

SPECIAL ANNUAL ISSUE

VOL. 4 NO. 3 DECEMBER 2006/JANUARY 2007

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RS 50

Civil Society

Best of Civil Society

Radical Hero

Bant Singh fights for equality in Punjab



People's Surgeon

Dr Devi Shetty provides cheap heart care for all

RTI Campaigner

Anna Hazare gets the govt to back off



School Designer

Kabir Vajpeyi makes buildings that teach

Teacher Crusader

Sister Cyril's Loreto has room for all



Different Docs

Arpana Trust revives a slum health centre

India Vs Bharat

Business booms. But the common man?

ARUN MAIRA, TN NINAN,
ANUPAM MISHRA, JUG SURAIYA,
TJS GEORGE, VANDANA SHIVA, HARIVANSH,
CHANDRA BHUSHAN, MILINDO CHAKRABARTI,
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- 1241 educated unemployed rural youth given vocational training. 864 employed. Income ranges from Rs.1,200/- to Rs.3,500/- per month.
- 100% enrolment of children in schools.
- Percentage of malnourished preschool children reduced from 71% to 35%.
- Now 74 schools have modern and clean toilet facilities. These are maintained by the students themselves.
- 4460 individual toilets and 28 community toilets constructed in rural areas.
- Safe drinking water provided to 112 villages. Morbidity due to infectious diseases reduced from 49% to 19%.
- Adult education classes have helped hitherto 4634 illiterate persons to become literates. Now they can read newspapers.
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- 1984 hectares covered by Watershed development programme.

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We invite partnership from those who are interested to make world a better living place'

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ROLE MODELS APLENTY

Civil Society reaffirms one's faith in mankind – a rather daunting task today. The profiles in courage emerging from its varied pages provide an endless source of stimulation: Anupam Mishra, the water guru, Bant Singh, the valiant crusader for the downtrodden who lost his limbs but not his resolve, the Additional DCP SP Huda, whose police force joins theatre group Jagran to attain social reform through street plays.... These are all awesome role models.

There are also plenty of success stories for inspiration: a slum school harnessing solar energy, a women's telecom revolution launched by Grameen Bank, platform schools for vagabond urchins started by the Railway Protection Force... these and countless such fascinating stories form the staple stuff of this worthy magazine.

I strongly feel that every secondary school should subscribe to CS. They should have weekly classes in which these stories should be read and discussed. This activity may nudge our impressionable young generation in the right direction.

Keep up the good work, CS!



Sai Paranjpye
Film maker

REACH OUT MORE

Civil Society needs to strengthen its distribution. More people should be aware of it because it is the only magazine of its kind. I think it should be made more visible and easily available especially in small towns or cities where there is industry or a university.

Every national issue has been covered by *Civil Society* in one issue or the other either as a personality feature, a cover story etc which says a lot about the magazine.

A lot of topics covered by the magazine are not carried in mainstream media, which gives the impression that the NGOs are slack in their work. This is wrong because many NGOs are doing good work.

I think the magazine needs to find out why younger people stay away from social issues. They should be more involved. *Civil Society* can have discussions with university students or broadcast a community feature on radio.

But the magazine needs more stories from the east. For instance, news from, say, North Bengal. You only get occasional articles about wildlife from there.

A magazine can perform a much wider role, not by diluting, but by spreading its coverage. Any distortion in balance can be adjusted by proper editorials. You can't be preachy. You've got to report.

Shankar Ghosh
Director, Charkha

SERIOUS STORIES

Civil Society is an outstanding magazine, very well produced. It takes up serious and important issues in a proper way and not in a snappy manner like other magazines do.

I think the magazine should take up more important issues. Instead of several stories in one single issue, it should write about a few important issues in greater depth like SEZs, genetically modified organisms, energy, especially nuclear energy are some examples. Another important issue is global warming, especially in the light of Al Gore's book and film, *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Prashant Bhushan
Lawyer

MEANINGFUL JOURNALISM



About three years ago Umesh Anand had met me and told me that he and his wife, Rita, were starting *Civil Society*. I knew it was a tough undertaking. I admire them for embarking on such a noble mission.

It is a great pleasure to see *Civil Society* being produced so beautifully and meaningfully. It has interesting stories with nicely printed pages and art work.

I am sure with a little bit of support and marketing push it will become a prime success. I wish *Civil Society* all the best.

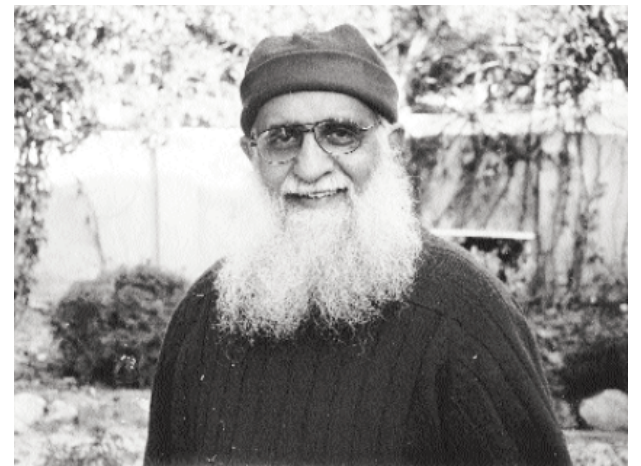
Pramod Kapoor
Publisher, Roli Books

EYE-CATCHING MAGAZINE

It was love at first sight when I saw my first issue of *Civil Society*. It is not only a professionally produced magazine, but it is also looks very attractive. The easy to read fonts, crisp headlines and pictures bait even browsers into reading the text. Nowadays few periodicals are attractive enough for readers to plough through. Hence *Civil Society* is like a breath of fresh air in

India's publishing world. I am impressed by *Civil Society's* sustained efforts to profile social activists and their work. The conventional print and electronic media appear to be happy wallowing in sensational gloom and doom stories. They are almost loath to carry reports of the positive efforts of social activists and their organisations.

Civil Society stands out as a beacon of hope in a gloomy landscape. I hope *Civil Society's* readership continues to increase. If possible it should target the youth to increase its readership. Every society needs positive and successful role models to sustain hope. *Civil Society* makes a significant contribution in that direction. A greater focus on areas outside the national capital region will help enhance its appeal over a wider region of India.



Ravi Chopra
Director, People's Science Institute

WIDE RANGE OF STORIES

I have been privileged to be a subscriber to this unique publication. The very title *Civil Society* expresses the spirit of the magazine. It has spoken very well against violence and about NGOs, intervention and justice to the people. It has gone beyond other publications to write stories from tribal areas, for example Manipur, and brought this region to the urban mindset. Of late it has covered all national issues like RTI. It has also carried stories about people who had not been seen as heroes before. If good journalistic standards are maintained the magazine has a very bright future. And I would like to continue as a reader.

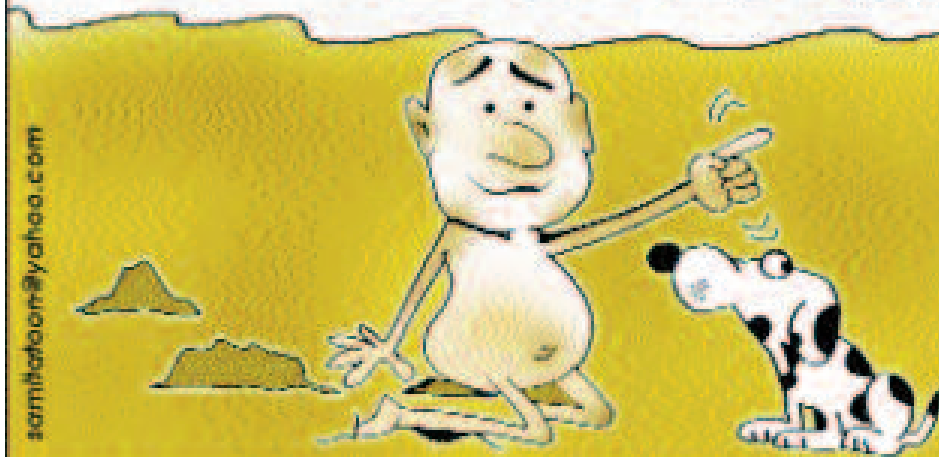
Every magazine has to build its character and that *Civil Society* has done. Secondly, the editorial has to continue to fight. As we know the masses fall prey to corporates. If the magazine can continue to keep itself away from such temptations, quality will improve further.

SP Singh
Businessman

IN THE LIGHT

by SAMITA

TO ERR IS HUMAN... TO BLAME IT ON
SOMEONE ELSE IS EVEN MORE HUMAN!



REVOLUTIONARY

On 26 October while waiting for a train at Jasidihi station in Jharkhand, I saw a copy of *Civil Society's* September issue. This was a special offer and I purchased a copy unthinkingly as it was available at Rs 20 as against its original price of Rs 50. When I started reading it, I found the magazine to be a revolutionary one. Thirty-five issues already published yet I was not aware of it!

I vigorously searched for its October issue at Bhubaneswar but failed to get it. I want to be a regular subscriber and get my copy in the post.

Biranchi Narayan Acharya
Cuttack.

BE A WEEKLY

First of all *Civil Society* should be a fortnightly if not a weekly. A month is too long. Events get stale. Secondly, the RWAs should have their own column where they can share their problems and bring these to the notice of the authorities. In this way people will be able to relate better to the magazine.

Civil Society is a very good magazine. There is no other magazine which covers civil society issues. It has wonderful articles on people who are working for good governance. There are well written articles by people like Arun Maira, Arvind Kejriwal and Ram Gidoomal. There are also articles on organic food.

I think it is an expensive magazine. It should be made more affordable. If you lower the price, sales will increase. The main issues facing four or five big cities should get covered every month, be it corruption, electricity or water.

There should also be dedicated space for the youth.

Pankaj Aggarwal
RWA Front

HINDI EDITION, PLEASE

I think *Civil Society* is a very good initiative. But it is available only in English. To reach a wider audience there needs to be a Hindi edition as well. It is possible to cut down costs by decreasing the magazine's size and lowering its printing costs. Once you cut down costs you don't have to depend on corporate advertising.

To achieve an impact on policy one has to keep following a specific story. Keep investigating and cover the same issues from different angles.

The magazine has very good articles especially on people friendly and environment friendly work done by the corporates.

Himanshu Thakkar
Coordinator, South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People

INSPIRING STORIES



In today's fast paced world, we often gloss over problems that are central to society. There is, therefore, an inherent need for a magazine like *Civil Society* that brings essential issues that impact us daily to the forefront. With much deeper insight than mainstream media, *Civil Society* explores corners and facets of India that many are unaware exist – the intricate web of grassroots and social initiatives that in many cases define our lives.

The fabulous piece on the Water Guru in the October edition, for example, not only brought to life the wisdom of traditional water systems, but recognised one of India's unsung heroes for his groundbreaking work - Anupam Mishra. So often, we think that

modernisation only means looking forward, but, as Anupam's insights prove, there is much wisdom buried in the past. It is news like this that we need to hear and news of this type that frequently never reaches us. From water shortages to women's empowerment, cola wars to technological advancements, *Civil Society* covers the beat of society in its own unique style. If education is one of the cornerstones of development, then insightful discussion on the components that form society is another. As the magazine celebrates its third anniversary, we celebrate its pioneering effort to help us find our conscience and moral voice in an age where issues are increasingly grey.

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Three full years

WHEN you launch a publication as a small entrepreneur you don't dare think about tomorrow. The possibility of failure is so real that all you are ready to look at is the work at hand: deadlines, stories, ads that don't turn up, printers who fail you and the long list of people who refuse to take your calls. But from time to time you stop and wonder how far you've got and where you could be headed. The completion of three years is one such nice point to reach.

Civil Society was launched in the belief that it is necessary and possible for professional journalists to run small, independent businesses in the media. India, large and diverse as it is, needs many voices and there is real danger to democracy in a few having control over information flows. There are websites and blogs aplenty, but a magazine in print has an altogether different impact. We chose to track change leaders because we found their stories exciting and as a business we knew we would be filling a slot that lay vacant. We were very clear that we didn't want to be an NGO ourselves and we didn't want to touch funding from sources in the social sector for fear of being asked to dance to someone's tune. The best service we could do to many of the remarkable change leaders around us would be to report on them from an honest distance.

In these three years, *Civil Society* has grown steadily. It has acquired loyal readers across the country. You will find them in Arunachal Pradesh and you will find them in Tamil Nadu. You will see our magazine at street crossings in Delhi and you will be able to pick up a copy at remote railway stations in Jharkhand. We recently found a distributor in Gangtok. In Kolkata, our hometown and where we grew up, readers have taken to us warmly.

We owe a special debt of gratitude to our advertisers who have put great faith in us and our mission. Several CEOs have personally reached out. They care deeply about issues bedeviling the country and see the need for a media that mirrors these realities.

"The Best of Changing India" seeks to showcase the stories of individuals and groups who make a difference. Of course it is not complete. Our broader frame of reference for the special issue is the reforms process and need for growth with equity and justice. Are we back to India Vs Bharat is the question we are asking the Manmohan Singh government.



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Hello, is it India Vs Bharat

If you drive down to Jajjhar in Haryana and ask farmers why they are giving up their land for a special economic zone (SEZ), chances are they will tell you that groundwater levels in the area have been falling, the soil has lost its vitality and largely unregulated urban growth has for long been licking at the boundaries of their properties. It is better for them to sell and move on. Perhaps they could acquire land afresh and continue farming deeper in the countryside. Or they could stash away their newfound cash and live in hope of the SEZ ushering in prosperity.

It is an old story that gets told across the country. But Jajjhar's reality check is down the road. In Gurgaon, not far away, you will find rural families which once upon a time sold out to real estate developers. Very few of them managed to do anything constructive with the money. Their sons wallowed in it and many of them are today marauding petty criminals in search of more easy cash.

The developers, however, went on to do fabulously well for themselves. Their names are up in neon lights. Gurgaon has grown into a new urban centre with the shopping malls and the apartment blocks that we now see around us. With these changes have come jobs and corporate addresses. The urban middle class has rushed in. But amidst all the hurly-burly there is no account of those who got pushed further into the fringes.

The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) came to power with the promise of seeking an end to such contradictions in development. It offered the hope of a new paradigm under which rapid growth through private investment would carry everyone along. The slogan: "Congress ka haath, aam aadmi ke saath" was to be the touchstone of all economic reform.

How was this to be achieved? Through consultation and discussion. The National Advisory Council (NAC) was one device. But more importantly, the UPA hoped to be flexible enough to reach out to individuals, NGOs and people's movements at the grassroots. From them it would get the real pulse and perhaps understand better what needed to be done.

The UPA's Common Minimum Programme (CMP) promised an Employment Guarantee Act for the rural poor and a stronger Right to Information law to ensure transparency in government. It pledged the UPA to greater decentralisation. It recognised extremist violence as having deeper socio-economic roots. It said people displaced by development projects would have to be compensated adequately and rehabilitated. Eviction of tribal and other communities from forests would be stopped. Also, the rights of tribal communities over mineral resources and water would be safeguarded.

The CMP committed the UPA to urban renewal and expansion of social housing in towns and cities, particularly with reference to slum-dwellers. The eviction and demolition of slums would be stopped. Housing for weaker sections in the rural areas would be expanded on a large scale. Urban and semi-urban poor would be provided housing near their place of occupation.

The UPA promised growth of the economy at 7-8 per cent and for that it said it would attend to the problems of the agriculture sector, boost private investment and expand infrastructure. Not insignificantly, it would seek to "unleash the creative energies" of entrepreneurs, businessmen, scientists, engineers and all productive forces of society.

How much of all this has been achieved? The laws on rural jobs and RTI have been passed, but the rest of the social agenda remains largely untouched. No solutions have been found to the problems of our cities and rural migration continues apace. An environmental crisis looms larger than ever. Extremists continue to hold sway over 30 per cent of the country and their control has much to do with the sense of alienation at the grassroots. The promise of a more accessible housing stock remains unfulfilled and glaringly so as real estate developers do roaring business and property prices reach dizzying heights. Let alone slum-dwellers, even the middle class can no longer afford most housing.

On the promises of better primary education and health, too, the record is dismal. There are more private schools in the cities, but just take a look at their fees and their exclusive character. For all the talk of investments in health care and medical tourism, where



are the hospitals that the ordinary individual can go to?

But the economy on the other hand has grown. The Indian corporate sector has performed brilliantly with managements making the most of the opportunities that have arisen from the government loosening its controls. The spate of investments overseas has put Indian industry on a global scale. Indian companies are showing efficiencies they never seemed capable of before.

This is to be celebrated because private investments of a huge order are needed across sectors. Where will those roads, ports and power stations come from? Look at the difference that privatisation has made to telecom.

But can India prosper if Bharat continues to lag behind? Will companies deliver what a government does not? Can they be expected to have a vision that takes the whole nation along?

Interestingly, these fears are voiced as much among serious-minded business leaders as social activists. Investments across the country are being held up by disputes over land acquisition and rehabilitation. West Bengal, Orissa, Jharkhand, Chhatisgarh: the list is endless. There are problems of access to forests and mineral resources.

All these flashpoints also involve the aspirations of local people who want ownership of their resources, security, justice, incomes and the right to get on with their lives.

Creating the mechanisms by which India and Bharat can connect is the UPA's forgotten agenda.

Many industrial groups do act on their own to curb pollution and help disadvantaged communities around their factories. They try hard to be good corporate citizens. There are others for whom corporate social responsibility is a convenient charade. They throw around a little money on social causes but do nothing to clean up their production processes.

No solutions have been found to the problems of our cities and rural migration continues apace. An environmental crisis looms larger than ever.

once again?

LAKSHMAN ANAND



But companies, both good and bad, will finally look to their bottom lines. And when given an opportunity to acquire land, as in the case of the SEZs, they will cynically help themselves to it with both hands. The result is that an idea, possibly efficient if used judiciously, rapidly generates into a scam.

Today there are SEZs proposed for all kinds of wishful reasons. In Himachal Pradesh, a particularly influential businessman has even acquired a few hundred acres in the mountains for a tourism SEZ! Acquisitions in Haryana will allow the country's leading industrial house to take off from where the Nawab of Pataudi lost his estate and privy purse.

So, two years plus into power, has the UPA landed in the same ditch as the NDA found itself? Is it so besotted by industrial growth at all costs that it can't see who is getting left behind? Have gyrations of the Sensex and high GDP growth figures come to be substitutes for the complex efforts needed for more inclusive development.

It should worry people in government that there continue to be 500 million people without bank accounts in the country. The unorganised sector flourishes in the villages and the cities, but nothing is done to give it the recognition it deserves.

One of India's valuable natural resources is its forests. If put to creative use and opened up to community enterprises, forests could be the trigger for much prosperity. Why is it that our politicians don't work for establishing honest markets in wood and minor forest produce that benefit people in villages.

Perhaps the UPA government, with its many reformers on board, can think a little out of the box. For instance, how about taking land back from defunct industries instead of taking it away from farmers.

Big ticket investments are needed, but they must finally be linked to the people on the bottom rungs of the economy. Even in China, with its huge SEZs, enormous inflows of FDI, and a dazzling rate of economic growth. President Hu Jintao, concerned at the breakdown of social harmony in China declared at a recent meeting of the Communist Party that

a range of social concerns, including the surging wealth gap, corruption, pollution and access to education and medical care must be placed on a par with economic growth.

Growth first, inclusion and equity later may work in the Chinese political system, not in India's democracy. India needs a different model of development. Chandrababu Naidu, who lost the people's mandate to govern, expressed his anguish at the failure of the economic model he was seduced into following to improve the lives of people in his state. How long will the 'trickle down' from big investments take, he asks?

There is much talk of an impending retail revolution in the country. Little thought, however, is given to using a retail boom to improve the fortunes of cooperatives and self-help groups. If such linkages are established it is only because retail chains seek them out. The government does nothing to create a framework in which malls and departmental stores become a driving force for a wider entrepreneurship.

In *Civil Society* for the past three years we have celebrated private initiatives that have tried to make our lives better. These are by people who have stepped in to make up for the inefficiencies of government and the greed of the rich and powerful. They are truly among the *Best of Changing India*.

Growth first, inclusion and equity later may work in the Chinese political system, not in India's democracy. India needs a different model.

In Dr Devi Shetty we have a physician who has made tertiary health care affordable. He has used insurance in ways in which the State should have to serve ordinary people who can't pay the bills of private institutions. Dr Shetty has also led the way in using information technology for long range diagnosis. Open heart surgery at his facility in Bangalore comes for as little as Rs 65,000. It is expected to go down to Rs 45,000. In a country where everyone grumbles about large numbers, Dr Shetty has used big volumes to bring

down costs.

Then there is the TVS Group in the southern states. This two-wheeler manufacturer has reached out to communities around its factories, boldly hiring people from lower castes and supporting efforts to create local infrastructure. TVS has worked wonders with women from backward castes, helping them set up small efficient businesses through self-help groups and even acquire land from their earnings.

There is also Sister Cyril, the Loreto nun in Kolkata. Fifty per cent of the students in her school at Dharamtalla come from among the poorest of the poor. They sit in the same classrooms as the children from well-off homes and they don't have too many problems catching up. Sister Cyril has shown what an inclusive school system is all about. She also puts to shame the people who run schools as businesses in cities like Delhi and complain about reserving seats for children from underprivileged families.

It is a good idea to catch up with Kabir Vajpeyi, an innovative architect, who uses school buildings as teaching aids. He runs an NGO called Vinyas. In Kabir's scheme of things, doors can be used to teach angles, window grills alphabets. For as little as Rs 20,000, Kabir has transformed village schools in Rajathan, making them welcoming and attractive.

If there is one message that comes through it is that a government has to think from bottom up. Liberalisation and reform are needed at the grassroots and it is the rural sector especially the farmer and forest dweller that needs to become the focus of government efforts.

If people are happier running their own small enterprises, as research shows, then millions of entrepreneurs should be created. Money should flow to many more people, especially the weakest sections of society. This can be done if the government tackles head on the crisis in agriculture and forestry. The focus of the government should be on water, pollution, land degradation, seeds, trees... in short an environmental agenda and a small business agenda, policies that can give the *aam aadmi* access to skill training, finances and markets. Reforms must be for everyone.



GDP is not everything

THE Dow Jones is reaching heights never reached before, as is the Indian Sensex. Stock markets elsewhere are doing well too. However, a recent multi-country survey by an international management consultancy shows that trust in corporations is very low everywhere (with trust in corporations in India somewhat higher than in other countries). Evidently, even though as consumers people may be satisfied with the products and services provided by corporations, and as investors delighted by their stocks' performance, as citizens they expect much more of corporations. What do they expect? What should corporations and their managers be doing differently? And, what can business schools do to help corporations? These were questions addressed at an important meeting in Cleveland in October 2006.

The subject was "Business as an Agent of World Benefit". The meeting was convened by the Academy of Management and the UN Global Compact. The Academy of Management is the largest organisation of business management teachers in the world with over 18,000 members. As one of its members said, it is the 'Teamsters Union' of business teachers. The UN Global Compact, now seven years old, is an international organisation of business corporations who have volunteered to conduct their businesses in ways that will accelerate achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Beginning with 40 members in 2000, the Compact now has over 3,000 members in six continents.

The meeting was attended by 450 persons from 40 countries. The majority were business school teachers and administrators with corporate executives making up most of the rest. There were also another 1,000 who attended by web-cast, mostly management students and their teachers. Over three days the meeting heard several thought-leaders in the corporate and education world, discussed over 100 papers, and carried on a lively dialogue facilitated by David Cooperrider of Case Western University using the principles of 'appreciative inquiry' that he has developed, whereby the intelligence of many participants can be combined in large meetings.

The backdrop of the meeting was the condition of people and the environment, neither of which seems to be improving as rapidly as required to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Meanwhile businesses report sterling financial performance. Therefore a lurking suspicion (contributing to the widespread mistrust of business corporations) is that not only are philanthropy and CSR which corporations do on the side inadequate but that the core operations of businesses may be somehow contributing to the unsatisfactory condition of people and the environment. Against this backdrop, it was encouraging to sense the genuine desire of business leaders at the meeting to rethink the role of businesses as well as to hear some inspiring accounts of what many are already doing. Here are some highlights of the meeting.

THE 'WELL-BEING' AGENDA: Higher stock-prices, more wealth, and more GDP do not seem to be creating feelings of well-being according to the Gallup World Poll, an extensive and ongoing global research project. Surprisingly, the survey reveals that Singapore, which is the richest country in SE Asia and one of the most efficient and least corrupt societies in the world, scores the lowest in the well-being index! People in Singapore are less satisfied with their lives than people in other, much poorer and less efficient countries. Evidently, according to the survey, to be respected as a capable and free human being and to have the freedom to make personal choices, parameters on which Singaporeans give their society a low score, contribute much more to people's feelings of well being than economists seem to realise.

This insight has important implications for the design of economic enterprises. It also explains why, while people as consumers love the mighty and efficient Wal-Mart for giving them everyday low prices, as employees and citizens they resent its dominance of their lives and communities. It also explains the remarkable contribution to people's dignity and feelings of well-being, far in excess of their economic gains, that are obtained from non-industrial forms of business organisation such as self-help groups, and from models of retailing such as rural women entrepreneurs (e.g. HLL's Shakti project) and small shop-owners in which people are their own masters and not employees in a gargantuan organisation like Wal-Mart. These looser forms of organisation may not provide the economic efficiency that often comes with scale through singular ownership of the enterprise as in Wal-Mart, (or by top-down control of people as in Singapore) but they give individuals more freedom.

The focus of the meeting was on what business corporations can do to improve societal well-being and it was heartening to learn about the good work of some companies. It was interesting to note though, albeit from the small

sample of companies represented, that US companies are primarily focused on environmental well-being, whereas European companies (and also companies from elsewhere) apply themselves more vigorously to human well-being along with care of the environment. In this vein, the concerns of US speakers were with climate change, energy consumption, and the extinction of species (evidently four species are becoming extinct every hour!). The Europeans and others talked more about poverty and human distress (such as one child dying of diarrhoea every second!).

I will make two more observations of patterns that emerged from the multitude of presentations and discussions before I turn to the main agenda of the meeting, which was the role of business schools. It was noteworthy that, even



though no CEOs from India were present, the work being done by companies in India, both Indian companies as well as multinational companies, was cited most often to illustrate the type of good work companies can do towards the societal well-being agenda. The Director of the UN Global Compact also reported that the most innovative work by businesses working for larger social benefit is being done by its members from the developing world. A further analysis of the Compact's data suggests that even amongst companies from developing countries, the work of Indian companies would stand out. (Perhaps the noteworthy work being done by some companies in India may explain why business corporations seem to be more trusted in India than they are elsewhere.)

The other observation was that in a large number of the examples of good work mentioned in the meeting, women at the grassroots were the principal actors who created well-being for themselves, their families, their communities, and their environment. Along with this observation it is worthwhile recalling some economists' comments that the Noble Prize for Peace this year (given to Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank) was, for the first time, a prize for a business idea. And to note further, that the Grameen Bank could work as a successful financial service scheme only because it empowered women. There is something to reflect on here, to which I will return.

MANAGEMENT RESEARCH: A roundtable discussion with CEOs at the meeting focused on what business schools could do to help corporations deliver against their agenda of broader social responsibility. The contribution that the schools

could make was divided into two parts: contribution through research about topics that business leaders considered important; and the development of students with the capabilities corporations would need.

The research agenda suggested had three components. One was to establish the 'business case' by proving that corporations that deliver against the broader needs of society also produce better returns for their shareholders in the long run. Evidently, even though the CEOs present were personally motivated, they needed such evidence to justify their strategies to analysts and investors who take a more utilitarian view of corporate investments. The business case could cover the angle of future risks to corporations if they did not perform against society's broader expectations, as well as the improvement of the bottom line by reduced costs (by reducing energy consumption etc) and higher prices that could be obtained by building a more trusted corporate brand.

The second component of the research agenda was to develop the 'moral case' for doing good. Some CEOs felt that everything in business cannot and need not be justified in utilitarian terms. In fact, they felt that the view that unless something has a financial value it is not 'valuable' has smothered con-

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A survey shows that nearly 70 per cent of students want business schools to change their curriculum to develop socially and environmentally responsible individuals.

cern for basic human needs. The morality discussion led to an intense debate about the schools' responsibilities for developing business graduates with good values, to which I will return later.

Whereas the first two components of the research agenda were about 'why' to do good, the third component was about 'how' to do it effectively in ways that benefit both investors and society. How should business strategies be developed? What organisational capabilities are required? What are the measures to guide the management of the business? Where are the examples of best practices?

DEVELOPING GOOD MANAGERS: The discussion that began with the CEOs about the development of MBAs was later expanded to include the views of educators and students participating in the conference. In the view of CEOs, graduates produced by management schools were too narrow in their view of the world. They were overly driven by the profit motive, in their own lives and in their view of the role of business in society. The CEOs recommended that the management curriculum be modified to include compulsory courses on the 'human condition' and the environment, and that the excessive emphasis on economics and finance be reduced. Endorsing the need for a course correction, a respected American CEO went so far as to say that economics should be removed altogether because its fundamental assumptions about human behaviour were flawed. Instead, students should be taught how to discover and relate to their conscience and the art of building human relationships!

The educators retorted that businesses are getting what they pay for and that

students with financial disciplines get the highest salaries. Therefore, in the spirit of putting one's money where one's mouth is, if businesses were to pay more to graduates in other disciplines, then students would want to take those courses and the schools would offer them! The educators were in a bind. They admitted that the curriculum was too narrow. They cited a study by Jeffrey Pfeffer of Stanford that showed that, whereas students broaden their thinking in other educational programmes, the MBA curriculum was the only educational programme that produced graduates who were narrower in their thinking when they left than when they entered the programme. The educators' problem is that business schools are rated by the salaries their students get on graduation and since students in the financial disciplines do get the highest salaries, schools must produce more of them to improve their ratings.

The views of students themselves were revealing. A survey of 2,100 students in 87 business schools found that 87 per cent believed that corporations should work towards broader societal goals but only 18 per cent thought corporations were doing so. Only 36 per cent felt business schools were preparing business managers to work for the betterment of society. Nearly 70 per cent wanted business schools to change their curriculum to develop socially and environmentally responsible individuals; and 79 per cent said they wanted 'socially responsible' jobs. What is also revealing is that while 63 per cent of the respondents said they would work for a medium and large company after graduation, only 33 per cent said they would continue to work there after five to 10 years. Since they had to repay the loans they had taken for their education, they needed the salaries the big companies paid, but after repaying the loans, they would rather do more socially responsible work.

The young teacher who presented the survey had selected two statements she thought expressed the overall feelings of the students. One was: "The key business role is to develop society, not profits." The other: "Profitability is easy; changing the world is hard."

CHANGING THE WORLD: Businesses, students and schools are part of a system. Each is responding to the other. All are wondering how the system can be changed so that business can play a more effective role as an 'agent for world benefit'. Who shall change first to begin the change in the system?

While discussing what would be required to make more corporations work for the greater good of society, the CEOs had said that if their customers were to demand that companies act responsibly and if they were to buy only from those that do, businesses would change their behaviour very fast. In other words, these CEOs are calling on customers to take the lead and pressurise business managers to change. They are saying that when people start acting like responsible citizens rather than as passive consumers, they can make the companies behave responsibly too.

I now return to the stories of women changing the world around them. In Andhra Pradesh, eight million women are members of self-help groups. The groups function autonomously. They determine what help they need from a level of organisation above them. In turn that level, in the village or mandal, determines what it needs from a level above itself to fulfill its own role. Thus, from the bottom up, empowered women are scaling up an organisation that presently engages eight million women, which is many times larger than Singapore's total population!

What does a story about women self-help groups in Andhra improving their well being have to do with hard-core models for business? Perhaps little. But it has a lot to tell us about models of leadership, organisation and changing the world. Changing the world is hard, as the management student had said. Changing the world requires leaders, rather than merely managers. Leaders are those who take the first steps towards that which they deeply care about, and in ways that others wish to follow.

Concluding CII's Leadership Summit in Delhi on October 13, 2006, on "Winning through Inclusion", in which many stories were shared of Indian business leaders who are growing their businesses successfully and profitably by including sections of the population not usually included in business models, Montek Ahluwalia said that economists do not know how to factor in leadership into their models of change, but they should do so.

In conclusion, therefore it will be very worthwhile for business students to examine a variety of leaders as role models not merely the CEO perched on a large pyramid with great power over people and resources. They should also see how leaders, like the women in Andhra, with little power over others and with few resources are nevertheless scaling up an organisation. Such are the 'fireflies'—millions of leaders with their own lights—who can change the world together. And since business students must learn some economics, perhaps they should have less of Milton Friedman—'the business of business is only business', and more of Amartya Sen—'development as freedom.'

(Arun Maira is chairman of the Boston Consulting Group in India).



Just be good companies

SOME ideas catch on so much that they become like motherhood and apple pie: assumed to have innate goodness, and therefore possessing virtues that cannot be questioned. So it has become with corporate social responsibility, hard-wired now with widely-recognised shorthand: CSR. civil society advocates it, politicians demand it, the chambers of commerce endorse it, and companies increasingly say they practise it. The sceptics keep quiet, or mutter under their breath like Galileo. Perhaps it is time to examine the counter-view.

The view that companies must accept a social responsibility implies, however subtly, that they are fundamentally anti-social, and therefore that they must atone for their sins – which are usually undefined. If you listen to socialists and consumer activists, environmentalists and of course politicians, those sins come into clearer view and range from profiteering to exploiting labour, and from short-changing customers to ruining the environment. And so it is that a company, in its annual report to its shareholders, has to report not just its financial performance, but also the following: the amount of foreign exchange earned and spent during the year, the money owed to small scale industries at the end of the year, the efforts made to conserve energy and to develop new technology, the number of people paid more than a certain sum of money (currently Rs 2 lakhs per month), whether they own more than 2 per cent of the company, and so on. Implicit in all this is a social good (it is better to earn foreign exchange than spend it, for instance), and the danger of big squeezing small (not paying small scale industries!).

Companies get the message and play to the gallery. Their annual reports will have pictures and extensive descriptions of relatively minor CSR activities: a tube-well dug here and a blood donation camp there, or sewing machines handed out to villagers near a factory by the boss's wife. Why, the ITC chairman in the course of a lengthy speech to his shareholders recently did not mention either tobacco or cigarettes even once (though they account for 70 per cent of the company's sales and 84 per cent of its profits). Instead, he dwelt at length on e-choupals and rural marketing, tree-planting and emission control...all the CSR you could possibly want.

The idea that companies must step in and take on social responsibility has gained further ground in recent years because of the manifest failures of government. Companies must take on rural development and micro-credit for self-help groups, subsidised lending to farmers and the supply of cheap drugs to government hospitals, uplift of the socially downtrodden and a helping hand to small industry, transport for staff and education for their children.

Somehow, though, the logical flaw in all this does not get pointed out: what good is all the CSR in the world if your products are ruining people's lungs, if your soft drinks contain impermissible levels of pesticide, and if your genetically modified strain of cotton seed does not deliver the promised yields? CSR in all these contexts becomes the key element in a game of smoke and mirrors: the company hopes you will see the mirage it sets up, and not look at the reality of what is going on in the marketplace.

Which is why I have a lot of respect for Milton Friedman's view that a company's responsibility begins and ends with fulfilling its corporate purpose: to serve its customers while using capital efficiently. One could add what Friedman assumed: that the company will stay within the law – on taxation, minimum wages, environmental standards, food safety, and anything else you can think of. If it does all this, it has in fact fulfilled all its 'responsibilities', and society as a whole has no right to ask for anything beyond these.

