

# Civil Society



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# Conservation of Biodiversity by Himalaya

We, at Himalaya, have planted more than 700,000 trees over the last 5 years as part of our Biodiversity Conservation initiative in the Western Ghats, Maharashtra. In association with SEBC (Society for Environment and Biodiversity Conservation), Pune, we also conduct Annual Awareness programs around International Biodiversity Day in Pune and Goa.

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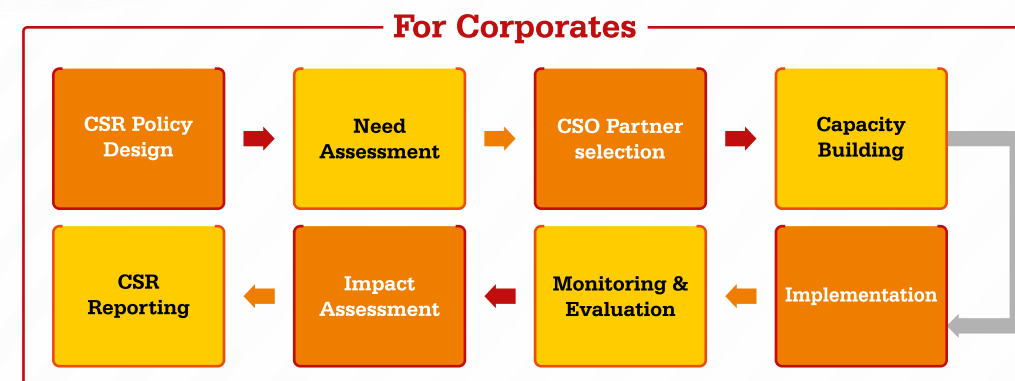
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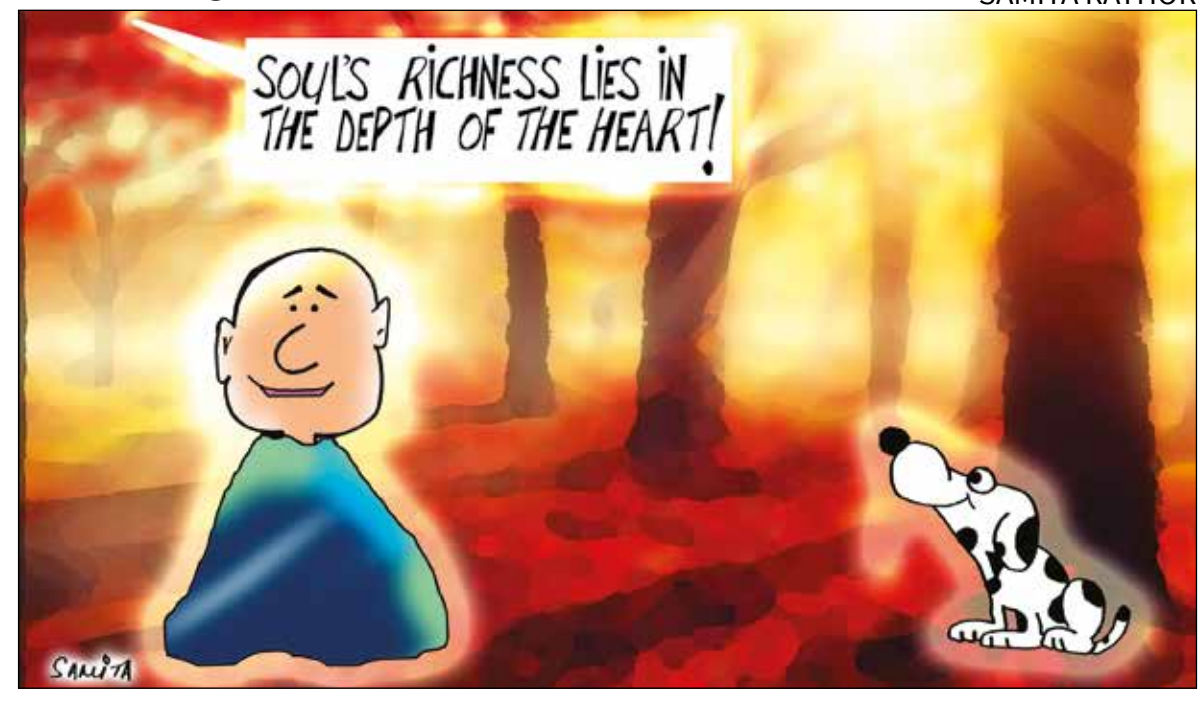
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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



surveillance state would have been very useful.

