

Civil Society



ARE NGOS GOING BUST?

**THE UNTOLD
RECESSION STORY**

SPECIAL



ARUNA ROY AND JEAN DREZE

On RTI and NREGA and what political leaders need to do to strengthen implementation.
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COVER STORY

ARE NGOs GOING BUST?

The recession is having an impact on the voluntary sector. Foreign funds will taper off. Domestic contributors are being cautious in giving. Some NGOs will be hit the most.

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Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

NGOs and the downturn

THE economic slowdown has voluntary organisations wondering where their financial support will come from. Donors in India and abroad have less to give. The impact will take a while to be felt because funds that have been committed are in the pipeline. But there is talk of foreign funding going down by 25 per cent. In the country, the people with high incomes in IT and other such sectors are contending with salary cuts and pink slips. Companies that are earning less aren't in the mood to be generous.

Organisations like CRY or Child Rights and You, which have ongoing fundraising schemes in which they collect small sums locally, say that they have not been affected. They don't expect their projects to suffer. Is this then the way out for NGOs? Should they function as small businesses?

It is perhaps easier said than done. First of all not all NGOs have the talent and expertise to run as businesses. Then again, many an NGO may be raising issues and creating awareness. It is an important role to play, but because they don't have clinics and schools to show as the result of their work, they don't have business models they can roll out. They need donors, but are the first to be counted out when the economy is down.

The government has also chosen to tax NGOs that go out and earn for their causes. So a socially responsible business which raises its own money for a good cause gets treated just like any other business. How fair is this?

There are other problems with over emphasis on being business-minded. For instance, the venture capital money flowing into microfinance finally doesn't care too much about poverty. Similarly, bottom of the pyramid businesses only make the rich richer.

What is clearly needed is a separate financial architecture under which voluntary organisations can be given a fair chance to raise money, meet costs and be sustainable on terms that meet their own goals. Within this NGOs too must learn to live with regulation.

Ashok Khosla has been building Tara as a socially responsible business for the past 25 years. He tells us that even now, with great work to show, he has a tough time finding investors. They either consider the investment amount too small or want him to shed some of the businesses so as to make the whole operation more profitable. It makes no sense to them that a socially beneficial product like a literacy tool be subsidised by returns from other products.

Mohammad Yunus says: "The big banks are like super tankers. Banks for the poor are like a dingy. We need shallow waters and short distances." This is why Yunus fought for and got a separate law for Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. How and why Grameen Bank lends is now governed by a different set of priorities, which would not have been possible under the established banking system.

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In our operations, we are blessed to bond with some very special people. People not daunted by odds, but with the passion and perseverance to overcome them. In doing so, they allow us to work with them to support livelihood generation and environment protection, to create education and health infrastructure.

Above all, they help us fulfill our goal to be a committed corporate citizen. True to the tradition of the Tata Group.

Mr. Sujit Soren of Gopalpur village in East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. He was the first in the village to adopt water conservation techniques of the Gram Vikas Kendra society of Tata Motors. Today, the village boasts of perennial irrigation for about 100 acres and about 10,000 fruit and timber generating trees.

Mrs. Rohini Bhanudas Wadkar of Pune in Maharashtra. A widow with three children, she was trained to become self-dependent with technical skills by Tata Motors' Grihi Social Welfare Society.



Mr. Jowahar Ram Paswan of Baranindih Mahalla of Chalbasa district in Jharkhand. Today, he is an employee of Nav Jagrat Manav Samaj. It became possible when the Nav Jagrat Manav Samaj, supported by Tata Motors, intervened to manage his leprosy and found him a job with a permanent income. Today, Mr. Paswan intervenes to bring comfort to others.

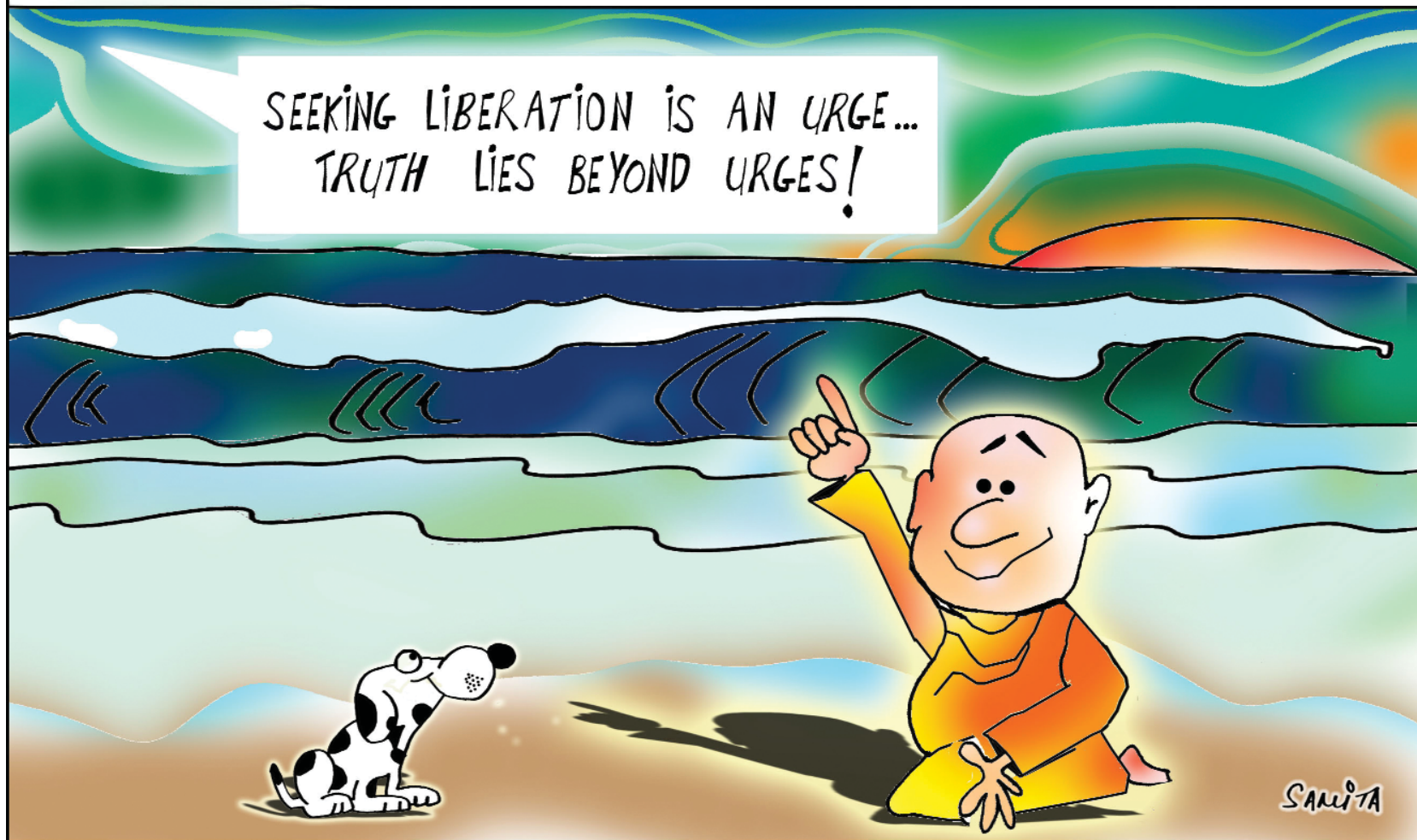
Mr. Man Singh Murre of Rajnathdih village in East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. With mostly infertile land holdings, Mr. Murre and other residents found meeting both ends difficult. Tata Motors helped him lead change by beginning a tree plantation drive. Today, Rajnathdih has a forest of income-generating trees, and a Forest Protection Group to nurture its economic turnaround.

Mr. Navnath Karande of Sheju village in Pune district of Maharashtra. A diploma holder in mechanical engineering, he is also a trustee and an alumni of the Bhamchandra High School in the village - the only one in the vicinity covering seven villages. Tata Motors helped set up the school and continues to support it. About 600 students have passed through its portals till date.

Tata Motors' Sustainability Programme. Striving for Sustainable Change.

IN THE LIGHT

by SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Farm saviour

Your cover story 'Rolling back the tsunami' was enlightening and encouraging. We know large sums of money were wasted by NGOs on tsunami rehab. People also donated generously but they got no feedback on where that money was spent. A lot of construction for tsunami victims turned out to be shoddy. Projects were left incomplete. And worst of all fisher people were displaced forever. They were forced to relocate to areas

further from the sea. It is heartening to know that at least in Nagapattinam, one of the worst affected districts, farmers are being helped.

R Prasannan

I admire former panchayat president Manimekhalai. She has worked in a practical manner for her people. After the tsunami, she personally supervised relief operations. She took full advantage of NGOs and got them to do what her people needed. We need many more leaders like her at the grassroots.

Shantha Kumar

Great story. The work of people like Bhuvaneshwari needed to be highlighted.

Sadasivam

JNNURM

Your story, 'Is urban renewal just hype' shows that public-private partnerships don't deliver. There is a mismatch between what towns and cities want and what the government thinks should be done. The delivery system is not right. People should be organised under urban panchayats. They should decide what needs to be built and how infrastructure should be constructed. The municipality must connect

with them. Slums can also be organised as panchayats. Partnerships between communities and government agencies may work better.

Divya Singh

RTI

About your story on RTI, I would like to say you are being overly optimistic. A very small section of the middle class comprising of activists, are using this law. It is the bureaucracy which is using it to get information about their own benefits. Many more ordinary people should be using RTI but they are not doing so.

Srinath

RTI is one of the most powerful tools in a democratic set up. But the way the Indian government is implementing RTI, I don't think it will have any impact on society. One example is the lack of interactive government sites on the Internet. So we are not given any scope to collect official information. Awareness of RTI is due to NGOs like Parivartan who have worked hard to inform people.

Sivan

All the money in the world cannot buy freedom. We have earned our freedom. RTI is one Act which will

help sustain that freedom.

Shekhar Agnihotri

RTI is a powerful law, one of the best in the world. It is thanks to people like Arvind Kejriwal that the law is being used.

Anand

In the Light

Samita Rathor's cartoon is enlightening. I look forward to it every time. It is beautifully and artistically done. The slogan is very original.

Asmita

Samita's Soul Value is useful. It gives us good tips on how to improve our lives. It is practical spirituality. We are tired of so called gurus who talk in riddles. But we can connect with what Samita has to say. We need ethics today, not some mumbo jumbo religious discourse.

Amit

World

I don't understand why you dropped your world pages. South Asia is very poorly covered by the media. There is hardly any debate on development of this region in newspapers or even in journals. At least we used to get some development news on Afghanistan and Nepal.

Monica Chawla

RTI ownership runs acro

Civil Society News
New Delhi

AS political parties began releasing their manifestoes for the coming general elections, the People's Action for Employment Guarantee and National Campaign for People's Right to Information organised a Jan Manch in Delhi on 22 March to ensure that politicians included the right to work and the right to information in their election agendas.

RTI activists are demanding a national council for RTI to monitor its implementation, selection of information commissioners in a transparent manner and access to information from the private sector.

NREGA activists would like the scheme to be expanded to urban areas. Instead of 100 days per household, the employment scheme should give 100 days of work to every adult who asks for work.

Politicians of diverse persuasions turned up for the public meeting. It seemed they were taking no chances, making sure that no vote slipped between their fingers. Sharing the dais with Aruna Roy, Jean Dreze and other activists were politicians from the Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Communist Party of India and the Janata Dal (Secular).

The Congress political representative, Sudarsana Nachiappan, stood staunchly behind NREGA saying his party would surely take the scheme forward. Danish Ali of Janata Dal (S) also agreed that the number of days for work under NREGA must be increased. He backed demands that information commissioners of states be appointed in a transparent manner. D Raja, CPI secretary, backed all the demands raised by the Jan Manch activists. He said his party wants education, health care, housing and employment to be made fundamental rights.

Prakash Javadekar of the BJP called for corporate accountability under RTI and for the judiciary to be made answerable to the public. Judges should have no hesitation in declaring their assets, he said. He also said urban poverty needs to be tackled with a holistic approach.

Civil Society spoke to Aruna Roy on RTI.

What have been the gains from the RTI law in these four years?

This is perhaps a law, along with NREGA, which has directly impacted the lives of India's vast citizenry. Much has been written about the failures of RTI. I will only recall a few telling examples of its spread. In Shillong I sat through a two-day meeting in December last year organised by RTI activists. People from rural Meghalaya came to discuss issues concerning RTI. They had no clue

Rivals on board: Prakash Javedkar of BJP and Ashwini Kumar of the Congress, (centre and right), with Yogendra Yadav



ss India

Photographs: LAKSHMAN ANAND



D Raja of CPI and Aruna Roy at the Jan Manch

about the celebrities of the RTI, a great sense of equality prevailed. In Mangalore, Goa and in Mumbai the Act has been used by people to fight displacement. Thousands of poor people have used the law for food security. In Gujarat victims of the genocide used it to regain their self-esteem and get law enforcing mechanisms into treating them with dignity. The ownership of the Act is across all categories, in all parts of the country. Even the bureaucracy, having largely opposed the Act, has been a user and abuser in its fight against the arbitrary use of power. The Act is owned by people, movements and institutions.

How can RTI be used more effectively for getting information from companies? The experience so far has not been very good.

The experience of the last three years has emphasised that we need to work more on section 2f of the Act. Under that section, a citizen can access any information that a private body is obliged to

(Continued on page 8)

'NREGA is not artificial employment'

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) took birth under a cloud of controversy. It was supported by activists and hated by establishment economists. Four years down the line NREGA has grown in strength. From 200 districts it covers the entire country. There is a demand for the 100 days job scheme apparent from the number of people who have registered.

There are issues to be sorted out. Jean Dreze, Visiting Professor, Department of Economics, Allahabad University, and seen as one of the key architects of NREGA, spoke to *Civil Society* on the road ahead for the job scheme.

A very large number of people have registered for NREGA. Are you happy with the response?

My happiness is not the issue. But the fact that more than 50 million families in rural India have a job card is certainly good news for anyone concerned with the well being and rights of rural workers.

Each job card guarantees up to 100 days of employment under NREGA at the statutory minimum wage. This is an important step towards the realisation of the right to work. However, the main challenge is to ensure that rural workers are able to secure their entitlements under the Act, including not only work on demand but also minimum wages, payment within 15 days, essential worksite facilities, and so on. In that respect, there is still a very long way to go.

From 100 days per household you propose 100 days per adult. But the demand is also for increasing employment from 100 days to 200

days. One gram sabha calculated this was the minimum for people's survival needs in a year. Any plans to demand an increase in the number of days?

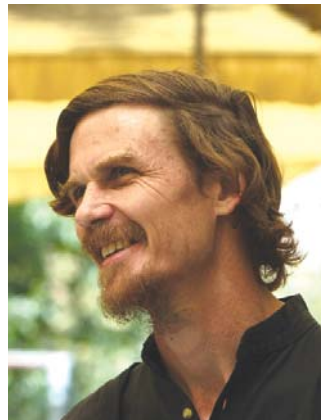
As far as an increase in the number of days is concerned, the demands for "100 days per adult" and "200 days per household" are more

or less equivalent. But the former is also a demand for treating every adult as an individual worker in his or her own right. This is important from various points of view. First, the household approach has caused much confusion, especially as the term "household" is not well defined in the Act. Second, taking the individual worker as the basic unit throughout the system would help to streamline NREGA records and achieve transparency. Third, this approach would facilitate equal participation of women in NREGA: women would have their own job card and bank account, instead of depending on the goodwill of their male relatives. "One person, one job card, one bank account" should be the basic principle.

There are complaints about full 100 days employment not being

provided. What is the grievance redressal mechanism being proposed for complaints?

There is broad agreement that powers of grievance redressal must be given to authorities that are independent of the implementing agencies. However, there is no consensus on appropriate grievance redressal authorities. Labour Courts, independent ombudsmen, and Lok Adalats are some of the proposals that have been made. This issue is yet to be resolved. Meanwhile, a useful step would be to activate Section 25 of NREGA, which pro-



Jean Dreze

'The share of women in NREGA work was around 40 per cent in the first year and has been rising steadily ever since. It is already close to 50 per cent.'

(Continued on page 8)



Aruna Roy

The biggest lesson we learnt from NAC was that if you provide a platform to involve people in the process of governance, there is a possibility of getting the best.

(Continued from page 7)

furnish the government under any existing law. Secondly, we must insist that the government strengthen all transparency obligations under all laws governing private and financial investment, in all matters of public interest.

You have proposed a National Council for Right to Information to monitor implementation. How would it function?

We are asking for a Council that would be an independent body with its own mandate. It would oversee implementation of the RTI Act and advise the government. The chairperson would be the minister concerned. The CIC would be a permanent invitee. The CICs of some states would be members on a rotational basis. It would have a number of distinguished Indians as members to ensure that the spirit and substance of the Act are implemented. The Council would advise government on the short-listing of candidates for appointment as CICs and Information Commissioners. A number of issues will have to be worked out in various consultations, if the government accepts the suggestion.

Appeal applications have been piling up. People are not always getting information in a timely manner. What is the way out?

We are asking for compulsory proactive disclosure. If government offices place information in the public domain, their burden will be reduced. A board displaying the information should be placed prominently at the entry to the premises. RTI applications must be received and receipts provided in a timely manner. Every office must have a room where applicants can

inspect files or ask for relevant pages of information. PIOs need to be trained. There should be a special cell or a helpline for them.