It is worth recalling that, a decade ago, the majority of Indian companies was earning a return on the capital it used that was less than the cost of that capital – in the jargon, their economic value added (EVA) was negative. In plain language, Indian companies by and large were eating up capital. That's what the

public sector as a whole does when it is set up by a government that borrows from the market at (say) eight per cent, while the investment yields a return of no more than two or three per cent. And that was what even the private sector was doing 10 years ago. To my mind, the corporate sector then was not fulfilling its primary economic responsibility – and frankly, nothing else mattered. The situation today, fortunately, is vastly better. Most companies have become more efficient in every way (supply chain management, production efficiencies, inventory management, labour costs, energy efficiency...) so that the average Indian firm now earns a positive EVA. If the cost of capital is 10 per cent, the return on that capital now is more than 10 per cent. The firm therefore is no longer eating up capital, it is generating it. In a poor country that (by definition) is short of capital, your average company is now meeting its social/economic responsibility.

What does this mean in a macro context? Quite simply, if the system is able

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to meet its growth objectives with more efficient use of capital, it can afford to spend the money thus saved on (say) a social safety net. China, for instance, uses five units of capital to generate one additional unit of output (an incremental capital-output ratio of 5:1). India's ratio is less than 4:1. So, for the same rate of growth, India needs 20 per cent less capital than China. In other words, systemic efficiency is a sufficient good in itself, because it allows so much more to be done.

The confusion arises from mixing up charity and responsibility, two very different ideas. CSR as it has evolved is not viewed as charity, it is seen as a company fulfilling its responsibility. Thus, if the government or society as a whole has not been able to address the problem of long-term social backwardness for a part of the population, job reservations for specific castes is seen as the answer. Or, there should be affirmative action in terms of asking a bank to also support self-help groups with micro-credit.

But should AIDS be fought by Microsoft or by the charitable foundation that the company's wealthy founder Bill Gates has set up? Should it be Wipro's job to work with government schools so that they become better at imparting education, or is that 'charitable' work that properly belongs to the sphere in which the Azim Premji

Somehow, though, the logical flaw in all this does not get pointed out: what good is all the CSR in the world if your products are ruining people's lungs.

Foundation (set up by Wipro's chairman) functions? Indeed, would it be right on the part of Mr Premji to take money from Wipro (money that belongs to the total body of Wipro shareholders) and hand that out for making government schools more efficient? If he did that, shareholders would be within their rights to question Mr Premji on how he is making use of their money.

In other words, should we be seeking CSR, or should we be demanding that companies perform their function well and profitably, while individuals focus on charity?

TN Ninan is Editor and Publisher of Business Standard.



Industry needs to be democratic

FOR the past 10 years or so, I have interacted with Indian industry. I have worked with the paper industry, investigated mining, cement, power, automobiles and chemicals. I have managed to peep into hotels, textiles and apparels. This I have done as part of the 'Green Rating Project', in which we rate industries on their environment performance.

We, at the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), started this project to make Indian industry accountable for its social and environmental performance. It is not an official rating. It is a public rating. We seek voluntary disclosure of information from industry and after extensive analysis and site visits, we release the rating and the rating information to the public. The process of rating has given us a unique view of the dynamics in different industrial sectors.

In the past 10 years, environmental consciousness in Indian industry has increased significantly. Industries today are far more conscious about meeting regulatory standards than they were 10 years ago. Many industries are so proactive that they do even more than what is expected of them under the law. They show greater concern than the regulators.

Major environmental improvements have been achieved when industries realise that caring for the environment is also good for their bottom lines. For instance, energy efficiency has improved significantly over the years in almost all sectors of the economy. Where water is in short supply, water efficiency has improved. In sectors, where raw material has become costly, raw material efficiency has improved. In the cement industry, as the particulate matter emitted from stacks are nothing but cement blowing away, companies have made all efforts to reduce particulate emissions. Today many Indian cement companies meet particulate standards that are about one-third of what is required of them under regulations.

But in those environmental areas where immediate tangible returns are not visible Indian industry still lags behind. For instance, the same cement industry that is doing everything to reduce particulate emissions from stacks is nothing when it comes to reducing fugitive emissions from raw material yards or mining. Similarly, where water is in abundance, industry's water efficiency is very poor. Industries that have captive sources of raw materials are still quite inefficient in their raw material use. Overall, however, the environment performance of Indian companies is far better than what it was 10 years ago.

But today, the environment performance of individual companies is losing its significance because the number of industries has gone up significantly and therefore the total pollution load from Indian industry has increased manifold. Despite improvements in the environment performance of individual companies, the pollution load in most places and in most environmental media is far higher than what it was 10 years ago. Tackling the issue of the cumulative pollution load and assimilative capacity of the environment calls for a very new paradigm in pollution regulation which industry has not yet comprehended and regulators are not yet fully prepared to tackle.

But apart from environmental issues, there are some inherent structural and cultural weaknesses in Indian industry. These are responsible for causing widespread social and economic dissatisfaction across the country. Some of these weaknesses are not widely known, some of these are well known but not talked about, while some are talked about but rarely addressed. I firmly believe that Indian industry can contribute far more in social, economic and environmental terms than what it is doing today if these weaknesses are recognised and addressed.

In my dealings with the Indian industry, I have come to realise that most Indian companies are relatively short-sighted as far as social and environmen-



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People are no longer swayed by the argument of 'sacrifice' to the so-called national interest because this argument for industrialisation has devastated millions of lives and livelihoods.

tal issues are concerned. They just can't see the impending problems. Their sense of the cost borne by society because of reckless industrial practices is very poor. They generally don't consider environmental and social liabilities as key economic factors in their operations. I have come across cases where water scarcity is acute in an area and yet a company installs water-guzzling technology. The company operates in peace for a year or two till public protests break out. Ultimately it is forced to install water saving technologies or get water from different sources.

The short-sightedness of industry is best reflected in its dealings with local social and cultural sentiments. I know of a prestigious company which was forced to construct a new 10 km long effluent discharge channel by the priest of a local temple because waste was landing right on the bathing ghats of the temple. While constructing the original discharge channel, the company had ignored the religious sentiments of the people.

Similarly, a leading paper company of the country was forced by the inmates of a nearby jail to install costly odour-control technology, because the odour emanating from the factory was unbearable. In this case too, the company completely ignored the effect its odour had on the inmates of the jail.

I have found that Indian industry is clumsy at dealing with people. Its oft repeated excuse is that local communities are interested only in jobs and want to take money from them. Communities are certainly interested in jobs because this is the only thing that can compensate for what they lose when big industries are set up next to their houses, fields and forests. Though industry lacks this understanding, most local communities know that when an industry takes water from their rivers or aquifers they are actually losing their wealth. And communities want to be compensated for what they lose. It is important for industry to understand that people are no longer swayed by the argument of 'sacrifice' to the so-called national interest simply because this argument for industrialisation has devastated millions of lives and livelihoods.

The disregard of Indian industry for social and cultural values and its impatience with local communities is not good for the country. Companies will have to learn to work with those that are not of their class or viewpoint.

There are also inherent structural weaknesses in Indian industry. A major weakness is that there is little democracy in the internal working of companies. In fact, I have found scarce difference between government and industry as far as hierarchy and internal power relations are concerned. The inter-

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action between the top management and the junior officials in Indian industry is rarely straight and complete – more so when it relates to social and environmental issues that are dismissed as being of low commercial concern to the business.

Those who work in factories have a completely different understanding of environmental and social issues from that of their bosses at the headquarters. Since honest dialogue is rarely encouraged, the local view, which is closer to the

ed getting clues from the lower and middle level scientific staff. It so transpired that scientific staff knew about this problem but never had the courage to speak openly to their bosses or even if they tried to speak were told by their superiors to keep quiet. And this practice continued for 30 to 40 years. The industry was so tightlipped about this issue that even regulators had not comprehended the true extent of the problem. We will never know the whole truth. We certainly don't know what will be the repercussions of this in the long-term (most losses of mercury were through air and we found more mercury

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Anti-Coke protests at Jantar Mantar in Delhi

ground, invariably does not get fed into policy. The message from the top is mostly to manage problems and not to look for solutions to issues. This mode of working is so entrenched in the businesses that even an open-minded top management has difficulty breaking out of the mould.

Let me quote an example. While rating the chlor-alkali industry (industry that produces caustic soda and chlorine), we found to our horror that there was a huge gap between the amount of mercury put into the production process and the amount of mercury that was being released from the factories through various sources. There was 'missing mercury' to the tune of 80-90 per cent of the total input mercury that no factory could account for. This was disturbing because mercury is highly toxic and because the amount of mercury consumed by Indian industry is very high. We started questioning factory officials as well as the top bosses. But we didn't get any satisfactory answers. Slowly we start-

ed getting clues from the lower and middle level scientific staff. It so transpired that scientific staff knew about this problem but never had the courage to speak openly to their bosses or even if they tried to speak were told by their superiors to keep quiet. And this practice continued for 30 to 40 years. The industry was so tightlipped about this issue that even regulators had not comprehended the true extent of the problem. We will never know the whole truth. We certainly don't know what will be the repercussions of this in the long-term (most losses of mercury were through air and we found more mercury in soil and water outside the plants than inside because mercury travels far and wide). But once this issue came out in the open everyone became serious about it. The Central Pollution Control Board set stringent standards on mercury inputs and industry invested significant sums of money to arrest and recycle mercury emissions. Mercury is such a toxin that its solution is complete elimination and today the industry and the government are working towards removing mercury from the chlor-alkali production process.

I firmly believe that lack of democracy and freedom to exchange opinions and discuss issues within Indian industry is detrimental to its own growth and that of the nation. It is something on which Indian industry will have to work very hard.

I have noticed in Indian industry a growing impatience with democracy as an institution. In my discussions with industry leaders, I have come to realise that there is a deeply entrenched feeling

that democracy is hindering industrial growth. One industrialist said to me: "The 70 per cent poor are holding the prosperous 30 per cent to ransom." Many industry leaders have openly told me that they would prefer the Chinese model of government. I view this as a most disturbing trend.

The last thing that I want to say about Indian industry is that discrimination is a fact of life in Indian industry. There are strong class, caste, regional, gender and religious biases in Indian industry. Very few Indian companies can actually claim that they practise equal opportunity. Industry needs to realise that it is to its own advantage to rectify this because only then will it be able to draw on an array of Indian talent.

Chandra Bhushan is Associate Director, Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), New Delhi
These are his personal views and do not reflect the view of the institution he works with.

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Death of the newspaper?

Recently *The Economist* published a cover story with the traffic-stopping headline: "Who killed the newspaper?" Almost simultaneously the World Association of Newspapers published its annual World Press Trends according to which newspaper circulation sales increased in Asia by 1.7 per cent in 2005 over the previous year. The five largest markets were China (copies sold daily 96.6 million), India (78.7 million), Japan (69.7 million), the US (53.3 million) and Germany (21.5 million) in 2005. Among these, circulation sales increased in China and India and declined in the other three. Figures for 2006 are expected to follow the same pattern.

From these facts emerge two sub-facts. First, *The Economist's* feature should have been more truthfully titled, "Who killed the newspaper in the West?" But we need not belabour this point. It's an old habit with the grand publications of England to mistake the West for the world. Across the pond, we'll find locals mistaking America for the world. It's a cultural problem. We'll have to ignore it.

The second sub-fact is that what is happening to the West today may well happen to us tomorrow. If economic development is what life is all about, then the less advanced economies of the world are destined to go the way of today's advanced economies. Notice that Japan, the first and only fully "developed" country in Asia, presents a circulation graph identical to that of the West.

It will be a bit of a surprise if the internet does not do unto China and India what it has done to the developed economies. A new breed of humans are inheriting the world. They want basic information and they want it fast. Their time is counted in minutes. The internet recognises them and gives them precisely what they want. The newspaper may have to yield to the culture of instant updates in byte-size – in one word, internet.

Either that, or the newspaper will have to shed its traditional ambitions and become an LCD product based on the Lowest Common Denominator. After all, what is the real problem with *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and the *Asahi Shimbun*? They want to hold on to their accustomed prestige. They want to be known as authoritative purveyors of information, honoured around the world for their editorial values.

There is a Calvinistic quality about such old-world ambitions. In a world where all values are changing, what is the virtue of holding on to editorial values? Those papers that have done so are losing numbers. Those papers who adopted new LCD values have put on numbers. So who is wiser?

What would happen if the aforesaid newspapers became modern and accepted the superior value of Page 3 over Page 1? Why should this notion of prestige, ambivalent at best, be linked with editorial values and not numbers? Isn't there great prestige in being known as "the largest circulated newspaper?"

Indian genius has recognised this, introduced changes in accordance with it and is helping the faithful to laugh all the way to the bank. This has been no accidental fling either. The pioneers of modernity had articulated a policy that was all-inclusive. The target audience of the newspaper, they said, is not the reader but the advertiser. We are not in the news business, they said, we are in the entertainment business. Newspapers, they said, have no responsibility other than making profits for their shareholders.

With aims and objectives so clearly spelt out, the best newspaper establishments have gone about implementing policies with exemplary thoroughness. Other countries, for example, have seen price wars. But when Indian papers introduced them, they reflected the distilled wisdom of 5000 years of civilisation.

The actual price printed on the paper was no more than a general indication of the owner's goodwill towards the reader. On a tag of one rupee, he would give an agent's commission of 70 to 80 paise. To vendors who bring in five new

subscribers, he would give a refrigerator, twenty subscribers a colour television and so on. Where in the world do they practise an economic principle that allows spending ten rupees for a product priced one rupee?

The British are slowly catching on. They have started giving expensive CDs free with every copy of paper sold at news-stands. But of course they won't succeed because theirs is a piecemeal approach. To succeed in the marketplace, they will have to adopt the Indian approach of wholesale restructuring of every idea and every practice.

For today's successful newspaper in India news is not what it used to be. Nor is marketing what it used to be. Their roles have been reversed. Earlier, you gave the best of news and analysis and someone marketed it. Today the mar-

keting people will tell you what they want in the paper and that's that.

One reason why the bottom line is unpromising to the newspaper that's being killed in the West is that they spend substantial sums on newsgathering.

To send one correspondent to the war front in Iraq is a matter of a few million dollars. We have some papers with the cash power to do that. But that power is used to send the Marketing Department to Amsterdam for their annual conference. As for the war in Iraq, Indian readers must be satisfied with coverage from embedded American reporters. And the bottom line comes out jingling.

The wholesale restructuring approach has helped Indian newspapers to take things to their logical end. The most successful newspapers have dispensed with the concept of editor. This is logical because, if we think about it really honestly, why do we need an editor? The editor is no good either for numbers or for revenue. Marketing managers are good for both. So, logically, successful newspapers in India are demonstrably marketing-led. *The Washington Post* and *Yomiuri Shimbun* persist in being editorial-led. They pay the price in declining numbers.

A new breed of humans are inheriting the world. They want basic information and they want it fast. Their time is counted in minutes.

The best minds in India have now institutionalised a system whereby editorial space is also turned into advertising space with the reader not knowing about it. The reader reads an interview with a medical college principal or a feature article about interior decoration thinking that it is editorial matter put together by the paper's journalists. In fact it is paid-for matter provided by the college's or interior decoration company's public relations agents. The reader doesn't know, so he has nothing to complain about. The marketing manager knows, so he has everything to be happy about. Everyone is a winner in the true tradition of 5000 years of distilled wisdom.

On second thoughts, *The Economist* had a valid point. Old values are killing newspapers in the West where they have the honesty to say so publicly. In India new values are killing newspapers but everyone pretends that Death is Life.

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Against corporate censorship

WHAT is the biggest challenge that the Indian media currently faces? Is it the exercise of State power and political manipulation in the fashion that used to exist? Or is it something else that has come to be so interwoven with the very fabric of the media that it doesn't get spoken about and confronted?

The media's enemy is within. For all the claims made by TV channels and newspapers about their impact, the Indian media is today faced with growing irrelevance resulting from the tight control that is exercised on it by the corporate sector. I would even say that corporate censorship of the media is holding Indian democracy hostage. It is leading to serious biases in the information that is put in the public domain and slowing down meaningful development.

India may have witnessed huge increases in the numbers of readers and viewers. But the reality is that though the media marketplace has grown, control of the media in terms of ownership is in the hands of a few. This is a worldwide phenomenon and it is also cause for concern among people all over who believe that a democracy is as good and as vibrant as the quality of information that circulates within it.

Corporations that own the media shape its functioning to suit their own narrow definition of profit. When profit becomes the only reason for being in the media business, then any and every means is employed for shoring up bottom lines. The quality of information on offer becomes secondary. It is a fact that today big advertisers determine what goes into the majority of newspapers and TV channels. They shape tastes both through their advertising and by influencing editorial content.

Media owners have come to believe that it is important to sound celebratory in order to keep advertising money flowing in. People don't want bad news, is the common refrain. But "bad news" has come to define anything that treads on the interests of corporate houses. So, whether it is the environment, the stock market, public health or education, the media shies away from serving the interests of the consumer and citizen.

We are frequently given glib talk about the "power of the media" and "media activism". The Mattoo and Jessica Lal murders are cited as examples. Perhaps there has been some media pressure in these cases. But the truth is that the media exists on a tight leash. It barks when it is allowed to do so and it does not bite except when it is set after someone.

When it comes to digging deep into political corruption or exposing the nexus between politicians and corporate houses, today's media prefers to be a spectator.

It can be argued that the Indian media always had only a few owners. Also, what the government-run media put out could not be trusted. This is true. But the problem of narrow control is much greater today because only a few have the money and organisational ability to be significant owners. Everything is a numbers game requiring huge finance. Distribution, advertising and the promotion of editorial products themselves are driven by this logic. There is no room left for the small voices and in their absence there is no diversity.

Moreover, corporate control of the media is resulting in a new sameness of journalistic talent. A whole generation of reporters and sub-editors has only one view of the world and it is defined by a glorification of personal wealth and prosperity.

There can be no argument about the fact that India was in urgent need of reforms. But reforms that don't deal with corruption in public life, allow companies to take over our lives in so many ways, don't deliver better education and health need to be questioned.

It is only an independent media that can provide such scrutiny. We need jour-

nalists trained to speak for equity and justice in spheres as varied as the stock market and forest policy. A market must be for everyone and in a poor country it must finally include the people on the fringes.

Successive weak governments over the past decade and a half have led to emasculation of the political class. The average politician gets elected and seeks out office to make money as quickly as possible. Politicians in themselves are no threat to the media. In fact they are careful not to act against the media. Even in instances such as the Babri Masjid riots where newspapers were clearly to blame for inciting violence, no action was taken.

The danger to the media comes from the nexus between weak politicians and an aggressive corporate sector. The two together today define the paths that the country is taking. In the absence of public discourse they are doing pretty much

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as they please. A subservient media, well-fed, well-paid and pumped up with notions of being global in its identity, serves the politician-corporate sector nexus well.

Between 1991 and 1995 chit funds raised perhaps Rs 100,000 crores from ordinary people. They made false promises and many families lost their life savings. It is no secret that these chit fund companies silenced the media, both big and small, by buying advertising space. Several politicians were closely involved with the chit funds. At least two of them are members of the UPA government in Delhi. The promoters of the chit funds have not been touched. The media remains silent on them.

The policy of special economic zones (SEZs) has been formulated and implemented without public discourse even though it involves handing over land in tens and thousands of acres to the leading business houses of the country. It is a land scam, if ever there was one and it is sponsored by the highest levels of the UPA government. There isn't an editor or a TV anchor who dares question the need for giving land in such large amounts and for innumerable dubious projects to the corporate sector.

What we get to know about politicians doesn't come from the media but from politicians trying to settle scores. For instance, how did we come to know that Sonia Gandhi flew in a plane belonging to a leading industrial house to Moscow? Why, from the BJP. And how do we know that Jaswant Singh also flew in the same plane to Israel? From the Congress, of course. And so it goes on. Deve Gowda needed the use of the same plane to fly back to Bangalore to give in his resignation as chief minister and take over as Prime Minister.

The media is a mute spectator to such goings on. It waits for stories to be dropped into its lap when its suits one interest or the other. It does not have a life of its own, a definition of the purpose it serves in a democracy.

Even as big interests dominate the media scene, we tend to forget how many small publications in the country have wound up. This is a tragedy because for every small publication we lose we mortgage our freedom. We need more people who believe in the importance of multiple voices. It is from this diversity that broad-based progress can be achieved.

Finally, a society gets the media it deserves. If we don't value information and the freedom of speech then we will get the kind of media we have today. We will see ourselves increasingly dictated to by companies that are driven by the tunnel vision of their profitability.

I am a supporter of *Civil Society* because it is the first magazine of its kind in the Indian media in several decades to face the challenge of the marketplace with professionalism and grace. More importantly, it has been created by people who moved away from the big media to prove small media works and is needed.

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The two-rupee liberal

If Narendra Modi unfurls the banner of victory in Gujarat – thus sending out a saffron signal to the republic – it will be at least partly my fault. For I am what I call a two-rupee liberal. Almost daily I face the two-rupee dilemma, in the form of two elderly gents who sit on the steps of the pedestrian subway outside the office. They're too dignified to be called beggars. The term 'mendicant', with its association of spiritually inspired self-abnegation, might be more appropriate.

One of them seems to be a Hindu, in that he wears saffron. The other appears to be a Muslim, from his cap and beard. They share the subway steps in an ecumenical amity that would put many a secularist to shame. Including me. My embarrassment is caused by determining how much to give each of them. If the coins in my pocket add up to two or four, it's easy: each one gets half. The problem arises when I have only three rupees in change. Who gets the one buck, and who gets two?

More often than not, the person I assume to be a Muslim ends up with the two rupees. My reasoning, if you can call it that, goes like this: In India there are relatively more, and more, affluent Hindus to look after other Hindus, than there are Muslims to look after Muslims. My liberal credo urges affirmative action, no matter on how small a scale, to help the underdog. Or, as in this case, the undererdog.

But doesn't such prejudicial selection militate against my secularism, which is the obverse and necessary side of my liberalism? If my choice – no matter how well-intentioned – is based on a communal premise, how secular is my secularism, how truly liberal my liberalism? Am I not guilty of the Sangh Parivar charge of 'pseudo-secularism', and 'appeasement of minorities', both of which are synonyms for illiberalism?

All this for a measly two rupees – aren't you making a big deal out of nothing? you'd ask, and rightly so. I'd agree with you. Except that my two two-rupee dilemma is only a symptom of a bigger problem, which has to do with the nature of liberalism and that of its opposite. And what would that be? Well, a conservative would say it was conservatism. And a liberal? A liberal might be tempted to call it fanaticism. But in doing so, the liberal would call into question his own liberal credentials which include the legitimacy of the other's opinion, so long as it does not violate the law of the land.

The liberal, for whom the means are as important as the ends if not even more so, is forever questioning his own motives. The conservative (or whatever else you call him), for whom the ends are the means, is under no compulsion to trip over his own feet. Which the liberal does with regularity. Whether the issue is two rupees or the need for a common civil code.

In the interests of gender equity, as a liberal I'm all for a uniform civil code. But this is uncomfortably close to the position the Parivar takes, though for somewhat different reasons. Averse to aligning myself with the conservative (fanatic?) Parivar, I shilly-shally on the civil code issue, and end up sounding like Rajiv Gandhi on the Shah Bano case – which everyone, liberal and otherwise, agrees was a shameful instance of minority vote-catching.

The general liberal stand (if you can call it that) on the common civil code is that, in the case of a minority community, it should be left to that community to

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My liberal credo urges affirmative action, no matter on how small a scale, to help the underdog. Or, as in this case, the undererdog.

evolve a consensus on the issue within itself. According to liberalism, minorities have to be protected from majoritarianism. Fine. But aren't Muslim women a minority within the larger minority of Muslims as a whole, and might thus doubly be in need of liberal protection, even if that protection involves falling in line with what liberalism otherwise sees as an anti-Muslim policy? To fight shy of this on the excuse that one doesn't want to be seen joining ranks with Islam-bashers is to duck the question: How liberal, really, is your liberalism? Protection of minorities is a secular/liberal tenet. So is impartiality under law. What happens to my liberalism when these two tenets collide?

A pregnant woman is being held captive in a Nigerian prison until her baby is born whereupon the mother will be stoned to death for adultery under a local Islamic law. Liberals have of course denounced such cases of Islamic fundamentalism. But the overall liberal view has been that moderate, or liberal, Islam must be the foremost voice to be raised against the more radical forms of Islam. Why? Why should I as a so-called Hindu liberal differentiate myself from a so-called Islamic liberal in speaking out against inhuman practices no matter what supposed religious sanction they have? And if I do, don't I justify the charge of pseudo-secularism against people of my ilk, and thereby help to validate the actions of people like Togadia and Narendra Modi?

So what's the answer? A 'hard' liberalism to counter 'hard' conservatism – hell, why not just spit it out and call it fanaticism? A liberalism that, like its opposite, refuses to heed any voice other than that of its own monomania, refuses to see anything other than its own delusions?

Jingling in my pocket the ideological small change of my doubts, I walk towards the two elderly figures. What shall it be today? Who gets the two rupees, and who gets one? Shall I play it by random chance? Shall I put a stop to footling sentimentality and give neither of them anything? Should I do exactly the opposite of what I think Narendra Modi would do? But by doing that don't I, in effect, empower him? Become him?

In either case, he seems to win. And all for my piddling two bucks.



Farmers and the money crunch

INDIA is changing very rapidly indeed though one is unsure if the transformation is for better or worse. The annual growth rate has almost broken through the nine per cent barrier during the last quarter, a feat surpassed only by the Chinese dragon. However, employment generation does not match with this spectacular growth.

The farming sector that still provides livelihood opportunities to about two-thirds of the population is in total disarray. The central government is deeply concerned and keen to find a road map towards inclusive growth. Efforts are on to usher in a second green revolution.

The reality is farmers have been committing suicide in thousands all over the country. Farmer suicides, though disproportionately concentrated in some states, are being heard of from almost all the major states. The farmers, we are told, took their lives as they were not in a position to pay off their debts since their crops failed. The *Times of India* published a piece by Sudhiredar Sharma on 16 September chronicling the plight of 60 farmers in Andhra Pradesh who committed suicide after having failed to repay debts they procured as members of self-help groups (SHGs).

Recently Professor Muhammad Yunus, the founder of Bangladesh's Grameen Bank and the man behind the idea of micro-credit and formation of SHGs was selected for the Nobel Peace Prize for 2006. The press release by the award committee on 13 October, immediately after the announcement, says:

"Lasting peace cannot be achieved unless large population groups find ways in which to break out of poverty. Micro-credit is one such means. Yunus and Grameen Bank have shown that even the poorest of the poor can work to bring about their own development..."

Why then, despite the conviction of the Nobel Peace Prize Award Committee and Prof. Yunus that SHGs can work wonders for the poverty stricken people of the world, did farmers in Andhra Pradesh commit suicide? Why could a successful solution, practiced by a leading peace-maker, not bring peace to so many households?

The answer is not simple. Indian farmers are in dire straits today. The fifth and final report submitted by the National Commission of Farmers on 4 October mentions two primary sources of stress for the Indian farmer:

The average cost of cultivation of paddy and wheat, the two most important crops grown in India, is higher in almost all the states than the minimum support price offered by the Union Government.

Most farmer households with land up to one hectare and many with land between one and two hectare, may not be earning enough to meet the consumption expenses of their families.

The irony is, in spite of facing such hardship, most farmers cannot leave cultivation because they cannot afford to engage in any other alternative livelihood, even if they want to. The reasons are not far to seek. Farmers do not have the necessary capital, both physical and human, to enable them to do off-farm activities.

That the level of human capital stock in villages of India is not enough to facilitate a smooth transition of farmers and their households to off-farm activities, was evident from the findings of the Annual State of Education Report (ASER) 2005. Early trends from surveys being carried out right now to compile ASER 2006 do not suggest any dramatic turnaround.

The lack of physical capital is evident from the very thin margin of profit a typical Indian farmer makes even when all relevant critical factors – availability of water, incidence of pest attacks, quality of seeds procured, farm gate prices realised for harvested crop etc – are seamlessly and simultaneously ensured. To put it bluntly, most farmers generate a slender surplus even when uncertainties are negligible.

The failure to shift to off-farm activities is the reason behind the near total overlap observed between rural livelihood opportunities and farming. The

most important off-farm activities – handloom and handicrafts – are also dying a slow death in villages, thanks to the availability of cheaper, machine-made substitutes across the country.

It is clear that rural India is badly in need of an effective network of institutions that can provide 'quality' credit in the right quantities at affordable costs. The historic nationalisation of commercial banks in 1969 and the subsequent experiments with rural banks could provide an opportunity for increasing the quantum of rural credit.

The quality of credit has never been given conscious consideration. Supply of credit was often far below the amount demanded and, to top it all, it never reached when it was most urgently needed. Agriculture, being a seasonal activity and still mostly dependent on the vagaries of the monsoon, credit delayed is

credit denied. The cooperative sector failed miserably to improve the supply of credit, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Another important obstacle to ensuring the smooth supply of quality credit to farmers was their low asset base. Most of them cannot afford to arrange for the collaterals that standard credit packages come with. Prof. Yunus' efforts developed an alternative package of credit that put value to trust among a group of individuals (SHGs) who knew each other since generations. Such an exercise helped get rid of collaterals in a credit disbursement model and increased the flow of credit on time to poor villagers in Bangladesh. The success of this model has been considerable and has been consequently

replicated in many parts of the world, including India.

However, problems remain. The value of trust among members of an SHG – typically around 15 – cannot go beyond a certain threshold, thus restricting the flow of credit beyond a certain maximum level to a particular group. Further, efforts put in by personnel from micro-finance institutions (MFIs) to maintain trust within groups through several group dynamic exercises also involves expenditure of considerable resources both in terms of time and money. Obviously, the price of credit could not be maintained at a level that would help borrowers generate enough surplus.

Experiences from the Grameen Bank and several MFIs suggest that the credit model can effectively halt the misery of the poor across the world. But there are questions. Will these efforts be effective in eradicating poverty altogether, given the fact that the quantum of credit provided to an SHG cannot go beyond a certain threshold?

Lack of access to credit is an important factor affecting the productive capacity of an individual. But it's not the only one. Several others like access to quality education and health facilities, access to the market, remunerative prices for outputs, quality inputs at minimum prices, also add to the capacity of a producer to realise a higher margin. We require further efforts to ensure these requirements.

Another point to ponder. Grameen Bank credits were aimed at involving groups in off-farm activities which have lower gestation periods, compared to farming activities that involve at least a gap of 90 days between sowing and harvesting.

SHG credit models are based on the principle of repayment in equated weekly instalments – a capacity beyond the practical ability of farmers. Besides, since agriculture is dependent on several natural factors which are beyond the control of the farmer, farming activities are much more risk prone than the off-farm trading activities supported by the Grameen Bank.

Indian efforts at bringing farmers into the network of SHGs requires much more innovative thinking to take care not only of the repayment capabilities of borrowers, but also of their capacity to create enough margins to make themselves more credit-worthy. Any takers?

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Classrooms in the marketplace

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EDUCATION systems always reflect and conserve the existing social hierarchy. In a period of rapid social change, such as India has experienced over the last two decades, the education system has struggled to keep pace. Predictably, as India embraced consumerism and a more liberal economy, so too did education.

In the last decade, there have been many changes in the education sector. For the highly privileged there has been the development of 'World Schools', the introduction of international qualifications, the development of new pastoral care initiatives, and the provision of specialised education for those with 'special needs'. The privileged section of society has also gained the opportunity for more diverse higher educational subjects, vocational training and greater opportunities for international study here and abroad.

For the not-so-privileged middle classes the boom in the growth of private schools has been a mixed blessing. Some of the new schools are an improvement on those provided by the State, but many provide a very poor service. This section of society has had to rely on the phenomenal growth of computer education centres, cramming centres, and specialised vocational centres to enhance their educational qualifications.

At the bottom of the social hierarchy, the rural and urban poor have seen a slight rise in provision, a large increase in funding, and the usual jam-tomorrow promises of the political and bureaucratic classes. The effects of spending of education cess is kicking in and more provision is being put in place, but the old problems of extremely poor management by bureaucracy and resistance by some cash strapped state governments means that the increase in funding is not as effective as it could be.

This year's budget saw a large increase in funding. Five hundred thousand additional classrooms are to be constructed and 150,000 more teachers appointed. Allocation for the Midday Meal Scheme for 2006-07 has been hiked to Rs 4,813 crore in 2006-07 and this should have a positive effect. Around 120 million children are now covered under the Midday Meal Scheme, which is the largest school meal programme in the world. The scheme is mostly working and school attendance is up.

Over the past 20 years Indian business houses have increasingly realised how lucrative schooling can be, and this has led to a tremendous growth in the number of schools that now compete with the established traditional schools for places at those few Indian universities that provide a reasonable learning environment. This coupled with the population explosion has led to the tremendous growth in demand for places and subsequently ever higher grades for admission.

These same higher admission marks and the poor reputation of Indian universities have fuelled the move towards higher education abroad for the children of the wealthy. In the USA, tens of thousands of Indian students swell the coffers of colleges, and Australia too is seeing exceptional increases in the numbers of Indian students who opt for their colleges and institutions of learning. Educating Indians has become big business for colleges in the west, to the extent that Indian students are now paying over \$3 billion a year to train abroad. This trend is set to continue and growth rates for Indian students going abroad is predicted to be 25 per cent per annum!

The globalisation of education has led to the benchmarking of institutions of higher education world wide, but only three Indian institutions rank among the top 500 in the world, and none of them are universities. Very few Indian institutions are globally accredited or recognised. While universities around the world are earning large incomes from tens of thousands of Indian students, hardly any foreign students are being attracted to our universities. The number of foreign students seeking places in Indian institutions has plummeted to below 4000.

Indian businessmen have not been slow to exploit the market for western schooling and large numbers of new 'World Schools' are being built. These schools combine the 'palace on the hill' approach of traditional Indian public schools with modern western curricula and western trained staff. Five star resources, huge campuses and large fees combine to produce an exclusivity that was once reserved for the Doons and Bishop Cottons. The major attractions of



these 'World Schools' include far more child-centred curricula, more modern subject options and most importantly, freedom from the tyranny of the Indian exam systems. In the next 18 months over 100 new 'World Schools' will open in India. These schools are expensive: Expect to pay fees between Rs 5 and 15 lakhs a year, but they are luxurious and different.

The move towards adopting modern education is also occurring in other schools for the wealthy. The International Baccalaureate (IB) and the International General Certificate of Education (IGCSE) to which the World Schools are affiliating are also being adopted by more and more upper middle class schools. With these affiliations comes teacher training, new ways of study and assessment, and a move towards teaching the child to think! Our traditional schools and their copyist clones are changing their programmes, and even Doon School is scheduled to start the IB programme from April of 2007.

The overall increase in State funding of education is reflected in some improvement in provision for the poor and in a decrease in illiteracy rates. However, according to the latest studies, education provision in India is continuing to fall behind other countries because provision in those countries is being improved at a faster rate than here.

The new Right to Education document has been watered down but antagonism between the States and the Central Government over funding continues and it is obvious that implementation will require a political will that has been noticeably absent over the years since independence. The continued increase in population, which is, and will be, particularly acute among the poor, and the wasteful ineptitude of our bureaucracy will mean that even if funding matches that allocated in other countries, improvement in India will continue to fall behind.

A new phenomenon that will affect the not so privileged middle classes is the entry of township developers into education. All the leading developers are seeking to add education to their activities and in the next five years this will create thousands of new schools for those buying houses and apartments in new townships. Given that these schools will be community specific, the opportunities to develop US style 'community schools' or UK style 'extended schools' will be numerous.

Recent years have seen a huge growth in the number of graduate hamburger servers, shop assistants, fizzy drink salespersons and call centre hands. This trend is bound to continue and with the coming of foreign colleges and schools, the higher education curricula will change to incorporate more soft subjects and less academic degrees. (Football is an A level subject in the UK).

So what does the future hold for you and your family? The answer, as always, depends on where you are positioned and how wealthy you are. As in all aspects of globalisation, the gap between the rich and the poor in access to quality education will only increase. The new schools are more modern in their approach. But how relevant are they in a country with wide disparities?