*Siddhartha Banerjee*

Your interview with Dr Kiran Karnik was very good. India is quite different from other countries. If broadband reaches remote villages it can bring about a sea of change. A vote of thanks to Dr Karnik and *Civil Society* for publishing the interview at the right time.

*Vasant Machwe*

**Northeast films**

I read your piece, 'Cinema's Rockstars', as late as today, at a meeting with another senior journalist, at her desk. I

must tell you, after a long time I read a news magazine that I just couldn't put down. *Civil Society* is wonderful — not just the stories, but the simple design, editing and overall appeal. As a journalist myself, I admire and respect your work. Keep at it, you guys!

*Vinaya Patil*

**Social values**

Dileep Ranjekar's article, 'Schools must teach social values', was an interesting read. It reminded me of the time I was transferred from India to Singapore. My two children joined a local school, not an international one, as most expatriate children usually did.

There were no inputs in the school curriculum about social values. When I returned to India with my children nine months later, we had all gone to a friend's house for dinner. My children, who were eating some sweets on the road near a bus stand, stopped suddenly when my wife and I were looking for transport to take us back home.

Before we could shout out to them they dashed across the road to throw their sweet wrappers into a dustbin that they had spotted. They stopped near the dustbin and found that there was waste strewn all around and the dustbin was absolutely clean.

My wife and I were struck by how quickly our children had assimilated the values of keeping a city and street clean in just nine months in Singapore.

That civic sense was acquired by learning, not from the school, but from the environment, by interacting with local children, the local community and the local law enforcement agencies who come to schools and speak to students in class and parents at home. Ranjekar is right. Only a concerted effort by many people and not just one institution can teach social values to children.

*Ramachandran V.*

**Reviving paddy**

With reference to Derek Almeida's story, 'Goa villager turn to paddy to save their land', I think the villagers have done great team work. We would like to try a similar experiment in our village with their guidance.

*Manoj Gaonkar*

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**Biennale**

Thanks for Saibal Chatterjee's cover story, 'Biennale's radical shift'. I attended the art fest and it was a truly amazing experience. I felt it didn't receive the coverage it should have. Your reporter has done a well-rounded piece.

*Vinitha Sundaram*

The Kochi Biennale is emerging as a tourist attraction but it needs to be promoted much more all over India. Kochi is a lovely city and worth visiting. It should emerge as a tourist destination like Jaipur.

*Ashish Sengupta*

**Tech and people**

Apropos your interview with Dr Kiran Karnik, 'Tech must go bottom up and take people into account', I feel that some discussion of the risk of Aadhar being used to create a

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COVER STORY

**GIRL POWER IN BIHAR**

Project Lehar by the Aga Khan Foundation is helping adolescent girls feel good about themselves by getting an education and acquiring skills so that they can be employed and confident.

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*Rita Anand*



SHREY GUPTA

P.D. Rai: 'What we are really staring at in India is unemployment. It's unimaginable'

# 'Up in the mountains, the mind works clearer'

## P.D. Rai on Sikkim's plans for a universal basic income

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

**S**IKKIM has a lot going for it. The state's economy has been growing at 12 percent. It has the third highest per capita income in India. It has also been successfully organic in agricultural practices for some time now. It produces and sells a whole lot of hydropower.

Even as an agrarian crisis swamps the rest of India, Sikkim's farmers command a premium on their produce. They bolster their incomes through tourism, turning villages into idyllic destinations with beautiful homestays that are much sought after by travellers from all over India.

The state also boasts of political continuity with Chief Minister Pawan Chamling, a charismatic leader, having been happily in power for 25 years.

In an India beset with problems, Sikkim seems to lead in achievements. Most recently, it was back in the news for announcing, much before anyone else, that it would be declaring a universal basic income (UBI) for its people.

But why UBI in a state which is so well-off and evidently far removed from poverty? To find out we spoke to Prem Das Rai, the Sikkim Democratic Front MP in the Lok Sabha. Rai is a loyal Chamling supporter.

Rai has an IIT degree and also went to IIM, Ahmedabad. When we first met him in 2009, he was a newcomer to Delhi and was camping at Sikkim House in Chanakyapuri.

Now with two terms under his belt he is a seasoned politician who puts Sikkim's aspirations in perspective as only a well-honed insider can.

**Sikkim seems to do things ahead of everyone else. And now Universal Basic Income. With high growth and high per capita income, what has prompted this?**

Well, why does Sikkim do things ahead of others? I think it's because of the leadership of our chief minister, Pawan Chamling, and our core ideology. You can call us a green party. We talk about nature. Nature worship is a core article of faith with our communities. Since we are up in the mountains, the

mind works clearer.

