence of which we would pay only lip service to quality education. ■

*Dileep Ranjekar is CEO of the Azim Premji Foundation.*

# Minister in needless hurry



HIMANSHU THAKKAR

## WATER WATCH

IT's a curious case of dam fundamentalism, now manifested as ILR (interlinking rivers) fundamentalism. On 7 June, as widely reported by the media, Union Water Resources Minister Uma Bharti "threatened to go on hunger strike if the Ken-Betwa river linking project is further delayed". She termed the attempt to delay the project by environmentalists as a 'national crime', as reported by *Business Standard*. The threat was directed against all those raising questions about her ministry's Ken-Betwa River Link proposal.

Many of those opposing the Ken-Betwa River Link are actually official agencies. A senior Union cabinet minister making such threats is a clear subversion of the regulatory apparatus, and is a vitiation of the atmosphere. Officials and members of the statutory committees will find it difficult to take decisions under such threats. This also amounts to unduly influencing the process.

For a project that has so far no statutory clearances, no proper environment impact assessment (EIA), no proper public consultations, whose environment management plan is still being formulated by some official committees, whose environmental appraisal is incomplete, whose hydrology is under wraps, and has seen no peer review but is highly questionable going by all available evidence, the minister has categorically asserted, as reported by *The Hindu*: "The dam will be built and if there are further delays I will launch an agitation"!

At the same time, she acknowledges that the EIA and management plan are incomplete when she says: "We have asked the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) to help us with the vultures." She could have added that the Wildlife Institute of India is still preparing the Landscape Management Plan, which would have taken two years, but may take longer since there is no reliable EIA available.

The Ken-Betwa project will facilitate transfer of water from Bundelkhand to the higher rainfall Upper Betwa basin and for whatever little benefits parts of Bundelkhand may get from this project, better options are available. Moreover, when the project, in any case, is not the least-cost option, the

minister is trying to create a people versus tigers and vultures conflict where none exists when she says: "People, however, must come first."

The minister claimed that 70 lakh people will benefit from the project and even the 7,000 affected (both figures are highly questionable) are for the project. She goes on to ask, "Who are they (the expert committee members) to stop this?" By this token, we do not need any regulators since the minister will certify who are or can be for and against a project!

It may as well be added that there is no implementation agreement for the project between the two participating states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, 11 years after the MoU, only for preparing the Detailed Project Report, was signed.



The Ken-Betwa link will harm both Panna and Damoh districts

The minister may also like to know of the letter from the Panna collector to the Planning Commission mentioning how the Bundelkhand districts of Panna and Damoh will remain permanently backward if the Ken-Betwa project were to be implemented.

This is further reinforced, as *Business Standard* reported, by the minister saying: "I will save the tigers, the vultures, the deer, and the affected people, please give us environmental clearance. But, I will not consider reducing the height of the dam." So, just based on the minister's assertion, we are to take it that the tigers, vultures, and everyone else will be saved! Why do we even need wildlife or environment clearances if the minister's statements are adequate?

As *The Economic Times* reported, the minister called herself "the biggest environmentalist", and asked how her intentions could be doubted when she pitches for initiating work on the project. She then derided members of an expert committee under the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests. In another report by the same newspaper, the minister "added that she will also look into the issue of *gidh* (vultures) and tiger rehabilitation if required."

So now we have the developer of the project who asks us not to bother about vultures and tigers since the minister is looking into it! Do we really need an environment ministry?

Further, the minister is quoted as saying: "I have told them that the tiger population will increase, with the region getting more water. Further, 97 per cent of the vulture nests are going to be above the maximum water level."

So now we have a new paradigm: submergence, bifurcation, destruction of tiger reserve is good for tigers! As for vulture habitat, while the official minutes of the National Board of Wildlife quotes officials saying that 50 per cent of the vulture habitat will be destroyed and when BNHS is now being asked to do a study, we have the word from the minister, no less, that only 3 per cent of the vulture habitat will be affected!

The minister would, of course, not bother to mention the impact of the project on the downstream Ken Ghariyal Sanctuary or the fish population in the Ken river and how the river itself will be affected by the massive deforestation in the catchment area. And how all this will affect the already ravaged Bundelkhand region caught in a climate change scenario.

So, in future, when the Expert Appraisal Committee on River Valley Projects considers environment clearance for the Ken-Betwa River Link, when the Forest Advisory Committee meets to consider forest clearance for the project, when the National Board of Wildlife

considers wildlife clearance for it, when the media writes critically about the project proposal, when the people of Bundelkhand or civil society groups question the project, or if the Central Empowered Committee of the Supreme Court or any of the judicial institutes were to consider any legal challenge to the project, they will all need to keep in mind that such actions are a 'national crime' and that they could be facing protest action from the Union Minister herself!