A city in search of justice

SUNDAY, August 27, 2006: a slow time to catch up on the news. What do they say about my city of Delhi? Apparently, in one part of the city, the medicos have been observing a "black day" because they think that increasing reservations for lower castes in medical colleges will dilute the quality of treatment. In this case, the government is being forced to backtrack and the concerned Bill has been referred to a Standing Committee of Parliament. In another part of the city, though, the traditional peerzadas of the Nizamuddin Dargah are protesting because the Wakf Board wants to take away their control over the coffers. But in this case the High Court has appointed a receiver to take over the treasury. Does this mean that the legislature and the judiciary perceive public protest through different lenses?

The papers have a few titbits to offer on that. It seems the Members of Parliament have just hiked their individual salaries and perks to a cool Rs 38 lakh per year. The Prime Minister has been occupied in allaying the concerns of the scientists on the issue of the nuclear deal with the President of the United States of America, while also facing an enquiry by the Election Commission on whether he occupies an office of profit. At another level, the legislators in the Municipal Corporation have been busy fighting, depending upon whether they belong to the Mayor's camp or that of the local boss of the Congress. (And, as usual, there is the scuffle between the NSUI and the ABVP in the Delhi University polls.) It's not clear whether all or any of them have much time for public issues.

So what is the picture at the judicial level? The recursive news is that the High Court has stayed the expulsion of a 17-year-old who lodged a criminal complaint against his Principal for corporal punishment. Another 17-year-old has approached the High Court for relief from the ill-treatment meted out to her by her foster parents. The same Court has also been petitioned for claiming damages by the father of a 10-year-old who fell through a vent at the India Habitat Centre. And another court has framed charges against Godman Chandraswami for transferring funds worth \$200,000 to fashion-woman Bina Ramani, who also stands accused in the Jessica Lal case. It would not seem that, on this pleasant Sunday, the courts have much time for public matters either.

But wait, other pages of the newspapers reveal that the leaders of society do have some time for the concerns of my city. The Chief Minister is inaugurating the first of 36 new and ultra-modern (and exorbitantly expensive) hospitals. She is also keenly pursuing massive infrastructure development in East Delhi, where her son is the resident MP. As part of that infrastructure, more than four large hotels are likely to come up on the ecologically vulnerable Yamuna flood plain to house the athletes of the Commonwealth Games. But that has to wait as the Delhi Development Authority still has to acquire the 12.35 hectares of land at a cost of Rs 190 crores from the UP government. In the meantime, the city fathers are planning to make the city "streetsmart" as the Games approach. Does this mean that my city is well on its way to the future?

Several news items would belie that hope. The Delhi Jal Board has discovered that the illegal taps it plugged in its water pipe line from the modern Sonia Vihar plant have been reinstalled in a posh South Delhi colony. The police have not been able to find any leads in the murder of a 94-year-old widow, living in a colony given over to refugees from Pakistan, who laboured to bring up six children, all of whom have left for greener pastures abroad. The Income Tax sleuths have raided the premises of a company in entrepreneurial West Delhi, whose employees falsely reported a robbery of Rs 1.5 crores. An RTV (designed for rural areas, but merrily plying within the city) driver fled after the vehicle turned turtle and injured 15. And 70 shops were gutted in a fire at a chemicals market in the old walled city.

Clearly, things are not as they appear. Violence and conflict seem to lie just below the fabric of the city. A criminal has been held during a routine tenant verification drive. The area around the Kos Minar built by the Mughals at the edge of the city on the route to Agra has had to be decongested through a High Court order and 30 shops and 30 vendors have been evicted. There is some editorial grumbling about the slum-dwellers, who have also encroached on 'public' land. This grumbling spills over in Pavlovian fashion to the introduction of DTH tele-

vision where, finally, there will be no nasty cablewallah interfering between the consumer and the corporation. And some side swipes are taken, for good measure, against the pesky autowallah whom the police and the administration have not been able to tame.

So where does the truth lie? Does my city treat all citizens the same? Protestor and peerzada; Parliamentarian and student; adopted child and crafty embezzler; athletic contestant and aquatic duck; widow and entrepreneur; tenant and shopkeeper; auto driver and slum dweller; do they get even-handed treatment? Are they equal in the eyes of the law and their fellow citizens? Or is there a spirit of exclusion, of feel-goods versus feel-bads? Does the World City sit uneasily with the Walled one? And why is it that so many events this same weekend are not reported? Like how Reliance is trying to swallow up the Sultanpur jheel. Or how activists are endeavouring to take children out from sweatshops and into schools. And how streetsmart kids are creating their own art and culture.

Perhaps fractals of the truth lie in the grumbling – the grumbling that resonates with the turmoil below. Is there something fabricated about the manifest

fear of the tenant and the terrorist? Are the vendor and the slum-dweller as fairly or falsely accused as the cablewallah and the autowallah? Turn the pages of my city to 1994, when an industrialists' association filed a writ praying for the removal of slum encroachments in their area. Eight years down the line another writ was filed by yet another association, the two cases were clubbed together, and, without giving any opportunity to the slums to be heard, the judge proceeded to quash the slum policy. In this manner, a judgement on two cases, referring to slum encroachments in two industrial areas, gave sweeping powers to the administration to uproot slum-dwellers everywhere in the city.

Another case provides another glimpse of the truth. An employees' union challenged the construction of the Akshardham Trust temple on the Yamuna riverbed, on the grounds that the land on which the temple was being constructed did not belong to Delhi, but had been leased to the Trust at a paltry rent of Re 1. The employees also argued that construction on the riverbed would endanger groundwater and lead to long-term environmental damage. The union described how the Master Plan was amended to allot 28 acres to the Trust, above the 40 acres already granted, ostensibly for a parking lot. The petition

alleged that the powerful patrons of the Trust had taken unauthorised possession of the land and started construction of the temple without any valid authorisation. But the court, ruling in favour of the Trust, held that all clearances had been granted to the temple and dismissed the writ.

As Delhi moves towards its tryst with destiny, the city's elite posture in world-class fashion, while the people of my city have artificial walls built around them. Hawkers and vendors can no longer ply their trade because it is claimed that they are occupying the space of the pedestrians (actually evicted by the expanding road); non-polluting cycle rickshaws are banned because they must be causing congestion (although all data points to the wildly proliferating car as the real culprit); migration of the domestic servant and service sector worker to the city is to be stopped because they are supposed to be responsible for the breakdown of civic facilities (even though they consume the least resources); and urban space is to be protected for the mall, the flyover, the private vehicle, the skyscraper, and the gated colony (but not for the vulnerable widow, the girl-child, the nurse and the maidservant).

There is nothing inclusive about my city any more. High walls and low words can only, by design, breed more exclusion as social interconnectedness is rent asunder and human beings are alienated from each other and from the organic city. I watch the glitter of power and pomp, the ignorance of the law-makers and the arrogance of the law-dispensers, the victim being made villain, and how the rulers revile the ruled (because they fear them so much?). I watch, but I also wait. Because, as Sunday rolls into Monday, the news filters out that the traders are ready to hit the streets, to challenge demolitions, discrimination, and prejudice. And to ask whether law is higher than livelihood. I pray, they will slowly, but surely, be joined by those hundreds of thousands of my fellow citizens who wonder if justice is valued less than lucre.

Dunu Roy is an activist with the Hazards Centre in New Delhi

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Does my city treat all citizens the same? Protestor and peerzada, student and Parliamentarian, adopted child and crafty embezzler.

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Here come corporate zamindars

THE Union government, after prolonged deliberations, notified the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) Rules in February 2006, putting into operation the SEZ Act 2005. The government has cleared as many as 117 SEZs and applications of several other developers are pending.

SEZs are specially demarcated zones where units operate under a set of rules and regulations different from those applicable to other units in the country. The emphasis is on enhancing exports and creating an environment for attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) by offering tax sops. While units in the zone have to be net foreign exchange earners, they are not subjected to any pre-determined value addition or minimum export performance requirements.

Any private, public, joint sector or state government or its agencies can set up SEZs. Foreign companies, too, are eligible.

SEZ units will be entitled to 100 per cent tax exemption for the first five years, 50 per cent for the next two and 50 per cent of the ploughed back export profits for the next five years. Losses will be allowed to be carried forward.

Developers may import or procure goods without payment of duty for the development, operation and maintenance of SEZs. They will enjoy income tax exemption for 10 years, with a block period of 15 years. The developers will also have the freedom to allocate developed plots to approved SEZ units on a purely commercial basis. They will have full authority to provide services like water, electricity, security, restaurants, recreation centres etc on commercial lines. Moreover, they will be exempt from paying service tax.

Haryana seems poised for setting up the country's largest multi-product SEZ, stretching over 25,000 acres between Gurgaon and Jhajjar off the Delhi-Jaipur highway. It is being set up jointly by Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) and the Haryana State Industrial and Infrastructure Development Corporation (HSIIDC). RIL alone will invest Rs 25,000 crores, while Rs 15,000 crores will be put in by companies interested in investing in the SEZ.

It is claimed that the SEZ has provisions for a cargo airport and a 2000 megawatt power plant, and that it would generate 500,000 jobs. Further it is said that the State government will earn revenues up to Rs 10,000 crores. Reliance is the major stakeholder with 90 per cent stake in the joint venture company while the remaining 10 per cent rests with HSIIDC.

Reliance has also got about 10,000 hectares for an SEZ in Pen Tehsil of Raigad district in Maharashtra. The villagers realise that they are pitted against a formidable adversary – the giant Reliance. It is branching into textiles, power, contract farming, medicinal herbs, the sugar industry and retail stores. Farmers know the company has enormous sway over the political, bureaucratic establishment and the media.

The SEZ land grab will make paupers of our peasantry and create a new generation of corporate zamindars. Average land holdings in India are two acres and less. To rob small peasants of what little they have and put it in the hands of giants like Reliance with Rs 100,000 crore wealth is to create a country of dispossessed paupers. Land grab for SEZs will also aggravate the agrarian crisis by robbing farmers of their main resource – land.

FARMERS' SUICIDES : A NATIONAL SHAME: Our research and the Bija Yatra we undertook in May 2006 confirm that the agrarian crisis leading to farmers' suicides is a result of debt. Debt is due to the convergence of rising costs of non-sustainable and inappropriate production systems coupled with falling prices of agricultural products that are linked to unjust and unfair trade patterns.

Financial, ecological non-sustainability of production is due to: Costly seeds that are non-renewable. Hence such seeds add an entirely new financial burden on peasants. These seeds are also untested and unreliable, and have been brought to the market through self-certification.

Costly chemicals, which drain the peasant's scarce capital and leave agro ecosystems more fragile and impoverished, hence increasing the vulnerability of farming.

Monocultures of cash crops, which further aggravate the risks of crop failure due to pests, diseases and climate change.

Unfortunately, the Prime Minister's Vidharbha Package has aggravated suicides in the region. The Rs 180 crore Quality Seeds Replacement Programme will further spread costly, non-renewable, hybrid and genetically engineered seeds, turning the Rs 3,750 crore package into a bonanza for Monsanto-Mahyco, but bringing no relief to the distressed farmers.

"Seed Replacement" is the language introduced by seed corporations to stop farmers having and saving open pollinated seed varieties, and making them dependent on buying costly seeds from the market each year. As our report on "Seeds of Suicides" shows, the dependency of farmers on high cost, unreliable, non-renewable seed is the most significant reason for farmers distress in the cotton belt. What needs to be replaced is Bt cotton, not the jowar, bajra, tur, that are adapted to Vidharbha and necessary for food security.

IMPORTING HUNGER: The Prime Minister has also announced the creation of corporate markets. However, this is precisely what created the wheat crisis, when agribusiness bought up and hoarded the wheat harvest. About 5.5 million tonnes

of wheat were imported at more than Rs 10,000 to Rs 13,500 per quintal, while Indian farmers were paid Rs 6,500 to Rs 7,000. This has led to wheat prices being doubled and can rapidly aggravate the crisis of hunger.

High cost imports have already reduced PDS supplies. Import costs will increase because of reduction in global supply and India's growing imports. The first consignment was bought at \$178.75 in February. Now the bids are for \$270.00 and they are expected to increase. In spite of imports, supply of wheat to the PDS and the Grameen Rozgar Yojana is facing cuts. Even supply to orphanages have been stopped.

The food grain allotted for the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana, the rural employment programme has been reduced from five million tonnes to 2.8 million tonnes. Villagers working under the employment guarantee scheme will from now on take home 2 kg less food grain every day.

This will aggravate food insecurity of the poor. Thirty per cent of rural households consumed 1,600 kcal in 1998 compared to 1,820 kcal in 1989. In 1999-2000 almost 77 per cent of the rural population consumed less than the poverty line calorie requirement of 2,400 kcal.

On 8 September 2006, nine teams of farmers' unions in Punjab organised a Public Hearing on Farmers' Suicides. I was invited as a member of the citizens' jury. The Diwan Hall of Gurdwara Haaji Rattan was overflowing with a sea of people – all family members of suicide victims. The farmers' organisations had collected information on 2,860 suicides, and mobilised family members to give evidence at the public hearing. This was building on an earlier public hearing organised by Navdanya on 1-2 April 2006.

One by one the women shared their pain and their loss. The names were different, the faces were different, but the tragedy was the same: the avoidable tragedy of poisoning farmer's fields and farmers lives for profit.

The seeds and pesticides, which had created debt, also became the source of ending indebted lives. Costly seeds and chemicals have pushed farmers into a debt trap.

Navdanya's work over the past 20 years has shown that we can grow more food and provide higher incomes to farmers without destroying the environment and killing our peasants.

Biodiverse organic farming creates a debt free, suicide free, productive alternative to industrialised corporate agriculture. It leads to:

- An increase in farm productivity and farm incomes, while lowering costs of production
- Fair trade and just trade lowers costs to consumers
- Pesticides and chemical free production and processing brings safe and healthy food to consumers

We must protect the environment, farmers' livelihoods and public health and people's right to food. We can go the Navdanya way. We can break the chains of food slavery. We can create food freedom.





Vande submerged Mataram

MUMBAI, Barmer and Surat have one thing in common: the propensity of our administrators to forget the importance of traditional water systems. In Mumbai it was the Mithi which overflowed because of the huge and irrational burden brought upon it.

In Barmer, the government insists there are no perennial rivers. But the fact is that there are three and they come to life whenever there is a significant increase in the average annual rainfall. So, the nation and our administrators can now say hello to Rohili, Nimbla and Leek: three rivers which have always been there, even though they may have gone dry, and are now brimful. All three flow into the Luni basin.

What is the reason for this gap in knowledge of our water systems? The answer is that official knowledge is mostly made up of what goes into files. The government's officers are taught to think about investments, tenders and the awarding of contracts. But water? Well, water does not live in files. It belongs among communities. For our resources to be administered we need a governance which recognises what the community values and understands best.

Our memory of water can be short, but water has its own schedules. It comes in cycles of its own. The three rivers that have sprung to life in Barmer have existed for thousands of years. Barmer itself has witnessed on 11 occasions rainfall 125 per cent in excess of normal. The highest was in 1917, when the rainfall was in excess by 285 per cent.

Nature's way of taking this water away has been through the three rivers. You could say they have served as drainage channels. But we have had no time for Nature's messages. The government has created the Kawas railway station and at Uttarlai the Air Force has set up a base. Uttarlai actually means a water body. There are other urban structures as well. Along with all this, ordinary people have moved in, built their homes and so on. When the rivers sprang back to life and everything went under water.

Everyone assumes that deserts are all sand and can absorb an ocean. But on the routes of these rivers are gypsum belts, which are impervious. Gypsum and that too in a desert? Perhaps this is some indication of the complex structures with which Nature works. The gypsum is itself proof of the presence of large water bodies at one time. Incredibly, you also have a railway station nearby called Gypsum Halt!

Now take the train to Godhra.

Godhra, etched in our memory for different reasons, has once again become a ghost town. The Sabarmati, which has been so dry that you could play a game of cricket or watch the Great Indian Circus on its bed, swelled and inundated Ahmedabad in the recent rains.

The city in Gujarat which has been hit the hardest by the floods is Surat, the diamond capital of India. It has been among India's fastest growing urban centres. It was also the centre of the textile industry and in recent years it became the hub of important companies like Reliance and ONGC. But suddenly because of the overflowing of a small dam called Ukai, about which no one seems to have heard, Surat has been devastated. ONGC, which could float its huge platforms in Bombay High, could not save its production unit in Surat.

Some 30 odd years ago the Ukai dam was constructed on the Tapi River near Surat and was inaugurated by Indira Gandhi. It has been there ever since, but everyone had forgotten about it. When it was being planned, nobody except a cer-

tain Ramesh Desai opposed it. For 10 long years he fought the idea of this dam through the 'Ukai Nav Nirman Samiti'. He tried to make the people of Surat and the planners of Gujarat understand the problems that could result from this dam. He also fought the case for the displaced people. He pointed out that some Rs. 7 crores were needed for the proper rehabilitation of these environmental refugees. The government apparently had set aside only a sum of Rs 1 crore for this pur-



Official knowledge is mostly made up of what goes into files. The government's officers are taught to think about investments, tenders and the awarding of contracts. But water? Well, water does not live in files.

pose. This miniscule amount too never reached the displaced. They were forced to abandon their houses and villages and according to Ramesh Desai most of them made the footpaths of Surat their new home. He used to travel on his bullet motorcycle far and wide and was tragically killed in a road accident.

At that time nobody in Surat and Gujarat had any sympathy for these people and their hardships. Now suddenly the whole city of Surat knows what it is like to be uprooted and left homeless.

The same story of unknown small dams can be seen in other cities of Gujarat as well. Some of these dams are the Kadna, Vanakbori, Panam and the Dharoi. In the recent rains all these dams released huge quantities of water and flooded Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Panchmahal, Kheda, Anand. Several parts of South Gujarat, Central Gujarat and North Gujarat were under knee-deep water.

The Ahmedabad-Vadodara Expressway has come in the way of the free flow of water from one side to another. It is said that this 93 km long highway was built after extensive topographical surveys conducted by the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI). Didn't anyone notice that the highway would become a very long dam in itself and prevent the flow of water towards its natural outlet – the Gulf of Cambay.

Shortly before the rains, we saw Narendra Modi going on fast over the Narmada Dam, saying it was needed to give water to Gujaratis. Then came the rains and one-fifth of the state was submerged, but you couldn't even get a clean glass of water to drink.

Anupam Mishra is with the Gandhi Peace Foundation



Friendship for ethnic minorities

MY columns during this past year have in the main sought to highlight issues dominating the UK media – multiculturalism, integration, racism, immigration, managed migration, citizenship, identity and nationality. So as I reflect on the theme to focus on for this special issue of Civil Society I cannot help but find myself being driven to write about what I believe lies at the root of many of the prejudices reflected in the debates surrounding these issues – MONEY. Or as a famous US politician once said – 'It's the economy - stupid!'

Here in Britain, myths about the negative (economic) impact of our multicultural society abound. Organisations like Migration Watch and the BNP (a far right political party that has been enjoying significant success in some areas of the UK) claim that migrants are a net drain on the economy spongers who are putting pressure on our transport systems, on housing, on health; the cause of almost all our economic problems.

But those who believe such myths overlook the fact that if the ethnic minorities were helped to go 'home' (whatever that means for people who were mostly born in Britain), their toothaches would go untreated, their buses would not arrive, and the bottom would drop off the independent retail market! Migrants own 75 per cent of all independent retail outlets. They represent 7.6 per cent of the population but own nearly 12 per cent of all UK SMEs, a total of 444,000 businesses. One-sixth of the total restaurant business is Asian-owned, and 50 per cent of the 8,000 independent pharmacies (turning over £2.5 billion annually) are owned by migrants. More than one third of London's workers are migrants.

Independent studies have shown that migrants contribute more to the system than they take out, because their own support systems lead to fewer demands on existing social and welfare benefits. They are also more enterprising. A survey conducted by Business Link (a government funded agency) in South London found that while South Asians comprised five per cent of the local population, they accounted for 10 per cent of the entrepreneurial business start ups.

When my family arrived as refugees from East Africa in the 60s we took over declining corner shops and derelict housing in a deprived and blighted inner city area of West London. You can blame our multicultural society for the development of 24/7 retail outlets that support a 21st century society increasingly demanding goods and services whenever and wherever required! We worked hard and spent as little as possible to save and invest money, so that we saw these same one time unfashionable addresses become sought after postcodes with thriving communities and rising real estate values (Shepherds Bush and Hackney to name just two!).

Legal migrants comprise 8.7 per cent of the UK's population but contribute 10.7 per cent of all taxes and have between them an estimated £25 billion disposable income. The latest Rich List shows that the wealth of Britain's richest 300 Asians has gone from £24.9 billion to £35.5 billion, an increase of 42 per cent over the previous year, boosted no doubt by strong stock markets and their links with the booming Asian economies.

The arrival of migrants from different parts of the world has also helped to build on these trading links by harnessing their global networks of contacts and providing access to the ethnic Diaspora, opening up global markets and outlets and attracting inward investment into the UK. According to UK Trade and Investment, Britain got £160 billion in foreign direct investment - with India all set to become the top Asian investor in Britain surpassing Japan and China. In the first three quarters of this year Indian companies announced 115 foreign acquisitions, with a total value of \$7.4 billion, a huge increase on previous years, and almost as much as foreign firms invested in Indian purchases.

It was fascinating to see both UK and Indian governments comment on the recent bold £15 billion acquisition of the Belgian steel company Arcelor by British based but Indian born steel billionaire Lakshmi Mittal. Both had the right to claim him!

Not only have migrants catalysed an entrepreneurial spirit in their local communities, but they also unleash innovation and creativity – from fashion and design e.g. the sari to cuisine (fusion foods) and off-shoring.

Entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity are all essential ingredients for any 21st century economy that wants to have a sustainable competitive advantage in the global playing field. In a recent conversation with Ross Perot (founder of one of the largest software companies in the USA) he acknowledged the pivotal and prominent role played by NRIs in giving Silicon Valley its cutting edge.

We have hardly scratched the surface of the potential competitive economic edge that our multicultural society offers to Great Britain and UKplc.

But this potential is under increasing threat from the 'clash' of communities, first along ethnic and now increasingly on faith lines. For decades some have

expounded the myth of a pure Britain, for example, in the kind of statements that British National Party spokespeople make about a pure strain of Britishness struggling to preserve its cultural and ethnic purity in the face of increasing contamination from the arrival, or indeed the mere existence, of other ethnic communities and cultures. Today the BNP argument is shifting from a negative anti-immigration policy to a positive rallying call for the preservation of this strange quality of Britishness.

It's a strange quality because it's hard to see what it actually is and whether it ever existed. Other nations and ethnic communities have taken and re-taken these islands over the centuries, so that

through most British veins runs the blood of Jutes, Angles, Danes, Vikings and others more recent. Ironically, most people who hold to a notion of pure Britishness also honour a monarchy that originated in Germany, and cheer football teams with owners, managers and players from all over the world.

India, like Britain, has also seen wave after wave of invaders from the Dravidians and Aryans, to the Moghuls and the British! The Hindutva emphasis on a 'pure' race has similarly raised questions about what it means to be Indian in a diverse society.

But this dangerous myth of a 'pure race' in Britain and in India is being overtaken by the increasing tension and separation between 'faith communities'. Even before 7/7 Muslims felt themselves under increasing suspicion and isolation. Since then there has been a constant succession of actual or imagined events that feed the perception of a community separated out - the Danish cartoons, events in the Middle East, the 'air plot' and now the veil... Other faith communities have responded either by indifference (which effectively endorses negative attitudes) or by themselves competing for attention and recognition.

There are clearly parallels between Britain and India and we should perhaps be doing more by way of sharing experiences and learning from one another.

An excellent example is a recent publication by an influential UK think tank The Runnymede Trust – based on research conducted by Omar Khan as part of his doctoral dissertation on the justification of preferential policies in India. Omar Khan suggests that those concerned with widespread disadvantage among certain communities in the West may benefit from examining how Indian thinkers and policymakers have attempted to deal with the issue of preferential treatment. He argues in his thesis that 'even those who find the idea of preferential policies for whole groups entirely objectionable might be interested to learn, or rediscover, how compensatory and democratic-distributive arguments have been employed to justify quotas and positive action in the world's largest and perhaps most diverse democracy'.

One of the most serious challenges facing our societies is undoubtedly the lack of relationships between people of different faiths and cultures. All of us urgently need to take steps to build bridges of understanding and work together towards a genuinely inclusive society. Because that is the strongest kind of society. The economic imperative is crystal clear, leave alone the moral and social arguments!

Ram Gidoomal CBE Chairman South Asian Development Partnership





Global warming and your life

IN her award-winning work, *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai weaves a beautiful and complex net that encompasses two very diverse worlds: Kalimpong, hidden away in the foothills of the Himalayas and bustling New York City. The book spans the poles of a spectrum that is brought together by – to use Pankaj Misra's words – "just about every contemporary international issue: globalisation, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism and terrorist violence".

The stark reality of the global village is no longer fiction and we can palpably feel the effects of the metaphorical flap of butterflies wings halfway across the world, be it in the stock exchanges of far flung regions, computer viruses spreading with electronic rapidity across the Internet or biological viruses riding piggyback on everything from migrating birds and wildlife that refuse to tow the immigration laws of wealthier nations, to containers that shuttle billions of tonnes of goods from continent to continent each year.

One thing that anyone opposed to globalisation must accept is that the genie is out of the bottle and can never be put back. Evolution is a one-way street. Does that mean that we have to live with the ills of globalisation and let it lead us down the primrose path and extinction? The answer is, "not necessarily".

While it may be utopian to fantasise that Gandhian economics (which isn't on the curriculum of even the major universities of India, leave alone the rest of the world) will suddenly become a global fad and rid us of human greed and rampant consumerism that currently has the world in its unrelenting grip, it is not unlikely that the powers that are really responsible for the negative phenomenon of globalisation will start taking heed when it hits their pocketbooks.

Secularism (either overtly as in much of Western Europe or covertly as in the Americas) has closely accompanied the post-war development of democracy and has been instrumental for structuring the current economic societies that are increasingly becoming global models. Such societies can be defined by their predominant, one can almost say sole focus, on the economic criteria of human existence to the exclusion of any other. The production of goods and services and their distribution have become the mainstay of such societies. Even education has become increasingly geared to the functional needs of such an economic system. In a world where we are buying houses not to make them our cherished homes but to make profit on their resale; where appreciating art has come to mean increasing the value of your investment in an objet d'art, is a world that is obsessed with the price of everything but not their value (with apologies to Oscar Wilde).

It is with such a perspective that United Kingdom's Chief Economist, Sir Nicholas Stern presented his 700 page Stern Report under great fanfare with both Blair and Brown participating in the hope of channelling away public disgust with the new Labour in the UK and salvaging some figment of credibility with both the domestic and international audience. That Stern is an economist and not a green environmentalist, flouting statistics which are already configured in pound sterling or dollars, or can easily be converted to them, maybe a major reason why the business world and their backers, the national governments, might pay heed.

Stern speaks to them in a language they understand: profits and losses and

long term investments and growth. An ex-World Bank official, he offers them the penny-wise, pound-foolish solution. Spend only one pound now and save more than five in just a few years. He even has as an advisor, an ex-President of the USA – albeit one who never took charge after he was elected- Al Gore, to provide beef and body to his propositions should the Democrats become the majority in the coming mid-term congressional elections.

It would, of course, take one major brick in the wall to come off before they all tumble. Not only is the maths clear, the business axiom that it will of course be the customer and not the companies who will pay the one per cent of global GDP required to meet the expenses, to offset any short-term investments and losses,

LAKSHMAN ANAND

may persuade even the stingiest companies. There are, of course, those like Toyota who are already committed to a greener future with larger profits. But then, their roots are in a civilisation which has a slightly more long term perspective than the generation that lusts instant gratification and currently rules the USA. It will all depend on how enticing the presentation of a new perspective to profit-making can be finessed by Blair in his desperation.

The USA remains the principal culprit directly contributing 25 per cent to carbon dioxide emissions with only five per cent of the world's population. Democratic governments live with the paradox

of being liable to the electorate for their economic well-being (which often translates to maintaining low inflation, low employment and a supply of cheap energy) all of which translates to burying their heads in the sand regarding all long-term problems during their relatively short shift. The Bush government is no better. The happy sign may be the growing dissent among both the populace and the state governments in the USA.

What about the emerging market economies? Would they like the brake pressed on the euphoria of their recent growth? We often overlook the fact that much of the energy consumption and growth in the developing world is still directed by the demand for goods by Europe and the USA and not by local development. This makes the current paper allocations of their contribution to global warming somewhat dishonest. Were these countries (China, India, Brazil and countless others) to produce only what they consumed the figures would change dramatically. Moreover, at least in the case of China, the new environmental laws are even more stringent than in developed countries.

The situation in Europe is dramatically different from the USA. Should the effects of global warming pan out the

way it is currently being projected an estimated 100 million climate refugees will be let loose that would make the current immigration problems look like a garden party. The UK is already tightening the bolts on its doors against EU members to be, like Bulgaria and Romania that have potentially tens of thousands of workers. The same applies to the rest of Western Europe. Again, the cost benefit analysis shows that it would be far more economical to spend now than later.

It seems that we may be on the verge of seeing a sea change in our attitude towards global warming now that we have worked out the economics of it and have been assured that it will not, unlike the Al Qaida, require us to change our way of life in any significant way. Secular or not, it's profit and fear, reward and punishment... the eternal themes that propel man along his evolutionary path, that are still at work.



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Middle class in politics

WE believe that the regeneration of a city follows a reorientation of mind-set. If we insist on seeing our cities merely as business addresses rather than as spaces where we belong, or if we regard ourselves as perpetual migrants and not as indigenous city dwellers, we lose the essence of developing urban spaces and cities with soul.

To that extent Gurgaon started out perhaps with the best credentials – at least on concept – and then thundered down a familiar path of self destruction. The reasons were many: imbalances caused by high octane private development, government corruption, administrative bewilderment and political incompetence.

Our initiatives in Gurgaon to first confederate the middle class into a vocal cohesive organism through Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) and then to intervene politically and challenge the established political setup by putting up a candidate through the Gurgaon Residents' Party (GRP) in 2004 were all aimed at revitalising public opinion and directing public outrage at missed opportunities. Since then nothing much has changed. But constant nagging by a vocal residency is drawing continuous attention to bad governance and infrastructural deficit.

Delhi is now the hotbed of our interventions because it affords us the opportunity of seeing real time reforms in urban planning. Curiously, it was the Metro that inadvertently sparked an avalanche of urban planning activism helped along by confederating the RWAs. The Metro was a plan that was so behind its due time that it not only became representative of what should have been done much earlier but also a measurement of almost every corresponding 'world-city' amenity that was not there.

While meeting various stakeholders to seek a plausible plan for the future, we have seen that the city cannot be created by excluding any social group. The friction between the aspirations of hugely variable groups is a marker towards not only the challenges facing urban renewal, but also the difficulties of imposing western city modules.

Paradoxically, the recent situation in Delhi on demolitions and protests is the result of middle class initiative. Having lost all hope of remedy from the government and the political setup it moved the courts. It is quite another matter that the courts themselves woke up due to an unexplained synergy of views between a judge of the High Court and the CJI.

I predicted in an article I wrote in February that the Court's orders will come to naught thanks to the guile of political players. Last we heard, even the CJI seemed resigned to the fate of things to come as he deferred the next hearing beyond his date of retirement.

In such a situation it becomes important that the power to modulate the growth of our city is wrested from the hands of temporal politics and temporary departmental heads and placed in the hands of the recipient public, for we are more permanent than a five year term politician or a transferable or retireable bureaucrat.

We have predicted that the only solution to such an impasse is the creation, both in Gurgaon and Delhi, of empowered committees consisting of urban planners, experts and professionals who have the requisite experience, expertise and bandwidth to provide urban plan solutions. In Gurgaon we have argued for a Planning Board, and in Delhi a similar Committee to examine the city and its needs in macro terms which would be the skeletal framework of the Master Plan.

Our modus operandi therefore remains the same – expand the voice of the silent majority, contract the options of political players and squeeze a deal that works for us, the citizens. The way to do this is, once again, to strengthen and confederate civil society through all means – alliances, collaborations and so on and prepare the constituency of the educated middle class to engage more actively with the political process so that we can make or break the electoral chances of candidates.

In Gurgaon, this worked magically, although many are quick to dismiss the learning. The GRP candidate, although defeated, came fourth numerically dislodging established parties such as the SP, BSP etc. It not only defeated the Congress party, which was on a roll in Haryana, in over half a dozen booths but

actually cornered an average of 50 per cent votes in the primary area of its influence – New Gurgaon. Remember that the GRP was a party only a month old on election day, and that no money was paid, no liquor served or banners or posters printed and you get the picture.

Delhi will be no different. Without citizen activism and political agglomeration there will be no effective change.

I am emboldened to suggest this as a remedy for almost all cities of India, and yes, this is an urban-centric strategy because the constituency of the educated is most prominent in urban centres. As we develop, this constituency will only



Curiously, it was the Metro that sparked an avalanche of urban planning activism helped along by confederating the RWAs.

grow. In about 15 years time I believe we will be able to oversee an overhaul of the entire system. But there is another reason we believe that urban renewal is linked to political reform and renewal and that has to do with the expanding footprint of media and the internet, concentrated in urban centres.

It is now easier than ever before, to design and deploy winning strategies across the country through a network of highly wired communities. Rather than involve ourselves in philosophical dilemmas of serving equity, we can grab the opportunity of creating hubs of leadership across cities and then expand into suburbs. These concentric circles of development will soon have the country under its influence, not necessarily in an ideal geographic symmetry of political constituencies but surely under a geometric mosaic of circulatory expansion.

Why do we believe this will work best? First, despite the work of many able civil society organisations in urban areas, real changes have not been noticed on the ground. Part of the problem lies in the hesitation of civil society groups to share political spaces. This is a flaw because then the fundamental change agent - politics - is practically kept out of the very system it must impact.

This might seem a contradiction for us to say, since technically we are an NGO, but we see the NGO as a big deterrent to real time improvement since it cannibalises the role of governance from government in a supplementary manner and in fact sometimes becomes party to the precise malaise it started out to correct.

There may be room for disagreement here but consider the fact that there would be no need for NGOs if the government did its job. When the system itself is corroded, how effective can a new component be in its midst?

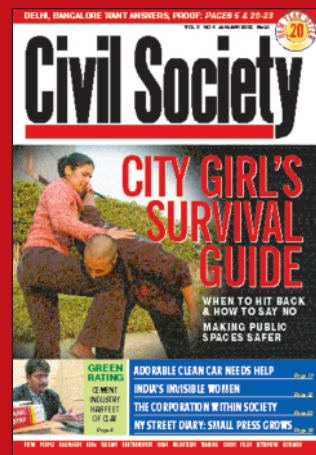
The good news is many active NGOs in remote, rural domains are backing independents in panchayats and local elections. A group of IITians have stepped on the political turf with a party called Lok Paritran. Hyderabad based Lok Satta has forayed into full time politics in Andhra Pradesh.

To buttress our theory, we have now launched the New Delhi People's Alliance or NDPA – a civil society confederation that promises to impose its collective strength on issues that may impact us as citizens of the state. Now about the second part of our avowed theory of complementary political engagement – just watch this space.

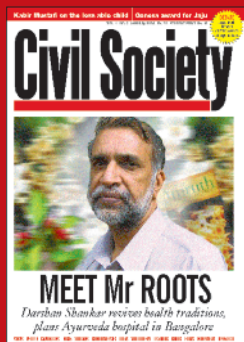
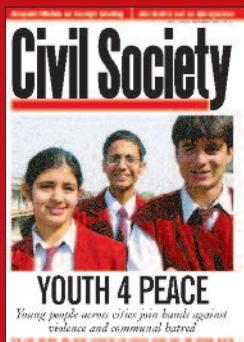
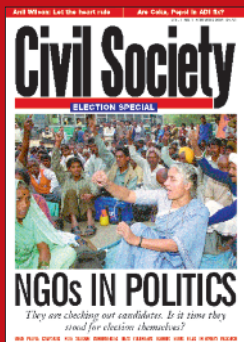
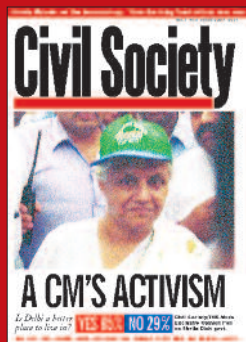
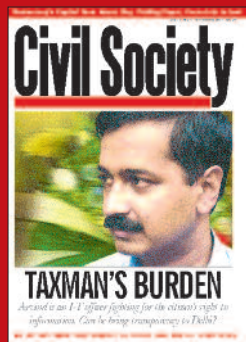
Sanjay Kaul is head of People's Action

BEST OF CIVIL

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SOCIETY



great stories of change





Dr Devi Shetty spends time talking to patients and their families.