Actually, I have been asked this question a lot. Right now there are two or three basic factors that have placed us in this happy position. One is peace, which our chief minister has maintained. The other is continuous good governance for as long as 25 years. Education levels are very high in Sikkim. Certainly, high literacy is going to show up in economic development.

As for our pillars of economic development, the first one is tourism. To buttress tourism, and provide health benefits to our people and whoever else wants to join in, we have organic farming. We are now ensuring that every piece of fallow land gets cultivated. A lot of young people are being propelled into tourism and organic farming. In fact, there is a whole village called Chalamthang in south Sikkim that has created a tourism buzz. They have a lot of homestays. The entire village came together and decided to make it the cleanest village and an organic one.

We have more than 40 pharmaceutical companies that employ a lot of our people. We generate 2300

MW of hydropower. Sikkim is one of the clearer stories of hydropower in the country. We use less than 200 MW. The rest is sold. So we get 15 percent free power except in one hydropower project in which the state government has a stake. The Government of India (GoI) pays for the rest. We have a network of roads that is the envy of many.

I think we are in a really good position to think ahead. So Universal Basic Income or UBI for us is a leap of faith. In 1999, Pawan Chamling said we will make everyone in Sikkim a *lakhpati*. People were sceptical. That too was a leap of faith. We have given *pucca* houses to everybody. Housing gives dignity to people and a sense of pride. Given this scenario, UBI is the next best thing to attempt.

**But why is it needed at all?**

It's an interesting question. We need to wean our people away from this continuous subsidy regime and we would like our youth to get some income so that they can make choices which otherwise they would not be able to — choices related to careers, education or micro financing. If we give everyone UBI, people will be able to pool resources. UBI is an income, not a subsidy. Everyone will get it. It is untied and not means tested. What I am saying is that if you have an income, then you have the confidence to do something different.

What we are really staring at in India is unemployment. I mean the numbers of the unemployed are at 12 to 13 percent. It's unmanageable. We have the same problem. We need to address this jointly at state and central level. If you have artificial intelligence — and it comes in surreptitiously, by the way — and robotics and drones, you don't need so many people. Where are people going to find jobs? We have to start firewalling for that. The earlier we do it, the better.

It is interesting that Rahul Gandhi announced a basic income scheme but his is means tested. It is meant for the poor. We are a small state. We don't have a large population. Our TFR (total fertility rate) is 1.2. In future we are going to have problems with demography.

Things will transform by the time we put UBI in place. There is a dramatic shift in what India was like five years ago. So at a time of rapid change we need a drastic way of energising our youth. Why is UBI so stupendously different? Because the State says the responsibility shifts to you. All this while you thought that the State garners resources and will do something for you. But now the responsibility shifts to your end.

**But if you are assured of a certain income it could also become a disincentive to do things?**

See, if you get money every month in your bank account after some time the family will think, let's do something with this money. We can't really predict the dynamics of UBI. A number of people from all over the world have written to us, offering help. Because everybody feels that if the government turns employment on its head then it will work. It's not about poverty or about equalising society.

**You will be giving this money to households or individuals?**

To individuals. Our UBI scheme will be universal in its purest form. If the rich want to give it up, like the LPG subsidy, we will be very happy. We will put it in

a fund and use it for some other purpose.

**How much will you give?**

We have not as yet calculated that. But we will make it meaningful. It will take us three years to develop it. We are going to have consultations. We will also look at it from the paradigm of the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals). It can't be a standalone scheme like all Government of India schemes. We will look at it holistically and use a participatory approach. We will get the people of Sikkim involved. We want everybody to understand clearly what it means and how impactful it can be.

**What are the subsidies that you will subsume into the UBI?**

Just look at the way subsidies and reservations are going. We really need to relook at all this but I don't know who is going to take the initiative. Either we can align these in a more meaningful way with the UBI or they can add to the UBI at some point of time. When we do this entire exercise we will be certainly undergoing one of the most massive consultation processes ever. What the outcome will be, we don't know.

We are already in touch with the Basic Income

**'We need to wean our people away from this continuous subsidy regime and we would like our youth to get some income so that they can make choices — choices related to careers, education, micro-financing.'**

Earth Network (BIEN) and others. We are going to look at UBI minutely and see how to apply it to our people. But I have done some initial work and the reaction from people is that it is a good idea.

Also, I think it connects the income accrued through natural capital and economic processes to the stakeholders, the citizens. Supposing we use part of our tourism revenue for UBI. This is our natural capital that we are selling and tourism connects it to the income. You can talk about other resources as well, whether it is forests or hydropower.

**Does Sikkim have a lot of schemes and subsidies?**

We have all the schemes that every state has. My chief minister has done more. We provide an income to senior citizens. We are giving farmer pensions, pensions to senior journalists as well. These could be subsumed into UBI. Some funds we can't take away. Like money spent on health, education and scholarships.