These statements are clearly wrong and unacceptable on so many counts. We hope she will immediately and publicly take back the threats and statements and apologise for deriding the statutory processes and calling any opposition to the Ken-Betwa linking project a 'national crime'. Since the minister's threats are going to remain in the background, even if withdrawn, the only way to somewhat correct the vitiated atmosphere is possibly for her to step down so that all the regulatory committees are able to do their tasks without any fear or threats of agitation by the Union minister. Otherwise, people's diminished faith in these processes will be completely shattered. ■

Himanshu Thakkar, SANDRP ([ht.sandrp@gmail.com](mailto:ht.sandrp@gmail.com))

# Ravaged by drought

BHARAT DOGRA

THE daily struggle to ensure two subsistence meals and a minimal supply of water saps the energy of most villagers in Bundelkhand these days, but when they have time to think they ponder some crucial questions about their lives and livelihood. Whether it will be possible to save the remaining animals, whether it will be possible to clear the increasing debts, whether it will be possible to plant and also harvest a satisfactory *kharif* crop, and whether it will be possible to return to normalcy in the near future.

The Bundelkhand region, spread over 13 districts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, is among the worst-affected by drought. As the drought situation appeared to be peaking in early June, a visit revealed very disturbing signs of extreme distress. The worst manifestation appeared to be the large-scale deaths of village animals including cows, buffaloes, goats, sheep and pigs. Thousands of these and other animals have been dying every day for several weeks now due to a combination of hunger, thirst and disease.

My visit to five villages and hamlets of Kulpahar *tehsil* in Mahoba district revealed a scenario of fast-emptying villages as more and more youth have been migrating to cities like Delhi and states like Gujarat for work. Although MGNREGA work had increased compared to my earlier visits, it was still inadequate for the remaining villagers. In Basor hamlet of

Mahuabandh village, inhabited by the poorest community, people said that the majority do not even have job cards as yet.

In almost all the villages I visited there were numerous complaints about the food security law provision of ₹2 per kg wheat not being accessible for a significant number of villagers or the number of family members having been listed below the actual figure.

The cash compensation for loss of several crops has been marred by delays and allegations of unfair denial to some. Even at the policy level, sharecroppers and land leasers are being excluded though they may have suffered huge losses while the decision to exclude big farmers has actually left

out several middle-level farmers who have suffered big losses.

In the case of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) the nutrition provision for pregnant women is better implemented but nutrition supplements for small children and adolescent girls have often been denied in recent times.

The almost complete absence of milk products and pulses in the diet of villagers has led to serious malnutrition. A significant percentage of families cannot afford an adequate quantity of *rotis* even when they are being eaten with just salt and chutney. In some villages 50 per cent or even more may be suffering from hunger in this form.

There is apprehension that, after the rains arrive in July, relief work may be curtailed further while there is need to upscale it until the arrival of at least one good harvest.

If the rains come in time and are bountiful, farmers need to be ready to plant the *kharif* crop. The government must help by arranging for good quality seeds and so on. The government should realise that providing farmers timely help to get a good crop is the best way to return to better times.

If the rains are inadequate or initial good conditions are disrupted in the middle of the crop growth, preparations should be made for even more difficult times ahead. In such a scenario it is very important to keep up people's spirits and assure those in the worst-affected areas that the nation and the government are with them. The government and the citizens' groups both should extend a helping hand.

At the time of my visit, on 4 June UP Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav visited Mahoba district and made several announcements about providing more relief for the people. However, the question is to what extent all these promises actually deliver to the villagers. In the villages I visited, the relief provided was far short of the requirement.

The inadequacy was clear in the homes of the Basors in Mahuabandh village. The Basors are generally regarded as the poorest of the poor and it was shocking to know that the overwhelming majority of them do not even have job cards for getting MGNREGA work. They complained that their pigs are dying in large numbers due to lack of drinking water. Over 200 pigs have perished during the last two or three months in this single hamlet.

Akauna village used to be famous for its water sources created during the time of the Chandel rulers but they have dried up now. Jagat Singh Yadav, a village leader, says that none of the village households gets a balanced diet and they subsist on *rotis* eaten with salt or chutney and sometimes some watery vegetable dish. He said that as many as 80 per cent of village households do not get adequate amounts of even this low-nutrition diet and so there is chronic hunger and malnutrition in the village for several months. The migration from this village is very high. There are several elderly and poor persons in the village with hardly any support system.

It is evident that much more needs to be done to reduce the distress in Bundelkhand. ■