People's surgeon

Dr Devi Shetty takes heart care to the masses

Vidya Viswanathan
Bangalore

It is 7:26 pm. Dr Devi Shetty's day is not over but he looks as fresh as he did at 7 am. He is India's topnotch cardiac surgeon and yet Dr Shetty makes it a point to meet nearly every patient who comes for treatment to the Narayana Hrudayalaya in Bangalore and wants to meet him. He understands their need for reassurance.

This evening about 30 patients wait for him. The first, accompanied by his brother, is from Bangladesh. They sit at the end of a long table. Dr Shetty walks in, dressed in surgical green. He has a calm, unhurried, even saintly demeanor. An intricate, clay model of a heart rests on his table. He looks at a digital image on a slick laptop behind him.

In fluent Bengali, Dr Shetty explains his prognosis to both brothers, using the clay model. The main artery is blocked 100 per cent and the second 80 per cent. Surgery is required.

Then there is Subramani, a mason. His brother explains that Subramani cannot walk even half a kilometre. The doctor shows him a blockage in the main artery. Subramani has had a heart attack and will have to be operated.

There is also a baby that needs surgery. The doctor pats the mother's hand reassuringly and says in Kannada, "Don't heat up your head over money". He coos gently to the baby. The family members prostrate themselves in front of Dr Shetty before they leave. "Narayana Hrudayalaya is a hospital for the poor like this family and not for the rich," he explains. He talks to the family of Jyothi a seven-year-old girl who needs a major heart surgery. Her father is an agricultural labourer from a village in Tumkur district, Karnataka.

Narayana Hrudayalaya has three packages for surgery. The lowest slab is Rs 65,000 and for those who cannot afford to pay there is a trust which raises money. The next slab is for the general ward that costs Rs 110,000 and then come the special wards at Rs 195,000.

The break-even for the hospital is Rs 90,000 for surgery on an adult and Rs 130,000 on a child. Most patients in the hospital get themselves admitted to the general ward. A small elite, along with patients in the general ward, subsidise the rest.

The treatment and care in all cases is identical. "We look at our balance sheet daily. If we are profitable on a given day, we step up charitable cases. Otherwise we postpone cases that are not urgent. We make sure that we keep our nose above water,"

says Dr Shetty.

An angioplasty costs Rs 75,000 in the general ward, Rs 1 lakh in a twin-sharing room and Rs 1.2 lakhs in a single room. For the poorest patients, an angioplasty is done for Rs 45,000. For those who can't afford this, the trust steps in.

No one is turned away. The hospital on an average sees 400 patients a day. Surgeries and interventions are taken up on the basis of urgency.

But this is just the beginning. As Dr Shetty's model acquires new efficiencies, he hopes to finally offer open-heart surgery, including in-care facilities at a fixed price of Rs 40,000. Non-cardiac surgeries such as for removal of stones in the kidneys or the gall bladder would be for less than Rs 10,000.

"This will happen when we build our 5000-bed health city. This is Walmartisation of healthcare," says Dr Shetty with a gleam in his eyes. His mission is to make state-of-the-art healthcare affordable to all in India and then make that process a model for the world.

Narayana Hrudayalaya claims to be the largest children's cardiac care unit in the world. Nearly 40 percent of operations are done on children. The pediatric critical care unit has 60 bays occupied by newborn babies on life support systems. Each bay is monitored 24/7 by an individual nurse. One child

needs three nurses in three shifts.

In 1989, Dr Shetty created history by performing open-heart surgery on a nine-day-old baby. Today, some newborn babies in the critical care unit are even younger. Dr Shetty says the hospital has a 98.8 percent success rate with newborns.

Indians are genetically prone to heart disease. In many cases a heart attack gets passed off as indigestion. Every year about 224,000 babies are born with congenital heart conditions and the incidence is higher among the poor. India needs 2.4 million heart surgeries a year and all our heart institutes put together do just about 60,000.

"The reason is that cardiac surgery is sold as a boutique product. We should try and dissociate healthcare from affluence. Ten years ago who would have imagined that an auto-rickshaw driver could afford a mobile phone? Has he become wealthier? No, he is as poor or as wealthy as before. But the technology of mobile companies has changed. The same thing is going to happen to healthcare. The technology of healthcare delivery will change," he says.

WALMART WITH A HEART : The first step in driving down costs has been to play a volumes game or to 'Walmartise' healthcare.

Along with Dr Alok Roy, Dr Shetty set up the Asia Heart Foundation, a non-profit which helped start two heart hospitals – the BM Birla Heart Research Institute and the Manipal Heart Foundation. The non-profit then built its own 150-bed hospital in Kolkata, the Rabindranath Tagore International Institute of Cardiac Sciences (RTIICS), and Narayana Hrudayalaya, a 500-bed hospital in Bangalore. Together these hospitals perform 12 per cent of all heart surgeries in India.

Narayana Hrudayalaya does 23 surgeries a day. The hospital hopes to increase this number to 70 surgeries a day in three years.

"That gives us tremendous bargaining power. We operate on zero inventory," says Dr Shetty. The hospital does not pay for a lot of its medical equipment. It pays for the reagents. But that volume is so high that the vendor makes enough profit.

"Cost reduction is a mission for us," says Srinivasa Rao, CFO of the hospital. When Rao worked for Canara Bank he helped Dr Shetty with project finance. Rao gets a report on each patient. He keeps a close watch on costs. "We don't have long-term contracts. We bargain with suppliers every week. Consumables are a big part of the cost. We have brought prices down by 35 per cent in four years," he says.

The hospital uses a shift system to reduce costs. If 150 X-rays can be taken in one day, then in three shifts three times as many can be done. The operation theatres work

till 8 pm. A team of more than 90 surgeons and cardiologists, who are full-time employees of the hospital, work in stints. "If nurses can come in shifts, why can't they? That is the mentality we have here," points out Rao. "Existing manpower is put to use as much as possible." Staffing is lean. The hospital has 1,300 nurses and technicians and just 24 are engaged in administration.

Narayana Hrudayalaya does not pay mind-boggling salaries. The hospital has an "assembly line" operating process. "Doctors work from morning to night and operate four or five times a day," says Dr Shetty. "They make Rs 3 to 4 lakh a month, but could make that much in a day if they worked in Mumbai or Delhi. We address their need, not their greed. The greatest satisfaction for surgeons is that they don't have to turn anyone away because of money."

ATOMS TO BYTES : Dr Shetty's favourite presentation is called "Atoms to Bytes". He is convinced that

advances in information technology and communications will make quality healthcare available to everybody. His telemedicine project with ISRO is now legendary.

Government hospitals in the northeast are linked via satellite to Narayana Hrudayalaya. Patient data, such as ECG, X-Rays, CT Scan, MRI, echocardiography, angiograms are transmitted back and the patient gets prompt advice from India's leading doctor.

At 5 pm every day he goes to the top floor for a video-conference. General physicians, trained by the Asia Heart Foundation hospitals in cardiology, bring their patients online from the district centres.

"Even very poor people are not intimidated by technology. They are so comfortable talking in a video conferencing mode. They need to see the doctor's body language and compassion. Only those who require surgery will then need to travel to Kolkata or Bangalore," points out Dr Shetty.

The hospital's next big project is to get all 30,000 general physicians in Karnataka to have a mobile ECG machine. The readings from these machines will be transmitted to Narayana Hrudayalaya. The mobile ECG machines, made by a company called Schiller, cost Rs 37,000. The hospital got its sister software concern, SN Informatics, to develop the software to get this reading into a PC so that it can be transmitted.

"We got the price of the ECG machine down to Rs 10,000. We give the software free and that drives volumes. The goal is to make this machine at Rs 5000 and there are several Indian companies that have come forward," says Dr Shetty.

HEALTH INSURANCE: To help people pay for health Dr Shetty launched Yeshasvini, a health insurance scheme for farmers who belong to cooperatives. It all began when farmers from the Karnataka Milk Federation (KMC), a cooperative with more than two million members in Bangalore, asked him to endorse milk in an advertisement. "When I chatted them up I told them I would give my endorsement if they signed up for insurance," says Dr Shetty. Each farmer pays Rs 10 a month and the government Rs 5. The farmer can avail of surgery in one of 500 hospitals registered under the scheme. It takes only a back of the envelope calculation to see that the scheme can be viable. Only about one in 150 need surgery. If 150 farmers don't need surgery the amount collected in a year for one surgery is Rs 27,000.

This scheme covers about 1600 surgical processes and not just medicines. Farmers get a 50 per cent discount from the hospitals because, in any case, their facilities are not being used optimally. By the second year of the scheme, 2.4 million farmers had enrolled. Yeshasvini was so successful that during the last election in Karnataka the ruling party wanted it projected as the chief minister's contribution and even took over its administration.

"Narayana Hrudayalaya is a hospital for the poor and not for the rich," says Dr Devi Shetty. He talks to the family of Jyothi, a seven-year-old girl who needs heart surgery. Her father is an agricultural labourer.



Sister Cyril's Loreto has room for everyone

Rina Mukherji
Kolkata

IN 1979, when Sister Cyril took over as principal of Loreto Day School, at Sealdah in central Kolkata, she noted that her school catered only to the elite. Outside her school gates there were thousands of children on crowded footpaths in desperate need of an education.

"I could see no justification for running a big English medium school for a relatively small number and leaving out so many in need," she says. Sister Cyril decided to start admitting children from underprivileged families into her privileged school. Today

these parents and write out the form.

Richer students help enrol poorer children. Initially, the school targeted slum-dwellers. "We would often walk up to slum-dwellers and tell them they ought to send their children to our school. It would ensure them a bright future," says Sangeeta Mondol, administrative assistant and an old student of the school. "It was a tough proposition, but finally a small number started trickling in."

In 1985, the school authorities extended enrolment to street children. They launched the Rainbow Project. Under this, street children were initially admitted as day scholars. Students from the school would teach them mathematics and lan-

guage for three hours. diverse backgrounds, parental opposition and financial hurdles are a faint memory here. Part of the credit goes to the school authorities and, of course, to Sister Cyril. "I made it clear to the parents that since the Constitution of India guarantees liberty and equality for all, they should not have a problem," she says bluntly.

Parents now accept the school's philosophy and programmes. "They often donate small amounts of Rs 500 and old clothes for the Rainbow Project. Even my students try saving out of their pocket money to contribute," says Sister Cyril. Certain rules have been laid down. The school has banned mobile phones, lavish birthday parties and generous pocket money. "I taught my children to laugh at these practices since these are substitutes for people who have no personality," says Sister Cyril. "I told them to stand out as people who do not need any of these trappings."

The school consistently teaches children to be sensitive to the less privileged. They have a Barefoot Teacher programme under which school dropouts from rural areas are identified and trained to become primary teachers. There is also a One-to-One Rural Outreach programme. Once a month, girls from Loreto Day School travel to rural areas adjoining Kolkata to teach children.

PRASANTA BISWAS



Sister Cyril with her school children

50 per cent of her students are either street children or come from slums. They have been integrated into the school system. Sister Cyril implemented the idea of inclusive education some 25 years ago.

In contrast, elitist schools in Delhi, which are supposed to admit 25 per cent of students from economically deprived families, continue to debate the issue, despite a court order. They balk at the idea.

Loreto Day School, Sealdah, looks like any other school. Walk through its iron gates and you will see brightly coloured walls, children playing games and mothers waiting for their wards. Look again and you will spot barefoot children strolling around. Nobody shoos them away. They are a part of the school.

The parents of these children are often rickshaw pullers or domestic servants. Filling up an admission form is difficult for them so teachers sit with

each team comes up with a plan to tackle the problem. The entire class then debates the solutions and arrives at a conclusion.

But in 2002, a three-year-old girl was raped just outside the school gates. The incident jolted Sister Cyril. "It made me realise that street children needed much more than a night shelter. With both parents off to work, they were vulnerable to all kinds of anti-social elements on the streets"

So the school decided to provide boarding facilities for these children. Nearly 300 girls between the ages of two and 16 years live in the school. Older children are taught basics and then admitted to government-run Bengali medium schools or corporation schools. The younger ones are inducted into Loreto Day School. Currently, some 60 students from the Rainbow Project are studying as regular students.

The problems of integrating children from

The school's time-table is designed so that girls from Classes V to X get two hours every week to teach the Rainbow children as part of their work education class. There is an incentive in this. Class XII girls who find time to teach earn a 'Work Scholarship' under which their tuitions and books are taken care of by the school. "We do not have scholarships beyond Class X. This enables junior college girls to earn and pay their way through," says Sister Cyril.

There is also a value education course for students from Class I to Class X. This syllabus is designed so that every child realises the need to lead a disciplined lifestyle, share what she has, return the love she gets from parents, be neat and tidy, sensitive to the less fortunate and never take part in teasing. Children are also taught to question the injustice of caste and class and respect all religions. They are trained to be responsible and caring citizens.

The value education course also tries to build team spirit. Children learn in groups of four and five. The teacher introduces the topic to be discussed. The group then talks about the subject and

each team comes up with a plan to tackle the problem. The entire class then debates the solutions and arrives at a conclusion.

The underprivileged children get food too, from rations supplied by the government. The teachers contribute from their salaries. Sometimes children collect money. Partnership Foundation from Holland, the Rotary Club and individuals sponsor many of the underprivileged children.

"So far, we have managed to break even and we even have sufficient funds to help more children," says Sister Cyril. "We have 500 children paying Rs 775, another 200 pay Rs 440 and others pay anything from Rs 300 down to nothing. However, if you do the calculation in some of the big schools who do not take any poor children, you will find that such schools make a handsome profit."



Rehabilitated poachers taking tourists on a trek

Women, ex-poachers shield the tiger

Susheela Nair
Periyar

If you visit the Periyar Tiger Reserve you will notice women wearing green caps trudging through the forest unarmed. They are part of the Vasanthasena (Spring Army), a volunteer group of 90 women, which has been patrolling the forest every day for the past six years to keep human predators at bay.

In addition, there are ex-poachers at the Periyar Tiger Reserve protecting the forest and the tiger. They work as Tiger Trail and Tribal Tracker guides. These squads, along with forest officials, organise treks for tourists. Some of the ex-poachers have walked these narrow trails for 15 years and they know every twist and turn.

The Periyar Tiger Reserve is one of the most successful conservation programmes of the India Eco Development Project (IEDP). It was started in 1998 because earlier approaches to forest protection and conservation had clearly failed. In many ways, a growing population, unclear tenure arrangements, poor enforcement and faulty public policy were responsible.

The IEDP aimed at reducing people-park conflict and biotic pressure on the forests by providing alternative livelihoods. It has successfully involved people living in and around the reserve in the eco-tourism and biodiversity conservation programmes of the park.

There are around 5,540 families living in the two km fringe of the reserve. They include the tribal communities of Mannas, Paniyans, Ooralis, Malampandarans and Mala Arayans.

Local people have been organised into 72 eco-development committees (EDCs) and 175 self-help groups of women (SHGs). The three categories of

EDCs are the village EDC, the professional EDC and the user-group EDC. The village EDC comprises tribals and locals who collect firewood from the forest. The professional EDC has as its members, ex-poachers and those who used to collect vayana bark illegally. The user-group EDC has people who graze cattle.

Six to eight women from each eco-development committee (EDC) form a Vasanthasena unit. There are 14 such groups now. Vasanthasena members are married women with children. The genesis of the Vasanthasena can be traced to the women of Kollampatada, a colony bordering the Periyar Tiger Reserve. This area was once notorious for criminal activities.

Most of the women work as casual labour. They also sell curry powder and textiles and run small-scale manufacturing units to supplement their income. But their mission is to save the forest. They even forgo their wages once or twice a month to protect it.

"Initially we had to face stiff resistance from our family members. We overcame that after strong persuasion. We felt the need to contribute our bit towards conserving forests as we are indebted to them," explains Noorjahan Shamsuddin, president of Vasanthasena.

A group of six women, each headed by a leader, trudge through these forests by rotation from 11 am to 5 pm after finishing their household chores. Braving the vagaries of the weather and the danger of encountering wild animals, they venture deep into the dense jungle.

During the rainy season blood-sucking leeches add to their woes. Each day's observations, including signs of encroachment or poaching, are reported to the authorities. The women also record the species seen, their number and location, the collec-



Vasantha Sena, the women's brigade all out to

tion of minor forest produce and so on into a log-book. They report the presence of suspicious persons in the forest and have thereby prevented sandalwood smuggling.

Poachers too have become protectors. Their in-depth knowledge about flora and fauna and their survival instincts make them an asset. They take tourists along the tourist trail, enrich visitors with their in-depth knowledge of the jungle, earn revenue for the EDCs and ensure themselves a steady income.

The ex-poachers share their experiences of the wild as they guide tourists, pitch tents and cook ethnic food. Some members of the Tribal Trackers' EDC take small groups on three-hour sightseeing trips, either on foot or on a river raft. They also rent out leech-proof socks and binoculars to tourists and distribute colourful brochures about the reserve. Earnings from all these activities are pooled into a Community Development Fund (CDF) from which each EDC member receives a monthly salary.

In 2004, when the IEDP in Periyar came to an end the Periyar Foundation, a charitable society of officials and citizens was formed in 2005. Under its various schemes, livelihood options of the people are taken care of.

Pramod Krishnan, the architect of the project says: "No effective conservation is possible without taking into consideration regional socio-economic issues. Activities have now been extended from policing to social fencing."

The successful implementation of the project by a team of motivated and well-trained officials and staff of the reserve, supported by an enlightened public and government, has made this project a model for other protected areas in Kerala.

"There is a perceptible decline in tiger poaching and forest offences. Tiger conservation has moved from being state run to being overseen by the community. Dumping of garbage, particularly plastic waste, has reduced considerably," says Basheer, eco-tourism officer.

"Within a short span the forest has regenerated dramatically. More than two million seedlings and saplings are being saved from destruction every year," says another forest official.

With the income generated from the activities of the Foundation, it has adopted 38 anganwadis, three tribal schools and a hospital.

The pressure on the park for collection of vayana bark, black dammer, reeds and other biomass has also reduced. By empowering EDCs to collect and market pepper, middlemen have been eliminated, and this has resulted in a significant increase in the income of tribals living in and around Kumily.

A sense of pride and social security is palpable among the members of the EDCs, especially the professional EDCs. The social ostracism of poachers has been stopped and they are now role models in the local community. Forest officials too have changed their mindset.

'They have smashed my body,

Photographs by LAKSHMAN ANAND



Bant Singh's courage has made him a radical symbol of the poorest of the poor in Punjab

Amit Sengupta
Mansa (Punjab)

BANT Singh wants to walk. Bant Singh wants to talk. Bant Singh wants to 'red salute' you with his half hands cut off from below the elbow. Bant Singh wants to crack jokes, to laugh, to spoof, to smile effortlessly, to reintegrate himself with his stark reality of tragedy, oppression and rebellion. One of his legs gone, two of his hands gone, this revolutionary Dalit Mazhabi Sikh still wants to sing. A soft melodious lilting Punjabi quasi folk song its words soaked with the smell of the soil, the hard labour on the fields and the empty stomachs of the landless, seething with angst and anger.

"They have smashed my body, they have taken my limbs, but my tongue is still there," he says, half naked but for a white cloth on his body at the Mansa Civil Hospital. "And I can still sing."

Every day not less than 200 people come to visit Bant Singh in the hospital. He has become part-legend, part-icon, part-radical symbol of the poorest of the poor in this crisis-ridden most prosperous state of India where thousands of farmers

have committed suicide in the last decade, especially in the debt hit Malwa region where Mansa belongs.

That is why, January 5, 2006, will mark a rupture in the social and political consciousness of the deeply divided caste society of the rural interiors of feudal Mansa and Punjab. That was the day when they ambushed him outside his village Burj Jhabber, tied his hands and legs with layers of cloth, and used hand pump handles to smash his limbs. "Will you stop us from loitering around the Dalit homes," the attackers, sons of influential local landlords and sarpanches, asked. They smashed his limbs meticulously and they avoided the rest of his body including his head. They did not want to kill him. They only wanted to send a hard and brutal message to all those who dared to defy the diktats of the landlords in the region.

They left Bant Singh to die. Later, they reportedly made a phone call to former sarpanch Beant Singh, who rushed with the villagers to save Bant. By that time, a bleeding Bant in abject pain was almost dead. Gangrene had slowly set in by the time he was rushed to the Mansa Civil Hospital 25 km away. The doctor on duty (now suspended)

refused to treat him, despite desperate pleas, unless Rs 1,000 was deposited. The money was then raised from the locals, a chemist and a hawker. But by that time it was too late. Bant Singh had to lose his limbs to save his life.

But why did they attack Bant? It is because he fought back when his daughter was raped and saw to it that the powerful, landed criminals of the village were arrested. He refused to work on the fields of the landlords, and became an independent entrepreneur, running a small piggery and poultry farm in his humble, mud-smeared home in Burj Jhabber, selling toys on local festival days and feeding his pigs with the leftovers of the *langar* in nearby villagers. "I had decided I will never work as a bonded labourer or on such low wages for the landlords," he said. "I told my fellow comrades, don't work for them, boycott them, reject this ancient slavery, become your own man, rediscover your own identity." Inspired by the overground Naxalite organisation CPI-ML (Liberation), he joined the party and the Mazdoor Mukti Morcha, and actively enrolled hundreds of members, campaigning for the rights of the Dalits. "Reject the mental shackles of the caste

but my tongue is still there'

system. Join the revolution," Bant would sing, and he was already a hero.

This basic instinct of rebellion sustained the inner spirit of Bant Singh who had earlier worked with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and other political fronts. He simply refused to succumb. If the upper caste landlords would announce a social boycott of the Dalits from the gurdwara speakers and ban them from going for their ablutions to the fields (of the 250 landless Dalits in this village, not one has a toilet), Bant Singh would retaliate by demanding a social boycott of the rich farmers.

"He would never go to this gurdwara in the village. If he wanted, he would go to the nearby village gurdwara," says thin and tall Baljeet, his eldest daughter. "I now want to travel with him and campaign for the rights of the landless and small farmers, the Dalits, the women, the bonded labourers who are caught in a debt trap. I want to work alongside my father in the liberation of our people," she says, stoic like her father, stoic like her mother.

It runs in the family, this spirit of rebellion. Bant Singh's wife, Harbans Kaur, thin and tall like Baljeet, with a serene and transparent smile, makes *nimbu paani* for the streams of visitors at the hospital. She lives with Bant Singh in the hospital and takes care of him. She cooks and feeds him, washes him and dresses him. The bathroom is attached, but it's not easy to go through the daily chores. Obviously, she adores Bant Singh. So what if he is attacked again? "Let them dare to attack him again. This time we will smash them," she says. "He has to go back to the struggle," says Harbans Kaur. "He will. That's his path. And we will walk with him in solidarity and resistance, come what may."

Bant has a cellphone which the party gave to him, and he is already sending messages of solidarity for struggles in distant parts. Those who can't come to Mansa, call him for inspiration. But Bant is dying to walk. "He wants to get out of the hospital fast, get artificial legs, and start campaigning from village to village. He seems invincible," says Comrade Rajvinder Singh Rana, state secretary of the CPI-ML. "Once I am out, two days in my village, 28 days in the field," says Bant and smiles, joyful in this anticipation. "I will sing and I will speak and I will hold people's hands and I will fly the banner of freedom. This revolution has just begun."

But even great heroes and idealists have problems. Bant Singh has no land. In his small home in the village, there is no toilet. His artificial legs are still a distant dream. He has always insisted that his eight children will go to school, but that is a big financial burden. The CPI-ML led movement, after the attack, was so intense and it was spreading so fast among the Dalits and small farmers, that the Punjab government quickly sanctioned Rs 10 lakh and arrested the accused. The interest might fetch Rs 5,000 for Bant and his family. But the missing links remain.

The poultry hatches no eggs, the piggery has been shut down, the children are too small to

work and earn and Bant has no hands and only one leg. It would take a gigantic technological, emotional and social support base to get him back strong and health.

The CPI-ML wants to get him a vehicle with a bed and a toilet, a party whole-timer as a driver, and friends who would accompany him to rallies across the state. Other friends are trying to get doctors in India and abroad to design a special wheelchair for him and get him special artificial

which is sanctioned to them but is appropriated by the gurdwara.

"Bant has taught us to rethink our lives. Why should the rains submerge our homes? Why should our daughters not have bathrooms and toilets here? Why don't we get running water from taps and electricity? Why don't we have an iota of land? Why are we condemned to work as bonded labour on such low wages," says an anguished 80-year-old Mukhtiyar Singh whose three genera-

"I had decided I would never work as a bonded labourer or on such low wages for the landlords," said Bant Singh. "I told my fellow comrades, don't work for them, boycott them, reject this ancient slavery, become your own man, rediscover your own identity."



hands and a leg so that he can partially function on his own. They are trying to fix a convenient toilet for him in the village and perhaps a functional room where he can operate without great difficulty.

But all this is still in the realm of speculation. "Bant is a hero, but he is also a tragic hero. He is a great fighter, but his tragedy is greater," says a comrade with tears in his eyes.

Says his neighbour in the village, Surjit Kaur, "*Saanu koi dar nai hai*. We have no fear now. Bant has removed all the signs of fear. He has carved a new history for us. He challenged them openly. They tried to destroy his body, but his spirit soars beyond petty defeats, because he has given us a new identity and purpose in life."

His Dalit village now wants toilets, land, official wages, an end to bonded labour, no sexual harassment or eve-teasing, free movement, rights to the gurdwara, education and health, and the money

tions have lived here in similar conditions of relentless oppression.

In a tangential sense, the ideology of upper caste domination has been pushed to the wall by Bant

Singh's sacrifice and valour. He has become a revolutionary icon, a catalyst for change, a protector of human and fundamental rights, a symbol of defiance against archaic symbols of feudalism and slavery, a physical reality of a dream which is not so impossible.

This independent entrepreneur and committed revolutionary, with his own tragedy and resistance, has achieved a new landmark of hope, which the Dalits and the poorest will now have to transcend and turn into a tangible truth.

But it will be a long and hard struggle.

As Bant sings, his eyes pierce you. "So what did the girl going to be married tell her father? O father, don't give me dowry, give me a pistol, because my blood is boiling with rage..."

Change looms with the young

Vidya Viswanathan

New Delhi

THE voluntary sector has its gurus. But it needs young leaders. Where do you find them? Pravah and the Ashoka Foundation decided go out and look. This year's Change Looms Award goes to five organisations of young people from across the country. They have worked for communal peace, helped save tigers and forest dwellers, resolved tribal conflicts in the northeast and sponsored entrepreneurship among children.

"In our experience youth can lead change but they work in isolation and get no support," says Meenu Venkateswaran, CEO of Pravah. "This award is an endorsement that they are on the right track."

SAHER: Amity in Mumbai

Having grown up in Jogeshwari East in Mumbai, Masood Akhtar was no stranger to communal hatred. He had seen its ugly face many times. But when the 1993 bomb blasts shook Mumbai, it was quite a different thing.

Like many Muslim young men he was picked up by the police and beaten and thrown back bruised and battered. He was 19 then and there were hundreds of others like him who carried the scars of the aftermath of the blasts.

Akhtar went to Delhi to recover from his bitter experience. He returned to find Jogeshwari East more divided than ever. The aged shook with grief, the young seethed with anger.

Akhtar wanted to heal these wounds and he chose the balm of sport. He and his friends started a cricket team which went here and there to play matches. Young boys who would normally brood now had a wholesome way of spending their time.

The team then began to help children who were badly off. It collected money for books and school bags. In 1997, the cricketers formed the Navjawan Ekta Committee. Its youngest member was 14 years old. They staged street plays on communal harmony, drug addiction, education and dirty drains.

In 2002, Rama Syam then a second year student at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) arrived as an intern through the Mohalla Committee Movement Trust. The Navjawan Ekta Committee decided to work more systematically and re-named itself SAHER. It identified the divide between police and youth and started police-public interactions. For Eid and Diwali it set up a community kitchen and invited the police to join the celebrations.

In 2004, SAHER formed the Jogeshwari Sports Association and brought together all the youth groups including social work groups, Navaratri committees, Waz committees and Ganapati mandals in Jogeshwari. A three-day sports meet was held for the 20-odd schools in Jogeshwari. There were both Muslim schools and Marathi medium schools. "Sports promote brotherhood," says Akhtar.

"Today there are at least 50 or 60 young people of

both communities who are willing to put their own lives at stake to prevent communal riots at any cost in Jogeshwari," says Akhtar.

After the Godhra incident in Gujarat, it was SAHER that stopped rumours from floating and worked with the police to prevent communal conflagration. This July, when serial bomb blasts devastated Mumbai, Akhtar got off the train at the Jogeshwari East station and immediately phoned his friends. They arrived at the station and helped with first aid till the police and ambulances turned up.

"We pacified people and asked them to go back," says Akhtar. Soon after, representatives of SAHER's youth groups met the police at the Meghwadi and Jogeshwari police stations. They informed them about their plans to reduce rumour mongering. They also left a list of names and phone numbers of all their youth members offering help for information gathering, investigations and first aid or blood donation.

Save Satpura: Tigers and tribals in Melghat

Vishal Bansod was in school when he went on a bird-watching trip into the Melghat forest in Maharashtra. That excursion converted him into a passionate wildlife conservationist. The National Conservation Society of Amravati (NCSA), an organisation started by Kishore Rithe, an Ashoka fellow, to save tigers in the Satpura Range, had organised that trip. Bansod now works for NCSA.

A year and a half ago he and Pratap Khare started a movement called Save Satpura. The movement is aligned with the NCSA and has 50 young volunteers.

The young conservationist ardently believes that saving tigers means saving the entire

ecosystem. He devotes two-thirds of his time to projects for improving the lives of people in 39 villages bordering the Melghat Tiger Reserve. This is a difficult terrain where there is no infrastructure. Nineteen villages are asking to be settled elsewhere.

The Save Satpura movement has sought the resettling of these villages. In 1990, the villagers around Melghat, sick of the tension of living in a Project Tiger protected area where grazing land had vanished and very few owned land, started a dialogue with Praveen Pardeshi, an IAS officer who headed the Amravati Zilla Parishad. The villagers were willing to resettle if they were provided good facilities.

Bansod explains that a committee was formed to resettle 22 villages in 2000 on Pardeshi's request. But only three were resettled. On March 26, 2001, the villagers of Bori finally left their old homes to build a new life at Rajura Girwarpur. The Maharashtra State Electricity Board and the agriculture department started providing services to the village. Two more villages, Koha and Kund, were also resettled in 2003.

The resettlement package consisted of some cash for building a house, a school, a hospital, drainage,

a playground and a temple. The landless were also given land. The three villages that moved are now relatively prosperous. But after that resettlement, the collector and his team were disbanded.

The other 19 villages now saw what could be done for them. They also want resettlement.

Bansod has identified four needs of the villagers: employment, health, education and legal help. At first he got engineering companies and hotels from the nearest city to recruit youth. "But tribal youth are not happy living far from their roots," says Bansod.

He is now examining self-employment opportunities and government schemes.

According to Bansod, the Chikaldhara hill station has enough tourists for five photographers to earn a living. Some boys have been trained in screenprinting. Bansod is working with the tribal department and Project Tiger to see if any funds are available for other cottage industries. So far 40 boys have found employment.

The Born Free Foundation has funded a healthcare programme which is being managed by Bansod. The project has an ambulance and Ayurvedic doctors from a network of doctors called Nima (National Integrated Medical Association). "We maintain health files on every villager," says Bansod.

Bansod has roped in the mechanical engineering department in the Badnera Engineering College to generate electricity for Kandha village using biodiesel extracted from mahua seeds. "There are 45 families in the village. The college is designing the generator," he says.

Chamna Thuptep: Peace cells in Manipur

Rebecca Haokip has started a peace programme in Manipur called Chamna Thuptep, which in Thadou dialect means Promises of Peace.

She trained as a schoolteacher in Churachandpur district, but the Kuki - Paite conflict turned her family into refugees. The experience left her with a resolve to bring peace to her strife torn state.

"It is hard for an outsider to understand what is really happening," says Haokip.

"For us culture is very important. In Churachandpur, people speak eight dialects. There are 61 denominations, some with just five households. There are clashes. Each of these ethnic factions wants to dominate and have security forces of their own. As a result, drug dealing and addiction have become big issues."

In 2002, the NERYC (North Eastern Regional Youth Commission) identified peace building as an issue to be tackled by the youth. Rebecca was identified by the NERYC as a facilitator. She was sent for training in conflict management. That helped her understand how to work for peace.

She and other youth volunteers started bringing ethnic tribes together. They got some of them to talk. "I have gained the confidence of most of the tribes over the years," says Rebecca.

Rebecca has also succeeded in including the need for dialogue and understanding in the curriculum for young school children. The NERYC works with schools and churches of all denominations.

After a year's research, Hoakip is setting up peace

SUDHANSHU MALHOTRA



Nidhi Arora and Anirban Gupta of Dhriiti



Rebecca Haokip of Chamna Thuptep



Abhishek of Alternative Realities



Masood Akhtar (right) and Rama Syam of SAHER

This year's Change Looms Award goes to five organisations of young people. They have worked for communal peace, helped save tigers and tribals, set up peace cells and sponsored entrepreneurship among children.

cells at locations where there is a lot of conflict. Each peace cell has 10 to 30 members. "We want to empower the cells to raise their voices for peace," she says. So far there are eight peace cells – five of Kuki tribes and three others.

Dhriiti: Early entrepreneurship

"The right time to foster the spirit of entrepreneurship is in childhood itself," says Nidhi Arora.

She is one of the founders of Dhriiti, which means inner courage. Dhriiti was started by Anirban Gupta, Arindam Dasgupta and Arora in 2005.

"The only way to tackle underemployment, unemployment and frustration is to get the youth to dream. Provide a support system to help them start-up on their own," says Arora who graduated along with Gupta from the Xavier Institute of Management, Bhubaneswar in 2004.

Dhriiti has an entrepreneurship development cell where opportunities for start-ups are identified and young people are assisted in launching their own businesses.

Dhriiti holds workshops of different durations for private schools, street children and rural youth. Dream-building exercises are in the first part of the workshop. Participants play an exercise called Five Whys. Each time a child says something others ask 'Why?'

The Ideaslab workshop gets children to think up new business ideas. "They come up with the whackiest ideas," says Gupta. "One boy wanted to make clothes that grow organically as you grow up. Another wanted to start a business in killing mosquitoes. One child wanted to eliminate corruption in India in a day. His solution was an injection that would remove the corruption gene. We list these ideas and try to build a story around how to make the idea possible and the alternatives available."

For city schools Dhriiti uses a simulation game called Bandhustan. The game was first tried out at Ramjas School. Bandhustan is an imaginary country between Pakistan and India. There is a need for friendship bands. Over four days, children were encouraged to design, patent and start

a mock general store.

Children have misconceptions about running a business, says Gupta. They believe they need lots of money. For instance, one boy said he wanted to start an automobile business but since it would require lots of money, he would settle for a business in auto spare parts.

"Now how much is lots? If he spends time at an automobile workshop he might just like to design," says Gupta. Another child said she wanted to start an Internet café with 30 computers but that needed lots of cash. Dhriiti advised her to begin with an old computer from a street corner and then expand.

Parents and teachers wrongly believe only children in Class 12 taking commerce or arts should attend Dhriiti's workshops. Science students, they think, don't need to be entrepreneurial.