There are other suggestions we have given—clear directions about the name and location of the appellate authority, punitive action by the commission, financial transactions by public authorities on the Internet and so on. We are also asking that appointment of Commissioners be done in a transparent manner with certain norms, and their work be reviewed periodically. **States are often indifferent to legislative changes or procedures proposed by the Centre. How will recalcitrant states be tackled?**

The States are governed by the same law. They are not therefore obliged to follow the Centre but the law.

When the UPA came to power, National Advisory Council (NAC) was set up. Would you like a similar council to be set up post elections so that there can be interaction between people's movements and the government?

The biggest lesson we learnt from the NAC was that if you provide a platform to involve people in the process of governance, there is a possibility of getting the best possible inputs from a wide variety of individuals and organisations to produce sounder policy and legislation in tune with peoples' needs. The important thing is to have a body that will allow and encourage open debate. All legislation must be openly debated by civil society and a forum should be provided for that purpose. All draft policy documents should go on the website and facilitate public consultation. There needs to be more debate about the nature of such a forum to foster genuine democratic debate.

'NREGA is not artificial employment'

(Continued from page 7)

vides for penalties on anyone who fails to do his or her duty under the Act. In our experience, even small fines can go a long way in keeping the concerned functionaries on their toes.

According to your experience are more women than men coming to work on NREGA sites? What can be done to ensure they get facilities like crèche, drinking water etc?

The share of women in NREGA work was around 40 per cent in the first year of implementation, and has been rising steadily ever since. It is already close to 50 per cent. In many areas, NREGA is an unprecedented work opportunity for women, whether in terms of wage rates, or work conditions, or parity with men. In areas where women are otherwise confined to the narrow lane of household work, NREGA is also an important entry point for their participation in the economy and society. Thus, NREGA is an important tool of empowerment for rural women, and the fact that their participation rates are quite high is good news. Having said this, there are still many barriers to women's full and equal participation in NREGA. One of them, as you rightly point out, is the lack of essential worksite facilities, including child care. This is a

blind spot in the implementation of NREGA, but it is not incurable.

Some economists are complaining that NREGA activists are messing up the labour market by creating 'artificial' employment. NREGA is preventing labour from going to high demand markets and thereby giving rise to a shortage of labour. What do you have to say?

NREGA does not "prevent" anyone from moving to areas of high labour demand. What it does is to enhance the bargaining power of those who might do so, by giving them alternative employment opportunities. This is not a bad thing. It

does mean that employers in those areas may have to pay higher wages, and perhaps even the minimum wage. The reason why many economists frown at this is that they look at the situation from the point of view of the employers. But for the workers, it is good news. And after all, the payment of minimum wages is a legal obligation. Further, I would not agree with the characterization of NREGA as "artificial" employment. Much of it is, or at least can be, fairly productive.

What are the safety mechanisms the state can provide to activists who are threatened while implementing NREGA?

The first step is not to participate in their harassment or protect the culprits. Unfortunately, this

seems to be the rule rather than the exception. In Jharkhand, for instance, state authorities are well integrated with the nexus of criminals and crooks who have been targeting NREGA activists and even killing some of them. The suicide of Tapas Soren was also a direct outcome of harassment from state authorities. Aside from abstaining from direct repression, the state should take firm action against those who indulge in violence against NREGA activists. Strict implementation of the transparency safeguards would also be of great help in preventing corruption and averting conflict situations. Prevention is better than cure.



Binayak Sen's Shaheed Hospital

Bharat Dogra
Dalli Rajhara

YOU may have heard of hospitals built by socially conscious citizens for economically distressed workers. But have you ever heard of a hospital made by workers themselves by collecting their meagre savings and doing free labour? Shaheed Hospital is precisely such a noble venture. It has been built by the iron-ore mine workers of Dalli Rajhara, district Durg, Rajhara. They wanted to create good health services for villagers living near the mining township. The mine workers succeeded because they got help from a few dedicated doctors who came from far away to assist this noble venture.

One of these doctors was Dr Binayak Sen who was an important member of the first team of doctors that was formed even before the hospital's building was ready. As a reporter when I visited Dalli Rajhara in 1982, patients had started collecting in large numbers as Dr Binayak Sen, Dr Saibal Jana and other doctors examined them in the Union's office. Dr Sen served here for several years before moving on to join the health programme of Rupantar, an NGO. It was while he was continuing his services to the poorest people here that he was arrested several months ago. Since then he has been languishing in jail.

It was the great movement of iron ore mine workers led by the legendary Shankar Guha Niyogi that drew distinguished doctors like Dr Binayak Sen and Dr Saibal Jana to Shaheed Hospital. Niyogi linked the livelihood struggle of iron ore mine workers with constructive and social reform activities like a workers' health programme, an education programme and a strong anti-liquor movement which successfully motivated 10,000 mine workers to give up liquor. This trade union of iron-ore mine workers, called the Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS), soon became well-known for its success in improving the socio-economic condition of workers in the iron ore mines of Dalli Rajhara (linked to the Bhilai Steel Plant) as well as mobilising the workers for several reforms.

Shaheed Hospital was one of the many achievements of these efforts. When it started 27 years ago, Shaheed Hospital had just 13 beds. Today, it is a 100-bed hospital. When I visited it recently I found villagers from as far away as 150 kms, near the Maharashtra border, coming all the way here for treatment. So why did they travel this distance, I asked them. After all there were so many hospitals, including government hospitals, nearer their villages. Because of the strong belief and trust that we'll get good treatment here, they replied, and because everyone behaves well with us.

In the early days of CMSS movement, Kusuma Bai, a frontline leader of the miners, died due to lack of proper maternity care. The workers then thought of opening a maternity centre. Gradually this idea got converted to a more ambitious, more difficult proposal for a full fledged hospital. The workers wondered how they would raise the

mittee with 100 volunteers was formed who took up various responsibilities. As soon as workers got some of their pending dues, there was a spate of donations. On 14 May that year, as many as 1000 workers toiled from dawn to dusk to speed up construction of the hospital building.

The hospital was inaugurated on 3 June, 1983 in the presence of freedom fighters and senior trade union activists. Shankar Guha Niyogi said that this was a gift of organised workers to people in villages who are not organised as yet.

Workers enlisted themselves for training for various kinds of services and provided voluntary services. Equipment and beds were added as more donations came in from workers. By 1992, in roughly a decade's time, Shaheed Hospital became a two-storied, 50-bed hospital with an operation theatre, pathology lab and maternity centre. During a recent visit I learnt that the hospital is now equipped with X-ray and sonography equipment and the number of staff is 40.

But, there is a shortage of doctors and the burden on the two doctors working here was very heavy. Several nurses told me that even though they are offered a higher salary at other nursing homes, they don't want to leave this hospital. They said that the opportunity to learn and serve is the most in this hospital.

I was informed that a patient is charged only Rs 5 for a bed for one day and Rs 20 if all the allied expenses are added. One patient said that after hospitalisation here for two months, his total bill was merely Rs 15,000. By purchasing good quality generic medicines the cost of medicines is kept low. For surgery and other procedures the expense is generally less than half of what nearby nursing homes charge.

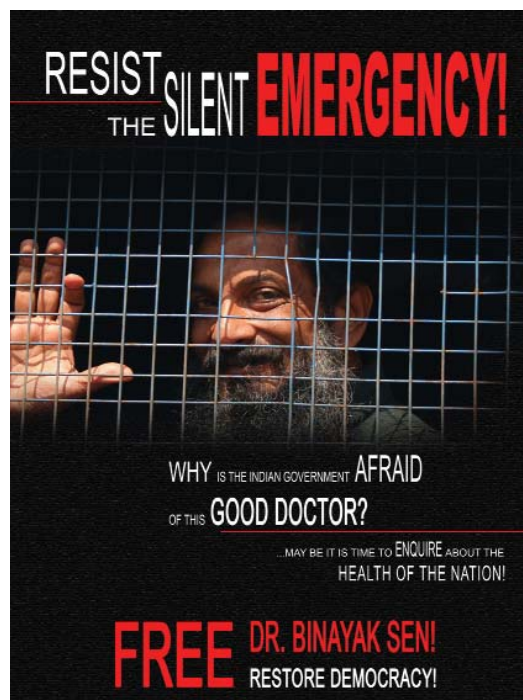
Despite patients crowding the OPD and corridors the hospital looked very clean. This is because of the dedication of voluntary cleaners. There is one mine-worker, Jaggu Bhaiya, who volunteers as a health worker. He refuses to drink even free tea offered to all staffers. He says it would taint the voluntary nature of his service.

Despite the heavy burden of work within the hospital, the health staff here has managed to find the time to help people affected by floods, the earthquake in Latur and the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. This hospital has contributed to the training of nurses and 'mitanin' or village-level health activists. It has mobilised a cultural team to spread public health messages and brought out a series of easy-to-read booklets on health.

Dr Saibal Jana, who has been with the hospital since it started as a small dispensary in the Union's garage, says, "Workers have proved that they can create a hospital and run it successfully for over 25 years, all the time expanding its services."



Shaheed Hospital



money to construct a building, buy all the essential equipment and pay at least a minimal salary to doctors and staff for their dream hospital.

But when highly qualified doctors like Dr Binayak Sen, Dr Saibal Jana and Dr Ashish Kundu started coming here to work at a subsistence wage, all doubts about the success of this venture vanished. Workers dedicated themselves to building the hospital by voluntary service.

In 1982 the Shaheed Dispensary started functioning from the Union office and garage. A health com-

Hill residents fear the monsoon

Vivek S Ghatani
Darjeeling

VILLAGERS living in the Darjeeling hill region await the monsoon with dread. Hema Pradhan, a tea garden labourer, is spending sleepless nights. She fears a massive landslide could take place. Heavy rainfall will sweep away her house and her village. Last year her small wooden hut suffered major cracks in a landslide.

The 2008 landslide is considered one of the biggest. Seventy-seven houses had to be shifted. This year fears are that 88 houses will be displaced. Experts warn that continuous rainfall for two days will sweep them away.

"Shifting means we need money to construct a new house. Where are we going to get money from?" asked Uma Lama, a resident, anxiously.

The 77 houses that were shifted got funds. "We received money from the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), Rajya Sabha MP, Saman Pathak, the then Lok Sabha MP, Dawa Narbula, an NGO called Amyalaya and from the Indira Awas Yojana. For these 88 houses there are no funds, not yet at least. We fear it will be impossible to shift them," said Ashoke Gurung, vice president of the Landslide Action Committee formed last year.

Hema Pradhan's village falls under the Balasun tea estate area. Residents said the management had provided a few relief measures. "Apart from some wood and Rs1000 to each resident of 54 houses, the management has not provided anything," shrugged a resident who did not want to be named.

Balasun has a history of landslides. "In 1998 this landslide started. The exact reason is unknown. Many say it is due to lack of proper drainage in the village though human carelessness cannot be ignored," said Jagat Syangbo, a former gram panchayat pradhan. Older residents point out that Balasun had dense alpine forests which have now vanished.

Seventeen families in Sindebong under the Kalimpong subdivision were displaced in a similar landslide three years ago. They are yet to be rehabilitated. Fifteen more families may suffer the same fate.

"Such disasters could happen every year as hardly any effort is made to check the calamity. A major part of Kalimpong town is likely to be affected," said Praful Rao, president of Save the Hills, the only NGO based in Kalimpong that is working on landslides. Sindebong is 5 km from Kalimpong.

Dilip Bhujel, who used to live in Bameygaon in the Sindebong area, quoted a 2006 Geological Survey of India study which said if landslides were

not checked 524 hectares in Kalimpong, right up to Dr Graham's Home, a prestigious school, would be devastated. "Ten villages fall under the Sindebong gram panchayat area. This means 788 families are at risk. We have been spending sleepless nights," said Bhujel, who shifted to Gairigaon, 1.5 km from the landslide-hit zone, out of fear.

Save The Hills is making a documentary to highlight Sindebong's landslides. "Lack of drainage, coupled with several small streams (jhoras) appears to be the cause. I have just received a report on the landslide of Balasun and the reason seems to be the same. These streams have neither been widened nor strengthened," said Rao.



Landslide- hit home

Officials of the Kalimpong Block 1 - Sindebong gram panchayat said they were too tied up with election work to look up records of relief provided to affected villages. The villagers are now trying divine intervention. "Three years ago we set up a Devi temple near the landslide hit zone. We hope the goddess will protect us," said Bhujel.

Last year a massive landslide occurred at Upper Mamring in the Kurseong subdivision. Huge boulders with trees came rolling down the hills. Although no one was killed, around 170 households now live in fear. The boulders halted just above the village but blocked their only road. Villagers suffered financial losses since they could not get their farm produce to the market.

In 1968, torrential rainfall unleashed about 20,000 landslides killing thousands and breaching the Darjeeling-Sikkim road at more than 90 places. Forty years later chances of a similar calamity loom large.

Leszek Starkel, a professor from the Polish Academy of Sciences who has been studying landslides in this region for the past 40 years, said: "I first came to Darjeeling to study the evolution of mountains in 1968. I was amazed with the destruction. The region had received 1000mm of rainfall in 52 hours which is equivalent to two years of rainfall in Poland."

Speaking on the sidelines of a Landslide Hazard Workshop, organized by residents under the banner of Save the Hills, Starkel said a catastrophe like 1968 could recur.

"This time the devastation will be fatal. It will largely be concentrated in urban areas. There would be chaos if these slides are triggered by earthquakes," Starkel said the state should focus immediately on preparing for such calamities.

"Coal quarries in areas like Tindharia must be stopped immediately. Afforestation must be taken up on a war footing and construction of buildings on steep slopes must stop," he said.

Landslide curse

SAVE The Hills is the first NGO, based in Kalimpong, which seeks to address the landslide issue. It is creating awareness and lobbying with the government to take preventive action. *Civil Society* spoke to Praful Rao, president.

What motivated you to start Save the Hills?

In September 2007 there was continuous rain for one week. The rain caused a lot of damage. I started a blogspot to convey messages on the hazardous impact of landslides. Many good people responded. Soon a team was formed. Six months ago, we converted this into an NGO. Now we have members from all over, from the Darjeeling hills and neighboring Sikkim.

What should the government do?

The reasons behind landslides are anthropogenic. The government has conducted several surveys. These gather dust in their offices. The government should find ways to stop all the illegal construction and unplanned urbanization that has taken place.

What do the experts say?

Neither the media nor experts know about the hazardous landslides that have been occurring here. We have several times highlighted the issue in seminars and briefed them on every detail. This includes the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), the State Disaster Management Authorities (SDMA) and the District Disaster Management Authorities (DDMA). Interestingly, some progress has been made.

How should local awareness be spread?

Educating school children and people in urban and rural areas is a good idea. We must make them understand that it is we who have created such a disaster. We must tell them the cause of the landslide. Many times a house is swept away because it was constructed near a small stream. A house should not be built near a stream. If locals take the initiative the government is bound to act.



Praful Rao



Ganga in upper reaches

Pro dam NGO springs court surprise

Rakesh Agrawal
Dehradun

WHEN the government suspended work on the Loharinag Pala hydroelectric project in Uttarakhand environmentalists and activists breathed a sigh of relief. Everyone seemed to agree that the project was too close to the Gangotri glacier, the source of the Ganga.

Dr GD Agrawal, former dean of IIT, Kanpur, and widely respected, called off a fast unto death that he had undertaken saying the Ganga was sacred to Hindus and could not be abused in this way.

However, in a strange turn of events, a single NGO, the Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra (RLEK), headed by Avadesh Kaushal, went to the Uttarakhand high court and got work on the project resumed. Kaushal says that he is fighting for the development of Uttarakhand. To find out more about what exactly he is trying to achieve, *Civil Society* spoke to him.

Why did you go to the Uttarakhand High Court in support of hydro-projects?

The people of Uttarakhand asked for a separate state to decide the goals of development themselves and get employment here. Today the situation is that the gap in the average per capita income of Uttarakhand and the national average is widening. Every child in Uttarakhand is borne with a debt of Rs 15,000 on his or her head. So,

I'm also aghast at the NGO community forgetting the vision behind the very foundation of this separate hill state.

But local villages do not get electricity from these hydro-projects and neither do they get jobs.

Yes, today 1,220 villages in Uttarakhand haven't even seen an electric pole. This is because the state government gets only 12 per cent production from central projects like the Tehri hydroelectric project, whereas it would have got 100 per cent electricity from state projects like the Pala Maneri and Bhairav Ghati projects that the current BJP government suspended due to Dr GD Agrawal's fast.

Energy is an important measurement of development. The degree of development is measured by the unit of energy one consumes. Today, energy means electricity. As per the terms of the agreement, 70 per cent of jobs from these projects must go to locals, barring technical jobs. So, most unskilled and semi-skilled jobs go to locals from these projects.

But isn't the Ganga the holiest of rivers? By diverting it into tunnels what will happen to the rites and rituals Hindus perform on its banks?

Only six villages will be affected by this project and no one from these villages even goes to take a bath

in the river. From Gangotri to Rishikesh, not a field is irrigated from the Ganga water. So, if hydro-electric projects come up, fields will be irrigated and people will get electricity. That is a must to realise the Vision 2012 of both the Government of India and the state government of Uttarakhand to which both are signatories. This requires power to all by the year 2012. Even the President of India says Vision 2012 must be realised.