**In which sectors do young people in Sikkim find jobs?**

Employment patterns are in the services sector right now. We can become an education hub. We have two or three universities and several good schools. Already lots of people from the Northeast come and study in these educational institutions. We are making a name for ourselves in education. There is the health sector as well. We have good hospitals. We also have fresh air and organic food.

**What about entrepreneurship?**

It is happening. We would like a lot more of our

young people to become entrepreneurs. Everybody talks of a job, a government job. It's crazy. How do you wean people away from that?

**Does the Sikkim government employ a lot?**

Oh, yes, we employ a lot. Like in Nagaland. Because, willy-nilly, there is nothing else.

**Does Sikkim have a solid database of its people? Do you have a good banking system to transfer UBI?**

Yes, we have a good banking system and database. See, 25 years of continuous good governance have ensured that we have one of the best banking systems in the country. We have 25 banks. Our rural areas are growing and banks are setting up brick and mortar branches in villages. In telecommunications, we probably have the highest density of data usage. So all our villages are connected. Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) is not a problem for us.

**What about subsidies for organic farmers?**

No subsidy is given to organic farmers. In fact, we are fighting with the Government of India over this. Their policy is warped. They give subsidies for

chemical fertilisers but not to organic farmers who are giving you natural foods. In 2016 we were declared organic.

**What difference has organic farming made to your agrarian economy?**

Narendra Modi talks of doubling farmers' income. Recently, a Parliamentary Standing Committee visited Sikkim and found our farmers had increased their income more than two times. That was news for me.

I did not know our farmers were doing well. We now have young 'agripreneurs', as we call them. They are exporting foods like shitake mushrooms to Japan. Both ginger and turmeric are doing very well. Because of the organic tag farmers get a premium.

**So UBI is not going to affect your fiscal deficit in any way?**

I am only saying we have taken this leap of faith in order to be ready for the next decade. Our young people should be able to make more choices. Today the mindset is — I am a graduate or a postgraduate so give me a government job.

The prime minister talks of cooperative federalism. What does that mean? It means push more development ideas to the states. States must be able to start planning properly. After the Planning Commission was disbanded and the last Twelfth Five Year Plan ran its course, there is no planning. There is no perspective. Where are your priorities? My state should not be without a plan. Let Sikkim make its own plan. ■

# Agriculture college no one wanted to fund is a big success in Goa

## It has done a soil mapping exercise

Derek Almeida  
Panaji

IN 2012, when Mangurish Pai Raiker began the arduous process of setting up Goa's first agriculture community college, no one in the government nor his friends believed the venture was worthwhile. Agriculture was on the decline, they said, and young people would not be interested. But Raiker, an industrialist, was determined.

"I approached several philanthropists, but no one was willing to part with money for an agriculture college," he said. "Eventually, I decided to finance it myself."

In 2013 he launched the Ramnath Crisna Pai Raiker College, named after his grandfather, after a long but fruitful struggle. In 2020, the first batch of Bachelor of Vocation (BVoc), Agriculture, will graduate.

The college now has 120 students from all over Goa and has put the village of Savoi Verem, where it is located, literally on the world map.

After six years of persistent work and without financial support from the state government, the college has succeeded in forging tie-ups with Michigan State University in the US and HAS University in Amsterdam. It is currently pursuing a memorandum of understanding with Jerusalem College of Agriculture.

Dr Karim Mareidia, head of department of horticulture, Michigan State University, has already made two trips to the college to interact with the staff and give guest lectures. Dr Kees van de Klundert and Dr Gert-Jan Duives from HAS come to the college every year for guest lectures. Three agriculture students from the Netherlands visited the college as exchange students. Three more are expected this year.

The college collaborated with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), Goa, when it undertook an extensive soil mapping exercise across the state. About 40 students participated and covered six talukas, which is nearly half of Goa. While ICAR used GPS to pinpoint areas from where soil samples were to be collected, it was the students who did all the legwork and got the opportunity to interact with scientists in ICAR laboratories.

Despite these achievements, the state government is yet to give the college financial aid to create or upgrade infrastructure or salary grants for the 18 teachers employed by it.

"On July 30, 2014, the then chief minister appreciated the work done by the college on the

floor of the House and gave an assurance of financial support. Then, in the 2018 monsoon session the chief minister and the agriculture minister reiterated this assurance, but till date I have not received a single paisa from the government," says Raiker.

**STARTING FROM SCRATCH:** Over the years the Raiker family began to migrate from the village of Savoi Verem, which is around 26 km from Panaji. Mangurish Raiker, too, left to work in a multinational and later started a business in manufacturing corrugated boxes. What was left behind was the ancestral house, which Raiker thought was large enough to start a higher secondary school. After all, Goa has a tradition of educational institutions being set up in family homes.