"We want to start with children in Class 2," says Arora. "That is when a mindset begins to take shape. We have now convinced some schools to hold workshops in Class 9."

Dhriiti's members believe most vocational courses run by NGOs are not helpful. "They are not market driven," says Gupta.

Alternative Realities: Shelter for the homeless

Abhishek Bharadwaj did not look for a job after he graduated from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in 2004. Instead, he spends time with homeless people who sleep on Mahim beach, in Crawford market or at Santa Cruz. According to him, Mumbai has at least 100,000 homeless people.

"I imagined that the money capital of India is like New York or Shanghai, but that is not so," says Bharadwaj. "There is not a single night shelter in all of Mumbai for the homeless." He has started a society called Alternative Realities to fight for the rights of those without shelter.

Bharadwaj works with the police, the administration and companies. His goal is to create night shelters for 10,000 people in the next one year. These shelters would be carpeted and equipped with bedding, sanitation facilities, drinking water and first aid. He wants to make sure that state policies provide for low cost living places within working distances. The homeless should also get health-care and ration cards.

Who are the homeless? Bharadwaj says 50 per cent are from rural Maharashtra. They are political orphans because the Shiva Sena's "Amchi Mumbai" campaign does not allow NGOs to make them comfortable.

The homeless get treated badly because they are often filthy. "They look filthy because they don't have a place to wash their clothes except the sea and no place to hang washed clothes," says Bharadwaj. They spend all the money they earn for fearing of losing it to pickpockets. Some save with local shopkeepers who charge them an interest for safe keeping and sometimes cheat them.

Once seven of them decided to save with Bharadwaj. They would deposit between Rs 100 to Rs 500 a day. "So you see these people can pay," says Bharadwaj.

If night shelters charged Rs 8 or Rs10 a day, there would be takers. It is profitable for banks to extend services to the homeless. What needs to be worked out is some form of identity.



Vishal Bansod of Save Satpura

The campaign to rescue India's RTI

Umesh Anand

New Delhi

Avociferous protest by activists staved off attempts by bureaucrats to limit the scope of India's powerful Right to Information Act by not making disclosure of notes in files mandatory. The change, if it had gone through, would have made the law worthless.

Respected Gandhian and social campaigner Anna Hazare went on an indefinite fast in Maharashtra. In Delhi, protestors gathered at Jantar Mantar to denounce the government's move. Former bureaucrats spoke out. The government realised its image was taking a beating and decided not to tamper with the Act.

Passed over a year ago, this law allows the ordinary citizen to seek wide ranging information from the government. It has become an important tool to make the bureaucracy accountable and expose corruption.

From ration shop supplies to road repairs, pensions, examination results and privatisation initiatives, RTI has given people a sense of being in control.

But in August amendments to the Act were drafted by bureaucrats claiming to strengthen it, when in fact they took away the very provisions which made government accountable to citizens.

With an amazing sleight of hand, the bureaucracy sought to put the magical words "file notings" into the law through the amendments, but simultaneously so weakened the law that it could never be effectively used to unravel government decisions.

Faced with a public outcry that went on for weeks and seemed to involve all sections of society, Sonia Gandhi finally interceded and asked the government to drop the changes or to pursue them only after adequate consultations.

As the government backed off, RTI campaigners breathed a sigh of relief and even celebrated. But there was a new mood of caution and mistrust towards a government that came to power two years ago saying that it would listen to activist groups to make its policies more meaningful.

The RTI Act was drafted after extensive consultations and finally shaped in the National Advisory Council (NAC) headed by Sonia Gandhi. The amendments by contrast were moved by stealth. No one knew of their existence till they were cleared by the Union Cabinet and ready to be placed before Parliament.

Similarly, the decision to put the amendments on hold came with utmost reluctance. It was only when the protests continued to spread and former bureaucrats like J. Lyngdoh, Madhav Godbole and EAS Sarma spoke out that the government backed off.

Anna Hazare's fast was cause for serious concern for the government. He has a huge following in Maharashtra and if anything happened to him, the Congress would be in a mess. Thousands turned up to pay their respect to Anna near Pune. Anna has fought many RTI battles in Maharashtra and in fact got the state to draft one of the best RTI laws. Experience has shown that Anna and his slogan,



Anna Hazare on fast in Maharashtra

Respected Gandhian and social campaigner Anna Hazare went on an indefinite fast in Maharashtra. In Delhi, protestors gathered at Jantar Mantar to denounce the government's move. Former bureaucrats spoke out. The government eventually decided not to tamper with the Act.

"People are the rulers," cannot be taken lightly.

There was also a political wake-up call from the CPI and the CPI(M). Brinda Karat attended demonstrations. The Left made it known that it would not support the amendment bill in Parliament. The BJP, initially ready to go along, also pulled out after its knuckles were cracked by Sudarshan of the RSS and it realised that support for the amendments would run contrary to middle class sentiments in cities like Delhi.

Access to file notings has been an issue because the RTI Act does not specifically mention them. The amendments sought to bring in file notings, but the trick was that they would only be substantial notings and that too with regard to "social and development works".

Since there was no definition of "social and development works" the actual application of the RTI Act would be left to the discretion of the government. The role of information commissioners was also made advisory. Also no information would be given on matters in process. Only final decisions would be known.

Such changes would virtually seal off government from citizens and made a mockery of the

right to information. "Without access to file notings there can be no RTI," said Lyngdoh, the redoubtable former Chief Election Commissioner, on national television.

But why were bureaucrats so eager to push through these amendments? What is there in the government's files that they are so eager to hide?

It appears that as long as RTI was used to expose corruption at lower levels, it did not matter. Top bureaucrats began to worry when they found that transfers and appointments could come under public scrutiny. This was a challenge to their supremacy.

"It is the mindset of senior bureaucrats, even honest ones. They don't want to be subjected to intensive public scrutiny of their actions," says the Prashant Bhushan, the public spirited lawyer who has been championing RTI.

Particularly galling to the top bureaucracy would be the kind of petition moved by Arvind Kejriwal of Parivartan, this year's Magsaysay Award winner. He has sought information on the appointment of secretaries to the Union government.

Under the rules, secretaries have to be chosen from all cadres and have to have some proven com-

petence for the departments they head. Kejriwal has asked for the files to see what thought had gone into the appointments.

For months he received no reply. He appealed to the Chief Information Commissioner, who summoned the government, but it continued to resist. Finally the department of personnel agreed to give the files, but only after a month.

"I had waited six months. What was another month," says Kejriwal. But a week later the amendments to the law were drafted and moved. The files Kejriwal wanted on the appointment of secretaries had effectively been put out of reach.

So, was this the turning point that made bureaucrats want to kill RTI because it took transparency right to the top?

Shekhar Singh, an important campaigner who has long experience of dealing with government, agrees that it was when RTI was used to cut too close to the bone that the bureaucracy felt threat-

Jantar Mantar. The posters said: "Manmohan Singh you should be ashamed of yourself" and "Sonia Gandhi break your silence".

Such protests were not by people in huge numbers, but they were unprecedented. It is not common for the middle class to come out on the streets. There were also resident welfare associations in Delhi, which had used RTI and did not want to lose the protection it gave them against corrupt local officials.

Sandeep Pandey, a Magsaysay award winner, went on hunger-strike at Jantar Mantar.

But the real clincher was Anna Hazare's fast. When all seemed lost, Kejriwal said to us:

"I'm pinning my hopes on Anna's fast. Anna's fast has always worked wonders."

There were others too who added to the pressure. Shabana Azmi came out in public against the amendments saying that the people's right to information could not be taken away from them

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Aruna Roy with activists in Delhi

ened and decided to act.

"It is not corruption alone. Bureaucrats get worried when their supremacy, their right to make transfers and so on is questioned," he says.

The Congress-led UPA came to power with the pledge that it would provide RTI. The RTI Act itself was shaped in the NAC, but it was based on the experience of grassroots groups, who had worked long and hard on its provisions before the NAC took it up.

Once enacted, the Central RTI law reinforced laws in the states. With campaigners promoting RTI it has become a powerful tool to expose corruption. It has fired the imagination of citizens and empowered them like nothing before. The truth has begun coming out on how public money had been siphoned off.

In the light of these successes and the goodwill they had brought the UPA, the government did not seem to be able to explain the amendments.

As the Congress and the government lapsed into silence, protests broke out across the country. People who had used RTI to get justice did not want to give up the power it gave them.

Demonstrations and a rock show by Euphoria were held by college students and other activists at

so arbitrarily.

The Officers' Association of the Bhilai Steel Plant said it was in favour of a strong RTI law so that honest officers could act without fear.

The anger against the Manmohan Singh government was because of the peremptory manner in which it acted. Activists of the MKSS in Rajasthan and Parivartan in Delhi among others all over the country had struggled to implement state level laws to show that RTI improves the quality of governance.

Much of this work was done at the grassroots at personal risk. In Delhi, Santosh of Parivartan had her throat slit by resentful ration shop owners. In the early days Parivartan activists would also have to contend with police harassment.

After the Central law came into force last year, several of the states repealed their laws in the belief that the Central law would do. Now if the Central law was diluted, RTI across the country would get diluted. The government and the Congress owed everyone an explanation.

As the heat built, Suresh Pachauri, minister of state for training personnel, called Arvind Kejriwal and asked him to come over for a meeting.

Kejriwal said he would meet the minister but

not alone. He went together with Aruna Roy and other senior activists.

Pachauri said the government only wanted to specify the use of file notings through the amendments. The activists said that they were happy with the law as it was. Notes in files were already being accessed on the basis of orders by the information commissioners. If the government was passing the amendments to please the RTI activists there was no need for them, the minister was told.

Pachauri said that he would speak to the Prime Minister and get back to them. The next thing heard from the government was the decision to put off the amendments. But the decision came through the newspapers and television channels.

Shekhar Singh believes that the battle has been won but the war is not over. "They will strike again," he says, as though speaking of some malevolent force.

Aruna Roy calls it a "victory of the people", which also indicates a great divide and a sense of continuing conflict.

The government's attempt to push the amendments through without consultation is indication of how little the bureaucracy understands what people want and need. It shows bureaucrats have no estimate of popular sentiments.

"They thought they would slip the amendments through," says Prashant Bhushan. "They did not expect this public response."

He also sees the amendments as a blessing in disguise. "Greater public awareness has been created and the issue of file notings has been brought into focus."

The government has said that disclosing notings will deter good officers from expressing themselves. It has also said that RTI laws elsewhere in the world and at the state level do not include notings.

This is only partly correct. Access to notings are available though in varying degrees. The RTI Act in India however gives full access to all opinion and advice given at the time of taking government decisions. In this it is a model piece of legislation and can even be regarded as a showpiece of Indian reforms.

"There is nothing wrong," says Bhushan, "in encouraging officers to think carefully before they write. To write things which are in the public interest and which they can publicly defend."

Kejriwal says many honest officers have told him that RTI has come as a boon. They can now fend off politicians by telling them that all decisions will be open to public scrutiny.

Shekhar Singh says that the learning from the recent events is that campaigners cannot afford to be complacent. "We thought we had got a strong law passed and so plunged into getting it implemented. Little did we realise that the law itself could be changed."

He believes that the Prime Minister and the Congress leadership were misled into thinking that the amendments would actually deliver a better law. It was the bureaucracy that was pushing through the changes to protect its turf.

Bhushan does not agree. "Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was always against complete disclosure of the file notings. He is a former bureaucrat and has the mindset of a senior bureaucrat. It was only under pressure from the NAC that he agreed to a law that provided access to the files."

Finally, Laila gets a cycle

Biswajit Padhi
Khariar (Orissa)

PEOPLE lined up on both sides of the road in Khariar town, Nuapada district to welcome 18-year-old Laila Majhi, a Bhunjia tribal girl. She finally rolled in on a bicycle wearing a pair of *chappals*. A young girl on a cycle would not normally cause such a sensation. But Laila is the first girl from her community to own a cycle and wear a pair of *chappals*.

Laila lives inside the Sunabeda wildlife sanctuary, located 900 metres above sea level in Nuapada district. The Bhunjias, who live here, forbid their folk from wearing *chappals*. "We are not supposed to tread on the sacred earth where the deity Sunadei stays," explained Bhujbal Majhi, a Bhunjia. But he couldn't explain why rules were waived for the men.

Laila is going to appear for her Class 10 exams this year. The road, so far, has not been easy. The government school she attended in Sunabeda provided education only up to Class 7. The high school is located 30 km downhill and since travelling everyday was impossible, Laila dropped out. Then, three years ago, a Gurukul Ashram started a high school for girls like her. But Laila and her friends were asked to wear a two-piece dress as uniform.



Laila Majhi with her brand new bicycle

This posed a problem. Bhunjia women are permitted to wear only a sari. The village elders of Gatibeda in Sunabeda called a meeting. Finally, Laila and her friends won. As a special concession, the elders gave them permission to wear a dress to school so that they could continue their studies.

But a price had to be paid. Bhunjai girls are considered adult women after the *kandbiha* ceremony where a girl is married to an arrow till she marries at a later date. This ritual is performed after they attain puberty. Restrictions on women start from

then. Laila and her friends faced ostracism. They are not allowed to enter the kitchen in their homes.

A Bhunjia considers his kitchen to be sacred. He can even burn it down if an outsider enters it. Girls, once they are married, are not allowed to enter the kitchen in their parents home when they come to live with their families.

There is a remedy, though. "We have to sacrifice a goat during her marriage after which she will be taken back into the community," says her father Bhujbal. Laila has got a job as a community health worker with the Banjari Askyam Seva Kendra, an NGO in Tarbod. The state government has asked the Kendra to pitch in with its RCH-II, (Reproductive and Child Health) programme. The NGO, along with Srushti, a local NGO, will be providing reproductive health services to under-served villages in Sunabeda.

"Villages and hamlets in Sunabeda are very scattered. With my new bicycle I will be able to reach many more pregnant women and young mothers and offer them my services," beamed Laila.

The cycle was presented to Laila by Dr GR Padhy, CDMO, Nuapada, at a function in Khariar. The Nuapada chapter of the White Ribbon Alliance, an international network on safe motherhood, gifted her the bicycle.

Village shames corrupt committee

Biswajit Padhi
Bolangir

SUSHIL Bhoi looks like any rural unemployed youngster in his early twenties. But in the village of Guchapali, in the Khaparakhhol block of Bolangir district in Orissa, Sushil is something of hero.

His claim to fame is that he exposed corruption in development work in the village. His happy parents say his late grandfather Duryodhan Bhoi, the first president of the Bolangir Zilla Parishad in 1961, would have been especially proud of him.

Guchapali, with a population of 962, would be just one of thousands of forgotten villages had it not received funds under the Western Orissa Livelihood Project (WORLP), which promotes watershed development in drought prone areas. The Assistant Engineer of soil conservation in Patnagarh was chosen as the PIA (Project Implementing Agency).

The project got underway with the PIA entrusting the task of executing the work to a village committee. The villagers dutifully nominated office-bearers. The committee's job was to ensure transparency but it did little to justify its existence.



Sushil, hero of the village

The credentials of the committee came to be seriously questioned when its secretary released Rs. 30,000 to one self-help group (SHG) but took away the money after the cheque was encashed. Although villagers suspected that nepotism and corruption were creeping in, the problem was, who would bell the cat?

Gossip started doing the rounds and resentment grew. Finally it was Sushil who led a few villagers to the office of the committee. They demanded that the accounts of expenditure be made public. The committee refused to answer and dismissed Sushil's request as 'youthful exuberance'. But Sushil remained undeterred. The villagers went with him to the PIA and even met the district collector (DC). The PIA agreed to conduct a social audit of the work. The committee now had to make its accounts public. The villagers nominated four persons to verify the accounts. The committee was asked to show the records to the nominees

on two consecutive days. Accordingly, they waited outside the school building where the committee was supposed to turn up and show the accounts.

On the first day they came late, at around 1 pm and tried to hurry up the nominees. Sangram, a villager, told them they could get the list of benefici-

aries from the committee's book of accounts. And sure enough the nominees discovered that the relatives of the committee members were the major beneficiaries.

The beneficiaries were confronted and it was found that many false bills had been made. The nominees verified the village committee's cheque book. The secretary of the committee had issued many cheques in favour of his relatives for work that was never done.

The second day began with a conciliatory note. The committee members, headed by the secretary, realised that their misdeeds had been exposed. After thoroughly verifying the accounts the nominees prepared a dossier of wrongdoings. To be absolutely certain, the PIA agreed to cross check. The beneficiaries have been advised to complete the work for which they took the money.

The embarrassed secretary now claimed he had not misappropriated 'so much money'. But he has agreed to return it. Efforts are being made to sort out the matter amicably.

Sushil and his band of villager are elated. After this incident the next village committee will not dare to misappropriate money, they say with confidence. The PIA has assured them the committee will be changed in consultation with villagers. This sleepy village has generated a lot of debate in the district. Neighbouring villages are talking about community participation and the importance of a social audit.

Boys map Kolkata's biodiversity

Rina Mukherji
Kolkata

PRASANTA BISWAS

ONCE a week Nilanjan Bhattacharya, environmentalist and documentary filmmaker, shops for fish at his local market. On one such trip he made friends with Mithun Dhara, a teenager who earned a living cutting fish sold by vendors to their buyers. Mithun lived in Kalikapur, a rural outpost in east Kolkata. As he described his village, Nilanjan was most struck by the boy's vast knowledge of Kalikapur's biodiversity.

Mithun introduced Nilanjan to his pals, Shanu Maity, Raju Das, Sanjoy Mondol, Bhola Baidya and Sushanta Gharai from Kalikapur. These young lads could recognise each and every fish species found in the Kalikapur Canal, which drains Kolkata's sewage into the wetlands. They could identify birds that thronged the area. They could spot all the edible fruit, vegetables and medicinal plants that grew in Kalikapur.

Nilanjan started exploring Kalikapur with his new friends. He realised that he had stumbled on a part of rural Kolkata that had survived the onslaught of urbanisation. Species that had disappeared from the city were thriving in Kalikapur.

There were flocks of *bulbuls*, parakeets, weaverbirds, drongos and *munias*. The birds built nests on Kalikapur's numerous banyan, palm and coconut trees. Collecting twigs and leaves for fuel was a common practice. But none of Kalikapur's residents ever hacked a neem, banyan or *bel* tree. There was no formal health system in Kalikapur. Plants like *kulakheda* were used to treat anaemia, and snakebite was treated with *shankhachur*.

A keen environmentalist disturbed by the mindless urbanisation of Kolkata, Nilanjan decided to map the biodiversity of Kalikapur for posterity. His knowledge bank was these six teenage boys. He conceived his project as part of a larger work on the "Changing Urban Landscape of Kolkata."

Nilanjan's academician-ecologist brother, Dr Shilanjana Bhattacharya, drew up a framework for the study. He too was most impressed by Kalikapur's botanical treasure trove. After a preliminary survey of the area, a map was sketched and six spots marked for intensive exploration.

Nilanjan was keen that the boys map the area themselves. He got another friend of his, software engineer and Linux expert Indranil Dasgupta, to help with the project. Indranil and his Calcutta Linux User Group (Cal-LUG) were proponents of using ICTs for development. Since 1999 they had been working hard at breaking language barriers to bring computers closer to the people. This informal user group had grown into a virtual network comprising 1450 members, and had created the *Ankur Bangla* project in 2000. Indranil, and his software technologists invented Bengali software on an internationally accepted UNICODE platform using Linux.

The ecological mapping of Kalikapur was Indranil's first project for a new company he had



Nilanjan Bhattacharya (in yellow T-shirt) with his team of young boys.

just started called L2C2 (Localised Low Cost Computing Technologies).

"Once you develop something, it is time to put it to some positive use," says Indranil. "Nilanjan's ecological mapping project using these youngsters from Kalikapur seemed just the right thing for us since we had ambitious plans of deploying ICTs for

A keen environmentalist disturbed by the mindless urbanisation of Kolkata, Nilanjan decided to map the biodiversity of Kalikapur for posterity. His knowledge bank was six teenage boys who knew every species.

development."

Nilanjan and the boys now started field visits to Kalikapur. The group would leave every morning and return by afternoon. Every visit was a learning experience for Nilanjan, who discovered new birds, fish, fruit, trees and plants.

"I also discovered how harmoniously these people live with nature," he says. "Every single person in Kalikapur used twigs and biomass for fuel. Yet, nobody would ever fell a tree. They ate ripe, nutritious *babla* fruit and wild figs, which we city-dwellers do not even know of. The unripe fruit would be scooped out to make long-lasting oil lamps." He says meeting Sushanta Gharai's paternal uncle was a most humbling experience.

Sushanta's family members are experts in folk medicine. His uncle, Shibu Gharai, knew every natural cure for different diseases afflicting people.

Apart from Shanu, who had attended a missionary school in Santoshpur and Sushanta, who had dropped out of school in Class 6, none of the boys were literate. Getting them to learn how to read and write seemed a daunting task. "We hence got them to play games on the computer. This was something they enjoyed," explains Indranil. At the same time the boys started drawing what they saw on their field visits. This helped them to express themselves better.

Two months into the project, Nilanjan Bhattacharya was awarded a Sarai fellowship for his project, 'The Ecological Mapping of Kalikapur'.

"This helped us tremendously," he recalls. The project took the team one year to complete. They finally discovered that Kalikapur had not just bulbuls, drongos, barbets, *babui*, martins, but even fast-disappearing species like vultures. There were medicinal plants, fruit trees, several varieties of vegetables and swarms of fish that communities could thrive on.

Sixteen species of birds visited Kalikapur, including, coppersmiths, paddy field pipits, and four different varieties of kingfisher. The team identified 142 varieties of plants. A significant number were edible, while many had medicinal properties. Besides, there was a vast array of fish in the water bodies.

Nilanjan now plans to map similar habitats along the eastern fringes of Kolkata for the reference of urban planners. "It is high time our planners realised the value of such virgin vegetation and the need to preserve these unique ecosystems. Clearing all vegetation and then planting trees to bring in greenery is hypocritical. Habitats like Kalikapur are models that we ought to preserve, study and learn from," he points out.

Pay with plants at herbal hospital

Biswajit Padhi

Bolangir

YOU can get medical attention free of cost at the Sabuja Biplav Hospital in Jharbandhli, 40 km from Bolangir town, Orissa. Just pay by bringing along medicinal plants. Unlike other hospitals that put up big signboards with all kinds of messages, Sabuja Biplav's signboard gives the rates of various herbs.

Sabuja Biplav, a herbal hospital, has a barter system. "At least 70 per cent of patients who come to the hospital for treatment, pay by selling us medicinal plants," says Dr Khamari, an Ayurvedic doctor who practices here. In Bolangir there are hardly any health workers, doctors or government hospitals so Sabuja Biplav is a natural choice. The hospital even organises camps to teach villagers to identify medicinal plants in their villages and in the wild.

Founded just seven months ago by Santosh Kumar Das, who used to work for Orissa's forest department and his wife Lily, this hospital has been attracting 40 to 60 patients per day.

Santosh observed that poor people living in Bolangir were spending money beyond their means on allopathic medicines. If a person got a chronic illness, his or her family would invariably find themselves neck deep in debt. Yet there were plenty of medicinal plants growing all around. This was a resource not being tapped by poorer people.

They started Sabuja Biplav, which means green revolution, as an experiment from a one-room house in Bolangir town. "Being a forester I felt medicinal plants were just the right prescription. By using medicines made from plants people could avoid falling into the debt trap. We at Sabuja Biplav focused our attention on it," says Santosh.

The hospital's home herbal garden project promotes 20 medicinal plants for common health problems like fever, diarrhoea, headache, cough and cold, menstrual problems, gastritis etc. People are encouraged to grow these plants in their backyards. In rural areas where there is a paucity of medical services and allopathic drugs are expensive, a herbal home garden offers the best and most natural solution. Plants like *brahmi* and *aloe vera* are easy to grow and also cattle-proof.

Lily is deeply involved in the project. After her morning cup of tea, she works with the gardener of the hospital's medicinal plant nursery tending to plants carefully. Due to her constant vigil, Sabuja Biplav produces at least 500,000 saplings of different medicinal plants from three nurseries in Bolangir district. They supply the plants to organisations and business establishments in India. People from the vicinity, who have understood the effectiveness of plants, buy too. The plants are priced reasonably, at Rs 5 each.

Western Orissa is a treasure trove of medicinal plants. Previously, even if people collected these plants, they did not get a fair price. There was no marketing support. Moreover, the herbal plant trade was controlled from Kolkata. "Now we provide them a platform to market the products, however small the quantity may be," says Santosh.

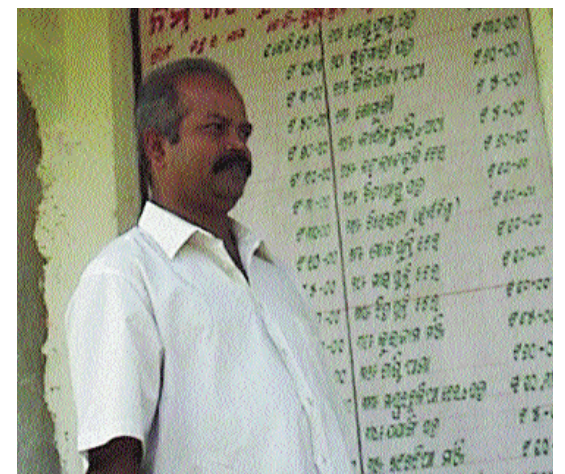
The Sabuja Biplav hospital today attracts patients, entrepreneurs and development plan-



The Sabuja Biplav herbal hospital sells medicinal plants for Rs 5 each



A patient being examined by an Ayurvedic doctor



Santosh Kumar Das

The hospital's home herbal garden project promotes 20 medicinal plants for common health problems like fever, diarrhoea, headache, cough and cold, menstrual problems, gastritis etc.

ners. Santosh and Lily receive a constant stream of visitors every day. There are many poor people who travel here for treatment. Fakir, a local villager, brought along his three-year-old daughter Sinu. She was in pain. "The treatment is inexpensive and I have the option of bringing along herbal plants to buy medicines," he explained.

Ullasha, from a nearby village, had ventured into the hospital for the first time. He said he had consulted many doctors, without success, for his chronic gastric problem. Pratima, a woman in her mid forties, wanted advice for her gynaecological problem. "The treatment here is cheap and effective," she said.

The hospital has four Ayurvedic doctors. One is a woman. The doctors provide consultation and conduct two camps every week in remote villages.

The hospital also has a pharmacy that produces medicines. "Since most of these are for patients we face no marketing problem," says Dr Khamari.

Sabuja Biplav has started a similar clinic at Bhubaneswar on its nursery premises. They have recently begun a health insurance card for poor patients. For Rs 100 a family can get free consultation for a year. To buy medicines, the family has the option of paying in cash or opting for the barter system. "We have enrolled more than 200 members," says Lily. They feel they can register at least 600 members within a year. "We are hoping to rope in WORLP (Western Orissa Livelihood Project). With Rs 6 lakhs as membership fees we will be able to provide services to the people without any external aid," adds Lily.

This path-finding project has not only popularised medicinal plants in Bolangir, it has helped people earn an income by growing and collecting medicinal plants. People are all praise for Santosh and Lily's efforts. Santosh is now busy studying Ayurveda and the scriptures.

Clean water for Meerut slum

Civil Society News
Meerut

FOR many years, residents of Jaibheem Nagar, a slum in Meerut, had no choice but to drink toxic water from hand pumps. Stuck between the polluted river Kali and the city's medical college with its pond of biomedical waste, Jaibheem Nagar has always had lots of water, but not a drop to drink.

The groundwater is loaded with pollution. People are dying of diseases that come from heavy metals in the water. There are cases of cancer, neurological illnesses, gastrointestinal complaints, skin infections and acute asthma taking place right across the medical college's wall.

Two years ago, the Janhit Foundation stepped in. It got Jaibheem Nagar's water checked, publicised its corrosive contents and filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Allahabad High Court.

Finally, the UP Jal Nigam has set aside Rs 2 crores to provide piped drinking water to Jaibheem Nagar and is in the process of laying pipes, said Anil Rana, director of the Janhit Foundation at a national conference on water pollution and health organised by the NGO on July 9. A documentary film on Jaibheem Nagar by Rakesh Khatri of Comnet Videotech was shown.

"We hope our strategy will bear fruit and the people of Jaibheem Nagar get safe drinking water so that no more deaths take place," said Anil Rana.

Jaibheem Nagar has 13,000 residents, almost all of them Dalits. They work as rickshaw pullers, vegetable vendors and painters. They pay house tax, even a water tax for fictional water and elect a municipal councillor. Politicians would dutifully collect votes but never fulfil their watery promises.

Desert like conditions prevailed in Jaibheem Nagar. Since the men leave early to earn a living, women and children spend the day hunting for water. According to Janhit's calculations, like Kutch in Saurashtra, women walked some 870 km a year to fetch water. Children collected money to hire bicycles to tow water.

"People would not marry their daughters to boys in Jaibheem Nagar because they knew their daughters would have to carry water and be exposed to diseases," says Arjun, a resident.

To get water residents would enter the medical college through a breach in the boundary wall. Then a theft took place. The medicos blamed the slum-dwellers. The wall was repaired. In desperation, residents of Jaibheem Nagar broke the wall. A scuffle followed with the medicos. The police was called in. Firing took place and two women died due to bullet injuries. The police entered the slum, beat up residents and threw some into jail.

The Janhit Foundation decided to help Jaibheem Nagar. They went to the slum and noted the medical college's wastewater lagoon and the Kali river with its industrial effluents. The NGO found hand pumps emitted water of different hues: black, brown and yellow. Janhit contacted the People's Science Institute (PSI) in Dehradun. Water samples from the slum's hand-pumps and the medical college's pond were collected and analysed. The results were shocking. Jaibheem's groundwater was literally doused with heavy metals like chromium, cadmium, lead, iron and mercury.

Residents like Kalu, Rambhool, Pramod and Ramdhari now knew what dangers were lurking in their water. Pramod's hand pump contained high levels of chromium. Kalu's private hand pump had 22.57 mg/l of iron whereas the permissible limit is 0.3 mg/l.

Jaibheem Nagar's water report clearly proved that liquid biomedical waste from the medical college's pond had leached into its groundwater, along with industrial effluents from the Kali river.

The medical college dumped broken thermometers into its pond. As a result, water samples from the pond showed mercury 12 times more than permissible limits. High levels of mercury were found in Jaibheem's water too. The medical college's pond had lead five times more than prescribed limits. So did hand pumps used by the community. The college's pond also had chromium four times higher and huge amounts of cadmium.

Janhit wanted to establish that it was the water that was causing health problems in the slum. So they did a door-to-door survey with a detailed questionnaire to ascertain the reason for death and ailments. Altogether they found 123 deaths, 1,068 people with serious ailments and Rs 1,80,000 being

spent collectively by residents on medical expenses per month. Sick people were turning to quacks for help.

In fact about 80 families migrated from the slum, abandoning their homes. Janhit made presentations of their survey to the district administration and officials in the UP government. They contacted the Food First Information Action Network, a Germany-based NGO. Food First informed their South Asia representative, Sabine Pabst, of the situation. Janhit gave her all the details. She got in touch with the offices of the Prime Minister and the UP chief minister.

Janhit also filed a PIL in the Allahabad High Court asking that each person in Jaibheem Nagar be provided clean drinking water and that industries polluting the Kali river should set up effluent treatment plants and only then release water into the river. The

court heard Janhit's PIL in May and has directed the UP government and the medical college to reply.

While crores are spent in futile attempts to clean sewage in the Ganga and Yamuna, no attention is paid to tributaries like the Kali or the Hindon that lie in between. Factories disgorge their effluents into tributaries. Towns add their waste. These dirty streams then poison fields and groundwater along their path. While the Hindon spews into the Yamuna at Noida, the Kali empties into the Ganga.

It has been left to Janhit, a gutsy team of local youngsters led by Anil Rana, a former lecturer to take on the battle for clean water. With little money and lots of enthusiasm, the Janhit team is doing careful research, publicising its findings and lobbying for change.

Janhit's case is due for hearing again and a sustainable solution lies in local industries and the medical college cleaning up their act. But till that is achieved the pipes the UP government is laying will provide some relief to Jaibheem Nagar.



Jaibheem's hand pump water

JAIBHEEM NAGAR'S WATER REPORT

HEAVY METALS

	Iron (Fe)	Cadmium (Cd)	Chromium (Cr)	Lead (Pb)	Mercury (Hg)
Permissible limits ⑩	0.3 mg/l	10.0 ug/l	50.0 ug/l	50.0 ug/l	1.0 ug/l
Medical college waste water pond	0.41	62	196	280	12
Kalu's private hand pump	22.57	25	70	98	
Ramdhari's private hand pump	4.04	11			
India Marka II hand pump	1.39				
Gorakhnath temple hand pump	3.86	116	78	152	2.5
Balmiki basti hand pump	1.68		60	70	
Rambhool's private hand pump	19.85				
Pramod's private hand pump	0.93	12	75		

Photograph by RITA ANAND



Anil Rana, director of Janhit



Top doctors in slum

The Arpana Trust takes quality health care to a resettlement colony in south-east Delhi

Civil Society News
New Delhi

ON an average day you may have to wait a couple of hours to see Dr Ashok Khurana at his Defence Colony clinic. So skilled is he with the use of ultrasound for diagnosis that he is the first choice of Delhi's rich and famous. Private practices hardly ever get bigger than his with money and fame and no end to the number of patients seeking appointments. Defence Colony is also one of the posh addresses in Delhi. You don't live here unless you are rich and you wouldn't even think of consulting Dr Khurana if you happened to be just one of Delhi's millions.

But once a month, Dr Khurana transits to a very different world. Unknown to most people in his circle, he spends several hours at the Arpana Health Centre in Molarbund, a festering resettlement colony in southeast Delhi. Patients wait in large numbers to be examined by him and news of his arrival sends them scurrying to fall into a queue.

If the elite at Defence Colony do not know of Dr Khurana's altruistic trips to Molarbund, the poor who gather to be examined by him in Molarbund don't have any clue as to his upmarket avatar. But patients rich and poor know a good doctor when they find one and he works for both.

In the very basic examination room at the health centre Dr Khurana is much the same person he is in

his Defence Colony clinic. He has his characteristic twinkle in his eye and he is engaging and attentive as he draws on all those insights that go to make an exceptional ultrasound specialist.

For Molarbund, with its open drains and cholera count, Dr Khurana is a godsend. But he is not the only one who takes time out of a busy schedule to do his bit for public health. Several other top physicians also visit the Arpana Health Centre and like him most of them seem to do so to without fanfare, as if to worship at forgotten altars of the medical profession.

There is Dr Dilraj Gandhi, also an ultrasound specialist, with a flourishing practice in east Delhi, who comes once a week in his Honda Accord. Dr Yuvakshi Juneja, a gynaecologist with Moolchand Hospital, serves in Molarbund. Dr Sadia Zinzani, Dr Usha Mehta and Dr Rakesh Sachdeva – all paediatricians – are much in demand. Dr Vidya Gupta, a neo-natologist comes from Apollo Hospital and Dr Ashok Gupta, a vascular surgeon comes from Escorts. Dr Rastogi and Dr S M Govil, both chest specialists, make themselves available.

Then there are those who don't make regular visits to the centre but are available on tap. For instance, Dr J S Khurana and Dr Rajni Saxena provide all possible assistance for reporting of X-rays. Dr Krishna Taneja, a senior paediatrician is always ready to fill in for missing doctors. She helps conduct the out-

reach clinic from Arpana's mobile van in Ali Gaon, adjacent to Molarbund.

Literally hijacking them all to Molarbund is Dr Rahul Gupta, a gastroenterologist. Rahul comes from a family of physicians. His mother, Dr Raj Gupta, is a respected gynaecologist. His father, Dr Indar S Gupta, is an ENT specialist. Rahul's wife, Lena, is a gynaecologist.