PICTURES BY KUMAR GAUTAM



Children are suffering from acute malnutrition in Bundelkhand



The elderly have to fend for themselves



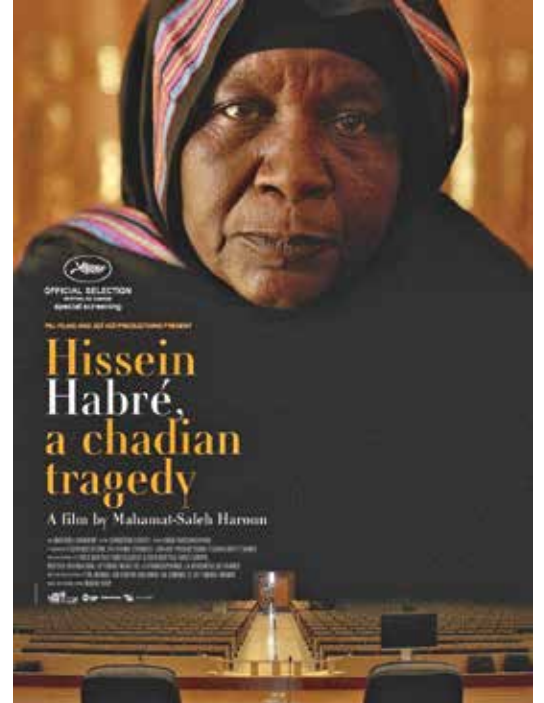
Animals are dying in droves

# LIVING

BOOKS | ECO-TOURISM | FILM | THEATRE | AYURVEDA



*Hissein Habre, A Chadian Tragedy, is a searing story of dictatorship and torture*



## The agony of war Cannes showed powerful documentaries

Saibal Chatterjee  
Cannes

THE Cannes Film Festival does not have a section dedicated to documentaries. It does, however, usually showcase significant feature-length non-fiction films across its official sidebars and other parallel sections.

The festival's documentary selection has often been rather patchy in recent times. But not so this year. The 69<sup>th</sup> Cannes Film Festival in mid-May programmed a quartet of strong documentaries providing perspectives on contemporary geopolitical realities and probing the human cost of violence in war zones.

While three of these entries were directly about conflict and abuse of political power, one delved into the last five and a half years of the life of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange who has been at the receiving end of Western powers miffed with his campaign to expose misdeeds.

Two little-known mass killings in Africa are investigated in Mahamat Saleh-Haroun's *Hissein Habre, A Chadian Tragedy* and Jonathan Littell's *Wrong Elements*.

*Hissein Habre, A Chadian Tragedy* premiered in Cannes just two weeks before the ruthless former Chad dictator was sentenced by an African court in Senegal for heinous crimes committed during his eight years as president in the 1980s. Over 40,000 people perished in the despot's prisons.

Filmmaker Haroun, who went into exile in 1982 and escaped bodily harm, focuses on the scarred victims of Habre's reign of terror in his sharp and terse 82-minute documentary film.

Habre, who is now the first-ever African tyrant to be punished for human rights violations, had the support of the CIA during his rule from 1982-1990. His dreaded secret police, the Documentation and Security Directorate (DDS), was trained by the US.

The dictator fled to Senegal after his fall and spent 23 comfortable years there before being finally arrested in 2013. He was brought to trial in July 2015 before a special tribunal. Habre, of course, kept questioning the standing of the court — but to no avail. He has been sentenced to life imprisonment.

Haroun, one of Africa's best-known filmmakers, speaks through the voice of Clement Abaifouta, a survivor of incarceration and chairman of the association of the Habre regime's victims that kept up the pressure for two decades to ensure that the despot was eventually held to account for his misrule. While the director himself is the narrator, it is Abaifouta who does the onscreen interviews with victims of the dictatorship.

"The victims were silenced for a long time, so it was important to give them a voice," says Haroun, who focuses on a handful of people who were subjected to torture and drives home the enormity of the crimes committed by the Habre regime.

"The film," he adds, "also reveals that both the executioner and victims were in fact victims of a bloodthirsty and authoritarian political system."

In one defining moment in *Hissein Habre, A Chadian Tragedy*, a torturer seeks forgiveness from a victim who lost a leg as a result of repeated beatings. "I had to follow orders," mumbles the former, an outcast who now lives on the streets of N'Djamena, Chad's capital city. The victim asks why, then, he was beaten so mercilessly. The perpetrator has no coherent answer.

One striking aspect of Haroun's film is that it does not show Habre's face even once. Says the director: "Hissein Habre's presence haunts the film and there was no need to show him any more than that. I think that makes the film more powerful. There are plenty of archival images, but I decided from the outset not to show his face."

Another African perpetrator of mass-scale violence similarly hovers over French-American novelist Jonathan Littell's *Wrong Elements*, a lengthy but thought-provoking documentary on former child soldiers of northern Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel force led by the still-at-large Joseph Kony.

LRA was founded by Kony, then in his twenties, in response to Yoweri Museveni's divisive rise to power in 1986. Over 60,000 teenagers were drafted as rebel fighters into his ultra-violent army over a period of 25 years. Only half that number escaped LRA's clutches and received amnesty when government forces regained control of the area.

*Wrong Elements* picks out three such survivors who talk about their lost childhood and the acts that they were forced into. They were, the audience is told, pre-teens and turned into remorseless killers. Like Haroun's Chadian film, Littell's 133-minute documentary walks the thin line that

*Continued on page 30*



Bernard-Henri Levy, director of *Peshmerga*



A battalion of women fighters from the film, *Peshmerga*



*Risk* is about the institutionalised hounding of Julian Assange



Laura Poitras, director of *Risk*

separates victims of war from its perpetrators although it takes awfully more time to get to its point.