However, having a place to house the school was not enough. The idea was a new one and it meant Raiker would have to work out everything from

**120 students from all over Goa are enrolled and the college has put the village of Savoi Verem literally on the world map.**

scratch. Fortunately, he found the right man in college-mate Pradeep Lotlikar who had graduated from the Konkani Krishi Vidyapeeth, Dapoli, in Maharashtra. Lotlikar, who was employed as an agriculture officer at All India Radio, came on board and the duo went to Ratnagiri to seek the advice of the former vice-chancellor of the Dapoli College and ask him how they could create an education model that would impart practical knowledge to students. The other members of Raiker's core team were Chintaman Pirni, Dr Sachin Tendulkar and Satish Tendulkar, then director of agriculture in Goa.

Around that time Raiker bumped into Vijay Kumar Mehrotra, the chairman of the then Board for Vocational Studies at Delhi airport. To Raiker's good luck, Mehrotra had a doctorate in horticulture and he agreed to visit Goa to help design a syllabus. "He stayed with us for four days, fine-tuned our plans and gave us insights into use of technology and controlled farming," said Raiker.



Mangurish Pai Raiker (left in deep blue shirt) with Pradeep Lotlikar and the first batch of students. The building is Raiker's ancestral home

Armed with the syllabus, Raiker and his team approached the Higher Secondary Board for permission to start a Class 11 vocational course in agriculture. In order to start the course, a Board of Studies had to be constituted and Raiker and Lotlikar got experts from the Konkani Krishi Vidyapeeth, ICAR and the Department of Agriculture to form it. The syllabus was cleared in September 2012 and in June the following year the school was opened.

"We were given permission by the Board to admit 20 students but we got 26 applications," said Raiker, "we had to go back to the Board to increase the number."

Raiker then approached the government for financial support and was happy when he was given an assurance with a rider not to charge tuition fees.

Around this time, Raiker got news that a gold medallist from the Dapoli agriculture college, Shrirang Jambhale, was living in the village and providing assistance to farmers. After one meeting, Jambhale, who also holds a master's in social work from Pune University, agreed to join the college. Subsequently, a lady who was a research assistant to an agriculture scientist also joined. "It was like a blind man asking for one eye and getting two," was how Raiker described his stroke of luck.

As the first batch went to Class 12, the school started getting queries about upward mobility. After giving it much thought, Raiker came to the conclusion that starting a full-fledged college was not within his means. Instead, he opted for a community college which offers a one-year diploma, a two-year advanced diploma and a Bachelor of Vocation (BVoc) at the end of three years.

Initially, he sought permission from Konkani Krishi Vidyapeeth to start the course which was granted. Then, in 2015, Dr Satish Shetye took over as vice-chancellor of Goa University (GU) and he convinced Raiker to do the course under GU. But this meant heavy investment in infrastructure. A

new ground-plus-two building with classrooms, laboratories, a library and hall was constructed in 2016 and the community college was launched. In May 2020 the first batch of BVoc students will pass out from the college.

Explaining the thought process behind the community college, Raiker, who was Goa Chamber of Commerce and Industry president in 2013, said, "I always wanted to launch a venture in agriculture with the aim of making it viable. I also knew that to revive agriculture one would need a trained workforce and introduce scientific methods and newer technologies. More important, we also had to teach students how to make a business plan."

In 2018 the first batch of 32 students passed the advanced diploma course. Today, over 100 students who trained in the college are back in the fields. Some have got jobs in the agriculture and forest departments and assist in schemes run by the Agriculture Technology Management Agency.

**'I knew that to revive agriculture one would need a trained workforce, scientific methods and newer technologies. We also had to teach students how to make a business plan.'**

In 2013, when a storm damaged areca nut, banana and nutmeg plantations in Valopi and Bicholim, a team of students camped in the affected area for a week to help clear the debris and prepare the ground for replanting.

The college has also succeeded in generating income for the village. Stationery shops and paying guest accommodation for students have sprouted.

The college has drawn big names in the field of agriculture education like gold medallist Jose R. Faleiro, Girish Kamat, and Dr Sachin Tendulkar to interact with students, and plans are afoot to create

facilities for video conferencing with experts around the world.