The Gupta family is deeply influenced by the Arpana Trust and its head, Param Pujya Ma, who preaches the unity of faiths and a life of action in service to humanity.

The Arpana Trust works extensively in rural Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. It runs a hospital, provides extension medical facilities and works with women's self-help groups. It is this experience and spirit that the Arpana Trust brings to Molarbund in the creation of the health centre and a lot else.

People in Molarbund live beyond the pale of governance. They would never know how to gain access to an ultrasound machine, let alone a specialist capable of reading its images with reliability. If they went to any of Delhi's public hospitals run by the government, it could take them as long as a month, perhaps two, before they could get examined. Most private clinics would be too expensive for them to go to.

Women in Molarbund get pregnant six and seven times. Often, they don't even know they are carrying. The water supply in the area is dicey and together

with the filth in the drains it is the reason for stomach disorders. There is also the Badarpur thermal power plant next door that spews flyash all day.

After people were evicted from slums in East of Kailash and other such neighbourhoods and dumped here by the Delhi government four years ago, there was no attempt to clean up and provide facilities. Molarbund has no urban infrastructure worth the name though it falls within the city of Delhi. The health centre, funded originally by WHO, was a part of the plan for the resettlement colony, but it was built and forgotten.

When Dr Rahul Gupta first saw the health centre in 2002, it was in a shambles. Its walls and woodwork had gone to pieces. On paper, it was meant to serve the health needs of the local people. But in reality it was no better than a deserted building used by marauding ruffians.

This was the structure that the Arpana Trust took over. The municipal authorities had to be activated. As the Arpana Trust reached out, it got assistance and guidance from Dr Karuna Singh and her entire team of spirited young doctors. Like so many well-meaning people they, too, were prisoners of a bad system. The Arpana Trust brought them out of their shell.

Now the health centre caters to 4000 households or perhaps 22,000 people. Another 18,000 live in Ali Gaon. X-rays, ultrasounds, ECGs and pathology tests are done here. A dental clinic runs under Dr Kanupriya Saxena. A pharmacy doles out free medicines, which the Arpana Trust buys directly from the market, or sources in dribs and drabs from the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD).

Apart from the services of visiting specialists, there are three full time doctors on duty Dr R Sachdeva, Dr Anjali Soni and Dr Prabhjot Kaur. These are general physicians and they get a salary from the trust. An ambulance and three other vehicles are stationed at the health centre to take people to hospital in emergencies at any time of the day or night.

The health centre encourages women to have their babies in hospitals and helps to transport them there. Institutional deliveries have increased by 24 percent. There has been a drastic reduction in the infant mortality rate. There has also been an increasing number of couples adopting family planning measures. Immunisation has also steadily increased.

Private hospitals that provide assistance are the Sama Nursing Home run by Dr S K Sama and the Ganga Ram Hospital, where Dr Rahul Gupta worked for nine years.

The Ganga Ram Hospital provides free surgery. So, when it was found that a child who was crying all the time had a huge stone in the bladder, it was removed at the Ganga Ram Hospital. The health centre also sends women in its ambulance to the Ganga Ram Hospital for sterilisation.

"If you send them to a public hospital, they spend at least Rs. 60-70 on travel, have to wait 12 hours in a queue and lose all their motivation," says Dr Rahul

Gupta. Similarly, X-rays, ultrasounds and blood tests at public hospitals take time and more than one visit. This invariably means losing several days wages.

Registering with the Arpana Health Centre involves payment of a one-time fee of Rs 15. Each patient is given a laminated registration card because many people try to misuse the facility by calling relatives from other areas.

The registration cards also help in tracking patients and diseases, especially when there are outbreaks.

Thereafter there are nominal charges for X-rays, pathology services and ultrasound tests. Pregnant

are to immediately provide the ambulance or one of the other vehicles," says Brigadier Ashok Sondhi, who is the trust's energetic administrator.

The health centre is an example of how infrastructure created by the government, even in the Indian capital, exists only in name. The Molarbund health centre became functional only when the Arpana Trust took it over and Dr Rahul Gupta and his family attracted some of Delhi's best physicians to it. Till then it existed merely on paper like so many other health facilities.

Clearly, government spending on health does not necessarily translate into better health for ordinary citizens. Molarbund is a huge and congested area with people either living in shanties covered with plastic sheets or in shaky brick houses. There are no sewers and the drains overflow. When people moved here after being evicted from elsewhere, they were given all of 12 square metres or 18 square metres to build shelter and resettle themselves!

The government does not even attempt to send doctors to such areas, though these are the conditions in which close to 30 per cent of Delhi's population lives. You will find Molarbund-type settlements all over the Indian capital, but the government abdicates all responsibility for them and lives in perpetual denial of migration to urban areas.

How difficult is it to get top doctors to spare a little time for the poor and needy? Especially when they hardly find time from their practices for their personal lives?

"Everyone wants to do good," says Dr Rahul Gupta, in his clinic on the seventh floor on Kasturba Gandhi Marg in Connaught Place. "The problem is that we get so caught up in our lives that we don't know how to reach out. That is why we have devised a system at Molarbund for doctors to come there for two or four hours in a month or perhaps a week, whatever each one is comfortable with." The system works well. All the doctors, with the odd exception, who began visiting the health centre two years ago, have continued to go there.

Recently, postgraduate students in paediatrics at the Apollo Hospital have begun going to Molarbund every Thursday. Since Apollo is a private hospital, the students get more experience by seeing a larger number of cases at Molarbund and it is just down the road from the hospital.

"I think of all the professions, medicine is most suited to being pursued as a noble one. If you want to merely make money you don't have to become a doctor. You can always choose some business. It is important to earn a living and so on. But there is more to the profession," says Dr Rahul Gupta.

"In a sense we are all discovering ourselves. My father, for instance, is 81 and often has to skip his private practice because of his age, but he will be dressed and ready to go to Molarbund. For him, the patients at the private clinic can always go somewhere else, but where will the Molarbund patients go."



Dr Sadia Zinzani and Dr Usha Mehta have a large number of patients



Dr Raj Gupta, gynaecologist, sees a patient

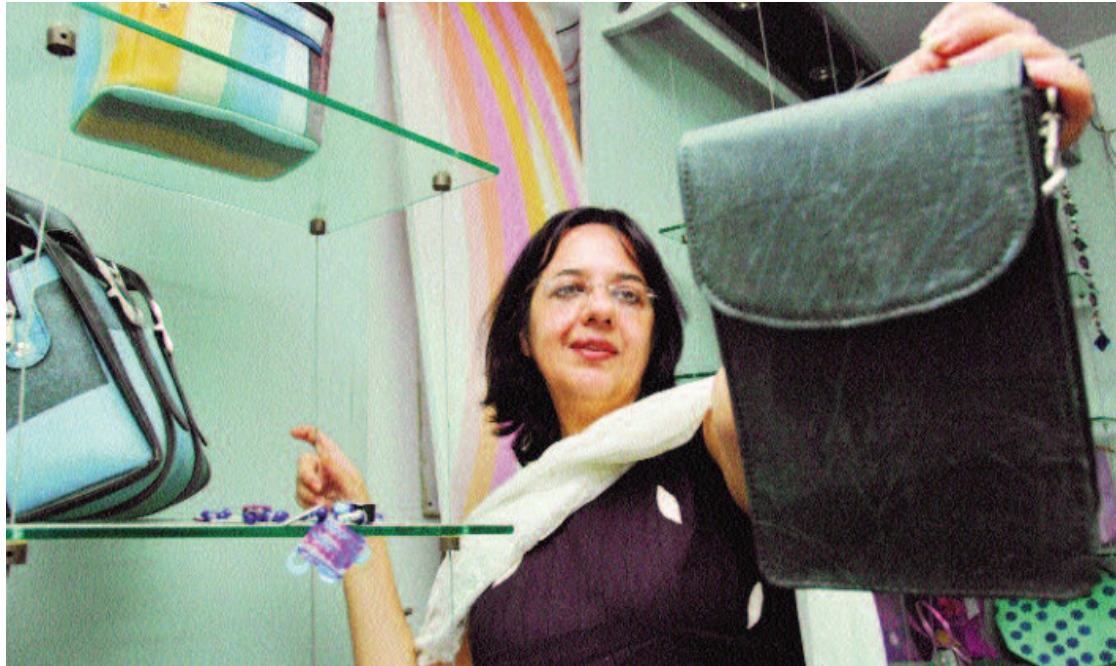
mothers are treated free of cost. The bulk of the health centre's monthly expenses come from donations. Companies come forward and the Arpana Trust has found big supporters in the Japanese government and Prince Al Waleed Bin Talal Abdul Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia.

"The medicines we get here are genuine and the doctors are very good and serious about treating us," says Shabnam, one of the patients.

The popularity of the health centre, as indeed the need for it, can perhaps best be judged by the large numbers of women and children who turn up throughout the day.

"Once someone comes to the centre we ensure that the person does not leave without being examined and helped. No one is turned away when our gates are open and when the centre is closed and someone comes in an emergency, the instructions

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Anita Ahuja with her bags made from plastic waste

Trendy styles from plastic waste

Vidya Viswanathan
New Delhi

DELHI'S discarded plastic bags are finding their way into some of the trendiest stores in Europe and the United States. How? Through Anita Ahuja and her NGO, Conserve.

Old plastic bags are collected and cleaned by rag-pickers. Then, through a process invented by Ahuja, the bags are stamped together to make thick new plastic sheets in sophisticated colours and patterns. The sheets are converted into stylish bags and sold under the brand name, Conserve India.

Hemant Sagar, an Indian designer who works in France, and his partner Didier Lecoanet have created a chic raincoat called Mossom from this material.

The pale green raincoat was unveiled at a fancy night club in New Delhi's Ashoka Hotel. It is being marketed as 'luxury with ethics'.

"Ten percent of the proceeds from the sale of these raincoats will go back to Conserve," said Sagar. "This is not charity. It is a new way of making and selling products for us. We want to move into fair trade."

Conserve India's work ensures each rag picker earns at least about Rs 3000 a month. Designers from across the world have volunteered to style the bags.

Ahuja's application for a patent for the process of stamping the discarded bags together is pending. But in the meantime Conserve India exported nearly 4,000 bags a month this year, which, at an average of about \$5 a bag, works out to a turnover of nearly Rs 1 crore. This is its second year of exports. The NGO now employs 300 people and has 25 customers including Benetton and Native by Nature.

Ahuja's factory is in the Patpargunj industrial area of east Delhi. Her supplies come from Madarpur Khadar, a settlement along the banks of the Yamuna. At 5 am every morning 25 rag-pickers

begin collecting certain kinds of bags from designated dumps. They bring these to a self-help group (SHG) managed by Geetha, a former rag-picker. Her group slits, straightens and washes the bags and passes them on to another SHG which presses the bags into sheets. A group of 15 fabricators then convert the plastic sheets into stylish bags. Pandeji, a former rag-picker, oversees production and quality control.

Ahuja, a 46-year-old mother of two daughters, has been working with waste for several years. In the late 90s she started going to RWA (Residents Welfare Association) meetings at Madhuban, a colony in east Delhi where she lives with her family.

She then started her NGO to address waste management, energy and water. Ahuja got others



The Conserve factory in east Delhi

involved: a proposal writer, an IIT professor who was an expert in waste management technology and her brother who is a legal counsel for the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).

They got a slew of projects. The WWF asked them to start energy clubs in 30 schools. The deputy commissioner from east Delhi wanted Ahuja's group to motivate sanitary workers. Conserve held a sports day for 1,000 sweepers. They also built a composting plant and held a skills development programme for rag-pickers.

But the NGO had to constantly look for funds each time from a new source.

"I was tired of this process and was looking for a revenue generation method," says Ahuja.

When the Delhi government's department of environment gave them a project to build a large composting plant in a park in Safdarjung Enclave, they thought this was their opportunity. Local residents said they were willing to buy manure from kitchen waste.

"But we were not breaking even. We also dumped plastic into another locality. So in our hearts we knew we were just moving waste from one place to another," says Ahuja.

She then began tinkering with plastic bags in her garage. "I must have experimented with a 1,000 kinds of plastic," recalls Ahuja. She tried weaving the bags. Then she started pressing thin bags into a sheet. In 2002, her husband Shallabh, an engineer from BIT, Pilani, designed a machine for her that could do this efficiently.

At first, Ahuja thought the plastic material could be used to build huts to insulate rag-pickers from Delhi's winter chill. But the rag-pickers said they needed to earn money. Ahuja realised she required a market driven project.

Nandita, her friend, had a leather bag unit and made some bags. Ahuja once took these to a sale at the American embassy. They sold out. So she decided to teach rag-pickers to make new bags from plastic.

Fortune struck when CoHands, an organisation that provides space to NGOs to display their products, gave them a stall at a prestigious gift exports show organised by the Exports Council at Pragati Maidan. Conserve bagged orders worth Rs 25 lakhs.

Now this was serious business. So far Ahuja had made a handful of bags. But manpower surfaced. Shallabh volunteered. Andrew Hall, a British techie who had made his money in the dot com boom, offered his services. Karen Cock, a Swedish designer, volunteered and opened doors for Conserve at IKEA and Habitat.

Conserve does not add any dyes to their bags. The colours of the new bags come from the colours of the original plastic bags when they are pressed together. So the old bags have to be segregated according to colour before being washed and dried. Buyers too ask for different colours like purple, lavender, lilac and violet.

This created some confusion. "People we were dealing with were illiterate. So, we evolved a language of our own," explains Ahuja. Depending on the colour required, plastic bags were named after Bollywood stars like Zeenat and Shahrukh. So rag-pickers knew that if a bag called Zeenat had to be made it needed a sheet of a certain colour.

Conserve has started making footwear and jewellery from the waste it generates. Rag-pickers are being trained and Ahuja says she will increase their salary to Rs 4000. "Our next collection will show that this project stands for rag-pickers rights, waste management and climate change," she says.



Divisional Railway Manager Shakeel Ahmed (left) and Senior DSC A N Sinha (right) with boys at sports meet.

RPF is Big Daddy to homeless children

Rina Mukherji
Kharagpur

EVERY railway station has its share of destitute, homeless children. Clad in tatters, dusty and dirty they clamber on to trains to clean compartments, sell knick-knacks, polish shoes or just beg.

Commuters find them a nuisance and often complain to the railway authorities who then ask the police to clear the platform of these children.

In 2003, it struck Divisional Security Commissioner K Arul Jyothi of the Railway Protection Force (RPF) in Malda that a non-formal school could be set up for railway children to keep them off platforms.

His idea blossomed into the Mukhtangan project that provides education and shelter to 500 railway children. The project has expanded from Malda railway station to the Asansol and Kharagpur stations. There are plans to replicate it in Tatanagar, New Jalpaiguri, Mughalsarai and Bilaspur.

Although most children end up on railway stations after being abandoned or orphaned there are many who just got lost. At the Kharagpur railway station, for instance, there is Pradeep who says he is from Ambarnath in Mumbai. He speaks fairly good English and is intelligent at picking up languages and games. Homeless since the last eight years, he boarded the wrong train on a day out with friends and landed up in Durg. From there, he somehow found his way to Tatanagar where he spent many years under the care of an elderly beggar woman, before striking out on his own.

Tahajur is a physically disabled boy who was abandoned by his father. Two years ago when his stepmother moved in with his family at Kenduara *basti* near Panchkura on the Howrah route, Tahajur was turned out. Since then he has been earning some money by begging. His friend, 17-year-old

Firoz, carries him around. Firoz left his home in Murshidabad after a fight. He started enjoying his independence and does not want to return.

To get its idea off the ground, the RPF sought help from Praajak, an NGO that works with railway children. "We realised that these children shunned restrictions. They valued their independence and mobility and were proud of being earners. We hence left it to their discretion to come and go as they liked," explains Abhinav Jha, Praajak office-bearer and coordinator of the Kharagpur arm of the project. The RPF-Praajak effort was aptly named the Mukhtangan (Open Courtyard) Child Protection Project.

It was decided to provide the children with some education, night shelters and bathrooms. These facilities turned out to be a big draw.

The night shelter was open from 8.30 pm till 8 am. From 8 am to 12 pm the children were free to earn their living on the railway station. After that they could visit the drop-in centre for non-formal classes. From 4 pm to 6 pm sports and games were organised for them.

In the three years that Mukhtangan has been working in Malda, the railway children have learnt to be hygienic and not eat discarded food served on trains. They do collect unused food and aluminium foil, especially since foil fetches Rs 80 per kg in the market.

At Kharagpur, which is this region's biggest railway sub-division, Mukhtangan caters to 40 railway children. There is a centre with a non-formal school and a night shelter equipped with games like carom located within the RPF barracks complex.

Once a week, the children pool their earnings for a community feast.

There is also an annual sports meet for railway children from all the centres. This has encouraged healthy competition and camaraderie.

In April 2005, when the project was started at Kharagpur, sensitisation programmes were conducted for constables and officers of the police force. Every RPF employee spends time interacting with the children when they are free.

Children who used to be accused of stealing now return lost goods. "These children have already returned a couple of mobiles to us for restoring to their owners," says AN Sinha, Senior Divisional Security Commissioner (Kharagpur Division).

At Malda, a bag of jewellery and valuables belonging to a businessman were recently handed over to the RPF by one of the children.

The RPF no longer sees the children as 'anti-social elements'. "They now look upon themselves as responsible for the well-being of these children, rather than as objects of awe that the children would fear and dread," says Sinha.

The children too don't shun the RPF. If they dislike a constable for being harsh with them, their ire is directed at him and not the entire force. They tie *rakhis* on their RPF friends during *Rakhsha Bandhan*.

Mukhtangan has even changed the mission statement of the RPF. It now undertakes to:

- Remain vigilant to prevent trafficking in women and children and take appropriate action to rehabilitate destitute children found in railway areas.
- Adopt all modern technology, best human rights practices, management techniques and special measures for protection of female and elderly passengers and children in pursuit of these objectives.

In fact, the informal networks of the railway children have helped the RPF in its policing activities.

"We have managed to rescue two little girls this June, thanks to the information we received from these children. We know this zone to be prone to human trafficking. Unfortunately, we have not managed to apprehend any traffickers so far. But given the way things are going, we are hopeful of achieving a breakthrough soon," says Sinha.

There are plans to provide vocational training to some of these youngsters with help from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kharagpur. At Asansol and Malda, the RPF has tied up with the Community Polytechnic Cell for vocational training.

The success of the Mukhtangan project is due to the thought that went into its planning. The children love to travel. They get on to trains, disappear for months on end and then reappear one fine morning with stories of what a wonderful time they had in Jammu or Shimla.

So an open ended, flexible schedule has been drawn up for them. Even the non-formal school's timetable is adjusted with the timings of 166 trains that pass through Kharagpur, every day.

Each child wants to earn some money on a daily basis. "I was working at a veterinary medicine factory in Mumbai," explains Firoz, "but they would not pay me every day. I would earn only Rs 1,200 at the end of each month. I could not stand it and I left in two months time."

The children are beginning to dream. Tahajur wants to save his money to set up a small cigarette shop at the station. Firoz has nearly given up his dendrite addiction. Little Subhas and his brother Vishwas, whose mother let them roam the station to pick up PET bottles for a living, now want to become plumbers or welders.

The Mukhtangan project welcomes volunteers. Interested readers can contact: muktangan@praajak.org.



Healing touch for cancer

At CanSupport, Harmala Gupta gets people to use palliative care

Madhu Gurung
New Delhi

THE bitter Canadian winter left 32-year-old Harmala Gupta, who was finishing her PhD from McGill University, prey to a persistent cough and cold. She blamed the weather for her poor health, as did her husband, a professor at the same university. But getting her work done and keeping pace with her three-year-old son was becoming more and more difficult. She felt listless and had no appetite.

One day, when her trousers fell in a pool around her feet, she felt alarmed. Her husband persuaded her to see a specialist. The doctor discovered a patch in her lungs. Her Indian roots made him suspect tuberculosis, but all tests proved inconclusive. Finally, an open biopsy revealed she had Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the lymph nodes.

That was in 1987. Almost 20 years later Harmala, fully cured and brimming with energy, is today a crusader for palliative care for cancer patients. Back in India she discovered she was just one among millions who needed help and understanding.

Palliative care was not merely a part of cancer treatment but also a necessity for helping people die with dignity. What doctors could not do, Harmala realised survivors like herself could provide, which is to improve the quality of life in ways that go far beyond medication.

She launched CanSupport to reach out to patients and their families with a personalised approach which hospitals and specialists don't provide. CanSupport now has a growing network in and around Delhi.

But it was in 1987 in Canada as doctors examined her that the journey for Harmala began.

"All I did on hearing the prognosis was to sit in front of the doctor and say, 'How can it be me. I am sure my papers are mixed up. I don't smoke, I am so young and healthy, how can I have cancer?' I was filled with shock and bewilderment. I was also filled with guilt that perhaps God was punishing me. The most painful part was I had a three-year-old son and I would have to leave him behind," recalls Harmala.

The doctors told her a cure lay in aggressive chemotherapy, insisting that Hodgkin's cancer responded well to it. The treatment left her feeling more sick, listless, and with no appetite. She lost all her hair. And she had to struggle to keep her flagging spirits up. "The amazing part is," recalls Harmala, "as your body fades, it begins to lose its hold over you."

It was a turning point in her life "Throughout the treatment, I had this conviction that I was not going to die," recalls Harmala. "For me my road to recovery lay in my relationship with God. I felt the presence of the spirit all the time and I realised that the key to survival lies in your mind – what

your mind suggests to you."

"When you are sick and fading, the mind can counter balance that decline and give you a reason to live," explains Harmala. "It changed the way I looked at cancer. I saw it as a friend, a teacher, who had come to teach me something. I embraced it. It was life, my life with all its good and bad, and after that it changed the way I viewed life completely."

Her treatment, which lasted for over eight months, included six cycles of chemotherapy. After that she returned to India. In Canada, Harmala had the opportunity of interacting with cancer support groups. She met people with a similar illness, as well as cancer survivors.

Returning home, she confronted a different reality. People did not know how to deal with those who had cancer. Says Harmala, "No one talked about cancer and when I did they did not know how to react. However, people would call me up directly and say, I have the same thing as you. They could not even call it cancer. I decided that once I was well I would start a group which would provide emotional support to people afflicted with cancer."

Two years after she had first been diagnosed with cancer, Harmala, with her friend Jitendra Tuli, was ready to work with people. "At the first oncology clinic in the hospital we went to, it was shocking to see people sitting dejected with their heads bowed. I went in and told them that I too had cancer and that

I was now fine. I was cancer-free. The shocking part was that family members of the patients would tell them not to believe me," says Harmala.

There was opposition from doctors too. They were told that their endeavour to start support groups was a Western concept, and that it could not work in India. Here families would not want to tell patients that they had cancer as it could take away their hope of recovery.

However, Harmala was determined. At the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Harmala and Jitendra targeted the breast cancer clinic.

They found surgeons grappling with the problem of providing breast prosthesis. Women were using cotton wool to give a semblance of breasts after an operation. They complained of backache as cotton wool provided little support. It also made women more self-conscious and less confident.

Harmala scouted around for breast prosthesis made from silicon. A group called Reach to Recovery in Canada donated these. Harmala got Air-India to transport the material to Delhi. A heavy customs duty was levied and Harmala had to speak to the top boss of the Airports Authority of India for a concession, which was eventually given on humanitarian grounds. Ten years ago, the silicon breast prosthesis proved most helpful. Now these are made in India and readily available.

Harmala's involvement thereafter, was to change the course of her life. She observed that a majority of people came for treatment in the advanced stages of cancer. The treatments suggested by doctors were toxic, expensive therapies that left the family struggling and ill-equipped to bear the financial burden.

She realised the importance of starting a palliative care group that would provide emotional support to the patient and the family, be cost effective, and resolve several issues like allowing patients to be at home, put papers and will in order and, if necessary, say goodbye at their own pace.

It is estimated that there are nearly 2.5 million cancer cases in India, and every year 700,000 to 900,000 new cancer cases occur. According to the National Cancer Registry Programme, tobacco related cancers are most predominant among men. The highest incidence of oral cancer is from Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. Breast cancer is on the rise especially in urban India.

By 2025, according to estimates, the cancer load will be three times more in developing countries. Seventy to 80 percent of this population will be in the late stages of this disease due to lack of awareness and inadequate medical facilities.

To combat the disease, the National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP) was launched in 1975-76, with the objective of primary prevention of cancers, early detection, prompt treatment, pain relief and palliation. Currently, there are 210 cancer treatment centres and 345 radiotherapy clinics. Most of the money has been spent in setting up treatment centres known as regional cancer centres. Only a minimal amount has been invested in palliative care, despite the fact that 80 percent of cancer patients need this.

It was this gap that Harmala stepped in to fill. CanSupport was registered as a non-profit society in 1996. Its vision was to start a caring and supportive society where people with cancer and their families could live with dignity, hope and comfort. Its mission was to enable people with advanced cancer, and their families to make informed choic-

es and decisions to receive appropriate physical, emotional, social and spiritual support, free of cost.

Every year, Harmala says, their records show that on an average, the CanSupport home team makes 5,000 home visits in Delhi and its neighbourhood. The patients they care for range from the age of five to 86 years, and presently they have 120-130 patients under their care. It costs CanSupport approximately Rs 4,000 per month to take care of each home care patient.

CanSupport works through its team of trained professionals. Each group comprises of a doctor, a nurse and a counsellor, who visit cancer patients routinely, at least twice a week, between 10 am and 5 pm. The visits become more frequent when it is felt that the patient and family require additional care and reassurance. The teams usually visit in

to Govindpuri, Okhla and Ghitorni in south Delhi and to the National Capital Region (NCR). To help teams operate efficiently, CanSupport works from three areas: RK Puram, Karkardooma and Mayapuri.

In Mayapuri, they have a room in New Era Public School, whose Principal, Vandana Chawla, is a cancer survivor. At 42, Vandana is a striking looking woman who leaned on CanSupport when she was undergoing treatment for breast cancer.

"Cancer evokes so much fear, I tried to bargain with the doctor to leave my breast after removing the lumps, but he told me the operation would leave it malformed. So I had radical mastectomy," says Vandana. "Before I went in for surgery, I met Harmala. All I did was just break down and cry. I knew of two other women who had a similar cancer and had died of complications. But Harmala was the first person I met who gave me hope. She told me, do as the doctor tells you to, there is life after cancer."

Sheena Varghese, counsellor of the home team with CanSupport, agrees that those who discover their cancer early may be luckier than those who find out at a later stage and have to depend on palliative care.

Says Sheena, "The biggest stumbling block we face on our home visits is that family members usually want to keep the disease a secret from the patient. Unwittingly this makes the patient feel no longer capable of taking any decisions, isolating him or her from family discussions like diet, medicines etc. Very often the patient plays along, but when they ask us if they have cancer, we tell them. We understand both sides of the coin. Most patients are not afraid of dying, but they ask us not to let them suffer. Fortunately that is now possible. CanSupport has the licence for administering oral morphine."

Harmala has made CanSupport's RK Puram office into a hub of activity. They have a day care centre. On Mondays, children undergoing treatment for cancer visit along with volunteers. It gives their parents an opportunity to interact, ventilate their feelings and seek advice. The young children also get some semblance of normalcy and fun. They have activities like drawing, origami, singing and playing and they leave after having a snack.

Every Friday, home care patients who are able to travel, come to the day care centre accompanied by their caregivers. Cancer patients and their attendants attached to hospitals and living in dharmshalas, are also brought in. Here, in a relaxed atmosphere, alternative healing therapies like yoga, foot massage and reiki, provide care-givers with a well deserved rest from the stress of constantly having to care for a sick person.

On Wednesdays, people with different stages of cancer have an interactive session, sharing their feelings and experiences. They get sustenance and courage from others who are undergoing similar experiences.

CanSupport also has a telephone helpline (011-26711212) that provides information and emotional support to cancer patients and their families before and after diagnosis. It is a confidential service manned by trained volunteers. "The calls range from pleas for emotional support to urgent requests for factual information on blood banks, hospitals, doctors, financial assistance, travel concessions, prosthesis and other related services," says Harmala.



LAKSHMAN ANAND

Harmala has made CanSupport's RK Puram office into a hub of activity. They now have a day care centre. On Mondays, children undergoing treatment for cancer visit along with volunteers.

pairs, and patients and members of the family are given their mobile telephone numbers, allowing them to stay in constant touch.

CanSupport has four such teams. On an average, each team visits five to six patients a day. To reduce travel time, a team concentrates on a particular part of the city. The duration of each visit is flexible, ranging from 45 minutes to an hour. During the visit, the patient's general medical condition and medicines are reviewed, as well as his or her nursing and psychological needs.

The CanSupport team involves the care-givers in all decisions relating to management of the patient. After a patient dies, the CanSupport home care team looking after the patient makes a visit, offering members of the grieving family bereavement counselling. The family is also invited to attend the CanSupport Annual Remembrance Day.

Presently, CanSupport covers Mayur Vihar, Noida and Shahdara in east Delhi and Karol Bagh and Rohini in west and north-west Delhi. They also go



Inmates doing yoga



The computer centre for inmates

Amritsar gets a model jail

Civil Society News

New Delhi

WHEN Kunwar Vijay Pratap Singh took over as DIG of Amritsar Central Jail last year, the prison was in horrible shape. Built to accommodate a thousand prisoners, it housed more than double. Jail staff, notoriously unkind to inmates, was divided into warring factions. Prisoners had to grease palms for everything.

In short, Amritsar jail was like any other Indian prison. Conjure an image of a dank, cramped cell with dirty bathrooms, rotten food and jail officials ready to roast you.

But in the span of one year, Kunwar Vijay Pratap Singh turned Amritsar jail into a model that is being replicated across Punjab.

"I dedicate my work to the holy soil of Amritsar," he said as he walked away with an award given by the India Vision Foundation in recognition of his work. The foundation is headed by Kiran Bedi, India's first woman police officer, well known for her zealous efforts to reform Tihar jail, Asia's largest prison, which won her the Magsaysay award. She started the foundation to continue her work.

While most Indian jails carry on as medieval dungeons, a small movement for reform is underway inspired by Kiran Bedi's efforts. "It showed us that relations between jailors and prisoners can be changed," remarked one jail official.

The award function, held on 31 August, also honoured SP Singh, the vice-chancellor of Guru Nanak Dev University, (GNDU) for extending educational facilities to inmates of Amritsar jail. Sunil Kumar Gupta, a law officer from Delhi Central Jail, was honoured for his efforts to get undertrials released while a team of jail officials from Haridwar were awarded for introducing organic farming in their prison.

The turnaround at Amritsar jail is dramatic because Vijay Pratap's reforms sought to change the character of the prison. Jails don't need to be congested. Across India thousands of prisoners are under trial. Most jail officials agree that almost 80 per cent are arrested for offences that are bailable but

many prisoners are too poor to pay.

"I wanted to save ordinary prisoners from becoming criminals," says Vijay Pratap. He helped to get 350 undertrials released. He got a Legal Aid Cell started with help from the India Vision Foundation, Lawyers for Social Action and local advocates. Free legal help is given to Bangladeshi and Pakistani prisoners as well. He also got the cooperation of the District and Sessions Judge, Amritsar.

Three types of prisoners were helped to get release orders: those arrested for petty offences who had already served time in prison and whose trial was still going on, those arrested in connection with excise cases and those against whom the police had not filed any charge sheet within the stipulated period.

The departure of 350 prisoners created more room. Instead of sleeping on the cold hard floor, for the first time, cots are being provided to prisoners. These are



Kiran Bedi with Kunwar Vijay Pratap Singh (on her left).

made in the jail premises and have been given to women inmates. Efforts are on to improve infrastructure.

Committees of prisoners make sure food is of good quality, is distributed fairly and cooked hygienically. Corruption has been weeded out.

The jail also provides inmates an alternative career so that they can contribute to society and don't need to turn to crime.

The jail's education centre was started in May this year and inaugurated by Kiran Bedi. The Guru Nanak Dev University offers certificate courses in computer basics, TV maintenance and tailoring. The university has financed a computer lab. SP Singh, vice-chancel-

lor of GNDU, visited the prison and took a decision to link the university to it. "He has shown what a university can do," says Kiran Bedi.

Prisoners run the education centre. The Principal is an undertrial with a Ph.D. There are five faculties: higher education, adult education, school education, languages and computer education. Educated inmates run the courses.

Inmates can study for graduate and post-graduate courses. IGNOU has also set up a centre in the prison and a library has been started. Seven hundred students have enrolled.

None of the children were going to school when Vijay Pratap took over. A government school was identified and the children are sent there. Some jail officials objected, saying it's not in our rule-books. Vijay Pratap asked them where is it written that children should not be sent?

There is also a crèche for the children. Women are taught candle-making, tie and dye etc.

To improve the mind and relieve mental stress there is yoga and meditation every morning and sports in the evening. Some 40 prisoners have become yoga teachers.

Also, a de-addiction centre has been started. Drug abuse was rampant among inmates. All those involved in selling and distributing drugs, including jail officials, medical staff and prisoners were rounded up. They were transferred and FIRs lodged against some. The de-addiction centre is being run with help from the Civil Defence and Rotary Club in Amritsar.

The prisoners have a say. There are complaints and suggestion boxes near the Gurdwara and temple inside the jail. The boxes are opened either by Vijay Pratap or his assistant. Prisoners can meet the DIG during office hours.

The prisoners were very moved when the Brahma Kumaris visited the jail and prayed for their long life and happiness. The Brahma Kumaris tied *rakhis* on their wrists and on Bangladeshi and Pakistani prisoners as well.

"It is possible to do your job honestly and truthfully in this profession," says Vijay Pratap, an MA in Sanskrit from Patna. "though to tread this path is like walking on the edge of a sharp sword."

Prisoners run the education centre. The Principal is an undertrial with a Ph.D degree.

Police campaign to protect women from violence

Photos: LAKSHMAN ANAND



Vidya Viswanathan
New Delhi

It is three-thirty in the afternoon. Arijit Roy of Jagran is standing on a stage that has been set up at Pitampura village, in Saraswati Vihar, in the northwest periphery of Delhi.

"No need for tickets or money," he yells. "We are showing you a play and it's free." Santosh, the woman head constable of the area, dives into lanes to drum up an audience. Soon, nearly 200 children sit giggling on a cotton carpet across from the stage. Women peep from balconies. Men hang around.

Northwest Delhi is infamous for its marauding criminal elements. Women don't feel safe here. The male-female ratio is the worst in the Indian Capital. Jagran's performance is aimed at reducing some of this stress and creating awareness.

More interestingly Jagran is here at the invitation of the police, who want to explore new ways of getting into neighbourhoods and preventing crime.

An enterprising officer, Sagar Preet Huda, addi-

tional DCP Northwest, has been running a campaign called Parivartan since November 2005. He hopes this will work better than wielding a stick.

"Even if all our 60,000 policemen in the city were to be sensitised to violence against women, we can't stop crime. We cannot be on each doorstep to prevent domestic violence and in each office to stop sexual abuse," says Huda, who is a sociologist with a PhD in gender issues.

One of the big problems that Huda's campaign addresses is of female foeticide. Others are domestic violence, alcoholism, drug abuse, child molestation, harassment for dowry and sexual harassment.

These problems mostly lurk below the surface. Sexual harassment, for instance, abounds within families. Making a difference means influencing thinking and changing environments. The plays with Jagran combine entertainment with education. There are 20 pantomimes being staged this month.

The first play is about a boy who gets lured into drugs. He sells his clothes to pay for his addiction. The mafia gets rich. At the end the children are



asked what they saw. All of them scream "*Nasha nahin lena chahiye*" (Narcotics addiction is bad).

The second play is about a man who tells his wife he has no money to pay school fees but when he goes out with his friends he pays for the booze. He beats his wife and in the end gets caught by the cops. The third is about a family of four which has a studious girl. They invite a man who is supposed to be a friend but is in reality a lecherous creep. One day when the family leaves him alone with the girl, he molests her. This was a play that Delhi police got specially written.