But surely there are other ways of getting power than building dams that are environmentally destructive?

Of the three known means of producing mass electricity—nuclear, thermal and hydro, hydro-power is the cleanest, but it can be produced only where water falls from a gradient, as in Uttarakhand. So, we must go for it, although we are against big dams.

The Loharinag Pala hydro-electric project is so close to the Gangotri glacier. Won't it be environmentally destructive for this fragile Himalayan region?

You should know that no project could come without an environmental clearance by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). And, after Dr Agrawal's fast, the GOI appointed a committee to look into the matter and invited him to become its member. But, he refused. Either, we shouldn't trust and believe our governments, or we should devise some other strategy. I'm for a balance between development and environment.

Why do you say so?

Dr Agrawal claimed to have fasted for 37 days. But it is humanly impossible. And that intermediate pass guy from Meerut, Rajendra Singh, the Magsaysay Award winner, knows nothing about rain-water harvesting, forget about bringing a dying river to life. Anyway, you get these awards only through connections and the Magsaysay is

just a club of highly placed individuals. MC Mehta said we don't need electricity, but need the Kumbha Mela that brings crores of rupees every year. But he must know that the Kumbha Mela is held once in 12 years in which people create massive amounts of pollution.

They say that you're harming the interests of Uttarakhand. People should manage their own natural resources.

Not me, they are harming the interests of Uttarakhand. When work stops on a hydroelectric

project, the contractor and builder are financially rewarded. I would have had no qualms if these projects were stopped from the very beginning. But not after Rs 400 crores has been spent on them.

What is the support for your view?

I am not doing this under any 'project'. I have not taken a single rupee from Indian sources or foreign sources. But we have people with us. I can make a thousand women stand here for these projects.

Do you have political ambitions behind this move of your?

(Laughs). No, no political ambitions. I just want to serve the people. We NGOs are not here to toe the government line.



Avadesh Kaushal

Tibetans in exile still Tibetans

Photographs: ABHINANDITA MATHUR

Abhinandita Mathur
New Delhi

THIS year the Tibetan community commemorates the 50th anniversary of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama's flight into exile after the occupation of Tibet in 1959. Nearly 85,000 Tibetans followed him into India without any certainty of return. They settled wherever they found space in refugee camps and colonies set up for them.

Fifty years later, the future of Tibet continues to be uncertain. But the Tibetan people under the Dalai Lama's leadership have succeeded in sustaining their way of life, language, cultural traditions and identity for half a century outside their homeland.

It is an extraordinary story of cultural survival.

How has the Tibetan community adapted to change? Are people still overcome with nostalgia for their homeland? Have Tibetans found stronger associations in newer communities based on profession, class, specific interests? What have been the strategies used by the community to retain its identity and prime mission - Free Tibet?

One of the oldest Tibetan settlements in India is at Majnu ka Tila in New Delhi. Here is what Tibetans have to say.

Born in 1957 in Tsalung, Kungachaedon came to India at the age of two, carried in her mother's arms. She may not remember the journey, but she feels she re-lives it every time she hears the story from her parents and their friends. Her parents and siblings travelled miles on horseback to reach the border. The days were spent hiding and the journey was made during the night. At the border, they had to leave the horse and travel on foot. Her parents often skipped meals to ensure the children were fed with whatever little supplies they had.

Kungachaedon's family settled in a Tibetan Refugee camp in Orissa, where she grew up. She started working as a primary teacher in the Tibetan central school. Four years ago, she was transferred to Delhi where she now lives alone. She chose not to marry so she could give her all to her students whom she considers to be her own children, and the future of her country. As a student, her teachers were all Indian as the Tibetan refugees at that time were not qualified to teach. Today, her school staff is entirely Tibetan.

Kungachaedon may not be directly involved in the political movement but she believes teaching is her tool. In her class she makes it a point to remind her students of their Tibetan identity and how China has occupied their land. She also initiates traditional programmes during Tibetan festivals at school. Currently,

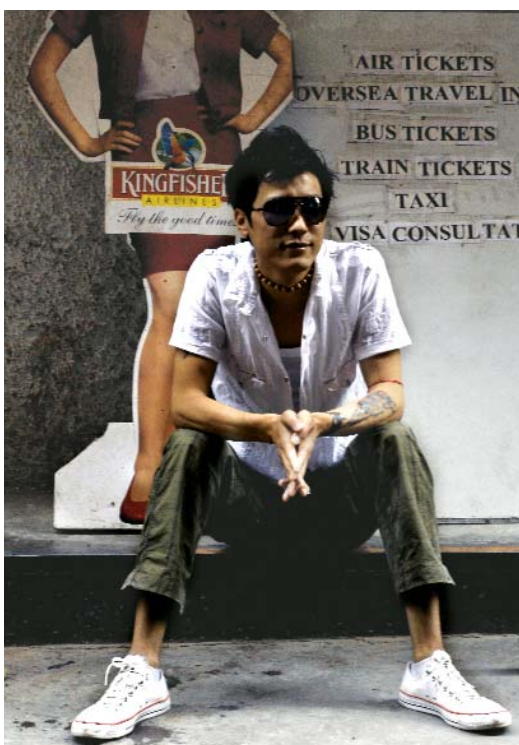
Kungachaedon is volunteering as a data collector for the Democratic Survey of Tibetans in exile. She feels lucky to have found refuge in India which has allowed Tibetans to not only live freely but nurture their tradition. "The future may be unpredictable at this point but I am hopeful of returning home one day and breathe my last



Ngawang Norbu and Rinzing Dolma

breath on my land," she says.

Ngawang Norbu and Rinzing Dolma shifted to Delhi from Siliguri seven months ago when their sons got admitted to boarding school. The family's expenses increased and the move seemed logical.



Tashi

"Like so many other people from small towns in India, we too had no option but to move here to seek better income generating opportunities," says Ngawang.

They managed to rent a small space in the old Peace House Hotel in the neighborhood where they set up a restaurant. While Rinzing works full time in the restaurant, Ngawang moonlights as a calling agent in a BPO for additional income. "I feel like an owl but I don't mind working extra hard. Hard work is in our genes," he points out.

According to him, it is the ability to work hard and not look down on any kind of work that makes Tibetans the most successful refugees in the world. "When our parents arrived here from Tibet, they came with nothing. Most people found work as laborers on petty daily wages. People took on any opportunity that came their way. They did not think the work was not worthy of them, even though a lot of them came from well-to-do families and led comfortable lives back home. They were grateful to be alive and happy to provide for their children. Keeping all this in mind, do we really have much complain about", he asks.

Rinzing points out why it is important for Tibetans to remember these stories. "These memories are all we have, to remind us of our past because today it is easy to live in oblivion". When Ngawang goes to work, he just merges into the scene leaving behind his ethnic identity. However, when he returns to his neighborhood, his Tibetan

after 50 years



A cafe in Majnu ka Tilla

identity becomes more predominant. "We have so little to hold on to," he explains. Community living helps them hang on to some of their traditional practices that may otherwise vanish.

Some of his Tibetan friends, who have chosen to live away from the community and closer to their workplace, rush back to Majnu ka Tilla at any given chance to be a part of the community, eat Tibetan food or converse in their own language. Ngawang views this as a reflection of a common conflict in their lives. "It is complicated and confusing. India is my home and Tibet my motherland. We have all sorts of connections and ties here. In many ways I am more Indian than many of my Indian friends. But in this almost entirely

Tibetan neighborhood, I feel at home," he says.

Such questions can be baffling. The couple wonders what they will do when their biggest wish of seeing Tibet free comes true, if they will leave for good or remain here. Meantime they work to pay their bills each month and save whatever little they can to visit their sons at school.

"Of course I am a Tibetan," affirms 27-year-old Kalsang who was born and brought up in Delhi. "Yes, I do have an Indian Voter Id card, and I shall cast my vote in the coming elections but that I will do so as a resident of India but not an Indian".

Kalsang studied in the Tibetan Central School. She chose to work rather than study fat books. At present she works at Convergys, a Gurgaon based

call centre. Her life may appear to be no different than her Indian colleagues but she remains deeply attached to her Tibetan identity. "Because I wear the same clothes as you, speak fluent Hindi, and know all the Bollywood songs, people don't see me as a Tibetan. I don't get bothered when people call me Chinki. I just tell them, hey I'm not any Chinki from Mizoram or Manipur. I am from Tibet and no, it's not in China!"

Such ignorance does not necessarily offend her and she understands the reason for it. "I know the Tibetan movement is not breaking news material. Our peaceful protests at Jantar Mantar don't stand a chance compared to Salman Khan's tiff with Shahrukh Khan or Kareena Kapoor's love life. It is the job of the media to spread awareness. People are struggling to support their families; it would be unfair to expect more than what this country has already given us."

She hopes to someday see free Tibet and visit the village her family belongs to but she is not in a desperate rush. "Yes, it's already been 50 long years but such things take time. India too waited two centuries to gain independence," she explains. She draws our attention to the Dalai Lama's teachings about learning to be patient. She believes that shedding blood in desperation will not solve anything.

"We are all human and only with a humanistic approach can we make a world worth living in. I'm optimistic, we shall do it someday!" The thought of that day when Tibet will gain independence from China is what keeps her going. When Kalsang imagines that day, the thought of leaving India leaves her with a strange feeling. "It is like leaving a rented house to move into one you own. When you leave, it does not feel final; you leave it with the illusion of returning to it another day".

"I grew up with one dream, to visit India and meet the Dalai Lama in person," says 27-year-old Tashi who left his home, his town and loved ones in the Kham region in Tibet to make this dream come true. A year ago, Tashi made up his mind to come to India. After paying around Rs 20,000 to the agents who helped him cross the border, he arrived in Kathmandu after 18 long days of travel in harsh and dangerous conditions.

The Tibetan Reception Camp there directed him to Dharamshala. After just a few weeks of waiting, he managed to succeed in his mission. His Holiness was addressing the community and Tashi made his way to the first row. "It was the most beautiful moment of my life," he recalls. The next few months in Dharamshala were spent learning to converse in English. Fluent in Tibetan and Chinese, Tashi's broken English according to him is getting better each day.

A few weeks ago, he arrived in Delhi to experience the real refugee life. Currently staying in a budget guest house, Tashi spends his time hanging out with friends, watching movies and exploring Delhi. He does not wish to return to Tibet anytime soon. But he realizes surviving here is no easy task. Next month he joins a Tibetan school in Dharamshala to further improve his English which may boost his job prospects. He is still in a bit of a blur. "Adjusting to this new life makes me feel lost sometimes. Last few nights, I've been dreaming of my friends and family in my hometown. It is very comforting. I hope that in my dream today, I see my mother. It's been too long".

Winners of Indian NGO Awards



WINNERS

NORTH :

• **Matsya Mewat Shiksha Evam Vikas Sansthan**, Alwar, Rajasthan (Small)

• **Mitra**, New Delhi (Medium)

• **Deepalaya**, New Delhi (Large)

• **Bharti Foundation**, Gurgaon (Large)

• **SOUTH:**
• **Vishala**, Bijapur, Karnataka (Small)

• **Mobility India**, Bangalore (Medium)

EAST:

• **Harsha Trust**, Bhubaneswar (Medium)

• **Centre for Rural Development**, Guwahati (Medium)

• **Centre for Youth and Social Development**, Bhubaneswar (Large)

WEST:

• **Catalysts for Social Action**, Pune (Small)

• **Aga Khan Rural Support Programme**, Ahmedabad (Large)

Shreyasi Singh
Delhi

THE winners of the 2008 Indian NGO Awards were announced at a well-attended ceremony in New Delhi's India Habitat Centre on 30 March. Instituted in 2006, the awards are a joint initiative of Resource Alliance and The Nand and Jeet Khemka Foundation. The awards recognize and celebrate excellence. They aim to provide inspiration to similar organization and promote cross regional learning.

Competing NGOs were categorised according to size-small medium and large. The national winners were given out across these three categories.

Pragati, an NGO based in Koraput, Orissa, was adjudged NGO of the Year (Small) for its sustained efforts at livelihood augmentation, natural resource management, and focus on food security of vulnerable families. Pragati was established in 1992, and today works in 168 villages in remote and inaccessible pockets of Nandapur and Koraput blocks of Koraput district, impacting over 7,000 beneficiary families. Headed by Prabhakar Adhikari, Pragati has also facilitated and strengthened people's organisations at different levels of society.

The NGO of the Year (Medium) was presented to Action for Social Advancement (ASA), Bhopal for its stellar work in developing livelihood secu-

rity in around 1000 villages in 11 districts of Madhya Pradesh and four districts of Bihar. Formed in 1996 by Ashish Mondal, ASA has an impressive mission - to ensure livelihood for three million people by 2015. Mondal says his organisation is confident of getting there with the help of a people-centric model and interventions in three key areas - land and water resource development, agriculture technology extensions, and microfinance and micro enterprise development through community-based organisations.

Two NGOs - BAIF Development Research Organisation, Pune and Sankara Eye Care Institutions, Comibatore - tied for the NGO of the Year (Large) category.

Pune-based BAIF's programmes have helped 30 lakh rural BPL families generate sustainable self-employment in more than 47,000 villages across 12 states. BAIF is focussed on environment protection, conservation of biodiversity, and equitable distribution among weaker sections, particularly tribals.

Founded by Dr. R V Ramani, the Sankara Eye Care Institutions have worked to eradicate preventable and curable blindness in India through a large outreach programme. Quality eye care absolutely free of cost has been delivered in villages across Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat. As many as 75,000 surgeries are performed annually in the three Eye Care centres. The Institute also runs an Eye Bank which has helped promote organ and tissue donation.

"This is a unique and much awaited initiative. In the short period of two years, the Award has been able to attract a diverse group of stakeholders to support it. Voluntary and non-government organizations are enthusiastic to be a part of the process. The award's objectives have synergy with the National Policy on the Voluntary Sector, 2007, piloted by the Planning Commission, and I am happy to have been part of the advisory committee," said Sayeeda Hameed, Member, Planning Commission, before handing out the awards.

Samita's World

by Samita Rathor





Bhavya with his granny, Suresh

Janhit's Childline tracks rescued kids

Shreyasi Singh
Meerut

FOURTEEN-year-old Sonu Jateo's parents worked as daily wage labour. But they dreamed of a better life for their son. So they put him in a private school and pushed him to work hard. Sonu did not want to study. He ran away from home and went to Mumbai, all by himself. In Mumbai, he landed up in a voluntary child centre which managed to get a vague Meerut address out of him. They called the Meerut Childline for help. Despite the grossly incorrect address, the dedicated Childline team found his parents and helped him travel home.

"I didn't know people like this existed," says Sonu's mother, filled with gratitude. "I had given up all hope of seeing my son again. But they did it. So many people who need their help don't know about them. I tell all the women I work with about Childline."

The Meerut Childline, a toll-free emergency service which helps children in distress was started in April 2007. It is managed by the Childline India Foundation (CIF), a nodal agency responsible for establishing similar helplines across the country. In 13 years since it first launched in Mumbai in 1996, Childline has come to the rescue of over three million children in need of care and protection.

The Meerut Childline, CIF's 73rd city service, is run by Janhit Foundation and is supported by the

Ministry of Child and Women Development, Government of India. Janhit is a Meerut-based non-profit extensively engaged in organic farming, water conservation, environment education, and protection of human rights in various districts of western Uttar Pradesh since 1998.

1098 is Meerut Childline's toll-free number, staffed round the clock by a dedicated team of seven people. Clearly, individual passion is what runs this place.

"All of us who work here are college students," says Asha, a Childline staffer. "I am sure that we could not have got the education we get here even in the best universities. You are rooted to reality. I feel privileged I can help families out. There is no greater joy than seeing a family reunite."



Sonu Jateo (right) with his family

Since April 2007, Meerut's 1098 has fielded nearly 8,000 calls. They have taken up 442 child protection cases and provided assistance like medical shelter, repatriation, intensive counselling and escape from abuse. Janhit has tied up with Bal Ashrams, Karna Ashrams (adoption centres), and other rehabilitation organisations to ensure children have access to safe living conditions till they find a long term solution.

Suresh Dutta, 80, lives in Meerut's old Lalkurti area with Bhavya, her 13-year-old grandson. Bhavya lost his parents in Delhi's Uphaar cinema fire tragedy on June 30, 1997, when he was just two. Life's been tough since then - fending off relatives eager to lay claim to the ancestral property, selling jewellery to pay for Bhavya's schooling, and waiting for compensation money. But, 1098 has stepped in to help.

Childline took up Bhavya's case. They have made numerous visits to his home, bought him books worth Rs 1730, worked with his private-run school, Darshan Academy, to get his tuition waived, and have become friends and guides to the young, Class IX student. Amazingly, they didn't even wait for Bhavya to call 1098 to get involved. They read a newspaper story about him, and traced him.

"These young people are doing so much for us. We don't even know how we can ask them to help. But they visit us often, and help Bhavya with his school. I am forever grateful to them. I really pray they can help my Bhavya when I am not there. He calls them often now to share his thoughts," says Suresh between tears.

Janhit's success has come with dedicated groundwork. Efforts have been made to enhance telecom access. The Meerut Childline has made 1098 a toll-free number from all mobile and landline phones, not just state-run BSNL lines that other Childlines generally work on.