Sucked into a spiral of appalling violence and sexual exploitation, these unsuspecting adolescents were indoctrinated into “a culture of free killing”. Now considerably older, they take the filmmaker back to the site of their abandoned base camp, a place that brings back memories of the nightmare that they lived through. The three are also brought face to face with their victims and the theme of anger and forgiveness is played out in an atmosphere defined by years of distrust.

The *Variety* reviewer took note of the film’s length but also identified a reason why it may have been necessary. “If Littell’s lengthy, firmly structured but stylistically unadorned documentary is sometimes a little pedagogic in its approach, that’s fair enough: it’s unpacking facts that, too many, may be horrifyingly new,” the review said.

While Kony, who set up the LRA in 1989 after he claimed to have been exhorted by spirits to do so, is on the run, Ugandan forces continue to hunt remnants of the rebel force scattered in the dense central African jungle — a pointer to the threat of violence that still simmers under the surface in this part of the world.

Violence of a very different kind is at the centre of Oscar-winning documentarian Laura Poitras’ *Risk*,

a chronological reconstruction of the institutionalised hounding of Julian Assange. The film had its world premiere in Directors’ Fortnight, an independent parallel section that was started in the days of French cinema rebels Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut, a year after the Cannes film festival was cancelled in 1968 in solidarity with striking workers.

*Risk* inevitably sparked off a debate on the nature and extent of State surveillance of citizens and the restrictions placed on people’s right to know what their rulers are up to. “I’m very supportive of the work that WikiLeaks does,” Poitras said ahead of the screening of her film.

Of course, Assange could not have got past the British police posted round the clock outside London’s Ecuadorian embassy to make an appearance in Cannes, but two of his closest colleagues, both now exiled from their respective countries, were on the stage with a fervent “free Julian” appeal.

One of them was WikiLeaks’ British section editor, Sarah Harrison, and the other the American hacker and technology whiz, Jacob Appelbaum. The two share a great deal of footage in the film with Assange and are key parts of the ongoing battle against government attempts to muzzle civil freedom.

Harrison read out a statement from the stage:

“Julian Assange, the subject of this film, cannot be here today. He is detained without charge. He is in an embassy surrounded by the police. He has been held in the UK for the last five and a half years. Julian hasn’t seen the sun for four years. The UK continues to deny him medical treatment. On 5<sup>th</sup> February, the UN condemned the UK and Sweden for illegally detaining him and ordered his immediate release. He has not yet been released.”

Poitras, who won the best documentary Oscar last year for *Citizenfour*, a film about another celebrated data warrior, Edward Snowden, makes no bones about her support for the WikiLeaks editor to whom she had unlimited access during the shoot. So, to some among the audience, *Risk* might appear a tad one-sided.

But as a film, *Risk*, divided into 10 chapters arranged chronologically, is highly watchable and instructive. It has many engaging moments, not the least of which is the one in which Assange’s Australian mother helps him with a disguise, complete with leather jacket, orange-dyed hair, coloured contact lenses and dark glasses.

In one of the many on-camera conversations, Assange puts his fight in perspective: “If you are not fighting every day of your life for the things that you care, you are losing a day.”

Poitras said: “Filmmaking is a collective effort. Many people helped me get this film done, people who put their freedom on the line for the truth.”

The New York-based filmmaker and journalist knows exactly what that means. She is on the US watch list and is detained at airports for questioning every time she flies out of the country. “I was put on a US government terror response list in 2006 after I

# The journey within

**Peggy Mohan**  
New Delhi

I begin this review of *Lessons from Ruslana* on the day when the African Ambassadors to India have come together to tell the Government of India that they are cancelling plans to hold or attend Africa Day functions in Delhi this year. This is in protest against the racial profiling and physical assaults on African students in India, most recently resulting in the death of a Congolese student in Delhi. It is the same fraught atmosphere in which Amit Dasgupta, then the Indian High Commissioner to Australia, sat down to write *Lessons from Ruslana*. What started him off was the spate of racially motivated attacks on Indians in Australia.

Dasgupta takes us on a rambling internal journey, aimed at freeing us from the 'mind boxes' we are trapped in. At the start he seems to be writing in Australia, and one gets a sense of unworldly blue-eyed imaginary readers who he cautiously approaches with images of Nazi Germany as the ultimate they can imagine in evil, readers who might even think all Muslims could possibly be terrorists. This patronising opening style makes an Indian reading the book wonder if he has blundered into someone else's conversation, with Dasgupta struggling to see from this imagined Australian viewpoint and declining to call out what is simply racism.

But the pace picks up after the first third of the book, and we are led on with roadside attractions like Steve Jobs, Vincent Van Gogh, Picasso, Sugata Mitra, Malcolm Gladwell, Edward de Bono, *Baywatch*, *Sex and the City* to come, by the bottom of page 99, to two tiny paragraphs about Ruslana Korshunova, the Russian supermodel who was the inspiration behind the title of the book, ending with: "I am so lost. Will I ever find myself?"