As the plays end, two women head constables are invited on stage to talk to residents. The idea is to improve the status of women constables. Huda has already begun deploying women constables in larger numbers in crime-prone areas of Seemapuri and Mongolpuri. The women constables go door to door talking to residents. They also train girls in self-defence techniques.

With this, it is hoped that the force will show greater sensitivity and become more accessible.

Along with Rajat Mitra, a clinical psychologist and founder of the Swanchetan Society for Mental Health, the police are holding workshops in schools to educate children about sexual abuse. They have also created a helpline for children.

So intractable are the issues that lead to crimes in areas under Huda that the only way out for him is to change perceptions even if that means taking the road less travelled to better policing.



TRACKING DOWN INDIA'S



After her mother's death, Savita's father got a woman from Bengal for himself. Later, he married Savita off, fully aware of the role she'd have to play in a family of three unmarried brothers.

Sixteen years after the birth of the youngest of her seven daughters, 53-year old Rani had a son. Villagers say she went into hiding during her pregnancy, suggesting that she may have 'bought' this child even though she already has a 12-year old grandson.



The woman smoking the hookah is the mother of Satbir, a handicapped man with little land. A man in his situation usually has to pay a lot of money to find a bride from another state. So he settled for Sonia, a widow who brought along her son from her first marriage.

20-year old Chandni's neighbours brought her from Orissa to 'help' her settle in Delhi. Instead, she was married off to Jabbar, a 70-year old widower with six daughters who lives in a village in Haryana with his 60-year old bachelor brother. Chandni is being treated well for now as her husband has found out she is carrying a son.



While sex selection is rampant among the well-to-do, it's the landless and those without jobs who bear the brunt. Finding it difficult to get a local bride, Dheeru, a 40-year old truck driver, arranged for two girls from Orissa for his younger brothers. He then got himself an 18-year old Bengali girl. It is alleged that he often finds brides for his bachelor friends, but for a price.



Married at the age of 13, Rajbala's reproductive journey began six months later. At the age of 27, she is pregnant again, even though the youngest of her six daughters is barely five months old. Misdiagnosed by an ultrasound technician in the past, this time she can only pray that her mother-in-law's insistence for a male child is fulfilled. For now, she dresses her girls up as boys.

MISSING WOMEN



Sukhvinder is the wife of Hardam Singh, the only married brother among five siblings. Since the family had limited land holdings, the other brothers found it difficult to get proposals of marriage. Once Sukhvinder joined the family, she had to look after the needs of all five men. Her son will now inherit



When Kalpa got pregnant for the seventh time, after having six daughters, her husband threw her out accusing her of being a girl-bearing wretch. She gave birth to her seventh daughter on the streets. The baby died. Kalpa now shares quarters with mentally unstable women at a short-stay shelter. Her husband remarried.



Bani has conceived 11 times till date. Five pregnancies ended in miscarriages. Six of her daughters are alive. She is too poor to opt for sex-selective techniques, but continues to try for a boy though she has been medically advised against it.

Jaspreet is married to the eldest brother in a family of five. For a while, she had to look after the other four, as the family didn't have adequate land to show for all. In time, this arrangement allowed them to purchase more land and the middle brother got married to Veena. The two women now run adjoining homes, and take care of the remaining single brothers between them.



Faced with a shortage of women, only one or two brothers manage to get married by showing their combined land as a single brother's share. Women end up as 'Draupadis' like Kulwant Kaur in this pix

Through Ruhani's lens, darkly



PHOTO journalist Ruhani Kaur picked up her camera and travelled through Punjab and Haryana to shoot India's invisible women. A fellowship from the National Foundation for India gave her the freedom to explore this sensitive and painful subject.

Nearly 35 million females are missing in India. Female foeticide is rampant in the killing fields of Haryana and Punjab. Girls are destroyed in the womb. Some die as infants. Women ruin their health and peace of mind in their desperation to have a male child.

The result is a shortage of women in the north. But society has not changed. Women are compelled to add to the famine of daughters by producing more sons. There aren't enough women left to marry any more. As the number of bachelors grows, men buy women from the eastern states of Orissa, West Bengal and Jharkhand. Sometimes these vulnerable women are shared by brothers. The family in the north is beginning to crack.

Ruhani's pictures are stark and heart wrenching. Each tells a story. Of women longing for a male heir. Of women bought and sold. Of women crying out for attention to their plight. Of a society badly in need of a changed mindset.

A freelance photographer, Ruhani has worked with 'Down to Earth' magazine. Her camera has pictured the victims of endosulphan contamination, tribal politics in Jharkhand, industrial areas of Aligarh and slaughterhouses. She has worked with 'Voices Unabridged' (a New York-based website on women and human rights), Helpage India, the Aga Khan Foundation, Greenpeace, Ashoka: Innovators for the Public, Little Magazine and Discover India, among others. During her stint with 'First City' magazine, she profiled many authors, artists, spiritual thinkers and the nightlife of Delhi.

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Scorched land now verdant campus

Purba Kalita
Jodhpur

VARUN Arya, director of the Aravali Institute of Management (AIM) in Jodhpur, wanted a new, spacious campus for his institute. All he had were 100 barren acres without a blade of grass 46 km away. The land was a vast stretch of salt and granite with a hillock. No chance of any trees growing there, for sure. As for water, the area was steeped in salt.

"In my 20 years of service I had not come across such saline land," says Pradeep Chaudhry, conservator of forests of the Arid Forest Research Institute (AFRI), Jodhpur. "The tanks had been dug up. I saw yellowish water at the bottom. It was an unpleasant sight. I put a drop of that on my tongue and it tasted like concentrated hydrochloric acid."

Today, the same land has six lakes gurgling with water. Three thousand trees are planned. Species that can survive harsh conditions have been short-listed. AIM's new campus will be constructed with old, forgotten techniques that used lime, sand and coal tar to withstand salt ingress.

Arya spent his childhood working in small shops and pulling a cart. But he did well in school and that trajectory took him to IIT, Delhi and then to IIM, Ahmedabad, where he paid his way through with a loan from the State Bank of India. In 1999, he chucked his Rs 2 lakh per month job at DuPont to set up AIM.

"When I was in the corporate world, I wanted to recruit people from Rajasthan but compared to other students, they fell behind. To bring them to the level of competence, I decided to start AIM," says Arya who also helped begin the Amity Business School in Noida, considered one of the better private B-Schools in India.

At the new site Arya plans to establish, besides the management school, an engineering and science college, a commerce and arts college, a 10-plus-two school, a prayer and meditation centre as well as residential complexes. "One year from now my students will be learning at this site," declares Arya. The entire project will be completed in 10 years, he says.

The salinity of the land will be turned into its strength. "We will set up a salt factory. Management students will work there in shifts and get hands-on experience about the industry," says the indomitable Arya.

And how did 100 acres of hopeless land change overnight?

Arya called in India's waterman Rajender Singh, to spin some magic. Singh, leader of the Tarun Bharat Sangh, is famous for transforming parched lands into wet zones through rainwater harvesting. "When I visited the site, I realised how anyone could be intimidated seeing white layers of salt on the surface," says Singh.

But he surveyed the land and pronounced there was hope. Salinity was maximum on the surface, he explained. "I tasted the water on rocks below the surface and found that at some places it did not taste so salty. Therefore I decided to dig deep (12-15 ft)."

This monsoon the lakes are overflowing with rainwater, enough to last till the next year's monsoon. "It took less than an hour for the lakes to get filled," recalls Arya. "It's such a different feeling now. When we came to the site last year, we felt like running away unable to bear the terrible heat," recalls site architect, Rajesh Sharma. "Now it's become a picnic spot," adds a delighted Arya.

The excitement is infectious and you quickly taste the water. And bingo! There is no trace of salinity.

Pessimists say after four to nine months the water will turn saline. But Singh dismisses such ideas. "*Paani khaara bilkul nahin hoga*" (the water will not turn saline). A composed Arya says, "Let's wait and watch. With problems come solutions."

Arya has spent close to Rs 20 lakh on the lakes but Singh says for neighbouring villages to replicate such structures the cost will be lower. "The design will be different. The ones for the institute have been planned keeping aesthetics in mind."

A green blueprint has been drawn up. "I would have advised against any plantation on the land had it not been for an educational institute," says Dr Ranjana Arya, senior scientist and head, non-wood forest product at AFRI. She explains that the soil depth is only between 25 cm and 40 cm. For forestry a soil depth of 60 cm is required.

But scientists are tiding over such snags. Both AFRI and the Central Arid Zone Research Institute (CAZRI), Jodhpur have selected salt tolerant species. These include the indigenous *Salvadora persica* (*Khara jaal*), *Cassia siamea*, *Pongamia* (*Karanj*), *Tamarix* (*Pharash*), *Bougainvillea*, the exotic Australian *Acacia ampliceps*, *Acacia nilotica*, *Termenallia catappa*, *Parkinsonia* and *Neem*.

Pits measuring one cubic metre have been dug and filled with soil of good quality. Vermi-compost, farm manure and gypsum, say scientists, could help balance the saline soil. Saplings have been planted at a one metre distance from each other. The *peepal* saplings failed. Others are braving it

out. Dr Arya says it is difficult to predict which trees will survive. "Which plants should be grown more will depend on success rates," she says.

Arya and Sharma have been undertaking a lot of exploration. "We went to Sambhar Lake and

Phagi in Jaipur to study the kind of structures that could withstand salt ingress. We saw a building fall apart in Phagi because of salt," recalls Arya.

Villagers, Arya says, advocate the use of *mudia*, a mixture of lime and sand. It was used to build the 500-year-old Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur. So Arya and Sharma got lime from Nagore, 150 km from Jodhpur. Since this ancient form of construction is almost non-existent because of its high cost and the presence of newer and quicker technologies, the machine to process *mudia* has to be made to order. Earlier, camels ran such machines. Arya uses a tractor. The foundation will be built with *mudia* up to plinth level.

For the building, an 'arch foundation' is being considered to minimise areas of contact. A visit to Swami Maheshwarananda's Ashram at Jadan in Pali district provided great insight. "There we saw how liquid coal tar formed a barrier wherever construction came in contact with the ground," explains Sharma. In addition, measures like DPC or damp proof course, they say, will also be carried out extensively.



Varun Arya

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Making maths add up

LAKSHMAN ANAND

Vidya Viswanathan
New Delhi

In ramshackle Shukurpur, a colony in west Delhi, there is a small experimental school called Jodo Gyan Kendra where children learn mathematics, not from books and blackboard, but by playing games and working out real life problems.

Jodo Gyan Kendra has 10 children between the ages of six and 11. They have never been to school and the Kendra serves as a laboratory where, as the children learn, effective ways of teaching maths are simultaneously sharpened.

There are three teachers in the class. A string of beads called a Ganit Mala, is tied across the classroom. The first 10 large beads in the string are red, the next 10 white, the next 10 red again and so on till a hundred. The class can count till 70. Some children count each bead. Others, who have visually understood the pattern, jump in tens. There is a lot of energy visible in the children as they collaborate and discuss each other's strategy.

Founded in 1998 by Usha Menon, a technology policy researcher and her partner EK Shaji, Jodo Gyan has about 50 tools or 'teaching and learning materials' along with methodology to help children understand maths and science.

There is the Ganit Rack. Rangometry has small triangles, squares, hexagons and trapeziums. Children get hands-on experience of geometry by designing birds, peacocks and patterns called tessellations. Jodo Gyan also has Dienes Blocks, Fraction Kits, Number Catchers, the Jodo Cube and a board game called Searching for a Hundred. (See box)

"We are a social enterprise," says Shaji who dislikes his group being called an NGO or a commercial entity. Jodo Gyan has a turnover of Rs 55 lakhs and employs 33 people. Apart from the school there is Jodo Gyan Education Services, which sells products and services and Jodo Udyog that manufactures the learning aids.

Jodo Gyan does not just sell learning aids. The idea is to sell services – workshops of different durations on how to teach maths meaningfully to primary school children. It has conducted 700 workshops across the country. "Selling our Ganit Rack (a bamboo frame in which there are 10 large beads) does not make sense. You have to understand that this is a number line that goes from left to right and is used in a certain way. We trace all patterns under 10 using the rack," says Menon.

For the Heritage School in Rohini in northwest Delhi, Jodo Gyan has worked out lesson plans for Classes one and two so that the tools become an integral part of classroom teaching.

"I have been a teacher for 17 years and I always knew there was something wrong in the way we teach maths," says Neena Kaul, the principal of Heritage School. "Children have to learn patterns in maths. They find it easier to understand that five square is a two dimensional figure and five cube is



Usha Menon

a three dimensional one when they make it themselves."

Jodo Gyan's clients include Delhi Public School and the Army Public School in Noida, the Amity School in Delhi and the Indus World School in Indore and Hyderabad.

"These are all elite schools. They embrace our work more easily but our goal is to reach the municipal schools," says Shaji. Jodo Gyan's approach is based on Dutch Mathematician Hans Freudenthal's

Realistic Mathematics Education. Freudenthal believed that mathematics must be connected to reality and treated as a human activity. So Jodo Gyan tries to relate mathematics to everyday situations in a child's life.

"You have to make the child discover patterns in the same way that our ancestors Aryabhata or Euclid discovered mathematical ideas," says Shaji. Menon explains that Jodo Gyan is trying to design a sustainable innovation system that

includes production and distribution. However the path to this strategy has involved a lot of hardship and experiment.

Menon met Shaji in 1995 at an adult literacy programme run by the Delhi government. She was working for NISTADS and was keen to do community work. But she soon discovered that even volunteers attending the literacy programme could not comprehend mathematics. Learners at the programme requested her to teach their children instead. Menon began by trying to upgrade learning in tuition centres these children went to. But the centres were not interested. So she started teaching children herself and alongside researching how mathematics should be taught. She soon discovered no such methodology existed.

At this time she met Vivek Monteiro, a trade unionist who had become a researcher in education. Monteiro runs an organisation called Navnirmitti in Mumbai that makes educational tools for children. One of the tools was called a Jodo kit and the name Jodo Gyan originated from there.

Initially Menon and Shaji decided to build a distribution company for educational aids. They located all the aids they could find and tried selling them at parent-teacher meets in schools. The venture never took off and Jodo Gyan lost money.

Then in 2000 Menon travelled to Holland to visit an experimental school. She went to Utrecht University where she stumbled across a maths education research facility with nearly 70 researchers who followed Freudenthal's philosophy. Menon spent time studying their techniques. The university's library put her in touch with maths teaching research centres round the world.

Menon's research is the mainstay of Jodo Gyan. She lives in a poky flat above a sari shop in Shukurpur. Jodo Gyan has rented all three floors in this narrow vertical building. Their school team lives here. Part of the space is used as an office. Jodo Gyan's learning tools, made mostly from soft rubber, are manufactured on the terrace.

Initially, people who wanted to work with Jodo Gyan had to live in the same place. They would work through the day. Ideas that cropped up during workshops were discussed over tea in the evening and translated into learning material at night. Even today, children and teachers freely walk into Jodo Gyan.

"We do not want to build a large organisation. That is not sustainable. We want to create many social enterprises," says Shaji who is determined to build a viable distribution network.

Jodo Gyan works with several organisations across the country – Tulika publishers in Chennai, CEVA in Chandigarh, Navnirmitti in Mumbai and Abhay Art Gallery in Kerala. These enterprises sell Jodo Gyan products and also conduct workshops.

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Rangometry: Triangles, squares, hexagons, trapeziums, thin rhombi and fat rhombi in six brilliant colours. Children get hands on experience of geometrical patterns by playing with all these shapes. **Price Rs 100.**

Schools by design

Kabir Vajpeyi and Vinyas show how to make buildings that teach

Civil Society News

New Delhi

IMAGINE a school where children learn angles from the sweep of a door: half open at 45 degrees, fully open at 90 degrees and so on. Or fractions from the iron grills of windows always in place to catch the attention of straying minds eager to get out there and play. Or weights and measures from furniture: a 2 kg chair, a 5 kg table. And language from a wall on which the teacher leaves new words for ready reference so that it is easy to go back and check for days together.

Imagine a school so imbued with the spirit of inquiry that the lessons are in its very structure: mystery walls and floor tiles; riotous colours; mud maps and sundials.

Architect Kabir Vajpeyi and his team at their NGO, Vinyas, have been hard at work for several years now reshaping schools to make them more attractive to children instead of being built for adults by adults.

Vinyas has published a book, 'Building as Learning Aid,' or Bala, which shows how this can be done. It has 150 design ideas that can be easily implemented.

Generally a school building is seen only as infrastructure. Teaching is centred round the teacher, textbooks and blackboard inside a classroom. But in Bala the entire school is so designed that children can learn from their surroundings. Floors, walls, pillars, staircases, corridors, doors, ceilings, fans, windows, poles, even rainwater, trees and flowers can all be used as learning aids.

"Everybody wants a child friendly school but they don't know how. We can tell them," says Kabir.

Interestingly, the Bala ideas were born in rural Rajasthan and came from ordinary villagers involved in the Lok Jumbaish programme. Former bureaucrat Anil Bordia was the driving force behind Lok Jumbaish. The programme sought to engage villagers in education at every level—the teacher would be answerable to the community, the building construction would be undertaken by them and they would also have a say in the curriculum.

Among the several innovations Bordia thought of was to get architects to repair dilapidated schools with the community. "It made economic sense. Repairing old buildings is a labour intensive, not a material intensive job," says Kabir, who studied architecture at Bhopal's Regional Engineering College and volunteered his services to Bordia in 1992. The architects were to make toilets functional, ensure drinking water, repair classrooms, provide ventilation and make storage spaces.

Kabir's first task was to renovate 100 dilapidated



Kabir Vajpeyi

schools in Banswara, a tribal district in south Rajasthan. He surveyed schools with villagers and carried out repairs with them. No machines or contractors were brought in. Money was routed through the community. At the 100 sites that Kabir worked on, the level of corruption was just four per cent.

"Schools are still a neutral subject. Repairing a school building tends to galvanise even a bickering community into action. In my experience the smaller and more remote a community is, the higher the chances of success are," says Kabir.

To get the community to handle future repair work Kabir and his team trained local villagers, especially women, to be masons. A resource centre was started. While the centre was being constructed, training began - so it was all hands-on.

In 1994 Kabir left the Lok Jumbaish programme to start Vinyas with his wife Preeti. "Lok Jumbaish taught us to innovate. We wanted to link research and design," he explains.

He rejoined in 1996. Lok Jumbaish was expanding and needed more architects. Vinyas agreed to renovate 60 schools in two blocks of Rajasthan's Pali and Jhalore districts. They took up 15 sites stationing an

LAKSHMAN ANAND

architect and engineer in each.

Sometime in 1997, Kabir realised Vinyas' engineers and architects were getting restless. The first 15 sites were completed and the novelty of the assignment had begun to wear off.

Kabir began to think how the project could throw up new creative challenges so that the Vinyas team wouldn't begin drifting. The idea of using school buildings as learning aids started to take shape. A social worker from Lok Jumbaish suggested they use waste material like bangles and pebbles on walls.

Kabir found this suggestion interesting. He asked his engineers to come up with creative ideas and offered Rs 1000 for each. The engineers and architects began attending teacher training programmes to find out what else could be done to create a learning environment.

One engineer suggested spaces other than the classroom could be designed for children to learn. Then they thought why not plant trees that could keep the school cool in summer and warm in winter. Vinyas began to examine species of trees. The cost of planting was nominal. Then it occurred to somebody to do something with grills on windows.

The Vinyas team squeezed money from the project. The landed cost of cement was Rs 130 but it could be reduced to Rs 122 by talking to the distributor. Similarly, transport costs could be reduced by appealing to a

kind soul to move the material free. The cost of the innovations was as little as Rs 300.

Government appointed teachers were indifferent. So they contacted Shiksha Karmis or para teachers who were appointed temporarily by the community and asked them what they should do. Initially the ideas were not very exciting. Finally, one teacher said her children got confused between numerals in Hindi and English. Why not shape grills into numerals so that children could see them all the time and become familiar with them?

Bright ideas began trickling in like puzzles on the floor and walls on which children could write and scribble. Neighbouring villages got excited about these innovations and wanted them replicated in their schools. Vinyas carried out ideas developed by para teachers and the community in 26 schools, each time refusing to repeat ideas. In this way their inventory of new ideas grew.

These included architectural innovations. They found that walls with small decorative holes (jaalis) excluded the heat and cooled the breeze. Using similar principles they splayed windows or brought them down to floor level so that rural children, who

generally sit on the floor to study, could get breeze.

Vinyas found that while sitting on the floor children had to crane their necks to see the chalkboard and the teacher. So, in some schools, they placed the children on a higher platform and lowered the level of the chalkboard and the teacher. They also noted that enrolment was higher in Class One and Class Two. Consequently, they joined two dilapidated rooms to make one large attractive classroom. Vinyas used ignored spaces between buildings to create open-air classrooms under shady trees.

The Vinyas team invented a new method of making the perfect topcoat for the chalkboard by using discarded marble dust. They showed local masons

drawn in.

What did this disparate team find? It found that in school children like running, jumping on the floor, climbing, scribbling on walls, playing hide and seek or marbles, revolving round a pole, group games and collecting natural materials. Children want a school that is warm in winter and cool in summer. Most of all they like nature.

Vinyas designed an eco-friendly school. The school's roof can be painted white to reflect direct sunlight. If the school doesn't have space, then vines, creepers and climbers grown round buildings can cut off sunlight. The species mentioned in the book are hardy and need little water to grow. A

bodies.

Door Angle Protractor: Every door when it swings open shows a range of angles. Mark the angles or paint them on the floor right under the door shutter of the classroom. Children can then relate what they see in their textbook to real life.

Fraction Aids: Fractions can be made in window grills. Fraction tiles can be inserted on the floor. A tiled wall can be designed. The first row would have tiles of a specific length. The second row's tiles would be half the length of tiles in the first row.

Grooved Writing Patterns on Walls: For visually, hearing or speech impaired children Grooved Writing Pattern on Walls can help strengthen finger



Door Angle Protractor

how to make these. The resource centre trained fabricators, masons and carpenters to understand how a school should be rebuilt. In this way Vinyas created a technical cadre for a cluster of 15 to 20 villages.

But in 1998 the Vajpayee government exploded a nuclear device at Pokharan. The chief financier of the Lok Jumbhaish project, SIDA, hurriedly withdrew. The government of India too refused to provide funding. In December 1998 Lok Jumbhaish was formally called off.

Back in Delhi, Vinyas decided to distil its experience and put together a book on how to create a learning environment for school children. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) had intimated some interest in such ideas for its schools.

Vinyas looked around for research but found nothing on the Indian situation. So it decided to put together an inter-disciplinary team. It drew on the Department of Child Development at Lady Irwin College, the Department of Elementary Education, Lady Shri Ram College and Samvay, an NGO. Vinyas also got a range of people from environmentalist Anupam Mishra to toy designer, Arvind Gupta, involved. Curriculum developers, physics teachers, theatre professionals and school teachers were also

herbal garden, water-harvesting techniques and use of solar energy can be part of school design.

The Vinyas team's design ideas are based on a careful study of child psychology. We can't get into the details of all of them but here are a few and the principles on which they work.

Tyre Flipper: Most government schools in rural areas find it tough to get sturdy play equipment. Vinyas has invented an inexpensive, hardy swing. The Tyre Flipper is made from a large truck tyre that still has some treads to provide stiffness. Round bars are used to pivot it. Timber posts fix the swing to the ground. Any carpenter or metal fabricator can make it. A bed of sand placed under the Tyre Flipper can cushion a fall.

Mystery Wall: Most children are Peeping Toms. They love to play hide and seek. A Mystery Wall built in a corridor of the school with holes and slits is just the right thing for them. They can disappear and reappear, or peep at others from behind.

Planetary Pole: Children love to go round in circles. Draw nine orbits round a flagpole or pillar. Children, as they go round it, can experience the two movements, rotation and revolution, of the planets through the actual movements of their own

muscles. Outlines of alphabet patterns can be made like grooves. Children can trace these with their fingers.

Activity Brick Map: This is a large outline map of a country lined with bricks, mud and sand filling. Children learn by doing. They can playfully explore the features of a map by messing around with mud and sand. They can make waterways, roads and railways connecting places and in doing so get a sense of direction.

Word Wall: The Word Wall is a friend for children struggling with language. The wall is a chalkboard on which the teacher can write words that children have learnt from textbooks. The words are then visually accessible to children. Children can compare what they have copied. The Word Wall has an alphabet border and can be used to play language games or reinforce vocabulary.

Board Games: Children love to play games. A corridor has lots of space for games like hopscotch (stapu). Or for traditional board games that help children follow rules, develop strategies, innovate techniques and win or lose with dignity. Board games can be placed on the floor and seating spaces. All that children need are some seeds and a dice.

For a day's work and a wage



Unemployed women workers wait for work squatting on a busy street in Ranchi, Jharkhand. They come from nearby villages. Only some will find work for the day from contractors at extremely low wages. Those who do get work, share their meagre earnings with other women in the group. Such unorganised labour markets are a common sight in many cities.

LAST year the campaign for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was forging ahead. Activists had decided to undertake a Rozgar Adhikar Yatra across India to inform villages and hamlets about the significance of NREGA.

A yatra needs documentation and what better way to capture those many images than to have a young photographer on board. That is how Sohrab Hura journeyed with NREGA activists to remote parts of the country as they tracked people looking for work and eking out survival.

Hura is from the Delhi School of Economics where Jean Dreze used to teach. Dreze is one of the architects of NREGA and was a moving force during the days of the campaign.

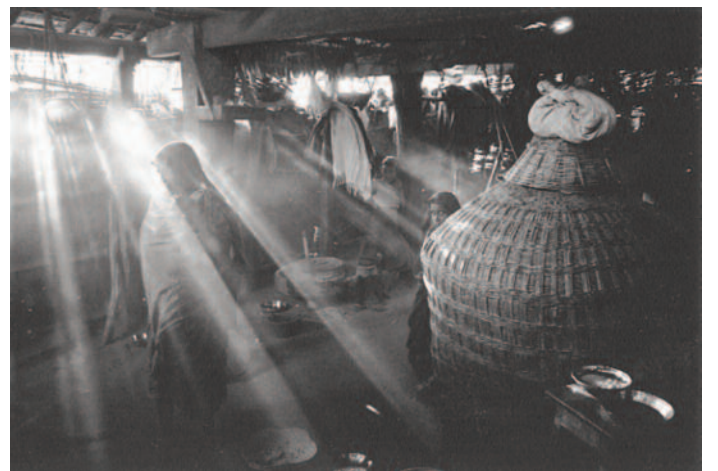
The yatra got Hura interest in the unemployment crisis gripping rural India. A fellowship from the National Foundation for India (NFI) in New Delhi helped him explore unemployment, a subject with deep social and economic implications for the rural family and the nation.

In many ways Hura's pictures are a stark exposure of the breakdown of agriculture. Even people with land, he found, are forced to migrate for work. Their parched fields have no water. There is no money to buy seeds, no knowledge of different agricultural practices. Those who don't migrate, like the Pahari Korwa tribe of Chhattisgarh, simply starve. Each child is malnourished. To get to them, Hura walked for hours.

Hura's camera captured children working on employment guarantee sites and elderly women walking barefoot to Dungarpur in Rajasthan to hear about the employment guarantee scheme. In Ranchi, he found women construction workers from villages waiting on a busy street, hopeful of a day's work.

Hura's black and white pictures convey the despair and anguish of rural joblessness.

An inside view of the sparse home of one of the richest families in the tribal village of Ubadgarhin in Pati block of Madhya Pradesh. Migration is the only option here. But with the NREGA in operation the family has decided not to leave their home, for the first time.



After working at the NREGA sites women workers in the Pati block of Madhya Pradesh wait anxiously to be paid wages for the first time in their lives.



In April, a Rozgar Adhikar Padayatra was carried out in Dungarpur district of Rajasthan to inform the people about the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and their right to work. These women from the local area, who were all above 65 years of age, walked the whole distance covering almost 20 km a day. Some of them walked barefoot.



Children of the Pahari Korwa tribe in Chhattisgarh walk into a cornfield. Every child is malnourished. The Pahari Korwas are one of the most backward tribes in India. The employment rate among them is nil and even the closest medical clinic is a day's walk away. Their parched land yields only a single crop of corn. But the employment guarantee scheme has not been planned for this area.



In many cases, rural families are forced to send their children to work at the NREGA worksites out of desperation. One hundred days of work a year per household is not enough for families with many members. So while parents look for work elsewhere and even migrate, children labour at the employment guarantee worksites.



Two brothers toil hard for subsistence on their small piece of land at Bokaro in Jharkhand. The soil is infertile and there is no irrigation so hardly anything grows. Women queue up for hours to get a pitcher of drinking water.

A sweets revolution in Bengal

Rina Mukherji
Kolkata

KAMAL Saha, MBA and entrepreneur, runs a very special Bengali sweets shop in Habra town of West Bengal. His shelves are lined with a range of natural sweets. You can buy green apple dahi, papaya sandesh, carrot rossogollas, tulsi dahi, honey sandesh, beetroot sandesh and brahmi sandesh at Saha's shop, the Srikrishna Mishtanna Bhandar.

His innovations have set many thinking. Other businessmen have begun selling traditional sweets with these flavours. Producers of rossogollas, sandesh and mishti dahi are replacing chemical additives with natural colours and flavours sparking a sweets revolution in rural West Bengal.

Kamal Saha mastered the art of making cutting edge sweets from Professor Utpal Ray Chaudhuri and his team of scientists at the Department of Food Technology and Biochemical Engineering in Jadavpur University. The department has invented an array of natural flavours and colours from fruits and vegetables that can replace chemical additives used in food products.

The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) in New Delhi had initially funded the research. Colours and flavouring agents from blackberry (jamun), watermelon, tomato, green apple, banana, and carrot were developed in 2003.

This low-cost technology was disseminated to budding entrepreneurs interested in innovative business ventures as part of Jadavpur University's Entrepreneurship Development Programme (EDP)-the first such programme in West Bengal under the aegis of the Department of Science and Technology (DST), Government of India. Kamal Saha was one of the early birds who learnt the technology.

The Science Association of Bengal (SAB) now wants to train people in rural areas who are in the sweetmeats trade on how to use this technology. Eight people from Sandeshkhali in south 24-parganas have been selected for the course.

"We want to train people in rural area in these healthier colouring methods. Milk and milk products are not too plentiful in Sandeshkhali and other parts of the district. But they make a lot of sweets from cereals and gram flour. Local alternatives for colouring and flavouring like honey, bel and palm can be used," explained Dr Subhabrata Roychowdhury of SAB.

Palm and papaya grow wild in south 24-parganas



Kamal Saha at his natural sweets shop in Habra.

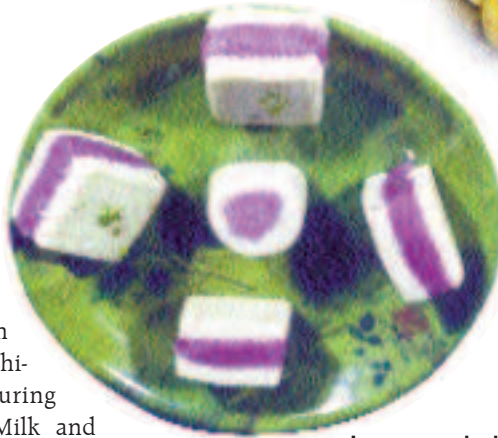
and honey is plentiful.

The district also has many medicinal plants and herbs. Palm juice concentrate in the form of a gel can easily make imratris and jalebis, says Professor Ray Chaudhuri. The yellow colour for the sweets can come from the beta-carotene in bel (wood apple). Ester present in palm and bel can give an inviting flavour.

The department held a two-day awareness camp at Sandeshkhali to introduce villagers to the technology. Interested producers of sweetmeats will now go through a special programme that will help



Carrot rossogollas



Jamun sandesh



Tomato sandesh

them adapt the technology to their individual needs and assess the acceptability of their new products by customers. This will be followed by a one-month hands-on training course at the university laboratory that will be especially tailored keeping in mind the feedback they get from their customers.

Professor Ray Chaudhuri and his team have used clarified watermelon juice to produce anthocyanin powder that can give boondis and sandesh a red tint. The scientists have also invented banana cake out of the local kantali banana. Normally, kantali is combined with rice powder, honey and bel to make a crude candy in villages.

Red anthocyanin from watermelon, green xanthophylls from spinach, ester/ketone derived flavour from banana and beta carotene from bel and banana were mixed to make a delectable sweet which looked good too.

The scientists have also invented a sugar-based osmodehydrated papaya petha (dry candy) from raw papaya. "These have great demand in the chanachur industry. There is a ready market here for rural entrepreneurs keen to produce papaya petha on a large scale," says Professor Ray Chaudhuri.

If the pH of these natural colours and flavours change, then the sweets also change colour, so the customer will know at once that the products are not fresh.



Prof Utpal Ray Chaudhuri explaining how to make sweets to a villager.



Prof Utpal Ray Chaudhuri in his lab at Jadavpur University.

Farmer as entrepreneur

Life and times of Subraya Bhat

Civil Society News
Gurgaon

IN 1980, cocoa bean prices went into a freefall. Cadbury and Amul, the biggest buyers in India, decided that they did not want beans from South Indian farmers at the Rs 13 a kg they were asking for. They preferred to go in for imports from Africa, which were cheaper.

Suddenly several thousand farmers in Karnataka and Kerala found that they had a cocoa crop on their hands with no buyer in sight. Their decision to grow cocoa on their arecanut plantations was taken five or six years earlier. Cocoa was convenient to grow and they expected it would add significantly to their incomes. But the reverse had happened. The decision by Cadbury and Amul came at a time when the farmers were readying themselves for their first real harvest.

Time was of essence. With agricultural produce you either find a buyer or dump your crop. The farmers turned up at the door of Varanashi Subraya Bhat, the man who had suggested that arecanut and cocoa would go well together. "You asked us to grow cocoa and now just see the mess we are in," they complained.

Subraya Bhat was not new to crises of this kind. He had spent decades improving the ways in which farmers marketed their produce in Karnataka and Kerala. In the seventies, he had managed to rescue arecanut prices by banding farmers together under the banner of a cooperative. It had come to be called Campco: the Central Arecanut and Cocoa Marketing Cooperative Society.

But it was one thing to shore up arecanut purchases and quite another to solve the problem with cocoa. Since the crop was ready, the immediate task was to pick up from the farmers large quantities of wet beans and simultaneously begin the search for a market for the produce.

Ever gentle and conciliatory, Bhat began by reaching out to Cadbury. He says he spoke to the managing director and requested that the company buy the cocoa beans for that month or at least 15 days. He received a flat 'No'. Bhat then went to the Karnataka state government. He asked for permission to buy the crop directly from the farmers. The government readily agreed because it meant passing on the headache to Bhat and Campco. It wouldn't have to face the farmers.

The entire cocoa crop as wet beans was thus purchased at a price of Rs 6 and stored. It was then exported through commodities traders.

Six months later, as international prices rose, Cadbury and Amul began buying cocoa again in India. But they did not go to Campco and instead negotiated deals directly with some Kerala farmers.

Bhat moved to strengthen the position of farmers in the cocoa trade. Campco decided that buying the beans and marketing them was not good enough. It would have to get into producing chocolates. For this it decided to set up a modern factory at Puttur, a small town in the Dakshina Kannada district.

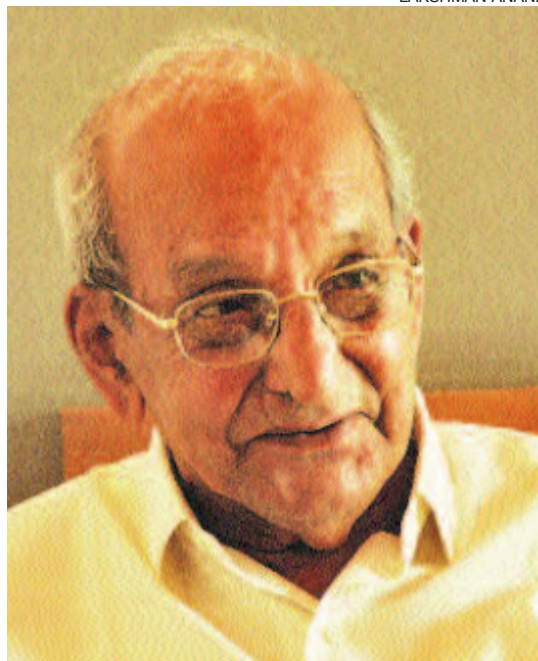
Factories are usually located near big cities. But Puttur was chosen because it is small and in the

heart of the coffee growing region and therefore easily accessible to farmers.