Raiker has forwarded applications to the director of education for aid under the pattern of assistance for higher secondary schools. When the community college was started he approached the Directorate of Higher Education and two years ago he applied to the central government under the University Grants Commission scheme. Sadly, Goa's first agriculture school is yet to receive financial support from the government. And this is perhaps why Raiker's achievement is laced with a modicum of hurt. ■



Girl students near a turnip patch

PICTURES BY DEREK ALMEIDA

### Samita's World

by SAMITA RATHOR



# ‘We must unionise workers, speak for them’

## Devaki Jain on feminist economics, empowerment

Kavita Charanji  
New Delhi

THE feminist movement has taken different turns over the years, but to remain relevant it needs to primarily address the situation of the multitudes of women who work in fields, factories, on streets and in homes. Ensuring rights and opportunities for them is particularly important in the face of the vicissitudes of a market-based, capital-driven economy. How can they be collectivised so that they aren't left behind?

Devaki Jain, 85, has had a long record as an economist and activist seeking an alternative model of development. Hers is the Gandhian view of bottom-up growth, especially so when it comes to the empowerment of women. She was one of the first to explain to India and the world that economics was also about justice and equity and that it wasn't gender neutral. She founded the Institute of Social Studies Trust in Delhi, the Indian Association of Women's Studies and Kali Feminist Publishing House.

Two collections of her writings and speeches, *The Journey of a Southern Feminist* and *Close Encounters of Another Kind*, have been published recently by SAGE and Yoda, prompting *Civil Society* to seek her out for this interview.

**What exactly is feminist economics and why is it important?**

Feminist economics started by separating the roles determined by gender in the economy. For instance, a man would dig a field while a woman would sow paddy but she would get less wages. The idea was to basically address the inequalities between men and women. But now feminist economics has moved



Devaki Jain: 'India could have been a torchbearer of how to make ourselves less poor without the North being on our heads'

beyond that because I think women are beginning to organise themselves much more. There is an All-India Domestic Workers' Union that has even got a law passed to protect their wages. We never had that in my time. All this happened because of the women's movement. So that is an issue that needs to be talked about.

We are still looking at inequalities between genders. Women are not getting the right wages. They are not getting enough. But, they are now becoming spokespersons for themselves. The latest figures show that more women than men are voting in the elections.

Along with domestic workers, self-employed workers, home-based workers and waste-pickers are organising themselves into collectives. That was never the case in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, we were still making the government understand that there was a difference between men and women and that women were not being treated fairly.

**In your writings you question the idea of the Western model of development, including using GDP as an indicator of progress. What development model would you like to see in India?**

I would be in favour of a labour-led, not a capital-led, economy. I am not left of left but I am very much for labour — wage for work, and by that I mean a mass-based programme. How do you reach the masses? Only through their labour and wages.

That is why Gandhi's old ideas are still relevant.

Of course, I don't think everyone should have a *charkha* at home but Gandhi believed that every home had to earn something — at least ₹2 a day — and he designed a system which was unbelievable. But Nehru was never really comfortable with that.

**What went wrong?**

I am going to give a talk at Harvard University where I will speak on "Before Midnight's Children". I was 14 years old when India gained independence and 21 when I came to work in Delhi. That was the mid-1950s and the air in India was like Diwali. Everybody wanted to reconstruct India. There was a very strong CPI and CPI(M) but also a very strong Gandhi and Nehru.

The 1950s and 60s was the era when we felt we could build an India that was different from other colonies that had been liberated. That was Gandhi's stamp and people came in hordes because of what we had achieved through non-violence. We were so excited that we could do something different. Cooperatives sprang up and Dr Verghese Kurien promoted his Amul cooperative at that time.

Up to the 1970s that worked. Then capitalism got hold of us. The blow came from liberalisation by Dr Manmohan Singh. It became all about lowering prices for exports and imports. Today, our economic growth model is no different from that of most other countries. India could have been a torchbearer of how to make ourselves less poor without the North being on our heads. Today, fluctuations in the

economy depend on world trade and exports and imports depend on what happens globally. Now we depend on the World Bank, international capital and our own capitalists have become more muscular.

**Does that mean you are not in favour of globalisation?**

I have always been against globalisation. I think it took away the autonomy of all our countries, especially the less advanced ones, in shaping our own lives.

**Economists worry about the falling numbers of women in the workforce.**

Feminist economists challenge this idea. Formal statistics may show a dip in the number of women in the workforce, but we think a whole lot of women who are doing other work which does not come under the definition of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), are not being counted. People are doing so much analysis on why so many women withdrew from the workforce. There is one argument, that women withdrew because their husbands earned more so they didn't need to earn. The other argument is that if you look at age distribution, women drop out when they are at a marriageable age.

But some of us feel that they drop out because of the lack of employment opportunities or they have found other avenues of employment. I argue separately that if we do what I call a class analysis,

break it down to the better-off, less better-off, Dalit, you will find that this has not happened. Stratified analysis shows that among the Dalits this has not happened. This is one of the dangers of some statistics — it doesn't do caste and class analysis. It only does gender analysis. You will agree that amongst the poor, women cannot afford not to earn. They are the breadwinners.