Sanjiv Kumar, Coordinator, Meerut Childline concedes awareness is the biggest obstacle. "In a country like ours, we all know there is no dearth of children who need help. But they need to know how to reach us. Getting to them and helping them get to know us is crucial. Not just children, we have worked with PCO and telephone booth staffers at bus stops and railway stations to convince them that 1098 is really a toll-free number, and they shouldn't stop children from using phones to reach us. It's been a struggle but now these people call us up when they see a child in need."

Sanjiv's team has tried to be creative with their outreach campaigns. Recently, they dressed up as circus clowns to attract a big group of children and adults. The trick paid off. Immediately, the helpline was activated with children calling to check whether 1098 really worked. Meerut Childline is also committed to long-term rehabilitation of children they have worked with. A volunteer base has been created for long-term follow up of children. Children are regularly watched over for three to six months till the Childline is confident they are safe and happy.

Childline also responds to current, local needs. On Children's Day last year, the Meerut Childline organised a Drop Outs Children's Rally to highlight the causes that force students to quit school. Janhit has also set up two informal schools named Gyan Ashram in Meerut's Shastri Nagar area, where the Childline office is located. Staff members take time out in the afternoon to teach more than 100 children.

Moy Moy builds a happy school

Rakesh Agrawal
Dehradun

YOUNG Vishal walks confidently on stage and performs a solo act of mimicry. People in the audience, especially those who know him, are amazed. There was a time when Vishal couldn't recognise himself in the mirror, they recall.

"If we asked him who he was, he would say, *yeh pagal hai* (I am a mad guy). Everyone used to call him that since he was mentally challenged," says Manju Singhania, principal, Karuna Vihar Early, a school in Dehradun for moderately mentally and physically challenged children.

When Vishal first came to Karuna Vihar, doctors here assessed him and drew up an elaborate action plan. It included a big dose of activities to boost his self-confidence, like making an album of his activities, reading books and engaging socially. It was a slow but rewarding exercise for the school. After three years, one fine day, Vishal went up to the mirror and declared, 'It is me, Vishal,' says Singhania.

Vishal gives the devoted people who run Karuna Vihar, a reason to smile. The school, established in April 2002, is part of the Latika Roy Foundation which started in 1994. The foundation is like a family, very personal and affectionate to its 45 children.

Its history, too, is a bit personal. The foundation came into being when it was time for Moy Moy, Jo Chopra's little girl, to start going to school. "But there was nowhere for her to go as she had cerebral palsy. So, we started a school ourselves and today she has 120 friends," says Jo who is director of the Latika Roy Foundation.

Karuna Vihar helps children to face life. Once they are between 18 and 21 years of age they go to a Vocational Training Centre to learn livelihood skills. Currently, 25 youngsters are being trained at the centre.

When a child joins Karuna Vihar an individual programme, tailored to her or his needs and capabilities is designed. The day begins early for children with social and merry-making activities. The afternoon session focuses on speech therapy, coordination and physical exercise.

Initially, a year long individual work plan is made. It includes therapies which focus on a child's social behaviour, language skills, coordination and so on. Periodic assessments are made and changes carried out according to the progress achieved. Several children have achieved good results in a year. Therapy programmes are activity based, emphasizing learning through informal but structured play.

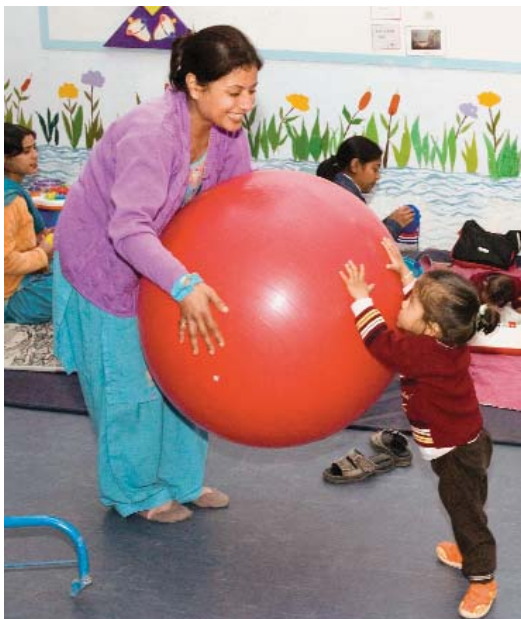


Young boys offer horse ride to tourists.

Each of the three daily sessions is organised around activities that involve playing with toys and other objects and with persons in order to give the children an understanding of colours, shapes, sounds and order. These activities, done individually or in groups, address each child's assessed needs.

In the three therapy sessions, children are grouped according to the problems they suffer from and the skills they possess. Each session is conducted by special educators and includes the physical therapist, speech therapist, and a staff member trained in mental handicap.

The first session is called the playgroup. It is for children over two and a half years of age who are accompanied by their parents or caregivers. Once children get accustomed to the group, parents are encouraged to leave them alone. The parents continue to receive advice on appropriate therapies



and activities from the school staff. Toddlers just love to be here. But they do wait for their parents to come and collect them. "Dad will come at 1pm," little Mitali keeps repeating even as she runs around breathlessly.

Then, there are two 'mother-toddler' groups. The first is for children who are two and a half years old and are accompanied by their parents or a caregiver who works with the staff during the session. Some children attend daily sessions. Others, who may be living at a distance, come once or twice a week.

The third group is the smallest. It is for children who require very specialized and individual attention more than what is possible in the other two playgroups. These children

are difficult cases. Some are older than those in the previous groups. There are children whose therapies began late and who, in some instances, have developed behavioural problems.

For instance, eight-year-old Abhishek Chauhan suffers from Down's syndrome. His individual work plan focused on refining his social behaviour, improving his motor skills and encouraging him to help himself. He was given special reading books and a toy to improve his mathematical skills. Today, he is very much like a 'normal' child.

Similarly, nine-year-old Dipak has mild cerebral palsy. He was unable to walk. The school volunteers designed a special walking plan for him. He was helped to walk alongside a wall and then switch over to using a stick. After three years of continuous effort, Dipak does more than just stand. "Catch me if you can," he challenges, running away.

But not all individual work plans are perfect. After periodic assessments, targets sometimes have to be watered down and plans modified. Sheila, a nine-year-old hyperactive child was one such case. She used to run around, throw things and hit people. After working with her for a year, when no improvement was seen, her time in the school had to be shortened. "So that other children can work peacefully and their guardians do not object," says Pushpa, the school's Vice-Principal, resignedly.

Anyway, most children feel a sense of fulfilment after joining Karuna Vihar. Meghana, 13, is an autistic child who couldn't speak properly, sit in one place and work. After three years of targeted therapy, she is a changed person. "I will go home and play with my friends in the evening. Until then, I'm mast (enjoying) here," says a chirpy Meghana.

Indeed, a school for Moy Moy is no longer for a single person. It has many more companions travelling with her on life's journey.

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ARE NGOs GOING BUST?

The untold recession story

Rina Mukherji
Poompuhar (Tamil Nadu)

THE downturn has seen banks go broke and markets crash. It has crippled giant corporations and knocked high net worth individuals. Software engineers are out of work and even fashion models can't seem to find assignments. Real estate magnates suddenly have more debts to pay than they ever told anyone about.

It is a story of hard luck all around. But you haven't heard everything as yet.

Far down the chain, people who never really managed to be a part of the market but somehow got linked to it are now bracing themselves for the impact of recession. A remote village school, a clinic in the middle of nowhere, a shelter for the homeless could be shutting down for want of funding. Similarly, small groups creating awareness of human rights, gender equality and the access to information could find their sources of support vanishing.

As businesses fail and jobs are lost, it is but natural that there will be fewer donors left in the world. Some money has already been committed so that won't go away. But after that what will happen is anybody's guess.

An extended bull run created a euphoria that made "giving" as easy as pulling in those extra bucks. Ever rising valuations and expanding credit provided an ongoing sense of plenty. There was also a sense of guilt. After all, half the world remained in poverty.

Now the opposite is happening. Fortunes have been wiped out, budgets slashed. It is the kind of mood in which people are not ready to give.

As businesses fail and jobs are lost, there will be fewer donors left. Fortunes have been wiped out, budgets slashed. It is the kind of mood in which people are not ready to give.



Mrs Heleen Verwaayen of the Alcatel Lucent Foundation visiting the Salaam Balak Trust

There is no verifiable figure, but it is estimated that the voluntary sector in India gets about Rs 75,000 crores in a year. The money comes from within India and from abroad. The sources are individuals, companies, large foundations and of course governments.

The voluntary sector in India is loosely defined. There are more than a million entities in India which are referred to as non-government organisations or NGOs. These include societies and trusts which could be into managing schools, hospitals and temples just as they could be canvassing against corruption in politics, seeking the right to information or fighting against industrial pollution.

Some societies are convenient garbs for prosperous businesses in health care and education. Others serve as umbrellas for the vast empires of godmen.

So, it's a mixed bag of genuine agents of national change, committed grassroots activists, manipulators, bored upper class ladies, retired bureaucrats, religious outfits and so on.

Very few of India's NGOs are very big; there are perhaps just 200 with more than Rs 25 crores each to spend in a year. A good many fall in the bracket of Rs 5 crores to Rs 25 crores. And around 70 per cent are the very small organisations, some with as little as Rs 4 or 5 lakhs in a year.

It is these small outfits which reach out to communities, work at the grassroots and represent the true spirit of an active and vibrant voluntary effort. These are organisations that work close to the ground and connect. Sadly, however, as the downturn sets in, it is they who would get hit and have few options for getting back on their feet.

COVER

Photographs: LAKSHMAN ANAND



Is there corruption? Do NGOs spend more than they should on themselves? How much of the money collected in the name of hungry children, homeless people and so on actually reaches them? These are valid concerns, but not as widespread as it has become fashionable to imagine. Some NGOs have unacceptable overheads. There are fly-by-night operators and corruption does exist. But essentially people who take up causes really care and they are as honest as the system allows them to be.

HOW MONEY FLOWS: Money flows in various ways. It could go directly to NGOs or through larger voluntary organisations serving as intermediaries. Many a small effort draws sustenance from some distant foreign source.

Of the estimated Rs 75,000 crores that goes to the voluntary sector, 75 per cent is generated within India and the remaining 25 per cent comes from abroad.

Last year Rs 12,500 crores came from donors in other countries. This year perhaps Rs 15,000 crores came in. Now much of this money could be going into religious activities.

But it is also goes towards funding development projects and awareness campaign on human rights, gender justice and so on.

There are 30,000 plus organisations which are supported from abroad with the funds coming from America and Europe - the very economies that have been hit very hard.

Clearly the continuance of this support is in question. Among international donors, personally wealthy individuals would be among the first to stop giving because their surplus money invariably came from stock markets which have crumbled. Then there are corporations and their foundations which would also cut back because business is down. Corpus money of such foundations parked in the market has similarly shrunk.

Next are small donors who give a \$100 or 20 pounds a month. They would continue to support good causes till they face personal problems like being

laid off or having to take salary cuts. So, while Action Aid has less of a chance of being hit since it relies on small contributions, the America India Foundation faces an immediate crunch since it survives on corporate support.

Finally, there is the money that comes from foreign governments, which is unlikely to stop unless the economic slowdown impacts tax revenues significantly.

"The impact is just about to be experienced. We will have a reduced corpus in a year or two," says Rajesh Tandon, President of Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) and one of the most respected leaders of the social sector in India.

Foreign funding will go down by 25 per cent after a while as the committed support runs out, says Tandon. He explains that the flow of funds to India actually began slowing in 2003 when the Indian government told the developed world that India did not need development assistance. Now the downturn will also see money from private sources drying up.

Then there is the perception that India is doing very well for itself because of growth figures, high profile corporate takeovers, IT leadership and a wealthy diaspora. The message that has gone around is that India is well on its way out of poverty though the reality is very different.

"ODA funds from Europe mostly financed progressive projects in non service delivery sectors like human rights, gender justice, environment monitoring. Also, research and campaigning issues will be affected," says Tandon. "But if you are doing service delivery projects on child education, health, HIV/AIDs, literacy, or micro-finance, you are not likely to be seriously impacted."

Nevertheless a whole range of development activities remain to be



Paresh Tewary,
CEO, VANI

The corporate sector was committing itself to socially responsible initiatives. Now that balloon has been pricked.



Rajesh Tandon,
President, PRIA

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addressed by NGOs and the challenge will be to find resources for this work.

"Domestically, company giving is also levelling off and declining," says Tandon. In India, individual donations have mostly been to religious and charitable trusts. In recent times companies had begun supporting causes. In the IT and BPO segments in Bangalore for instance, payroll giving was getting established. Not any longer. These companies are experiencing a decline in business and actually shedding employees.

"We raise money from corporates and foundations and since their expected money goes down, we also get affected. It's not as if we were doing very well when the economy was booming, though. Now its a little worse," says Ajay Mehta, director of National Foundation for India (NFI).

LOSSES ON THE MARKET: Shelved projects will leave the extremely needy in the lurch and slow down the process of inclusion. The joblessness that recession is causing means that more and more people require the kind of support that NGOs can provide --- be it in creating livelihoods or providing education and health care.

"The load factor has increased," says Paresh Tiwari of Voluntary Action Network India (VANI), which is an apex organisation representing some 2,000 NGOs across the country. VANI deals with issues of policy and interacts with the government.

"This is the time when NGOs have more work to do," says Tiwari. "Look at the loss of jobs in the textile sector for instance. The informal sector is increasing."

Tiwari points out that the downturn comes so soon after a period of plenty



Meenakshi Kohli
Sr Manager, CRY

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Ashok Khosla,
Head, Development Alternatives

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that it is even more difficult to cope with. "The whole economy was looking up. There was this rise in rural infrastructure development. The corporate sector was committing itself to socially responsible initiatives. Now that balloon has been pricked. NGOs who were thinking of upscaling can't even maintain their current status."

Riding on high growth figures, NGOs also tried to make the best of the market. They were allowed by the government to invest in select mutual funds. "At that time the market was going up. Now they have lost all that money. I won't take names but some pretty big NGOs went and invested," says Tiwari.

But Tandon observes that Indian income-tax regulations have protected NGOs to some extent from the vagaries of the market. "The IT Act allows us to invest only in some specified mutual funds. We have to also keep our money in rupees and not in foreign currency. Around nine years ago when UTI collapsed, I think the voluntary sector lost maybe Rs 300 to 400 crores. So it is not such a big hit this time," says Tandon.

A change in the definition of charity has been a blow for NGOs. "Raising funds through anything has been termed as a business activity and the NGO is liable to pay tax. So the charitable status is over. I am not saying the government is insensitive. They know the issues. But they take a lot of time in addressing it," says Tiwari, explaining how NGOs have to cope with rapid changes in their environment.

As things stand, an NGO which goes out and earns money which it then uses for a good cause is taxed not only on that income, but all the money it receives. How fair is this? On the one hand NGOs are expected to be sustainable and self-reliant. But on the other hand when they support their causes through their own enterprise, they are subjected to taxes.

Had a flexible environment been created, Indian NGOs would be doing much more for the efficient use of taxpayers' money for development. They would have been in a better position to weather the downturn. Most importantly, growth through bottom-up poverty alleviation initiatives would not have been put at risk like it has been.



Anita Bala Sharad
Resource
Mobilisation, CRY

CRY's great strength lies in raising money within India in small sums from individuals. It doesn't look to big time external funders or the govt.

THE SOCIAL BUSINESS: "NGOs have been tightening their belts from 2003," says Ashok Khosla, who heads Development Alternatives. "The fact is that government cannot do without NGOs who work at a human level at the grassroots."

"Government does not get to the people and it is this which makes civil society organisations so crucial," says Khosla. "I've been in government and I know that there is no other way."

Khosla believes that overarching issues such as climate change and alternative energy will not be affected by the downturn. They will continue to get funding. What will get hit are the smaller anti-poverty programmes in health and education which are crucial to development.

"We are not downsizing but we will not replace staff who leave on their own," says Ajay Mehta. "We may reduce fellowships we give out every year. Cut back on one or two. These are sponsored by donors and are low cost. What will suffer are our project grants of around Rs 5 lakhs we give out for health, education, local governance, eco-development, voluntarism."

What is clear is that many more NGOs will be seeking money from the government.

"We are approaching the government for support," says Mehta. "They have said encouraging things. We have also approached Capart with a project to provide youth exposure to the voluntary sector. They have not said no but we have not got the green signal as yet."

According to Tandon, since 2003 there is a structural adjustment taking place in the voluntary sector. "The Centre allocates around Rs 150 crores to each district under various schemes. The poorer the district, the less the utilisation of the funds," he says. "The poor states don't even use 50 per cent of this money. Voluntary organisations are called upon to work these programmes. But what is appalling is the corruption."

"To get these funds you have to give 10 to 15 per cent to government officials. A large number of organisations are succumbing to such demands at district level. Officials take 10 per cent of even small amounts like Rs 10

lakhs. If you are not party to it, the funding dries up. This has become a pressing issue because most organisations which use government funds judiciously combine them with foreign funds."

"The government schemes are badly designed. In every district there is Rs 5 to Rs 10 crore meant for creating awareness are unutilised. But there is very little allocated for professional costs. So you get money for printing posters but not for the thought that has to go into creating those posters. There is not enough to hire talented and experienced people."

Much needs to be done for the effective use of government funding, Tandon says: "We don't have a system where public resources could be managed and accessed by voluntary organisations independent of the government of the day."

"The minister, the government, the bureaucrat influence that. We have not been able to create a firewall round these public resources," he says.