I wish Dasgupta had not tried to dress up his main argument with a host of references to others who also concerned themselves with transformative thinking, because one is left frantically searching for Dasgupta himself in the multitude of voices, with his becoming more and more elusive.

His opening point, about moving beyond our 'mind boxes', shows a goodhearted man distressed by callous brutality and trying his best to turn around a world gone wrong. The problem is that he

seems to be saying we should want to transform ourselves because it is a Very Good Thing. But paradigm shifts do not happen like that: they happen because the existing order has bottomed out, forcing us to think again. Until we are faced with stark failure, we do not set about dismantling a lifetime's thinking that has stood us in good stead. There are creative people who do enjoy doing this for its own sake, but they are not the ones Dasgupta is speaking to here.

After this middle third he finds his way again when he begins to talk of death. Dasgupta sees the world in terms of right and wrong, and what's good for us: cancer, he says, is a "breakdown from within".

He tells the story of a man with terminal cancer heading home from New York to his first home, the Greek island of Ikaria, and then not dying. As though "when death was imminent, he had to remove noise and clutter, he had to simplify his needs, he had to reconcile his worlds".

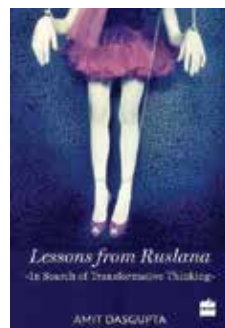
It is as though the writer himself is evolving as he goes, removing the noise and clutter, taking it one step at a time, delving deeper into something that started as a gut reaction. From a very corporatist wish to be positive, and a simplistic yearning for people to take the initiative in just transforming themselves, he does eventually arrive at the more evolved stage of asking if sadness too does not have an important role in our journey, even if only as a wellspring of creativity.

And from sadness and death he reaches that thing called meaning, which makes it all worthwhile. As he nears the end he becomes more and more spiritual, perhaps reflecting the changes in his own concerns over the many years he was at work writing the book: his style mellowing, and the mix of illustrative anecdotes and

analysis becoming more balanced, the hectoring feel of the earlier parts of the book subsiding too.

But why *Ruslana*? How important is she really, beyond an intriguing title and a great cover image? Dasgupta missed a chance to explore what promised to be an engaging story for the reader at a loose end and drawn to a book aimed at self-help. *Ruslana*, in this book, as in life, is reduced to being clickbait.

I can imagine readers who would warm to the insights near the end of the book. But they would first have to trudge patiently through the early part, the section that feels like it was written for Australia, and a middle that reads like a long literary search to get to that place. ■

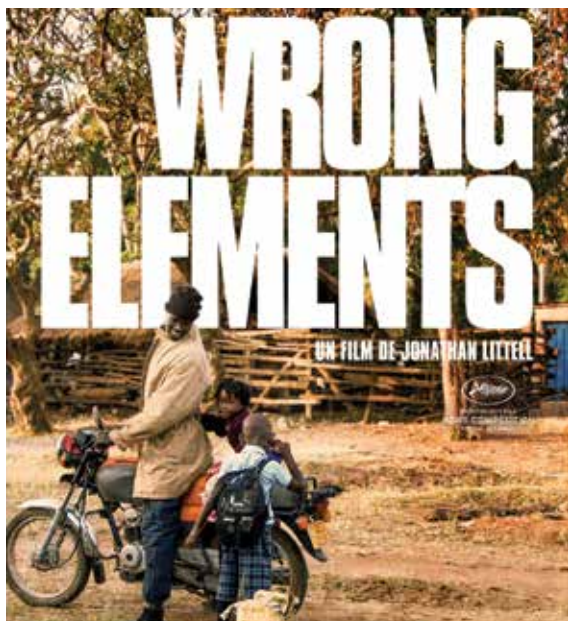


*Lessons from Ruslana – In Search of Transformative Thinking.* Amit Dasgupta, Harper-Collins ₹ 299

**But why Ruslana? How important is she beyond an intriguing title and a great cover image? Ruslana, as in life, is reduced to being clickbait.**



Jonathan Littell, director of *Wrong Elements*



made a film about the Iraq war (*My Country, My Country*),” she said, replying to a question after the screening.

“That was long before I started filming with Snowden and WikiLeaks,” she said. Poitras has just lodged a lawsuit against the US government over the harassment that she faces at airports in that country.

One of the bloodiest conflicts of our times is the subject matter of controversial French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy's *Peshmerga*, a film in which his crew travels with a battalion of Kurdish fighters along the 1,000-km frontier between northern Iraq (which is under ISIS control) and Iraqi Kurdistan.

The *Peshmerga*, who also have a fully trained female battalion, are the only force currently fighting the Islamic State on the ground. Levy focuses on their bravery and their liberal vision of Islam that allows gender equality, opposes obscurantism and negates the death cult that drives jihadists.