**What kind of policies would help more women get into the workforce?**

I believe in facilitating them wherever they are working as well as offering new jobs. There are two ways of doing this. Say, I am making garments in my home, how can I earn more? There are ways in which a self-employed seamstress can be helped. The bank and the system can help me with credit, help me to access raw material, help me to collectivise my work so that I have a market for my products.

Definitely, unionisation of workers, like the woman who bends her back to plant paddy, will help. There is nothing like a negotiating instrument.

**Does the women's movement go far enough to help women negotiate a better deal?**

The women's movement has become bigger with bigger networks and so much energy. Today, I hear more women exercise their votes than men. But I

**‘Consumerism is not something that will stop in my lifetime or yours. Maybe we are doomed to go that way and burn ourselves out.’**

still have a complaint against the women's movement. We are not entering into unionising workers, though we talk about injustice and exploitation. It need not be a very big deal; it could be about bringing women together to negotiate for themselves.

This happened with the tea workers on a Kerala plantation who were refused a wage hike by the company's owners. The workers went on strike and were able to get their demand fulfilled with the Labour Department's help. Collective strength is important. This is a model of how women activists in India should engage with women workers who are at the very bottom.

But many feminists are preoccupied with what I call bodily injury — like violence, rape. In my time there were bigger issues about working women, not just women in offices, though the Me Too movement has given a huge profile to journalists, which is a good thing. Though we speak for the working class we don't collectivise them or argue for them, by and large.

**There are instances of groups like SEWA where women from the informal sector have collectivised themselves.**

Let us not use the term informal sector, which is a catch-all term. SEWA's members are self-employed

women — vegetable vendors, fish sellers, women carrying loads. We call them all informal because they are not employed by any enterprise where there is a fixed wage structure. So they earn their own living. Now, is the State doing enough for them? These people are organising themselves and SEWA has provided that space, but not every place has that kind of organised space.

**Inequality has risen since liberalisation policies were implemented. How do we bridge the rich-poor gap?**

Last month, there was a table showing that more Indians have joined the top 10 most wealthy of the world list. I feel ashamed because we also have the largest number of poor people in the country. We have a large, hungry, sick and dying population.

There was a lot of pressure at Davos that there should be sharper taxation to cream some of that money into what can be called public expenditure. But the worry is that more wealthy people are putting their money into tax havens. We have to criminalise such people.

There has to be a moral imperative. Everyone is talking about Gandhi now. Gandhi asked all of us to support the services and products of the poor. The entire *khadi* programme hinged on that. I think that bridging inequality has to start with the complete rejection of the way we are going now. Consumerism is not something that can stop in my lifetime or yours. Maybe we are doomed to go that way and burn ourselves out. In the past there was a Gandhi or Vivekananda, but who can we turn to today?

**What is your opinion of cash transfer schemes and MGNREGA?**

The good thing about MGNREGA is that women get the same wages as men. In every industry, be it construction, handloom weaving or carpet making, women are paid less than men. Their work is considered lighter, but God bless those who designed MGNREGA.

There is controversy between those who feel that there should be a full public service facilitation of health, education, and childcare provided by the State, while the other side says give the poor Rs 100 a day and let them buy these services. The NITI Aayog and others are saying that cash is better because when we tried to deliver services it didn't work. The schoolteachers didn't come to work but would do private tuition instead. This is sad because it shows that human beings are incapable of nobility. It shows that the teacher won't teach, the doctor won't heal unless they get money even though they are paid by the State. I am not sure I like the cash transfer idea because services may still not be available to economically weaker sections.

**There are steps for gender equality like panchayats, talk of 33 percent reservation for women. Are these good harbingers?**

Panchayat Raj or local self-government was a very good idea and certainly gave power to both men and women in villages and local areas. But gradually the central government lost interest in its muscularity. The panchayats reduced the power of the bureaucrats and MLAs and they allowed it to die. Money is not going all the way it should go. The design of development is not in the hands of the village or gram panchayat anymore. ■

# Demand for patients' rights is growing

Rwit Ghosh  
New Delhi

SITTING in a coffee shop in Dwarka, Jayant Singh, 40, shows a video on his phone. It is a recording of doctors and medical staff inside an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) wearing no protective gear as they discuss where to shift patients. The standard protocol for staff in ICUs is that they must wear caps, closed shoes and masks since most patients in an ICU are at maximum risk of infection.