In Tandon's view: "No less than Rs 20,000 crores are available for NGOs if you take all the relevant ministries into account. If such resources were managed better, voluntary organisations would be able to perform their distinctive role."

Khosla says that in a sense he foresaw the present crisis 25 years ago when he set up Development Alternatives and emerging out of a company called Tara to be a self-sustaining initiative.

Development Alternatives brings in research funds which it uses for developing technologies. These technologies which have application in better use of energy, building materials and so on are then developed into products and marketed by Tara, which functions as a business enterprise. Tara pays Development Alternatives a fee for use of its technologies.

Tara and Development Alternatives work with about \$ 20 million a year. Of this \$ 12 million is provided to Development Alternatives by the British government to fund smaller NGOs. Of the rest \$ 2 million goes to Development Alternatives and the rest to Tara as subsidies for products, equity etc. Tara offers its investors a return of eight per cent.

But it isn't quite as easy as it seems. Tara walks a difficult line in running a social enterprise. Its customers are the poor. It can't choose its products solely on the basis of their profitability. It has to look at their social relevance as well. So, some products can have a greater relevance but lower profitability.

Asked about his experience in looking for venture capital, Khosla says the problem is with the high expectations of profit. "I've had people say to me that they will invest if we drop some of our products."

Small, socially relevant businesses like Tara require a framework within which they can address issues of their own sustainability. The amount of capital they require is so small that big investors won't even look at them. If they say they are ready for larger doses of investment then they are expected to deliver returns which tend to negate their mission.

Not all Tara's products are commercially viable though their social relevance may be beyond question. Take for example Tara Akshar. It promises to make a person literate in 30 days. But it costs Rs 2,500, which a poor unlettered person can hardly afford. So it needs to be subsidised by a donor.

It is a complex challenge, but organisations like Development Alternatives appear to have a better chance of survival in a downturn when compared to



Jerry Almeida
Founder, iCONGO

Some established voluntary organizations have merely become experts at raising money. Much of it gets spent on establishment costs.

others which depend solely on donors. The need to compete for space in the market in hostile conditions has made them more resilient. However, much more need to be done to make a Development Alternatives more sustainable by giving it access to institutional finance.

HOW CRY DOES IT: CRY is another model of a social sector organisation that spends as it earns. CRY stands for Child Rights and You and was started in 1979 by Rippan Kapur, a flight purser. Kapur died in 1994 at the young age of 40. CRY's great strength lies in raising money within India in small sums from individuals. It doesn't look to big time external funders and doesn't bother with getting money from the government. CRY is also into revenue raising measures like greeting cards.

CRY drums up, through direct mailing, telemarketing and so on, around Rs 40 crores in a year. CRY's own establishment costs take away about 15 per cent of this amount. Another 15 per cent goes into marketing. Thereafter 70 per cent of the funds are available for its projects for children.

CRY has more than 200 projects in 19 states. As much as 80 per cent of its funds come from individuals. The rest are from companies and events.

In Delhi, CRY's office is located in the MCD's slum wing near South Extension. There is lots of space, but this is no posh NGO. Getting to the CRY office means negotiating a series of narrow lanes and garbage dumps.

CRY clearly does not lavish money on itself though it has motivated and competent staff in people like Meenakshi Kohli, Anita Bala Sharad and Leena Prasad. The spirit in CRY is sufficiently strong to bring in volunteers. A programme called Manorat monitors municipal schools in Dakshinpuri in Delhi.

"We see citizens as catalysts of change. We have a strong volunteer base that takes up issues. People walk in and volunteer to teach. But what we are helping them do is activism to see that the right to education is fulfilled," says Meenakshi.

Another active and self-reliant NGO raising funds within India is the Smile Foundation. It essentially helps other NGOs implement a good idea and scale up. Smile's mission is to go beyond cheque book charity and define projects with a clear viability.

Smile raises its money from individuals in India. It looks for small amounts on an ongoing basis. It also draws upon the expertise of its supporters who could be chartered accountants, lawyers or managers who have come up the hard way and now want to give back to society.

Indrani Roy, national director resource development, says they haven't felt the impact of the recession as yet. "We have raised our target as we always do in our yearly budgetary exercise," says Roy.

Roy's team raises money from children in schools and pay roll giving.

Neither has suffered as yet. "Last year we involved Chennai Port Trust (public sector) employees. This year we are likely to rope in the employees of Bosch (private sector)," says Roy.

Neither Smile nor CRY seems to have been hit by the downturn. Development Alternatives does not plan to lay off people or cut back on projects. Khosla talks of salaries for some of the staff getting delayed but that was because of a temporary cash flow problem.

NGOs that raise money locally, in small amounts and from multiple sources seem to have a greater viability. Their finances seem to be based in reality and as a result their operations are structured to be sustainable.

EFFICIENCY NOT RESOURCES: Even as there are concerns about the lack of funding and the effect that it will have on development projects, another view is that NGOs need to be more efficient and focus on delivering results.

Shankar Venkateswaran, who was till very recently head of the America India Foundation in Delhi, says that even if all the government's resources were to be channeled through the voluntary sector it would not improve development indicators because the performance of NGOs itself should be put under scrutiny.

Shankar points out that 98 per cent of all development work is done through government programmes. If voluntary organizations want to take over they have to address their capacity to show results. It is simultaneously true that the government needs to streamline regulations under which voluntary groups function.

Shankar points out the example of SHGs being put in charge of mid-day meals in schools in a district in Orissa. Nothing perhaps could be better than women being put in charge of the meals for their own children. These SHGs were to be funded by the government, but since the funds were slow in coming America India Foundation agreed to provide the money as bridge loan. Finally, the money never came from the government because it wanted bank guarantees from the SHGs and naturally they could not provide such guarantees.

"There are too many vested interests and nobody is really interested," says Shankar.

Voluntary organizations should have a bigger role to play in delivery because they are sensitive and understand the needs of the beneficiaries. But without improving their efficiency they can't hope to be effective.

In terms of efficiency, companies would come first, followed by the government and NGOs would be at the bottom.

However as commitment goes NGOs are on top. Companies by and large tend to be cynical and self-seeking. The government has delivery mechanisms but little spirit.

Jerry Almeida founder of iCongo or the Indian Confederation of NGOs says the bigger and more established voluntary organizations have merely become experts at raising money. Much of it gets spent on establishment costs, paying fancy salaries, travel and so on. It is a very tiny part of a donor's money that reaches that starving child whose picture gets circulated.

Almeida's view is that the use of direct sales agents and telemarketing is in the long-term hurting the image of the voluntary sector. Each time new donors are being sought out. With each such drive for money more and more people who like to give but don't want to be taken for a ride are being turned off.

The dissonance this creates hurts those who work with sincerity and actually need more money to scale up, be more efficient and so on.

So, Almeida's concern is the lack of accountability and transparency in the sector. While people need to be paid and organizations must run, it is necessary he feels that the spirit of service must take precedence.

There is also criticism that NGOs come up with small, successful models which they can never scale up. Mehta does not find this criticism valid.

"There is value in depth. People who say this are ill informed. What we need to ask ourselves is why are so many people so badly served? There are path breaking NGOs and those who are not effective. It's not a good idea to aggregate the sector."

The failure to bring down poverty figures despite the growth of the NGO sector is a collective failure-of government, society and NGOs, he points out.

98 per cent of all development work is done through govt programmes. If voluntary organizations want to take over they have to address their capacity to show results.

'We need to go back to the basics of banking'

Mohammad Yunus, founder of Bangladesh's iconic Grameen Bank, says: "We live in an ocean of money. Connect people with that ocean. Dependence on foreign money is not a good idea."

Grameen Bank has shown how people can be brought out of poverty by providing micro-credit. The poor are not just reliable borrowers, but also save and want to see their money work as much as the rich do.

At the time of a downturn, Grameen Bank is not affected because it operates in the real economy of goods and services as opposed to the one which is driven by perceived valuations and paper wealth.

"We need to go back to the basics of banking. My advice to bankers is, don't build castles in the air. The market is not a gambling casino. It must have its own inbuilt solutions for failures. Government bailouts make no sense," says Yunus.

The problem is that established financial systems are not designed for the poor in terms of access, delivery and end results. Big banks therefore do not live up to the challenges of development in an emerging economy. They do not know how to collect from the poor and they do not know how to give to them.

"The big banks are like super tankers. Banks for the poor are like a dingy. We need shallow waters and short distances," says Yunus.

Grameen Bank's success has been great defined by a separate law which governs its functioning and is suited to the dingy in shallow waters.

Yunus believes that the time is right for a separate law on microfinance in India. "Pakistan has legislation so does Uganda, Venezuela. China does not allow deposits. NGOs should connect with one body, set standards and create a law."

In Bangladesh initially the Grameen Trust was created as a fund to get rolling. However, legal issues prevented it from connecting with the people.

"In 1976, I started like an agent of the bank, offering myself as a guarantor to give loans to poor people. It was not a good idea," explains Yunus. "A separate bank and a separate law were needed and we campaigned for it. In 1983 we got the Grameen Bank law. Grameen Bank is owned by poor people and that is still its strongest point."

Grameen Bank takes deposits from the poor and lends to the poor. There is no confusion over identity and purpose. For a brief period in the nineties Grameen Bank took foreign money at the urging of the



Mohammad Yunus

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Bangladesh government.

It soon stopped because it found that dealing with a foreign source was too much of a headache. It was easier, more sustainable much more tied into the mission of the Grameen Bank to raise money locally. "We found we could raise \$ 100 million right here," says Yunus.

"In 2004, we were setting up one branch per day. We added 400 new branches in just one year mobilising local money and starting the bank. Eighty per cent of these branches came to the break even point. In 2005, we were starting one and a half branches per day so we set up 500 branches that year. Expansion is easy so long as the financial system is in place," says Yunus.

The Grameen Bank was set up as an opportunity not to make money but to help the poor come out of poverty. Everything it does serves that end. Its rate of interest is the same as that of the Agriculture Bank of Bangladesh, which is very low.

"In 1996, the government raised the salary of employees by 40 per cent. We too raised our salaries. But we had to raise the interest rate from 16 per cent to 20 per cent. We could not meet expenses and we are still struggling to go back to 16 per cent quarterly compounded," says Yunus.

So it is not as though a separate law seals off Grameen Bank from the rest of the economy. What it does allow it to do is pursue its mission of eradicating poverty within an alternative regulatory structure. Reaching small customers who will save and borrow and have ownership requires a certain flexibility in design.

"We now give several types of loans. Housing loans at 8 per cent, student loans at 5 per cent, and this is the biggest amount Rs 250 crore

was taken, for beggars the interest rate is zero," says Yunus.

"There are other things we do. In 1984 we took 16 decisions to promote societal things like health, dowry, schooling, drinking water, and created programs to support this. It went to eight million of our borrowers. Today, night blindness does not exist."

Grameen Bank has a 'five star' system to assess the performance of staff. More deposits get a star for profit. If all children are in school, the bank gets a star. If all families are out of poverty, there is a star. "We have 10 indicators and we check it out with the family. Do they, for instance, have clothes, beds etc. Real, concrete symbols which can be checked. This is part of the bank's work," says Yunus.

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Business

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Stumped by CSR ? Get a mentor

Four Bangalore firms turn to TVS

Civil Society News
New Delhi

A year ago, Greeta Varughese was listening to a presentation on how the TVS Motor Co had helped improve life in the villages around its factories.

The women in the villages had been helped to set up businesses. Toilets had been constructed and school buildings renovated. Drinking water had been provided and problems of health and hygiene had been addressed.

Varughese, as senior director of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), wondered why more companies couldn't play a role in rural development just as TVS had. It was a question to which she very quickly found the answer: they just didn't know where to begin.

The companies either worried about spending too little or too much. They weren't sure about how to connect in a rural setting. Those that cared didn't have people on board who could translate their empathy into action. Managements feared being trapped between competing political interests.

It was then that Varughese conceived of the Namma Halli or My Village project. CII members were invited to adopt a village. They would put up the money, but the work would be done by the Srinivasan Services Trust (SST), which, led by Ashoke Joshi, looks after TVS' social initiatives.

It was in fact Joshi's presentation that sparked Varughese's interest in the first place and she had been in touch with him ever since on how SST's rich experience in four Indian states and some 300 villages could be used to persuade other companies to spread their wealth a bit and work for the development of rural Karnataka.

What is particularly attractive about SST's approach is that it works towards sustainability. Projects are handed over to the community and there is participation right from the beginning.

Mphasis, the IT company, was the first to come forward and adopt four villages in the gram panchayat of Doora. It has been followed by Shelk Software, Fowler Westrup and now Volvo.

Together these companies are pledged to put-



Mphasis volunteers conduct an awareness campaign in the Doora gram panchayat villages

CII members were invited to adopt a village. They would put up the money, but the work would be done by the Srinivasan Services Trust.

ting up Rs 30 lakhs a year for three years. SST does the work on their behalf in the villages. Volunteers from the companies visit the villages according to strict schedules as the interest and commitment among employees grows.

So, what the Namma Halli project really does is deploy the resources of companies for rural development even before these companies are ready

for such involvements. SST serves as catalyst: both on the ground in the villages and in motivating the companies to build their own capacities for CSR.

It has been just eight months or so, but the first results of this unique effort are pretty impressive. Self-help groups (SHGs) have been set up involving 885 women. Of them 113 are involved in activities that bring them more than Rs 1,500 each a month.

Nineteen farmers' associations have been formed with 358 members. They are learning to follow scientific and improved agricultural practices such as testing and treating the soil, using quality seeds and manure and so on.

Sixteen veterinary camps have been held where 5,820 animals have been attended to so that livestock is free from disease. The result is that milk yields from 1,069 cows have gone up.

Awareness has been created of the need for per-

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Soil and new MBA roots

Civil Society News
New Delhi

sonal hygiene, health and sanitation. More than 200 toilets have been constructed. Young mothers have been told about the importance of immunisation. Assessments have been made of the nutrition levels of children.

Anganwadis have been improved with toilets, kitchens and play areas. Mothers have been encouraged to become volunteers. Parent-teacher meetings are held at all schools.

"Namma Halli was a dream project for us at CII, but it was Ashoke Joshi and SST who made it possible," says Varughese.

The companies provide the money but there are strict norms for them engaging with the work on the ground. The sending in of volunteers is encouraged but well regulated so that there are no dissonances and the approaches that SST makes aren't derailed.

"You could call it an inspirational model," says S Viswanathan, managing director of John Fowler India, whose subsidiary John Fowler Westrup has pledged Rs 10 lakhs a year. Viswanathan was also the head of CII in Karnataka when Namma Halli was being conceptualised.

Viswanathan hopes that Namma Halli will lead to a greater spirit of voluntarism within his company. Perhaps the older employees, on their way into retirement, will want to begin working for such social causes. They could in turn help serving employees come out and serve in CSR initiatives much earlier in life.

"In CII we would have examples of companies providing clean water or building a school or setting up a clinic. But it was all disaggregated. We were also not sure of the long-term and sustained results," says Viswanathan. "What we wanted was an activity which would be done within a certain time, have measurable returns on the money spent and have a clear plan and feedback."

That is exactly what the companies found in SST's approach. It was programmed for measurable results. Interestingly, SST also believes in external auditing of its development initiatives.

"We all want to do something. The problem is that we don't know where to begin and how to proceed," explains Viswanathan. "SST because of its experience was able to undertake the social development work on our behalf and in doing so has showed us the way. In the fullness of time as employee interest grows perhaps we can take up such projects ourselves. For the time being we are happy to get results working through SST."

At Mphasis, Meenu Bhambani, head of CSR, says: "We have no interest in taking over." When people at Mphasis saw the work done by SST at other locations near TVS plants, they were so impressed that they felt it would be a good idea to support the Namma Halli project. Letting SST do the work on behalf of Mphasis was the natural choice. "SST are experts in their own field," says Bhambani. "They have been working with an empowering philosophy and we found that very attractive."

Bhambani joined Mphasis two years ago with the mandate to give focus and visibility to CSR. Thus far Mphasis has been working through NGOs. Bhambani has also helped grow the company's involvement in bringing disabled people into the workforce.

Mphasis has a presence at 11 locations in the

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OF what do most MBA students dream? Why, a fat pay cheque, of course. And what kind of new recruits do companies look for when they go to business school campuses? Why, they want the guys who will strain every sinew to get that fat pay cheque.

The relentless search for profits has invariably governed what companies do -- how they

failed corporations is any thing to go by.

But the difference now is that the emphasis is changing. It won't do any longer to have a value-based approach as business school decoration. It has got to be the real thing; a whole new approach to the way business itself is done. The question then is where to begin.

In India, Soil wants to go the whole distance and lead the way in pursuing this new identity for a business school: one that cares, looks within, celebrates wealth but doesn't forget poverty, stands for what is the right thing at all costs and so on.

So, Soil will teach HR and finance like the others, but the point of origin for all that it imparts will be a just and equitable society, the notion of trusteeship and shared resources. There is a heavy load of messages in the name itself. Soil as an acronym makes you think of the environment, nature, sustainability, agriculture, landlessness. And when you spell out Soil there is "inspired leadership", which really doubles the load.

Sachdev explains that ethics, mindful and transformational leadership, compassion and sustainability are the essential pillars of inspired leadership. That sounds cool at first, but how do you really teach such things? And who is really out there to do the teaching? So, what are the founders really promising? Is Soil just too pat, too clever? Are we witnessing some excessive branding going on here? Is the branding so complete, so perfect that we need to be wary? Are those stock pictures in the brochure a giveaway?