The Campco factory went into production in 1986, ensuring a fair price to farmers in surrounding areas. For a while, the Campco brand of chocolates came to be known across the country. Unfortunately it could not hold its own for long. But more importantly, Campco now executes orders for Cadbury and Nestle, which then brand the chocolates as their own.

Bhat was recently in Delhi to receive the Sahakarita Ratna Award given by IFFCO in recogni-

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Bhat moved to strengthen the position of farmers in the cocoa trade. Campco decided that buying the beans and marketing them was not good enough. It would have to get into producing chocolates.

tion of his contribution to the development and strengthening of the cooperative movement.

Now, 79 years old and with two heart attacks behind him, Bhat has been in retirement for the past 15 years. In this time, Campco, like much of the cooperative movement in India, has become a victim of many fatal flaws.

Politics was firmly kept out when Bhat was president from 1973 to 1990. In 17 years under him Campco had no more than two managing directors whereas in the past 15 years there have been seven as the state government has begun to meddle.

Bhat believes that cooperatives like good companies are built out of teamwork. Campco's success

was the result of such united effort. But finally it is businesslike realism that delivers results. This requires leadership. At Campco it came from Bhat.

"Competition, efficiency, honesty and the absence of politics," says Bhat, "are necessary for cooperatives to succeed. We made it a point to always hire the best young people available. We were impartial in our choice."

Bhat recalls how he sacked a bright young man for billing Campco Rs 8 instead of Rs 6 for a cup of coffee while on tour. "It is not that Rs 2 on a cup of coffee is a lot of money. The problem is of attitude. At Campco, an executive like him would have to take decisions on arecanut prices based on the quality of nut. One rupee or even fifty paise could make a huge difference while purchasing in large quantities."

Similarly, Bhat showed the door to one of his best executives when he found that he had taken Rs 2000 from a transport contractor. It hadn't affected the rates paid by Campco, but executives had to be above such pernicious dealings and set an example for others.

Bhat strongly believes that a vibrant private sector is a good thing for the cooperative movement. If cooperatives are to succeed they must pit themselves against higher levels of efficiency and learn to compete in the marketplace. It is only this that can give farmers better prices for their produce and rescue them from predicaments like the Cadbury-induced cocoa crisis.

Bhat's own approach has been entrepreneurial. "As a boy, for years together, I would hardly get to see him," says his son Satya Prakash, now a respected architect who accompanied his ageing father to the IFFCO award ceremony in Delhi.

It is the ability to seize the moment and make the most of it that has been Bhat's big strength. For instance, a French scientist travelling through India shared Bhat's car from Mangalore to Bangalore. The scientist was known for having studied African coffee. Bhat requested him, as a personal favour, to study Indian coffee. When his report arrived, it showed Indian coffee was as good as African coffee. Cadbury had all along argued in favour of imports, saying Indian varieties didn't measure up. This revelation finally led to the stopping of imports.

Campco's chocolate factory is a good emblem of its success. But it is in Bhat's ability to move with speed and a sense of purpose that there is a real message for Indian farmers who may want to make the best of opportunities that double as the world shrinks.

Like many entrepreneurs, Bhat has no big time formal education to speak. He did not go beyond school because his father could only afford to send one son to college. His family had holdings of 25 acres of so in Adyanadka in the Dakshina Kannada district of Karnataka.

Bhat took an interest in promoting development work and sponsored schools and a junior college. But it was in marketing agricultural produce that he was truly skilled. He did this through cooperatives and succeeded in establishing markets at taluk headquarters, which meant farmers could sell directly close to their landholdings.



Members of the Gokularlakshmi Magalir Sangam on their banana field

With TVS, everyone rides pillion

Civil Society News
Bangalore

MURUGESAMMA used to work on the fields in the Krishnagiri district of Tamil Nadu as an agricultural worker. She earned a daily wage and could at best hope for seasonal employment. But in the past three years her life has changed dramatically. As part of a self-help group (SHG), Murugesamma makes Rs 1,200 from just five hours of rolling out chapattis every alternative day. She has a house on land allotted to her under the Indra Awas Yojna. Her family has its own toilet. The children go to school.

Her husband still works as a daily wage earner, but for Murugesamma the uncertainties of being a labourer on someone else's fields are something of the past. Her SHG of 15 women, the Gokularlakshmi Magalir Sangam, has squirreled away enough money to lease one and a half acres to grow bananas.

The land has come for Rs 30,000 for the year. They have grown 1,300 banana plants and since they have relied on tissue culture they are reasonably certain about the yield. Each plant cost them Rs 12 and they spent Rs 60,000 on preparing the land. They hope the crop will give them a profit of Rs 3 lakhs, which will be divided among the SHG's members.

"This is light work. Previously I had no idea what it was like to have land and savings. I will use the money for improving my home, educating the children and so on," says Murugesamma.

The turn in Murugesamma's family's fortunes is the result of the efforts of the TVS Group, one of the country's largest two-wheeler manufacturers. The group's philosophy of reaching out to communities around its factories has led it to be a catalyst for development work that changes people's lives in enduring ways.

These activities do nothing for the TVS bottom line, but they do help bring people out of poverty and create a sense of well-being at locations where the company has invested. If TVS gains in any way, it is by reinforcing its image as a trustworthy and caring company that wants to give back to society.

In times when factories can no longer promise jobs, helping people like Murugesamma live a better life cuts hostility at factory locations. It also reduces the uncomfortable disparities that result from a modern business flourishing in the midst of poverty and collapsing infrastructure.

On occasion TVS has gone beyond factory locations to work in Tirunelveli, Tuticorin, Nagapattinam and Kanyakumari.

Importantly, TVS refuses to do charity. Its strategy is to assist communities in investing in their own



Ashoke Joshi near the toilet facility at Hosur

development. So, whether it is an SHG's business or a drain or clean drinking water, people have to make a contribution by way of money and labour.

Thousands of families like Murugesamma's have been helped to emerge from poverty. There are no cases of infant mortality in communities where its factories are located. It works with local schools by cleaning them up, helping provide better toilets, particularly for girls, installing computers and building infrastructure.

TVS has focussed on taking piped water to clusters of households. It has cemented village roads and helped people deal with the problem of garbage and waste. Villages around the factories in Mysore and Hosur are spick and span. Company doctors do regular rounds and animators from among the village residents get Rs 2,000 a month for disseminating messages of hygiene and a balanced diet. Kitchen gardens have been brought alive.

TVS works through the Srinivasan Services Trust (SST), which was established in 1996 by Venu Srinivasan, chairman of the group. Since 2002, SST's activities are overseen by Ashoke Joshi, a

retired secretary to the Government of India. It is his responsibility to stitch together various social initiatives in locations at Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh and, most recently, Indonesia.

But it is through 389 SHGs in south India that the company's goal of bringing people up and making them self-reliant has been achieved. The SHGs involve 4,277 families whose monthly incomes are now between Rs 800 and Rs 1,800 a month. The SHGs have savings of Rs 1.54 crores and have borrowed Rs 3.23 crores from banks.

In Hosur and Mysore the SHGs have savings of Rs 52 lakhs. They have borrowed Rs 1.44 crores from banks.

The banks charge 12 per cent and the SHGs in turn charge 12 per cent from the women. The money thus comes with an interest burden of 24 per cent. But despite this there have been no defaults on the loans.

In the vicinity of the Hosur factory, 900 women are members of 52 SHGs. They are mostly scheduled castes and normally speaking there would be little hope for them or their families. Now they run businesses in making chapattis and earn at least Rs 1,200 each from five hours of work every alternative day.

The SHGs also make phenol, incense sticks, baskets, soap and rear livestock. But it is in the making of chapattis that they have found a business that is at the core of their emancipation.

The TVS factories buy all their chapattis from the SHGs of these scheduled caste women. So do other neighbouring units such as Biocon and Mico SKF. Several caterers have become regular clients. This means a demand for more than 6,000 chapattis a day.

The chapattis are made in spotless kitchens on land which the SHGs have bought. The fact that the chapattis are made by scheduled caste women and eaten by everyone at the factories bridges an important caste divide. Normally the women would be untouchables.

They dress in clean saris with aprons, caps and masks for the mouth. Each SHG has its own uniform. The chapattis are labelled with coloured dots on the aluminium packing so that if there is a problem with quality accountability can be fixed.

The SHGs had to be trained to make chapattis because it is not a part of the local diet, which is ragi. Initially it would take them one hour to make 100 chapattis. Now they can make up to 2,000 chapattis in one hour.

The chapatti business has brought liberation in many ways. First of all it means ready money because they serve a captive market in the factories, which need to provide workers meals through the day. It is also a regular income.

Secondly, it has given the women status in the uniforms they wear and the higher level of work they do. In this sense it has rescued them from the bondage of caste. It has also taught them ownership because the SHGs are in reality rapidly expanding micro enterprises. They have a growing base of assets.

Finally, incomes for the women have changed their status in the family. They have become decision makers. Their aspirations for their children are invariably focussed around education. All their children go to school. One of them has a son who has taken admission to an MBA course. Another hopes her son will be an engineer. The women need to work for only five hours every alternative day. There is therefore more time for the family.

At the Mysore factory, Jason Samuel, the general manager, says 30 per cent of his 1,500-strong work force comes from nearby villages. That is a considerable number. But the same is not true of other locations.

Moreover, of the 1,500 at Mysore, only 650 are permanent employees. The rest get temporary work. It remains a need to reach out and make people self-reliant. It is through SHGs that this is best achieved. Improvement of toilets, drainage, roads and schools on the other hand creates an overall sense of well being.

TVS has shown that companies can connect with people in these ways. In Mysore, Jacob Philip, a civil engineer, has designed a community toilet for a cluster of families and is proud of a wetland where birds in large numbers visit. He works with Ravi, the community development officer, and A Chikkaswamy, a retired assistant commissioner of the Karnataka government. Since TVS believes in putting government programmes to good use, Chikkaswamy's liaison work is very important.

At Hosur, P Kamalakkannan is in charge of community development. He has a master's degree in social work. Kamalakkannan is a bundle of energy, out from morning to night networking the SHGs. His four assistants are Don Bosco

Mary, Nanjappa, Veerabhadraiyya and Manjunath. They are skilled animators.

BN Srinivasan, the president of the gram panchayat of Belagondapalli near the Hosur factory, says that requests to TVS for jobs go unanswered. "But when it comes to service to the community without fanfare you can't match TVS," says Srinivasan. "They may not give us jobs, but they do much more for our uplift by providing us healthcare, improving schools, helping us install drainage systems."

The Belagondapalli gram panchayat has won the Nirmal Gram Purushkar award for having the cleanest village in the district of Krishnagiri. Srinivasan has also been felicitated by the President of India for implementing the total sanitation project. Ninety per cent of villagers have individual toilets and 10 per cent use community toilets. Both solid and liquid waste management programmes are being implemented

Biodegradable waste is converted to compost through vermi composting pits which TVS helped to set up. There is house-to-house collection of garbage. Families pay Rs 10 each a month.

Now the panchayat is implementing a project through which sewage water will be sold to farmers and bring in revenue of Rs 7,000 to Rs 8,000 a year. All the sewage has been brought to a single point where in stabilisation ponds and with the use of reeds and trees it is being treated.

The panchayat president says he has depended on SHGs in the area to implement these ideas. It is his ambition to make his village so attractive that people from the nearby urban areas prefer to shift there. "A village should be clean and developed. It is possible to achieve this," he says, seated behind his office table on which there is a picture of him receiving the sanitation award from the President of India.

A year ago, the main bus stand at Hosur was like any other: it overflowed with garbage and spent plastic bags. The stench of unclean toilets was strong. Hundreds of buses rumbled in and out each day and for travellers on hot and dusty journeys there seemed to be no respite. With civic amenities collapsing just about everywhere in Hosur, there appeared to be little future for a bus stand hopelessly located at the tri-junction of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. It had users in tens of thousands, but, like most public assets, it belonged to nobody.

Just one addition to the bus stand made all the difference. It was a pay-and-use toilet. TVS part financed the construction on public land and put the management of the toilet in the hands of an SHG.

The toilet now generates Rs 1 lakh of revenue a month from users, who pay between Rs 1 and Rs 5 for the facilities. Some 3,000 people use it every day. It has running water and is perfectly clean. In addition, SHG members sweep the bus stand through the day. So, what was once a filthy terminal is now free of litter. A spot where men used to urinate in the open has been decorated with pictures of gods and goddesses with the result that no one dares to make a public nuisance any longer.

Women who manage the pay-and-use toilet earn at least Rs 2,200 a month. They didn't have any source of income earlier. Revival of the bus stand has, therefore, improved their lot as well

The importance of toilets can't be stressed enough. In villages around TVS factories people no longer defecate in the open. The result is better hygiene and, as a consequence, improved health indicators. There is no infant mortality and there is a lower incidence of stomach disorders.

Should a two-wheeler manufacturer be investing company resources in supporting SHGs in making chapattis and building toilets? In the TVS Group no one raises this question. It is a part of the group's corporate culture, says the self-effacing Ashoke Joshi who reports directly to Venu Srinivasan on matters relating to the Srinivasan Services Trust and the group's social commitments.

The interest in the community and the employees goes back to TV Sundaram Iyengar, who in 1911 started a bus service which was long remembered for punctuality and cleanliness. He was known for the personal interest he took in the welfare of the people he hired.

For Indian industry today, coping with the demands of job reservation and problems of land acquisition, the TVS Group's use of SHGs to spread prosperity and its emphasis on local development where it invests is an example of how businesses can pledge themselves to inclusion and strengthen bottom lines by going beyond them.

Photos: RITA ANAND



Rural women buy phone not cow

Grameen Telecom reaches nearly every village of Bangladesh

Vidya Viswanathan
New Delhi

IN 1974 Professor Mohammed Yunus was teaching economics in Bangladesh's Chittagong University. But he felt that the neo-classical economics being taught had little relevance to developing countries. Yunus believed every person, however poor, had an entrepreneurial streak. So he put his money where his conviction lay and started Grameen Bank in Jobra village close to the university campus.

The rest is history. Today, Grameen Bank is the largest financial institution investing in rural Bangladesh. It impacts the lives of six million

aging director of Grameen Telecom.

How did the idea of Grameen Telecom come up?

In 1994-95, the telecom sector was being de-regulated and foreign companies showed interest. Bangladesh had one of the lowest tele-densities in the world. The government could not increase its telecommunications services. There was one CDMA operator, who was a big business man, had a monopoly license but was not interested in expanding. We wanted to invest in telecom so that the clientele of Grameen Bank could get access to services. Iqbal Quadir, a young Bangladeshi venture financier based in the US, assisted us in locating potential investors from abroad.

Grameen Phone started operations from March 26, 1997. Today it is one of three GSM operators with 62 percent market share and 8.5 million subscribers. Out of that 240,000 are Grameen Bank borrowers. There are 80,000 Grameen bank centres all over Bangladesh. Every centre has at least one phone. Some have four or five. Nearly half the rural people now have access to modern cell phones.

A quiet revolution has taken place. The network has spread very quickly. Even remote islands in the Bay of Bengal, where people had never seen a phone in their lives, are connected.

You were able to spread quickly because Grameen Phone bid for right of way along the railway tracks...

In the early 1990s Bangladesh railways had laid a fibre optic cable to connect 330 railway stations for their internal communications. A lot of its capacity was not being used. The railways asked for international bids to lease out its fibre network and Grameen Phone decided to bid. Being the highest bidder, it was selected. From 1998, using this network, Grameen Phone was able to expand very rapidly.

Did the handsets have a special Bengali interface?

No. There were hilarious debates with Siemens, Nokia and Ericsson. They would say that a cell phone is like a computer and how will illiterate village people access it. We said as long as there is money to be made people will learn. Now of course Grameen Telecom is the largest agent of Nokia in Bangladesh and there is an interface for Bengali SMS.

We heard later that Telenor's board was against the idea. Tormod Hermansen, who was then CEO, came and saw Grameen Bank. He realised the enormous opportunities for mobile telephony in Bangladesh and bulldozed the board. This happened because he took the risk of venturing into an unknown territory.

Were you involved in technology decisions? Did you have to install special billing software at Grameen Bank branches?

No, we told Telenor to use whatever was best. We piggybacked on them. They just wanted us to tell them where Grameen Bank branches were concentrated.

Grameen Telecom buys telephone time in bulk from Grameen Phone and guarantees payments every month on the dot. Now each Grameen Bank centre has 40 members. If they have taken two loans each, there are 80 entries for repayment every week since loan installments are repaid on a weekly basis. The telephone bill is simply the 81st entry in the collection sheet of the local Grameen Bank manager. So the marginal cost of collection for us is zero. We can manage the rural telecom business better and more cost effectively because of Grameen's microfinance infrastructure.

How profitable are the village phones for the women who take loans to buy it?

Instead of taking a loan to buy a cow, a woman now

Continued on next page



Khalid Shams, managing director of Grameen Telecom.

households, disbursing half a billion dollars of loans every year.

The bank's Grameen Telecom, a not-for-profit set up in 1995 to promote ICT specially telecommunications in rural Bangladesh, owns 38 per cent stake in Grameen Phone, the largest mobile phone operator in Bangladesh.

Grameen Telecom sells handsets and provides technical services to Grameen Bank borrowers who become Grameen Phone subscribers. Grameen Telecom's Village Phone Programme now covers almost all of rural Bangladesh.

Poorer women buy these village phones with loans from Grameen Bank. The women then rent the phones to other villagers who need to make telephone calls and thereby earn an income. This has created a virtual telecom revolution in Bangladesh. The profit generated from village phones is being used to create a clutch of rural industries.

Grameen Telecom is headed by Khalid Shams who was a deputy of Yunus for nearly 20 years. He also served as the deputy managing director of Grameen Bank. *Civil Society* spoke to Shams who is now man-

“ **There are 80,000 Grameen Bank centres all over Bangladesh. Every centre has at least one phone. Some have four or five. Nearly half the rural people now have access to modern cell phones. A quiet revolution has taken place** ”

He spoke to Telia, the Swedish telecom company. It was not interested because it wanted to go to India which was a bigger market. Telenor of Norway was keen to bid. Professor Yunus wanted Grameen Telecom to be a not-for-profit company which would hold shares in a telecom joint venture and provide services to the rural poor. Telenor was initially reluctant. But they clearly saw the opportunity of doing business in Bangladesh with Grameen which is a well-known brand name.

How was the rural component built?

Grameen Telecom's rural component, the Village Phone Programme, was built into the bid. In the 1995 bid offer, we said there would be 250,000 mobile connections in Bangladesh by 2002 and out of that 50,000 would be rural, going to Grameen bank borrowers. Grameen Telecom initially had 45.5 per cent equity in Grameen Phone. Iqbal Quadir had 4.5 per cent. Telenor had 51 per cent plus the responsibility of managing Grameen Phone. Grameen Telecom decided to offer 9.5 per cent of its shares to Marubeni.



Aanchal Kapur (second from left) with the Kriti team and the diaries

A diary of people's movements

Shailey Hingorani
New Delhi

How do you get people's movements on to desks and into minds and make a little money to keep a capacity-building NGO afloat as well? That's simple. Print a diary that tells the stories of change-makers.

Kriti has become one of a long line of organisations that have found ways around funding traps by build-

ing a business that fulfils a social purpose.

Kriti's 'Our Diary' comes in two sizes big and small. The big one costs Rs 175 and the smaller one Rs 125. Kriti prints about 1,000 diaries every year and is able to sell all of them. Orders are placed in advance. The diaries make enough money to finance the next cycle of production. Students, companies, bureaucrats and social activists are the buyers of 'Our Diary'.

"Every year we first shortlist about 20 people's movements and then further shortlist them to

seven," says Aanchal Kapur, a member of the Kriti team. "Then we proceed to collect as much information as possible about the movements. Finally, the story of struggle is presented in the style of a feature as part of the diary. An analytical framework binds the diary together. It is not thematic."

Kriti works as a support group, providing its professional expertise to trade unions, women's groups, government and civil society organisations. Kriti members have skills in dealing with education, health, labour, environment and gender.

"We at Kriti were upset with the newspaper reportage of the movements. In the media, they were being covered as one-time events rather than as ongoing processes," says Aanchal.

Suman Bisht, another member of the Kriti team explains, "We also realised that movements themselves were not documenting their own struggles because of a variety of reasons like lack of skills or resources. We understood that this should not deter them or anybody else to put to paper their struggles. That's why we decided to pool our resources and start tracing the trajectories of various movements."

Every diary includes a 'movement map' that locates these struggles on the map of India. This, explains the Kriti team, "builds a physical and human geography of people's movements in India."

Every diary provides a contact list of resource groups and people's movements groups along with other references so that diary users are able to get in touch, if they want to. Like other diaries, Kriti's diary too is available in the market and has a year planner. What sets it apart is the documentation of people's movements that is interspersed with the planner.

"We get in touch with the people directly engaged with the movements and also conduct independent research of our own through other sources," explains Aanchal. This helps Kriti maintain a balanced perspective while writing a feature.

Kriti's diary is itself the story of a struggle by a committed group to bring forth long forgotten, obliterated scraps of history and to ensure that stories of the people are not lost in the labyrinth of corporate globalisation, privatisation and liberalisation.

Phone: 26477845, 26213088

Continued from previous page

takes a loan to buy a phone and a subscription. The ARPU (average revenue per unit) is the highest for a village phone as against other Grameen Phone users. On an average, the Village Phone operator's monthly airtime bill is 4000 taka a month. Fifty per cent of that is often the net profit because she can charge whatever the market can bear.

It used to cost 15,000 taka for a phone plus subscription. That has now come down to about 7,000 taka. So it is a huge return. Woman who took phones on loan have now invested in land. They send their children to school. They have repaired their houses. Many have bought sewing machines or started a grocery store or a teashop.

How are these phones repaired?

Grameen Telecom has 22 service centres spread across the country. We give each phone a year's guarantee. We have taken kids from polytechnics and taught them repair and servicing. We repair the phones straight away or replace the sets under Nokia's one year warranty.

How are the phones charged where there is no power?

About 30 per cent of Bangladesh is covered by electricity. Most of these phones are in public places like markets or bazaars where there is power or a generator. We have also started Grameen Shakti, another not-for-profit enterprise where we sell solar power systems through credit. These are slightly expensive and are affordable to people with a little higher income. But only a small percentage of people are using these now.

Professor Yunus had mentioned in an interview that at some point you would like Grameen companies to go public and that the wealth created would accumulate to the borrowers...

That is our dream. But the capital market is still very weak in Bangladesh. Grameen Bank launched the Grameen Mutual Fund and it was oversubscribed.

Our markets are down. Telenor is also not interested in an IPO because Grameen Phone does not need funds for expansion. But Grameen Telecom now owns 38 per cent of Grameen Phone. We use our share of profits to create new rural businesses that will enhance the wealth of villagers.

We have got into the hospital business with technical support from the Aravind Eye Hospital. We are setting up two eye hospitals and Grameen

Telecom is investing in the initial seed capital. Grameen Telecom is also investing in a Grameen Dairy project, which is a joint venture with Danone of France. Grameen Telecom will have 12.5 percent stake.

Grameen-Danone will set up small rural dairies to tackle malnutrition among children in rural Bangladesh. We will add nutrients to yogurt and distribute it to rural areas. Grameen Bank borrowers will be the retailers. These dairy products will not come into cities. So the idea in countries like ours should be to encourage entrepreneurship that is socially minded.

How do you manage to stay out of politics even though you are now such a large entity?

The government owns a small five percent stake in Grameen Bank and hence has the right to nominate the chairman of its board of directors. Grameen borrowers own almost 95 per cent of the bank's equity. Nine Grameen Bank members are elected once every three years to the board of the bank with very little commotion. Some of these women have now started contesting elections to the local union parishads that are similar to India's panchayats.

Rural India's crosslegged PC

Vidya Viswanathan
New Delhi

WHAT would be the specs for a truly Indian computer that could be used in village schools and panchayats? Rural children and adults tend to sit on the floor, so the computer would need to be comfortable to use on the ground. A range of Indian languages are spoken. The computer would need to speak in many tongues. That means software to create content, fonts and input devices. The computer should also occupy very little space. Ideally, it should be possible to put it into a box and store it away when not in use. Finally, the computer would need to use very little power and work on alternate energy.

Sounds like a tall order? Well, Kirti Trivedi, a design professor from the Industrial Design Centre at IIT, Mumbai, has designed a computer that matches these specs after visiting Village Knowledge Centres (VKCs) run by the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation in Tamil Nadu. Trivedi exhibited a working prototype to grassroots fellows of the Jamshetji Tata National Virtual Academy who had convened in Delhi.

"I'm a book designer and one of the most computer illiterate people at the IIT Design Centre in Mumbai," he says. "In fact, we are four computer illiterate people."

Trivedi graduated in design from IIT, Mumbai, before going to study at the Royal College of Art. He has been teaching graphic design and design history at IIT since 1976.

Perhaps that is why Trivedi and his team saw the PC differently. Most computer savvy people tend to design a low cost computer. But Trivedi has concen-



Kirti Trivedi with the rural PC

trated on designing a PC for rural India.

The machine Trivedi created has a TFT monitor, dual language keyboard, speakers and stereo system integrated into one piece. It weighs less than a 15 inch monitor. The machine is shaped like a traditional munshi's desk and can be used sitting cross-legged on the floor. It can, of course, be placed on a table. Many people can see the high-resolution screen at the same time. They can sit around it and that makes it ideal for a community centre.

The rural computer will be priced cheaper than anything of comparable configuration.

"There are several approaches to cost reduction," explains Trivedi. "One is to produce obsolete products. Another is to price deceptively. The third is to reduce the number of components but create a state-of-the-art product. That is what we attempted to do. This machine has three components whereas most machines have seventeen."

The machine he was exhibiting ran on a Pentium four 3 ghz chip. The motherboard was ruggedised and the CPU was embedded. The machine shell was made of ABS, an engineering plastic. The cooling system is a continuous horizontal cooling system that is more effective than a fan cooling one. The machine needs 160 watts of power instead of the usual 270 watts. Just one wire comes out of the machine, to be plugged into a power source.

Trivedi has also planned to design a box, like a typewriter box, to store away the machine. In several rural kiosks, rats damaged the wires hanging around. The box could also be used as a pedestal to place the machine and work on it. The machine can work with solar powered UPS systems. Trivedi pointed out that it is naïve to think that only hardware is enough. His team is working on several content creation tools in Indian languages.

Has the machine been tested by users? Can it be manufactured in existing assembly systems? It has been tested for ergonomics at a Mumbai based non-profit called Stree Bal Shakti. The systems will be manufactured at the Hyderabad facility of the PSU, ECIL, which has advanced manufacturing facilities to make electronic voting machines. The rural PCs are expected to roll out in December this year. The factory has the capacity to make 70,000 machines a month. But it remains to be seen if they can create an effective marketing campaign.



Street kids make some great films

Rina Mukherji
Kolkata

ADULTS lay down laws that say a child is best off at home. But ask a child who is abused by parents if this is true and the answer will be no. Children see things realistically. The Eastside Story project, a joint initiative by the Nalanda Way Foundation and UNICEF, aims to get the child's perspective across to big people through films.

The Foundation works with destitute, rescued and underprivileged children in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The children write the scripts for, act in and direct documentaries and short films on their lives, with technical help from professionals. The films are screened in slums and villages.

"We aim to use the visual media to create awareness on child prostitution, alcoholism, domestic violence, juvenile justice and the safety and security of adolescent girls on the streets," says Sriram V Ayer of Nalanda Way.

The first film, funded by the Confederation of Indian Industry (southern region), was on child prostitution. Children rescued from Mumbai's brothels and housed in destitute homes run by the Foundation helped to make this film.

Two more films, *Kalvettu* and *Mezugubarthee*, have now been produced. Funded by UNICEF and



Raju talks about abuse in *Kalvettu*



A still from *Mezugubarthee*

Deutsch Bank, these films are in Tamil, with English subtitles.

Kalvettu, which means 'Inscribed in Stone', is about an eight-year-old boy, Raju, who is constantly abused by his father. Raju narrates how his father would beat him and his sister every evening to extort money. After working in the fields the whole day the children would hand over their earnings to their mother. If she didn't pass on the money to the father, he would tie up the little boy, lower him into the family well and keep him suspended there till he extracted the money from Raju's mother.

Raju's father was a villain and a tyrant. Even today, Raju shudders when he recalls all that he went through. So disturbing are the memories that Raju wants to kill his father when he grows up.

Mezugubarthee or 'Burning Candle' explores sexual harassment on the streets and

its deleterious effect on the confidence of girls. The film shows how, in a small town, adolescent girls venturing out to buy sanitary napkins, put up with snide remarks and vulgar comments from young men.

Finally, a young girl picks up courage, walks up to the abusers, shames them and slaps some of them. The message of the film is that only the police and the community can't put an end to sexual harass-

ment. The person being abused should also try to stop it.

Nalanda Way has recently set up a Media Centre in Chennai. It has a full-fledged studio and mobile projection vans for screening these films in slums and villages with the help of local NGOs and the administration.

Ayer says they are planning to organise a festival of films made by children.

Nalanda Way has also set up a helpline called the Children's Listening Centre. Children can ring up and ask for advice on how to tackle a problems ranging from violence to homework.

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Swami Vivekananda taught us that all can be done if the touch of God is there. The Bible reminds us that if you lose your life for His sake you shall find it. Speak the voice of love, surrender yourself to His will, and He will silently stand by you in the realisation of your dreams. This is the essence of the Young Men's Welfare Society's (YMWS) story, which began with the blessings of the Late Mother Teresa and Fr. A. Bruylants, s.j. in the classrooms of St. Lawrence High School 39 years ago. From humble beginnings, we have spread our wings to 14 centres of learning - 'Islands of Hope', to quote the Late Canon Subir Biswas. Forty thousand children have been imparted primary education. Two secondary schools have been founded. To mark our 40th anniversary, YMWS will be hosting an international conference on Ethics in Human Development, in Kolkata between the 21st and 24th of January, 2007.

Delegates from 12 countries have been invited to participate. Sir Wesley Carr, Dean Emeritus of Westminster Abbey, UK heads the reception committee. Others who have confirmed their participation are the Governor of Nagaland, Magsaysay award winners Srimati Aruna Roy, Mr JM Lyngdoh, the Director of XLRI Jamshedpur, Dr. Davis, PhD from John Hopkins University, the Finance Director of the World Council of Churches, Switzerland, and Justice GN Ray, Chairman, Press Trust of India.

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Still from Hariye Jai Manush, an adaptation of Albert Camus' The Just.



Still from Ashvacharit.

Small town theatre gets loyal audience

Trina Nileena Banerjee
Kalyani

KALYANI is just another nondescript town in West Bengal. You wouldn't dash off there to holiday. It's unlikely you'd be sent there on work either. In fact, you would need a damn good reason to go to Kalyani at all.

Well, how about a path breaking theatre festival in the pleasant month of December?

Every year the town helps a local theatre group, the Kalyani Natyacharcha Kendra to organise a 10-day theatre festival called the Kalyani Natyotshav. Tickets are booked beforehand and sold out before the festival begins. Groups from all over West Bengal stage thirteen plays. Even theatre troupes from Kolkata, the big city, mark their presence. This year the festival opens with Trito Sutra's *Raktakarabi*. Directed by Suman Mukhopadhyay, this is Rabindranath Tagore's best known play.

The credit for making theatre so special in Kalyani goes to the Kalyani Natyacharcha Kendra, a group of 42 actors. Five work full time. The rest are home-makers, students and surprisingly government officials.

"We are a comparatively young group," says Santanu Jha, president of the Kendra. "We started working in Kalyani about 11 years ago with a theatre festival which we organised in the month of December. I remember we went with tickets to people's homes – trying to push-sell what we could, trying to convince them that watching a few plays on winter evenings would not be such a bad idea. And now, a decade later, all the tickets for the shows are booked."

The group was started to make serious theatre trendy in Kalyani, a town where such performances did not take place. And today the people of Kalyani make sure that every December their holiday season coincides with the theatre festival.

"It is the community in this town that supports us, both financially and morally. Without the community support that we have managed to garner,

all this would not have been possible," says Jha.

One reason why the Kalyani Natyacharcha Kendra has attracted a deeply loyal audience is its canny choice of subjects. Theatre, believes director Kishore Sengupta, should be politically relevant and entertaining. It should vie with populist media to grab the attention of the people.

So in choosing plays his first preference is for a story of conflict-dramatic, intense and tightly narrated. 'Will it hold the audience's interest?' is the primary question he asks.

That's why in 1997 when the Kalyani

"I remember we went with tickets to people's homes, trying to convince them that watching a few plays on winter evenings would not be such a bad idea. And now, a decade later, all tickets for shows are booked."



Kishore Sengupta

Natyacharcha Kendra staged their first production they chose a play that would ring a bell with the audience. Bangladesh was celebrating 25 years of independence. The Kendra performed *Chilekothar Shepai* (The Soldier in the Attic) an adaptation of a novel written by Akhtaruzzaman Ilyas in 1987. The story is set in Dhaka in 1969, against the backdrop of the people's uprising. The production was a deft portrayal of a man's difficult psychological journey at a time of political unrest, with all its twists and turns.

Directed by veteran actor Gautam Haldar, the evocative sets were created by legendary stage designer Khaled Chaudhuri. The play received accolades even in Kolkata where they performed a year later. The group went on to stage many more productions, one after another. Kolkata's audience sat up and took note.

The Kendra's next venture was *Nakshi Kanthar Math* (2000), which ran for more than 55 shows in Kolkata and elsewhere. Based on a verse narrative by the poet Jasimuddin, *Nakshi Kanthar Math* was a simple tale of love and strife. It tells the tragic story of Shaju and Rupa, a farmer and his wife, whose lives are torn asunder by violence. The dramatisation of this novel required a theatrical form that would be faithful to the rustic innocence of Jasimuddin's story yet modern enough to interest contemporary audiences. The production achieved this with ease and shows ran on till 2003.

The group then staged *Ashvacharit* (2002) and *Dashyu Kenaram* (2005). But perhaps the Kendra's most important production till date has been Ilyas's *Khwabnama* (2004). Broadly set in pre-partition rural Bengal the story grapples with the complexities of the Tebhaga Peasants' Movement.

The community rather than the individual hero emerges as the protagonist. This sense of a suffering multitude was what the Kendra was able to create visually on stage in a dramatised version of this text. It was a theatrical challenge but Kishore Sengupta, as director, emerged with flying colours.

Khwabnama was widely praised. Says Sengupta, "Besides the politics of the play, which was undeniably relevant, I found the magic realist form extremely exciting to translate on stage. Only the light changes, and you are transported from one time and space in history to another, effortlessly. That's the magic of the stage."

The Kendra's current production, *Hariye Jai Manush* is also imbedded with new ideas. It is an adaptation of Albert Camus' play, *The Just* (1949), a story about the abortive Russian Revolution of 1905.

Sengupta has skilfully tailored this complex text to reflect contemporary West Bengal. He transports us to a world of young revolutionaries, living in hiding.

We see them plotting to kill the head of the local police force. The play makes references to the contemporary Maoist movement in Bengal, raising difficult questions about extremism, the nature of revolution and the definition of political freedom.

The play has already received rave reviews and is being hailed as one of the best new productions on the Kolkata stage. It seems that nothing can now stop this small town troupe from making a dramatic inroad into the big city. But Jha remains modest about his group's achievements. "We are proud that, if nothing else, we have managed to make theatre popular among the people here," he says.

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