*Peshmerga*, which was added to the Cannes programme halfway through the festival, justified the late inclusion. It is a gripping and informative documentary that throws light on a war zone where life hangs by a thread. But the undaunted *Peshmerga*, fighting to reclaim Mosul and other areas from Daesh, labour on regardless, strategising ceaselessly to push their way into enemy territory.

Levy gives us glimpses of their daily routine, their stories and songs and their constant movements to evade detection by Daesh. One episode that stands out centres on a white-haired Kurdish general who leads from the front and believes that it is his bounden duty to be by the side of his men no matter how rough the battle gets. ■

## RANDOM SHELF HELP

A quick selection from the many books that turn up for review



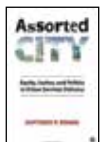
**Innovations in Family Planning: Case Studies from India.** Edited by: Jay Satia & others  
Sage ₹ 850

In India, while fertility rates are falling, the growth rate of the overall population is rising rapidly. In the next five years, India will pass China to become the world's most populated country. Hence, it is of utmost importance that we plan family structures and size along with ensuring that reproductive and health issues are adequately addressed.

It is in this context that *Innovations in Family Planning* can act as an important tool for programme planners, policymakers and researchers. The book is a compilation of case studies of innovations carried out by individuals, organisations and state governments. It is a first of its kind study of innovations in family planning service delivery in the country.

It features innovative case studies of family planning from across different states, which have demonstrated impact and can be seen as sustainable. Innovations are measured based on approach, methods of service delivery and capacity for demand creation. These cases can be used further for policy advocacy, strengthening programme reach and quality, and enhancing competency of health institutions.

The book facilitates problem solving, enhancing quality family planning care at the grassroots level and influencing future directions of the programme. Edited by professors and top officials of the Public Health Foundation of India, the book is a benchmark for further studies, developmental projects and governmental policymaking. ■



**Assorted City: Equity, Justice, and Politics in Urban Services Delivery;** Suptendu P. Biswas ₹895

*Assorted City* critically analyses the post-Independence planning of Delhi as a city based on an empirical study of the delivery of urban water supply. The book provides a conceptual and theoretical insight into addressing the theory-practice dichotomy in delivering public services. The author uses theoretical works of Althusser, Foucault and others, and combines them with statistics, research and in-depth analysis of ground realities to showcase the politics of distribution.

The author, Suptendu P. Biswas, is an architect, urban designer and planning professional involved in teaching, research and consultancy. The book, written over two years, is based on 10 years of research. It looks at the politics involved in distribution of urban services and whether it ensures equality and justice in the distribution of resources and services in a democracy.

The author reveals that even across legal colonies, multiple delivery conditions exist despite the same norms of delivery. This book explores and exposes the interplay between urban existence and the politics of service delivery. It emphasises the role of governance in ensuring theoretical objectives envisaged under democratic urban planning. ■

# 'SEZS NEED ENABLING

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

TEN years after the SEZ (Special Economic Zones) Act was passed, India has over 500 SEZs scattered all over the country. The idea was copied from China where SEZs fuelled economic growth. The government believed that in India too SEZs would become engines of growth.

The SEZ policy did hit a wall: land acquisition was bitterly opposed by people who had to give up their fields. NGOs and activist groups said SEZs were just a ruse to grab land from small farmers. When Export Promotion Zones (EPZ), set up by the government, had failed what was the guarantee that SEZs wouldn't meet the same fate, they asked. Dazzled by China's success, states went ahead anyway.

Not many have tracked the progress of SEZs. Malini L. Tantri's book, *Special Economic Zones in India: Policy, Performance and Prospects*, is a detailed and realistic appraisal of India's SEZs and of China's SEZ policy. It compares the policies of both countries and the contrasts are stark.

Tantri is an assistant professor at the Centre for Economic Studies and Policy, Institute for Social and Economic Change, in Bengaluru. She carried out extensive fieldwork for her study, travelling to China to study their SEZs. In India, she went to SEZs in seven places – Kandla, Santacruz, Noida, Chennai, Cochin, Falta and Vishakapatnam.

"These were the only SEZs that had been previously performing as EPZs. If we look at a policy we have to examine it from a 'before and after' perspective," says Tantri. Secondary data was crosschecked by speaking to exporters and to the Development Commissioner's office in the respective SEZ she was tracking.

Speaking to *Civil Society*, Tantri says SEZs in India do have the potential to become engines of growth, but an enabling environment is needed.

## Have SEZs in India become engines of growth just like in China, as the government said they would?

The answer to your question is a bit tricky. For SEZs in India or China to become engines of growth really depends on how policy is formulated and implemented. In terms of policy, yes, it's a very good concept. But in India we failed to understand why the EPZs failed. Perhaps we should have first understood that, then put in corrective measures and reworked the policy accordingly.

In 2000 Murasoli Maran thought the Shenzhen SEZ was a fabulous thing and the SEZ policy came into being. If you look into any government policy or literature on SEZs, they don't talk about how China's policy has been able to make SEZs engines of growth. So my take is that policy alone is not enough. One has to look very closely at how policy is being implemented at ground level. There we have absolutely failed.