Only time will tell how good a business school Soil is going to be. Right now it perhaps deserves to be taken at face value.

Soil will have two full-time one-year postgraduate courses in "HR Leadership" and "Business Leadership". The curricula are designed to help the students plug into a global business environment.

Among the innovations that are being planned, Soil students will be required to involve themselves with NGOs right through the course. Students will also have mentors from industry. It is called the individual learning plan (ILP) under which the mentor helps with the assimilation of course material and the shaping of career goals.

Some 15 companies have already agreed to be associated with Soil and will link up as creative partners. These companies include Tata Steel, Dr. Reddy's Laboratories, Schneider Electric, Mahindra & Mahindra, SRF, GlaxoSmithKline, Anand Group, Unilever, Bharat Petroleum and Max India.



Nischae Suri and Anil Sachdev

hire, fire and stack numbers. But the economic downturn and collapse of markets seem to be ushering in some new thinking.

Suddenly there are promoters and managements seeking out the "real economy", looking for "real wealth" and wanting to hire "real leaders". Companies are wondering how they can engage better with society, spread prosperity and earn respect. Business schools, anxious not to be out of sync, are reorienting themselves to produce managers who are as nuanced with issues of social responsibility as they are with finance.

In Gurgaon, in the periphery of Delhi, one such institution that is acquiring shape is the School of Inspirational Leadership or Soil.

Soil's got Anil Sachdev as its founder and CEO. Nischae Suri is the president. Both men have seen the hurly burly of corporate life. Sachdev has been with the Tatas, Eicher and had his own consultancy called Grow Talent, which he sold off for \$ 5 million to invest in this school. Suri was with Hewitt and doing really well for himself.

Sachdev and Suri believe that the time has come to train managers who care about ethics, sustainability, spiritualism and so much else that could make a company go far beyond its own bottom line and contribute to the balance sheet of society.

Is this entirely original? No. Business schools across the globe have always thrown in something on values to balance the hardnosed priorities that managers are supposed to live by. Did they get their message across? No, if the heap of

BUSINESS

Continued from Page 22

country and the intention is to have social initiatives at each of these.

But there has been a growing feeling among Mphasis employees that they are far too city-oriented and need to do something for rural areas.

The Namma Halli project fills this gap. The villages are in Mysore and rather far from Bangalore, but SST's involvement gave them confidence.

Mphasis also normally funds a project for one year. But this time it made an exception and committed itself to Rs 28 lakhs over three years. "We realised that a commitment like this was needed to make the project self-sustaining. We also respected SST's record of handing over and withdrawing," explains Bhambani.

The involvement of Mphasis employees has been limited to day-long visits to the villages. They have focussed on spreading awareness on health and hygiene and the importance of kitchen gardens. Local teachers have asked them to help with holding a science exhibition. A cricket match is planned to bring out the youth in the villages and then expose them to a session on entrepreneurship development.



Ashoke Joshi

This may be limited personal involvement, but it is fulfilling nevertheless. "We have seen 340 kitchen gardens come up," says Bhambani.

So, what is it that SST can do that others can't? What is it that qualifies it to be a mentor?

SST is the result of TVS' corporate philosophy to be inclusive in its business practices. For instance, TVS is one company that hasn't had to worry about lower-caste recruitment quotas

for the private sector.

What SST has managed to do is build competencies in taking this corporate philosophy forward in real terms. For instance, how can rural women be helped to set up SHGs? And how can those SHGs build businesses that greatly transform the lives of families around TVS plants?

SST has taken lower caste women who had nothing and helped them set up chapatti making businesses and from the profits they have ended up buying land on which they cultivate bananas. Their children now not only go to school but college as well.

So, SST knows how to make an entry into a village and win trust. "We work through the women, set up SHGs and from there take on other things," says Joshi.

The Village Development Council (VDC) plays

an important role because it is necessary to proceed through discussion and consensus. It won't do to dictate and implement without local involvement.

Nothing should be free. So, families in a village are expected to contribute small sums towards infrastructure, cleanliness drives and so on. The VDC is where such involvement converges. At first perhaps just a few people will come forward, but then others follow.

Sometimes a VDC can end on a high note with all those attending it trooping off to clean up the village or undertake some such collective activity.

SST works through community development officers and village level animators. They have to have good antennae. It is a gentle process, as tentative and watchful as it is evangelical.

SST works to schedules. Projects are not only taken up in a collaborative spirit but also handed over to the people they are meant to benefit. An important aspect of SST's work is to teach people to access government resources. These resources are often available but go untapped.

Joshi has ensured that SST is action oriented. He is interested in results, evaluation and operability. Asked about the Namma Halli project, Joshi says he does not know whether the companies will take over after three years. If they do it will be great. If they don't it doesn't matter. The projects would anyway be owned by the villagers and improvements would have been achieved.



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Insights

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5Cs for rural ICT

ASHOK DESAI

INFORMATION and Communication Technology (ICT) has become an inseparable part of our daily lives. However, the immense potential of ICT to catalyze development is still largely unrealized in India.

This is not to say that ICT has not been utilized in a variety of applications. In fact, there has been immense growth and application of ICT in both public and private spheres.

However, there has been a lack of synergy between them which has undermined the effectiveness of harnessing the power of ICT for development goals.

The government has launched ambitious programs towards harnessing ICT in its social services and civic services through its national e-governance programme. It has recognized the potential of ICT in stimulating critical pulse points of the economy. These include facilitating distance learning and education; providing remote services such as healthcare; creating virtual libraries and repositories of knowledge; establishing virtual markets, and enabling remote administration.

Three Cs of ICT: The dimensions of ICT that determine its effectiveness in promoting development can be assessed in terms of five broad variables - Content, Connectivity, Capacity-building, Consumer orientation, Convergence and Coordination. The effective deconstruction of these 5 C's and how they have been utilized so far spells out the warp and weft of maximizing the power of ICT to forge development.

Content: The content on official web sites has so far related almost entirely to government services and official information. The model has been one of government as provider and citizens as passive receivers; and the definition of what is to be disseminated has been severely limited. But it is possible to think of broader

The content on official websites has so far related almost entirely to govt services and official information. The model is of govt as provider.



LAKSHMAN ANAND

content with greater developmental impact - content aimed at building up knowledge and capability.

Connectivity: After the Indian telecommunications market was opened up to private competition in the early 1990s, both private and government operators have been driven by commercial incentives, focused on cities and needs a more even spread. The government has tried to balance these by imposing conditions of rural reach on all operators in the form of the universal service obligation. But the objective of this policy - to connect as many villages as possible - has been too limited; and it has been poorly served.

Capacity building: An important element in any strategy to broaden access would be recruitment of small, private last-mile distributors. These already exist in a simple form; telephone kiosks, run separately or as parts of shops, are widespread. But if content of internet services is broadened to serve development purposes, the market will expand, and will call for a larger number of distributors and better trained, specialized knowledge distribution centres.

Consumer orientation: If content is expanded as suggested above, it will be important to ask who would be the consumers, and to adapt content to what they want. The system should be able to consumer complaints, and embody an expeditious mechanism for redressal.

Convergence and coordination: If content is diversified, it will come from a larger number of con-

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INSIGHTS

(Continued from page 29)

tent providers who will have to respond to customer needs and ensure updation of content provide. At the other end, the service distributor will in effect be the agent for providers, and would need to manage feedback and demands from consumers as well as ensure that they reach the right content providers. This will require large-scale coordination between content providers and distributors.

Then and now: Internet started in India in 1986, and made a slow beginning. From 10,000 users in 1992, the number of Internet Users reached just 60 million in 2005 - just over 5 per cent of the population.

Internet in India suffers from certain fundamental constraints such as low computer intensity. Computer users account for 10% of the whole population. Moreover, the number of internet users within computer users is proportionally low. Computer penetration is hampered by affordability, and availability of power. Language too is a major handicap in the spread of the Internet as most of the content available on the Internet is in English and Anglophones are just 6 per cent of India's population.

The Indian market for the Internet is largely urban, and the usage trends mainly reflect the urban users. Although the internet has many uses, trends indicate that over 60 per cent of Internet users use it for communications.

There has been a rise in access for entertainment, presumably as children and students take to the net in increasing numbers. A fifth of the users seek information on the net, with virtually no business users in 2000; now some 5 per cent access the net for e-commerce.

The government fully embraced ICT around 1999 when it set up the Ministry of Information Technology. Subsequently, National Informatics Centre (NIC) under Department of Information Technology was set up to provide IT consultancy services to all governments. NIC ushered ICT adoption in the day to day functioning of Government offices such as mail, files, case files, land records, public distribution, and personnel management. NIC was also given the power to provide connectivity as part of the Government's e-governance initiative. As it turned out, these dedicated networks were under utilized for several reasons. The volume of government services for which it was designed was too low and the

network faced lack of maintenance. Moreover, several state governments made deals with private telecommunication operators active in the states and, when giving them right of way, obtained free or cheap telecommunication facilities. However, such statewide area networks were not necessarily connected to NICNET, and would have been useless for a national government network without interconnection.

As a course correction measure, Department of Information Technology in 2004 offered state governments to bear the cost of installation, operation and maintenance of their area networks for five years even if they were erected by private operators, provided they allowed NIC to interconnect the networks. However, states continue to operate their own, non-uniform area networks. From this offer emerged a new model - that of Community Service Centres (CSCs).

The Central Government proposes to set up 1,12,000 CSCs to provide broadband in rural areas. This model is still in its early stages, so it cannot be appraised.

For such mass based initiatives, the delivery of services has to be designed on innovative low-cost computing solutions. Such innovations will necessarily be built around low-cost models for data repositories, cloud computing options, thin clients or similar variants. These will need to be made accessible to a range of product and service providers to ensure cooperative conditions in the last mile delivery of ICT products and services.

As a part of its bigger mass based agenda for ICT the government is studying the possibilities of delivering services such as education, health care, rural livelihood generation, empowerment of the disabled, and rural connectivity. Towards this objective, the government has set up a non-profit company called Media Lab Asia which could engage scientists and technologists and take in capital from outside the government.

It has been working closely with teachers and students of Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur. Similarly, there are many organizations

that are experimenting with other low-cost and scalable models. Green Foundation, an NGO, and Microsoft Research have developed and incubated a pilot program for creating a social network and learning platform for farmers called 'Digital Green'. It uses laptops and DVD players to record successful farm practices.

State government websites reflect varying degrees of innovativeness, applications and ambition. The interactivity is however limited across states. The evaluation pattern of the government to judge the e-governance initiatives too follows no established criteria.

At present, the delivery of civic services and payment of various taxes top the evaluation table. However, the focus is entirely on the end usage without ascertaining the actual demand of the service and time efficiencies of meeting that demand.

The education system lacks resources to address the needs of people living in rural and remote areas. ICT can overcome the shortcoming.

Looking ahead: While the power of ICT spreads across domains, there are certain verticals such as financial markets and commodity markets, where ICT can be leveraged to gain vast benefit. Similarly, the utility market especially electricity and water hold vast potential for ICT based solutions. In fact, based on an innovative concept of virtual currency, ICT can stimulate the working of payment systems across verticals.

The education domain particularly can gain tremendously with the power of ICT. The education market in India has grown exponentially in recent times. However, there is still a mismatch between demand for education and capacity of formal education system. The education system lacks resources to address the needs of people living in rural and remote areas. ICT can overcome the shortcoming in the education system based on specifically tailored approach of five C's.

The importance of using the strength of technology to pursue developmental goals may not be a new thought. However, what is required is a synchronized effort to ensure that these pillars of technological support be sustained by the market so that their impact on developmental goals can be maximized.

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Water not UPA's strength

HIMANSHU THAKKAR

ONE important aspect of the general elections for the 15th Lok Sabha is that it is supposed to be an opportunity to hold the ruling coalition accountable for its performance, errors of commission and omission. On water issues, the performance of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) over the last five years has been quite poor. And yet, there is little possibility of holding them accountable in these elections.

There are many indicators of the poor track record of the UPA on water issues. The continuing spate of farmer suicides is significantly linked with irrigation issues where the UPA's failure is clear. A SANDRP study in 2007 showed that after spending over Rs 99,610 crores on big irrigation projects over 12 years ending in 2004, the net area irrigated by big irrigation projects has actually dropped by 3.17 million ha. More recent figures of the UPA years confirm this trend. These figures from the Union Agriculture Ministry contradict the claims of the Union Ministry of Water Resources (MWR). The MWR has been claiming that the irrigation potential created and utilised has been increasing every year. Such a claim was necessary since most of the water sector budget from the Union government goes for funding big irrigation projects. Why should such projects be funded if they are not providing any additional benefits and, on the contrary, the area irrigated by such projects is declining?

So in August 2007 the Union Ministry of Water Resources asked the four IIMs (Indian Institutes of Management) to study what it called the discrepancy between these figures and to study the gap between the potential and utilisation as in MWR's own figures. The final reports of the four IIMs were submitted in December 2008 and were made publicly available in March 2009. These reports support what the SANDRP study showed, that indeed there is an increasing gap between the figures claimed by the MWR and the figures of actual irrigation from the Ministry of Agriculture.

In fact, these reports also show the poor state of our record keeping in this vital area. The IIM, Ahmedabad, failed to get irrigation data from the respective states and concluded, "... either because they don't have such organized data or because, for some reason they did not like to part with their data."

What all this means is that the UPA government's continued funding of big irrigation projects was a wrong step. A very large proportion of the water sector budget continued to go for such projects during UPA rule and the same wrong priorities continue for the ongoing 11th Five Year Plan, formulated by the UPA govt.

India's real lifeline is groundwater and whatever increase in irrigation areas and in agricultural growth has happened over the last decade and a half, is largely from groundwater use. However, that lifeline is in a precarious situation with groundwater levels falling at most places and quality deteriorating at many others. The UPA government failed

to achieve anything significant in changing that situation. There is no progress in achieving groundwater regulation. In the second half of its tenure, the UPA government did start a project on groundwater recharge, but that remains mostly unimplemented and in any case does not get the priority it deserves.

The UPA's track record in reversing the destruction of groundwater recharge systems and ensuring rivers flowing with freshwater, protection of lakes, tanks, and wetlands etc is miserable. Following several agitations, more or less to take the issue away

LAKSHMAN ANAND



New Delhi's dirty river Yamuna

from the opposition, the UPA decided to create the National Ganga River Authority. However, the notification constituting the authority shows that there is no hope from that initiative either as it is in line with failed attempts of the past-it is top down, unaccountable, non participatory, centralized, with zero role for the real stakeholders. India still does not have a legal requirement for rivers to have freshwater flow to sustain the economic, social, cultural and environmental benefits from flowing rivers. Indeed, our system has zero value for rivers with freshwater flow.

On the controversial interlinking of rivers (ILR), the UPA in its Common Minimum Programme said: "The UPA government will make a comprehensive assessment of the feasibility of linking the rivers of the country starting with the south-bound rivers. This assessment will be done in a fully consultative manner." The UPA government has clearly failed in this respect. There has been no comprehensive assessment "in fully consultative manner" or otherwise. Having been a member of the government's Committee of Experts on ILR since January 2008, I can say that this committee was not even consulted on crucial matters under its limited mandate, leave aside the question of it being a vehicle for such a

consultative assessment. In fact members of this committee have been denied basic information about river linking proposals and it has been a struggle to ensure even inclusion of these crucial issues in the minutes of the meetings. This can only be called pathetic performance on its declared programme.

The CMP also claimed to give the topmost priority to providing drinking water to all, but here again, its performance is far from encouraging. One useful step would have been to provide a legally binding right to drinking water, which the UPA did not provide. On the contrary, the UPA has tried to push privatization of drinking water through the Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission. The number of uncovered and partially covered rural habitations under drinking water has increased under the UPA regime. In fact, one of the biggest factors leading to the deteriorating situation is the pollution of water resources and here again the UPA government has completely failed to achieve any success in controlling pollution.

The UPA government had the unique opportunity to reverse wrong policies when it formulated the National Water Mission under the National Action Plan on Climate Change. The UPA's MWR, instead, has used the mission to push for more large dams, river linking plans and long distance water transfer plans.

Some among the UPA government functionaries are likely to argue that water is a state subject and the Centre cannot do much. While water is indeed rightly a state subject (it would be better if water was a community subject but the Constitution has no such category) the Centre has a huge and influential role and the UPA government has used that influence in a completely wrong direction.

It is also true that the performance of the previous NDA government was worse on these issues, but that is of little help for the people facing the consequences of these failures. One should add that the Right to Information (RTI) Act and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) are two positive contributions of the UPA and both potentially have positive implications for the water sector. In fact, in the case of NREGA, the priority given to rural water works is particularly welcome. The potential of this positive step can be realized if there are enabling mechanisms to provide accountability mechanisms and to provide financial, technical and other help to the rural communities.

In spite of this pathetic state of affairs, the elections are of little help in either holding the UPA government accountable for its failures in the water sector, or ensuring better performance in future. In fact, these issues are not even in the forefront among the hot election issues.

This also shows how far we are from achieving a true democracy.

Himanshu Thakkar (ht.sandrp@gmail.com)
South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People (www.sandrp.in)

Living

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

Firaaq is straight from the heart

Saibal Chatterjee
Delhi

IN an industry where risk-taking is usually a strict no-no and commercial considerations override all other concerns, life can never be easy for somebody like actor-turned-filmmaker Nandita Das. Essentially a social rights activist who believes in tapping the power of her craft to articulate issues that matter to her, she is constantly at odds with the industry's insular, profit-driven ethos.

It's been no different with her directorial debut, *Firaaq*, a film that probes the emotional impact of the 2002 Gujarat communal carnage, which left thousands dead and many times that number scarred for life. It's a narrative that she opted to put on the screen precisely because certain forces didn't want the world to hear its shrill echo.

To avoid disruptions during filming, Nandita shot the film primarily in Hyderabad. "We had to hunt for locations that were similar to those in Ahmedabad," she says.

Pretty much like the 30-odd on-screen roles that Nandita has essayed in a career that began nearly a decade and a half ago, *Firaaq* is a daring departure from the norm. "I could have," she says, "chosen a safer theme for my first film as a director. But then, I live in Delhi. I am not really a part of the Mumbai industry. I do not have to follow its rules."

Says Nandita: "My identity as an activist has never been independent of my work. I've always been involved with film projects that were essential even if they weren't in great demand. So, when I decided to direct a film of my own, I couldn't have changed my approach."

The choice of Auckland-based Shuchi Kothari as co-screenplay writer was deliberate, Nandita adds. "I was looking for somebody with in-depth knowledge and understanding of the situation, somebody who would share my values and concerns. A typical Bollywood writer would have been out of place here." A native of Gujarat, Kothari is married to a Pakistani who grew up in



Nandita Das directing actor Naseeruddin Shah

the United Kingdom.

Nandita describes *Firaaq* (the Urdu word means both 'separation' and 'quest') as "a work of fiction based on a thousand true stories". Indeed, in her remarkably fluid narrative, it is difficult to tell where the bone-chilling reality ends and the merely imagined or constructed begins.

Firaaq is a searing portrait of characters caught in a vortex of communal hatred and grappling with its impact. Set in the immediate aftermath of the 2002 Gujarat riots, the film revolves around five different sets of characters, some hapless victims, some perpetrators of violence, and others mere silent spectators.

The multiple strands of *Firaaq* flow and intersect in an easy arc, creating just the right emotional ambience for a slew of disturbing questions to leap out at the audience and sow the seeds of a constructive debate. Says Nandita: "Some people

have accused the film of being one-sided. The reality itself was one-sided. I couldn't have balanced it artificially. How can violence unleashed on innocent people ever have another side to it?"

But Nandita certainly isn't averse to a debate. In fact, that is precisely what, she asserts, *Firaaq* is meant to provoke. "I intended *Firaaq* to be a small mirror that shows us not only who we are, but also who we can be. I want to engage with people whose prejudices are deep-rooted as well as with those whose faith in their beliefs and idealism are fading away in a communally charged atmosphere. *Firaaq* isn't really targeted at the already converted."

Firaaq works as a film, and as a heartfelt plea for sanity, primarily because Nandita plays down its political aspects, crucial as they are, and lays stress on the far more essential human elements embedded in the storyline. Aided by a clutch of fine actors, the stories that unfold over a 24-hour time frame are both engaging and disturbing. The film provides a rounded and universally resonant view of the fears, doubts, misunderstandings and suspicions that have for years and decades been gnawing away at the vitals of a divided society.

Nandita draws her stories from diverse seg-

In Nandita's remarkably fluid narrative, it is difficult to tell where the bone-chilling reality ends and the merely imagined or constructed begins.



Shahana Goswami

ments of society. A young, urban cross-religious couple, Sameer Shaikh (Sanjay Suri) and Anuradha Desai (Tisca Chopra), seeks to get away from the toxicity of the situation by relocating to a new city as the Muslim husband struggles to balance his compulsion to deny his identity and the urge to assert it with greater force than ever.

An ordinary Hindu homemaker (Deepthi Naval) grapples with the whims of a hate-mongering husband (Paresh Rawal) and is haunted by guilt and the anguished face of a woman who she could have saved from a frenzied mob but didn't.

When a Muslim auto-rickshaw driver (Nowaz) and his wife (Shahana Goswami) return to their modest tenement to find it completely razed to the ground, the man plots revenge even as the wife clings on to the last vestiges of hope.

In a predominantly Hindu locality, an ageing, idealistic classical vocalist, Khan Saheb



Mohd Samad

(Naseeruddin Shah) mourns the passing away of his neighbourhood's pluralistic traditions while hoping for good sense to eventually prevail.

A little orphan-boy, Mohsin (Hyderabad school-boy Mohd Samad), wanders through this benighted landscape searching for a father who went

missing when his Muslim majority locality was attacked by a frenzied mob. Each encounter changes the boy a little and he becomes a metaphor as much for loss of innocence as for undying hope.

"These are stories that I absolutely had to share with my audience. They were festering in my head," says Nandita, mindful of the fact that cinema, unlike poetry or painting, isn't a "personal art". Making the film was only half the journey, she says. "Getting it across to an audience was the second, more difficult half. Reaching out to people and eliciting reactions from them was absolutely crucial."

While she may have got responses, both positive and negative, from around the world, Nandita is less than happy with the way the film's producers have handled the domestic release of Firaq. "I chose a mainstream producer because I wanted my film to be marketed and distributed right," she says. "But that, sadly, hasn't really happened."

Firaq began its international journey last year at the Telluride Film Festival, before travelling to the Toronto International Film Festival. It has since been feted in London, Pusan, and Thessaloniki. In Singapore's Asian Festival of First Films late last year, it bagged as many as three top awards.

Says Nandita: "I enjoyed taking Firaq to festivals around the world. It struck a chord wherever it was screened because there is a collective desire for peace all around the world today. But what I was really waiting for was the film's release in India. I felt that it was here that people would relate most to the context and understand the nuances."

The stage was set. Firaq arrived preceded by a giant buzz. But the film's distribution strategy, laments Nandita, did little to cash in on that. She adds: "They don't give your film a decent release, do not market it well and then they give your kind of cinema a bad name, call it a niche film, a film meant only for festivals. That is not fair at all - there is an audience out there for films like Firaq."

PRODUCTS

SHOP WITH DEVOTION

Arpana Trust inaugurated its brand new shop, Devotion, at E-22 Defence Colony in New Delhi on 19 September. For quite some years, Arpana had been selling products under the Devotion brand name at various locations. Now everything has been brought under one roof at an easily accessible location.

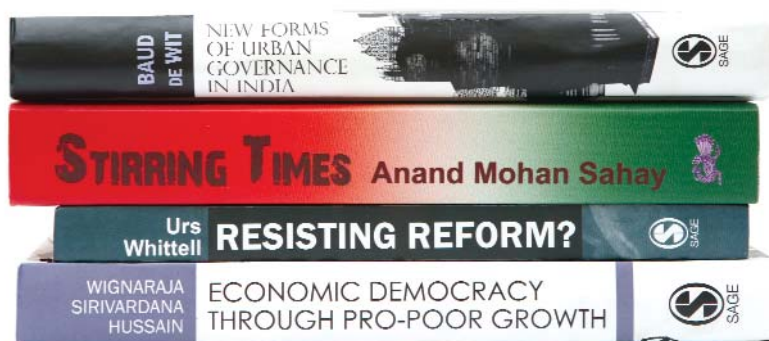
Devotion was inaugurated by the religious head of the Arpana Trust. The shop has all of Devotion's neat and attractive products. You can buy pretty had embroidered bedspreads, baby frocks, towels, nightwear, table mats, table cloth, napkins, kurtis and much more. The shop has a new range of gift items as well as religious publications and CDs.

The products are made by rural women in Haryana. The Arpana Trust has organised them and helped them learn handicraft skills and earn an income. Arpana also assists with material, design and marketing. So when you buy a lovely product you also help some 200 rural families.



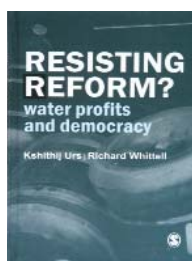
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A QUICK SELECTION FROM THE MANY BOOKS THAT TURN UP FOR REVIEW

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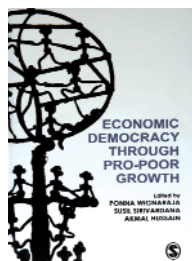
This book denounces water privatisation in Bangalore in no uncertain terms. The authors examine the Greater Bangalore Water and Sanitation Project (GBWASP) which, once completed, will provide piped water to the IT city's hinterland. Bangalore's new rich settled here. The urban local bodies, strapped for cash, couldn't meet their justified demands for water, roads and electricity. Once the local government becomes the target of middle class anger, privatisation is mooted.

So the government will now build the infrastructure for the GBWASP and then hand over its management to private companies. The authors say elected councillors get sidelined in the name of people's participation, a new 'corporate agency' comes into being and international funding agencies step forth to lend money. Foreign consultants who don't know the area are hired for indecent sums. It is a familiar story.

The authors argue that water privatisation is ethically unsound because the poor cannot afford to pay. They debunk the myth built by NGOs and development agencies that the poor are willing to pay. Full cost recovery is not possible. At best a poor person can pay three percent of his meagre earnings on water.

And what about the homeless or those below the poverty line? Bangalore's City Water Board has already shut down 6,000 public water taps, allege the authors.

The book says the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board has been doing water supply for 35 years. Since water cannot be regarded as a commodity, it is better for government agencies to get their act together and become more efficient. We have enough local experts and Indian companies who can provide consultancy if so required.



**ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY
THROUGH PRO- POOR
GROWTH**
*Edited: Ponna Wignaraja,
Susil Sirivardana, Akmal
Hussain*
Sage
Rs 695

Although South Asia threw out colonial rule a long time ago, the problem of poverty has not gone away. You could say, what to do the region is rife with ethnic strife and conflict. But even in India, the only stable democracy, the numbers of the poor are nearly static. A series of research papers in this book, courtesy the South Asian Perspectives Network Association (SAPNA), argue that the poor should be treated as a valuable resource. They need to be seen as a separate sector-the people's sector. For removing poverty, people need be organised, form partnerships and step out of their situation. The state, on its part, should restructure itself, reach out to organisations of the poor and tap their creativity and efficiency.

Part One of the book discusses what we have understood from a quarter century of learning from the poor. It locates the development debate in a historic context. Five core areas of cooperation in South Asia are identified: poverty eradication, food security, trade cooperation, payments union and a SAARC development fund. As Ponna Wignaraja writes, politics, social mobilisation and empowerment are critical.

The second part of the book discusses conceptual and methodological issues, which are very Gandhian. DL Seth writes on Participatory Action Research (PAR) to bridge the gap between knowledge and action. Akmal Hussein discusses participatory development in Punjab, Pakistan, highlighting the importance of local culture, organisations and training. Shrikrishna Upadhyaya writes on how to build community organisations giving as an example the work of Support Activities for Poor Producers of Nepal.

The third part of the book is on the role of facilitators, their sensitisation and training.

The amazing



STIRRING TIMES
Anand Mohan Sahay
Rs 495
Purple Peacock

Rita Anand
New Delhi

A lot has been written on India's freedom struggle. Now read a book that tells you what your history books never told you. Anand Mohan Sahay's biography is an absorbing account of the freedom movement as seen through the eyes of a man who was an indelible part of it.

Sahay's book would rank as original source material for researchers of history. Read it because it is the story of an amazing life honestly told with all the drama, fervour and hardship of those momentous years. Certain historical truths about the Azad Hind Fauj, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and the Indian patriots abroad have not been correctly interpreted by historians. This is the first time we get to know what really happened.

Anand Mohan Sahay dropped out of medical college in Patna to join the freedom movement when he met Mahatma Gandhi, after the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre. He served as Rajendra Prasad's secretary and was close to Gandhi. In 1922, after the first non-cooperation movement, he decided to go to the US to publicise the freedom struggle. A year later he ended up stranded in Japan with no money and no way of getting to the US. It was Nehru who advised him to stay on in Japan and gain support for the freedom movement. Sahay came into contact with Rashbehari Bose. He cultivated close relations with the Japanese and Indian communities in Southeast Asia, frequently travelling through the region. The circumstances under which the India Independence League and the INA were founded and how Netaji was invited to head it are written in graphic detail.

There are case studies on what goes wrong and what goes right. Part four is on the relations between the state and the grassroots. Kerala's panchayats are analysed- the evolution of local self-governance, the historic role of the KSSP and the People's Plan Model.

A second essay discusses decentralisation and governance in Pakistan where the provincial bureaucracy, under the thumb of feudal landlords, constantly bypasses elected grassroots representatives to paralyse the local government. There is also a case study from Bangladesh on the importance of linking the empowerment of the

life and times of Anand Mohan Sahay



Anand Mohan Sahay

Sahay comes across as a passionate freedom fighter deeply committed to securing India's freedom from colonial rule. He was also a man of great charm, a skilful diplomat who walked a tightrope between the Japanese, the Germans and the Chinese, while evading the British who were constantly on his trail. Though he gently understates the difficulties he faced we can see the hardship he and his family endured living in Japan all through the Second World War.

An unorthodox man he married Sati, niece of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das. His daughter Bharati Choudhry, then a beautiful 16-year-old, joined the INA's Rani Jhansi regiment. She is now



Bharati Choudhry (left) with her father and uncle

82 and lives in quiet oblivion in Jamshedpur with her son Sanjay who works for Tata Steel. Parts of her diary appear in the book and corroborate what Sahay is saying. After Independence, Sahay continued to serve India as a diplomat.

Why was the biography not published earlier? Why this long silence? Bharati says it was circumstance. A friend who took it to London died suddenly. Sahay then wrote an additional chapter but he passed away in 1992. Surprisingly, an important historical biography like this was turned down by some big publishing houses. It was, she says, her near and dear ones who in the end found a publisher. Historians checked it out. Finally, just 500 copies were printed: a sad thing for such an important book.

Sahay's biography clearly says Netaji died in a plane crash at Taihoku airport on 18 August 1945. "Netaji dies of 99 per cent burns," confirms Bharati. "Colonel Habibur Rehman who was with Netaji on that fateful day narrated the incident to my mother Sati Sahay at whose home he recuperated."

The assumption that Netaji and Mahatma Gandhi were at loggerheads is also wrong. Netaji referred to Gandhi as 'my father'. In the book

Gandhi inquires of Netaji when Sahay comes to meet him just before India gained freedom. Confronted with communal conflagration, Gandhi longs for Netaji's presence. He is needed most at this hour, he says. The INA was a model of communal harmony.

Through the book we note that the relationship between freedom fighters of the INA and the Congress was not an antagonistic one. There was quiet support. When Sahay and his fellow freedom fighters were imprisoned in Singapore, it was the Congress which lobbied for their release.

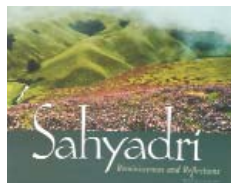
History has also failed to give the Indian diaspora its due. There were Indians abroad who had never been to India. Born and brought up in countries of Southeast Asia they were willing to lay down their lives for India's freedom. Business men contributed generously to the INA sometimes risking their lives to shelter them. Women came forward to donate all their jewellery.

Japan played a seminal role in giving birth to the INA. Beyond cold political calculations, there was an emotional connect with India which was emphasized by Sahay-Buddhism, the language Pali, the sympathy of one Asian power for another people struggling to win freedom. Even when the war went badly relations between the INA and the Japanese were cordial. For the INA's leaders, the enemy's enemy was their friend.

The INA leaders were willing to form relationships with anyone who could help them in their mission. Their yen for freedom made them clear headed and focussed. Sahay admired certain traits of the Japanese. He sent his children, Bharati, Sumona, Razia and Ashoke to Japanese schools. The family visited Shinto shrines.

The book was warmly received in Kolkata where it was launched. Historians have said that it is an important work because it is an original account by a person who lived through the freedom movement and was such a significant participant.

poor and social mobilisation with the local government.



**SAHYADRI
REMINISCENCES AND
REFLECTIONS**
Sudhirendar Sharma
Publisher: Prakruti
Contribution: Rs 200

The book is part of the ongoing 'Save the Western Ghats' campaign. It aims to create awareness of the big loss the country will face if we continue to

despoil the Sahyadri.

Stretching from the Tapti river to Kanyakumari, the Sahyadri or the Western Ghats cover the six southern states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Goa, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

This eco-zone with its forests, rivers, gorges, steep slopes and waterfalls is a veritable greenhouse for rare plants and species. But, beyond scenic splendour, the Western Ghats have a critical ecological function. India's monsoon depends on the high plateau of the Western Ghats.

The book is a tribute to the Sahyadri. It talks about the environmental degradation that has

taken place and calls for social action. It has articles by well known writers who capture different facets of this region. The stories explain varying perspectives of development and environment. The famous Appiko movement, inspired by the Chipko movement, is also written about. There are stories related to the flora and fauna of the region, like a rare blobby frog and the lovely kurinji flowers. There is a piece on Silent Valley, past and present. Wildlife photographers write on the adventure and angst of capturing that one fleeting image. The book has nice pictures done by NA Naseer.

How to match your food

Dr G G GANGADHARAN

GREEN CURES



IN Ayurveda there is an important concept called Viruddha ahara. This term refers to the incompatibility of certain food articles when consumed together. The concept of Viruddha ahara has important practical implications because incompatibility causes a lot of disturbance to the physiology of the body and gives rise to diseases of varied nature.