Look at one aspect: incentives. We thought, let's give incentives and performance will improve. Actually, that's not the case. When you give an



An SEZ being constructed. India has over 500 SEZs.

incentive you are giving an income tax benefit. This means, as an exporter I am able to pay a little less to the government. But the government is not doing anything to improve my competency or performance in the international market.

How can competency be facilitated? In China they did it by promoting better infrastructure and institutions which actually cut down costs and gave them a cost advantage. In India, we do not have a cost advantage.

## What is the problem?

The problem with India's SEZ policy is that the ground level understanding of how trade policy can push economics – engines of growth – has not taken place. Nothing has been built at an institutional level. They say for SEZs a single-window facility has been created. But the way it is implemented is questionable. All clearances/licences should be given through a single window, from trade to labour to investment to environment. But that's not what actually happens on the ground. In fact, the SEZ single-window facility can't really be called single window.

The Union ministry of commerce has a separate wing on SEZs and they are trying to see how the SEZ policy can still be pushed. But they are still battling around MAT (minimum alternate tax). They continue to think if we give waivers we will be able to perhaps attract investors. This is questionable.

The IT sector has got the maximum approvals. If you look at individual companies, many have closed operations elsewhere, maybe in a domestic area, and relocated to an SEZ because they are getting tax waivers. They are, of course, still providing employment and investment. The numbers of



# ENVIRONMENT TO SUCCEED'



You need a port for export and they would need to go to Chennai, Kochi or Mangalore. Look at the transport facility you have. One needs to examine the details of this enabling environment.

## Are the SEZs providing employment? Does labour receive a fair deal?

Again, it differs from sector to sector. Many companies in the IT sector relocated from domestic areas to SEZs, so what has taken place is a shifting of employment opportunities. Some manufacturing by Indian companies has started so intermittent employment has improved because of the SEZs.

The general impression of the layman is that since SEZs are considered a public utility there are no labour laws. That is not true. Labour laws exist, it's just that trade unions, strikes and lockouts are not supposed to take place within the boundaries of the SEZ.

In the gems and jewellery sector the feedback I received on labour was pretty good. When I went to Hassan in Karnataka where there is a textile SEZ I spoke casually to workers there. They reported that conditions were not that great. The problem, it seemed, was lack of dedicated power from nine to five. The management made it mandatory for them to work a second shift irrespective of whether the workers were men or women. I have not examined the wage component very much so I would not like to comment on that. Many SEZs are just taking off so we have

to wait and watch.

## You have also mentioned in your book that land acquisition and rehab are still issues for SEZs?

The EPZs were mainly set up by the government, so these are government SEZs. In Falta, the government acquired land in 1986. I visited the SEZ in April 2008. You will be surprised to know that the government is still sending cheques to people whose land was acquired. One of the respondents showed me the cheque.

The new SEZs are private ones. When I was doing

fieldwork on new SEZs in the south I found rehab is an issue because the policy still has a lot of ambiguity. The Mangalore SEZ is government-owned with private sector participation. Land acquisition issues did come up. Why? Again, it's a policy failure. I mean, who are you going to give compensation to? The farmer? I have agricultural land in my village but someone else tills it. So I get compensation but what about the tiller who loses his livelihood?

In India we have ownership rights over land but in China they have 'right to use'. The government had to acquire this 'right to use' from people on the land when it set up the Shenzhen SEZ. They assured employment to each individual. Not just that, they set up a technical institute because farmers weren't well-educated and couldn't be absorbed into jobs and management. In fact, the whole purpose of having a Shenzhen University was to have an educational institution that provided skills and evaluated the performance of the Shenzhen SEZ.

It means that academics were directly involved. Here, professors from the IITs and IIMs are supposed to be on the SEZ board of approvals. But in reality there is no active involvement.

We failed to understand the problem in land acquisition. It is not just about giving compensation to the farmer and the tiller. People need to have skills so they can be absorbed into this kind of employment. We have educational institutes but the overall structure of pushing a policy is missing in India. Everything is standalone.

## Won't it make sense to whittle down the number of SEZs?

I agree. See, initially China had just five SEZs. But there are differences. Shenzhen had six districts. Four were converted into an SEZ and two were left out. That means that 60 to 70 per cent of the city has been converted into an SEZ. China has a real population living in the SEZ. In India we have only the working population in the SEZ.

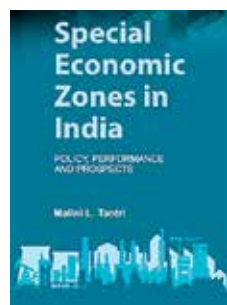
But I think the SEZ policy was pushed through with haste. We thought more numbers will push performance. We didn't look into what actually pushes performance. Definitely we need to slow down.

The other issue is – around 500-plus SEZs have been cleared but how are you going to integrate them? The existing ones need to coordinate with each other.