Over 20 different kinds of Viruddha ahara have been identified in Ayurveda. Some of these are:

- **Rasa viruddha:** Substances having sweet taste (like milk) should not be consumed with substances having sour

taste (fruits like grapes). In a very strict sense, it is hence unhealthy as per the norms of Ayurveda to drink the popular milk shakes of today.

- **Samskara viruddha:** These are food articles antagonistic in the way they are processed. Samskara means processing a food item to change its qualities, for example, by roasting, frying, steaming etc. Some healthy food substances produce harmful qualities when they undergo specific processing methods. Curds or honey on heating become harmful to the body.
- **Virya viruddha:** This refers to food articles that must not be mixed together owing to their virya. Virya is the potency of a food that can produce either hotness or coldness in the body while undergoing digestion. For instance, a food item prepared by using milk/buttermilk and fish together becomes antagonistic as milk is of shita virya (producing coldness) while fish is ushna virya (producing heat).
- **Samyoga viruddha:** This refers to food substances antagonistic due to the process of mixing. For instance, a mixture of fruits with sour taste and milk is contra-indicated. Also, a mixture of fish with curd, or of alcohol with milk products is antagonistic to each other.
- **Paka viruddha :** These are articles antagonistic in the way they are cooked. Uncooked food or partially cooked food is unhealthy.
- **Agni viruddha:** This means incompatibility due to a difference in the food ingested and agni (digestive capacity of an individual). For instance, if a person with manda agni (diminished digestive power) consumes a lot of food then it keeps piling up, leading to indigestion and disease. This will require him to fast.

Similarly a person with pitta predominance will have tikshna agni (increased digestive capacity) and has to take food articles which are guru (heavy), snigdha (oily) and manda (foods requiring a long time for digestion).

- **Satmya viruddha:** A person acquainted with certain food habits should not change his food habits all of a sudden. An abrupt change to a new food regimen is known as satmya viruddha.
- **Dosha viruddha:** Every person has a normal constitution and due to this he is prone to certain likes and dislikes from birth. A vata constitution type can stay healthy by taking food which is oily, heavy in nature and stable. Foods of these qualities help vata function normally. But, if the person consumes a diet which is dry, bitter, pungent, astringent and light then it would lead to the manifestation of disorders of vata.

TIPS ON DIET FOR HEALTH

- Every person should select a diet conducive to his nature, habitat and age. Such a course of action will help to maintain health and prevent disease.
- An improper diet results in abnormal doshas (vata, pitta and kapha) which in turn vitiates the body tissues, causes obstruction of the channels of nutrition, weakens the digestive fire, accumulating toxins in the body ultimately causing disease.
- The quantity of food ingested should be moderate and adequate and taken at the proper time.
- It is important to be conscious of cleaning one's hands, feet and mouth before eating food. The dining table, dishes, spoons, bowls, water containers and cooking utensils should be cleaned scrupulously.
 - The surroundings and atmosphere of the dining room should be clean, airy and fragrant. The clothes worn while doing outdoor duties should be changed and clean homely attire should be worn whenever eating at home.
- Ideally the food should be freshly prepared and warm. It should contain the six rasas or tastes (sweet, sour, salty, pungent, bitter, and astringent) in adequate proportion.
- Fatty content in proper quantity is essential in a diet, as it makes food tasty, bestows strength and promotes secretion of digestive juices. It also prevents excess production of vata dosha, nourishes the seven dhatus, increases strength, gives lustre to the skin and causes easy expulsion of stool and gas.
- Food should be taken after complete digestion of the previously taken meal. Roughly, the interval between breakfast and lunch should be around 4 to 5 hours and the gap between lunch and dinner should be about 5 to 6 hours. Dinner should ideally be taken before sunset and it is advisable to retire to bed 2 to 3 hours after taking



Continued on Page 33

Boost your self-confidence

SAMITA RATHOR

"Self-confidence is knowing that we have the capacity to do something good and firmly decide not to give up."

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

SELF confidence is to have faith in your self. Its impact extends to our daily lives. A confident being exudes positive traits. One of the primary goals of spirituality is to boost self confidence. Spirituality helps you to come closer to the inner self thereby releasing all your positive energies and calming down an agitated mind. Regular practice of meditation, yoga and deep breathing exercises helps one to de-stress and relax. This balances the mind and builds optimism and confidence.

The building of self-confidence isn't something that starts with will power. The ability to build self confidence has to start with spirituality which is a power outside the basic human will. The reason a person needs spirituality to build self confidence is that spirituality allows us to tap into a power outside our own resources or what we experience as our own resources.

Self confidence is the belief in oneself, to feel good and perform your best. However, this is easier said than done. Many people suffer from lack of confidence which further affects their productivity and happiness. It comes in between them and the life they want to lead. To progress in life we need to focus on decisions, implementation and results, apart from just meditating.

Look within

To increase self confidence the basic requirement is to look inside and see with an open minded our negative and positive traits. What assumptions did we make in our past that influenced us? What do we strive to become in future? What do we feel about ourselves at this moment? Why are

we upset? Why are we angry? Why are we sad? These are the answers we must seek. Most of the time negative emotions are there to test our ability and strength and to convert negative into positive emotions. Seek goodness in all and derive happiness from it. To be happy is the result of self confidence.

Deep rooted negative patterns of behaviour are related to our past that is interlinked with the way we behave and how we conduct ourselves. These can throw us beyond control and make us

SOUL VALUE

do things that seem natural at the time of occurrence. It is only later one realizes that these patterns of behaviour have occurred earlier in time.

Lack of self-confidence or low self-esteem would certainly be classified as a negative emotion or delusion, as it exaggerates one's limitations in aptitude, eminence and prospect for expansion. Lack of self-confidence can be made up of several different aspects like guilt, anger turned inwards, unrealistic expectations of perfection, false sense of humility, fear of change or making mistakes, depression and so on. Depression can actually also be due to lack of self confidence.

Here are 20 ways of increasing your self confidence:

- Consciously improve your actions and be aware of them.
- Be around positive environments, people and energies.
- Convert weaknesses and failures into challenges with determination to overcome them.
- Do something good without any expectations in return.

- Always accept responsibility for your conduct.
- Avoid excuses and blaming others.
- Do not be judgmental.
- Self discipline increases happiness and productivity.
- Set clear goals.
- Seek the company of people with high values and morals.
- Let your inner force drive you and not your materialistic dreams.
- Set realistic standards in your goals.
- Do not identify with criticism.
- Undertake a creative activity.
- Eradicate ill feelings for yourself and others.
- Give yourself positive auto suggestions. These affect our sub conscious levels and enhance our self confidence.
- Do a regular evaluation of your strengths and weaknesses.
- Be aware of your physical, mental and emotional states and needs. Realize their values and worth.
- Discuss your flaws and seek guidance.
- Increase faith and introspect.

People who are self confident generally exude 10 qualities. They are:

- Humble and disciplined.
- Strong decision makers.
- Responsible and dutiful.
- Optimistic.
- Always think of the benefit of others and understand them.
- Eager to learn.
- Solitary nature.
- Always ready to connect with others.
- Self belief.
- Inspired by their inner self worth.

Continued from Page 32

dinner. Eating food late at night and going to bed immediately produces indigestion, gaseous distention, hyperacidity and disturbed sleep.

- One should avoid consumption of viruddh ahara (antagonistic food) and vishamashana (improper method of food intake with regard to time and nature of food). Viruddh ahara produces skin diseases and vishamashana produces digestive disorders.
- One should not eat food hurriedly nor very slowly. One should masticate and chew the food properly and enjoy food cheerfully and consciously. It is necessary to be aware about the quantity of food intake and stop eating when one is adequately replenished.
- As a thumb rule, it could be said that half of the stomach should be filled with solid or semisolid food, one fourth should be filled with water and the remaining quarter should be kept empty for air.
- While taking food items of different tastes, the sequence of taking them should be like this- food items having sweet taste (madhura rasa) should be consumed first, then items having sour and salty tastes (amla and lavana rasas) should be eaten and lastly, items of other tastes should be taken. Food items having astringent taste should be taken at the end of a meal.
- The quantity of food that a person would need depends upon the agni (digestive power), prakriti (constitution of a person), ritu (season) and nature of one's profession or occupation (as that will decide the quantity of physical

energy required by the individual). Hence the quantity of food cannot be generalised. It changes from individual to individual. The correct quantity of food prevents abdominal distention, pressure on the heart, and ensures efficient functioning of all organs and sense organs of the human body.

- Taking food less than the required dosage reduces strength, weight, stamina, vigour and vitality because of increase in vata dosha.
- If the dosage of food becomes more than normal, the person feels heaviness in the abdomen and chest, feels sleepy, loses zeal and zest, vigour and vitality, interest in work because of increase in kapha dosha.
- When food is taken in the correct dosage, a person does not feel sleepy or slothful. Instead, he or she can engage in their routine chores without any impediment. The person can move about actively, exert physically, breath normally, retain normal stamina, zeal and vigour intact.
- Drinking water before meals leads to weakening of agni resulting in indigestion. When it becomes a habit over a long time, it results in a progressive loss of weight. Drinking water immediately after meals results in increased kapha production and over a period of time results in obesity. Drinking small quantities of water while eating food and drinking it in sufficient quantity 2 to 3 hours after a meal is a healthy habit which leads to digestion, metabolism and proper production of the tridoshas. Persons with hyper-acidity especially benefit by drinking water in this manner.

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The Independent candidate

RITA ANAND

THE emergence of the Independent candidate always causes heartburn among established political parties during an election. Who is this spoiler, this splitter of votes, this pain in the neck, they fume. Even for the lowly position of councillor, new actors emerge from the woodwork. The media dismisses them as oddballs.

Celebrity candidates are normally snapped up by political parties. But this time some celebrities are standing as Independents. There is Mallika Sarabhai fighting with gusto for the Gandhinagar seat in Gujarat. The lovely Meera Sanyal throws her hat in the ring in South Mumbai. And Captain Gopinath, who upgraded the middle class from trains to planes, is contesting from South Bangalore. These candidates have star appeal. So the media is most interested and we listen to the celebrity Independents being interviewed on a variety of TV channels. They sound perfect-sincere, committed, honest, passionate.

You could say what's the use they won't win and even if they do they will not be effective because they are not backed by political muscle. Use your vote elsewhere. Maybe you are right.

To my mind, Independents are not obsessed with losing or winning (by some miracle). They stand for elections because they want to protest or rather, make a point. Their action is symbolic. Any diehard campaigner will tell you it's no use protesting in some dark alley. If you want your cause or what annoys you to be in the limelight, choose an arena which will get you the most public attention. And what can be more high profile than the general elections in the world's largest democracy against an opponent like LK Advani or Milind Deora?

The Independents reflect the anger and angst of the middle class. State governments just can't deliver to urban citizens. Though liberalisation brought wealth to a section of the middle class, it did not improve their quality of life. See the state of our cities. Apart from Delhi, each city is beset with huge problems and Mumbai is a prime example. The middle class is fed up with promises. Infrastructure takes years to build. Some of it is pretty monstrous. Well-off people are asking for bijli sadak paani. It's pathetic.

We are told Delhi is better administered because it is a city-state. Most politicians come from rural areas, small towns, and they concentrate on looking after those constituencies, it is said. Now

which media goes to check what politicians are doing in their backyard? But we do know most of rural India is crying out for attention. And politicians spend more time in the big crumbling city than in their villages or towns. The middle class therefore surmises from all this that the politicians do nothing for rural or urban India.

Then look at our police force. Till the Mumbai terror attack happened, the police was best known for inefficiency and insensitivity. Yet they confronted well armed terrorists with sheer bravery and

humiliate us. Girls attacked for being in a pub, or a painter beaten up doing an 'offensive' image, or certain films not being allowed to be screened anger intellectuals, writers and artists and they shape public opinion.

We take pride in the freedom that middle class women in India enjoy especially when you compare it with what is happening in some parts of South Asia. We are happy that the number of mixed marriages is on the rise. We take great pride in our democracy which gives us freedom of expression. It is this that has helped cinema, art and theatre to flower. It has helped a hybrid sort of culture to blossom and unite our people. Such attacks cause discomfort and annoyance and you can see it in the protests which follow in Delhi.

These are not new issues and political parties are well aware of them. By and large people still look at councillors, MLAs and MPs in the same light. They expect them primarily to improve their quality of life.

The inability of the state to deliver because of poor governance has spawned the growth of regional parties. Indian voters look for politicians who are as local as a next door aunty because they believe a local can be held more accountable and is more approachable. The Independent is that voter who thinks none of the political parties are doing their job. A powerful Independent can split votes, but not all have such influence in a constituency and some are just happy to be heard.

Independents don't necessary matter for too many votes today. But it is good for our democracy that unlikely candidates emerge in an election. It is not necessary that they win. But it is important that they are out there and losing.

even captured one of them. Every citizen noted that the police were badly ill equipped. People appreciated their courage. They blame the bureaucracy and the government for keeping the police disempowered. If the police can shake off the tag of being corrupt and inefficient they will find the middle class to be their biggest supporters. Police reforms are a promise in the manifestoes of the Congress and the BJP. But the middle class does not believe political parties will do police reforms and provide citizens with good security. They think such issues will be brushed under the carpet post-elections.

Corruption does worry the middle class. For ordinary persons to get anything from the bureaucracy, even what they are entitled to, means paying bribes standing in queues and dealing with rude officials. Computerisation has not really helped. The most corruption is probably embedded in the government. Solve the problem of corruption within government and we might just rank with Singapore.

Another issue which hurts the enlightened middle class is the attack on India's secularism, plurality and freedom of expression. Don't take this lightly. Political hate speeches embarrass and





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Polur Block, Thiruvanamalai District.**

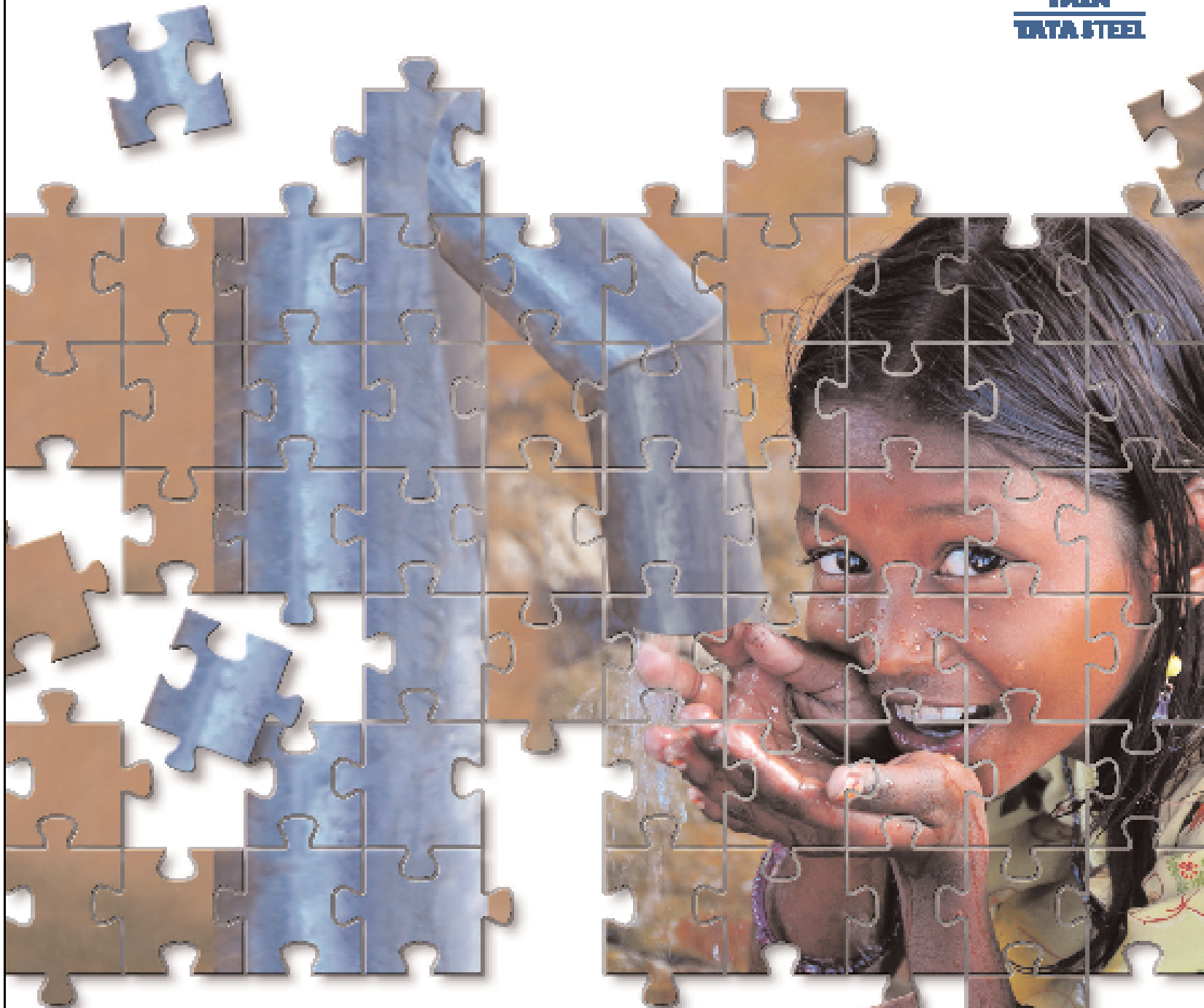
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