If you look at the SEZ policy of Karnataka, Kerala or Tamil Nadu, they are all competing in providing incentives and tax waivers. No state talks about the absolute advantage it has in a particular sector and then decides to promote an SEZ around it.

You look at the five SEZs in China. One, location pushed their performance. Second, their government actually thought thematically about which industry would be promoted where.

The exporters find many of the government's incentives most difficult to access. Many of them don't even think of applying because it is so much of a hassle. Better to create an enabling environment and fulfill your promises. ■



*Special Economic Zones in India  
Policy, Performance and Prospects  
Malini L. Tantri  
Cambridge University Press*

smaller players has not increased because single-window clearances and institutional mechanisms have not been addressed properly.

## So you are saying what is needed is an enabling environment?

Exactly. But an enabling environment for the IT sector is completely different from an enabling environment for, say, the manufacturing sector. One size does not fit all. It has to be sector-specific.

China followed a very systematic approach. Initially, they pushed small industries because those had a labour advantage. Policy was formulated accordingly. Then they moved to capital-intensive industries. In the 1990s they realised the SEZ industries were causing environmental degradation. So they restricted FDI in industries that hampered the environmental standards of the Shenzhen region.

An enabling environment differs from sector to sector and from state to state. In Karnataka, for example, Bengaluru has a good enabling environment for the IT sector. We have engineering colleges, you get fresh graduates and we have road connectivity. IT companies don't require a port facility.

But you can't have textile companies in Bengaluru.



Malini L. Tantri

## Lake-cleaner

GODASU Narsimha, a fisherman, has invented a device that can clean lakes and ponds of water hyacinth, an irritating invasive weed. Nearly every lake, pond or tank in India is being throttled by it.

The British introduced water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) as an ornamental plant to beautify their homes and gardens. Instead, water hyacinth invaded lakes, ponds and tanks and thereby hurt local economies. It is actually an aquatic plant native to the Amazon basin.

Government departments routinely employ labour to remove water hyacinth manually. It is a painstaking job. Narsimha examined the problem carefully and worked on two principles: first that the rate of removal should be more than the rate of growth (water hyacinth doubles in about 10 days). Second, that the overall weight (80 per cent of the weed's total weight is water), should be reduced.

He devised a machine that reduces the weight of the weed



Lake choked with water hyacinth



The same lake after being cleaned with Narsimha's machine

by cutting it into small bits. The machine has a conveyor belt which cuts the weed and a second one which lifts it. About 70 tonnes of hyacinth per day can be removed. For a bigger lake, more than one machine is needed. When Narsimha cleaned the lake in his village, he also cleaned about five urban tanks in Hyderabad. He manufactures his weed-removing machine in a workshop in his village.

Narsimha is from Mukthapur village in Pochampally Mandal of Nalgonda district in Telangana. The son of a watchman, he dropped out of a civil engineering course in the Government Polytechnic College in Nalgonda due to economic constraints. But the innovator in him continued to thrive and he invented this effective solution for removal of water hyacinth.

The water hyacinth-removing machine costs about ₹15 lakh and can be delivered in a month. ■

**Contact:** Creative Minds, Mobile: 9866001678 or Godasu Narsimha on 09492558689.

Contributed by: Palle Srujana

## Bija for diabetics



THE Bija Diabacheck Tumbler is made from the bark of the wondrous bija tree (*Pterocarpus marsupium*) that grows in the deciduous forests of the Northern Western Ghats.

The bija is known to have many medicinal properties, but it is a vanishing tree because of indiscriminate felling. To do your health a good turn, store water in the wooden tumbler overnight and drink it in the morning.

In Ayurveda, the bija's bark is used to treat diabetes and inflammation. It works on the pancreas and results in boosting insulin production. The bija is also known to reduce cholesterol levels.

The bija's benefits have been detailed in a study conducted by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

The Bija Diabacheck Tumbler is being manufactured by Nature Connect India, which collaborates with the Applied Environmental Research Foundation (AERF), an NGO based in Pune which revives and conserves forests in the Northern Western Ghats.

AERF has a My Forest initiative that allows you to adopt trees in the Western Ghats. Forest dwellers are financially compensated for giving up felling. So it was that AERF came across a cluster of bija trees about to be felled. It persuaded the landowner not to cut them. Instead from a single tree tumblers like this one were made and sold and the money put back into nurturing the other bija trees. ■

**Contact:** Nature Connect India Pvt. Ltd. 22, Siddhi Apartments, Bhaktiyog Co-op Housing Society, Kothrud, Pune-411038. Website: [www.aerfindia.org](http://www.aerfindia.org)

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# SHAPING THE FUTURE

## Healthcare - the key to a sustainable future

Tata Steel Rural Development Society (TSRDS), Tata Steel Family Initiatives Foundation (TSFIF) and Urban Services have been building capacity through training programmes to create community based healthcare partners as well as grassroot volunteers. Tata Steel also partners with local

government agencies to implement healthcare programmes of Central and State Governments, including the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM). In 2014, nearly 3.50 lakh people benefited from primary healthcare services in areas of operation.



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