In the ICU at this particular hospital was Singh's mother, who had undergone a knee surgery. She recovered. But just a year earlier, in 2017, Singh was devastated when his daughter died of dengue at Fortis Hospital in Gurugram. He was presented a bill of ₹15,59,322.

Singh went public with his daughter's death and the bill, alleging gross medical negligence, which the hospital contested. Singh thereafter dedicated himself to campaigning for patients' rights and gave up his job as an IT professional to be able to do this.

When this correspondent met him in January, he was all set to embark on a six-week national campaign to create awareness about the Charter of Patients' Rights, which has been drafted but has not been adopted.

Currently, hospitals are accredited to the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals & Healthcare Providers (NABH), but cases of negligence are not uncommon. Seeking justice is tough. Traumatized by their experiences in hospitals, victims of such negligence are in no position to grapple with steep lawyer fees, red tape and lengthy court processes. Most of them eventually give up and decide their only course of action is to settle with the hospitals.

Singh has formed the All-India Patients' Rights Group which seeks to bring together people who have faced medical negligence and malpractice. "Nobody listens to individual patients when they come forward. The government has always brushed their cases away as single one-off cases. I've been gathering all these people and their stories as proof that they are not one-off cases but a consistent pattern of neglect and bringing this to the attention of the government," says Singh.

An investigation by the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) revealed that private hospitals were making profits upto as much as 1737 percent on medication, consumables and diagnostic services.

In 2018, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (JSA), a network of public health activists, drafted the Charter of Patients' Rights, drawing on the Constitution of India, international healthcare charters and national healthcare guidelines.

A draft of the charter is on the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) website since August 2018. The ministry invited comments until

September 2018. "The MoHFW sought inputs from various groups but four months have elapsed and the government has still not moved forward," says Dr Abhay Shukla, a core member of the NHRC and of the JSA.

The JSA is demanding immediate implementation of the charter without any dilution "to stop loss of health and of lives". At a press conference in Delhi on January 29, the JSA issued a press release which said: "If the charter is not adopted before the Lok Sabha elections then a large-scale campaign will be taken up by JSA to demand this as an electoral issue."



Jayant Singh

The charter lists 17 rights. Among them are the right to information, right to records and reports, right to emergency healthcare, right to informed consent, right to confidentiality, right to transparency in rates, right to non-discrimination, right to safety and quality care, right to patient education, right to be heard and seek redressal, and more.

Activists feel that the private medical sector has been stymying the charter. It is because of this it hasn't been implemented, they say.

"Some private medical sector lobbies are trying to put pressure on the government to dilute this charter or add several burdensome responsibilities on patients which may not be appropriate," alleges Dr Shukla.

Time and again, the private medical sector has thwarted the efforts of citizens and governments to bring in regulation that would ensure patients get quality care at reasonable prices.

In 2017, the Karnataka government proposed an amendment to the Karnataka Private Medical Establishments Act of 2007 to bring private medical establishments under the purview of the government. Under this amendment the

government could fix the rates for each class of treatment, provide a grievance redressal system, put a stop to the practice of demanding advance payment for emergency treatment and not releasing the bodies of relatives till all dues were settled. These provisions led to huge protests by doctors across Karnataka. The amendment was eventually diluted and passed in November 2017 after it dropped a jail-term clause for doctors. It doesn't bring private medical establishments under the purview of the state.

In 2010, the central government had passed the Clinical Establishments (Registration and Regulation) Act (CEA), which is applicable to all types of private and public medical establishments. The Act was at first adopted in four states — Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Sikkim — and all Union Territories. Under this law all medical establishments in a state must be registered and adhere to certain minimum standards of facilities and services.

The rules were passed in 2012. Since then 14 states have adopted the CEA but they have not enforced it. Since health comes under the purview of the states, it is up to individual states to ensure the law is implemented. Activists say that states are succumbing to pressure from the private medical sector.

In fact, back in 2010, when the CEA was being passed, JSA activists had pointed out that the law did not take into account the rights of patients. In some places, like Tamil Nadu, the CEA serves only as a registration Act. "It's been diluted to the point where there is no mention of patients at all, especially in private hospitals. The CEA could have been a great opportunity to establish the rights of patients in private hospitals," says Ameer Khan, a member of JSA in Tamil Nadu.

"We're asking for the Charter of Patients' Rights to be adopted and the CEA to be implemented because both these together would form an effective framework to protect the rights of patients," says Dr Shukla.

The charter assumes even more significance because of the central government's Ayushman Bharat scheme which provides ₹5 lakh per family per year for secondary and tertiary care hospitalisation for 10 crore poor and vulnerable families. Most of the people seeking medical care under this scheme are being admitted into empanelled private hospitals. How much are these hospitals charging and what is the level of care? There is no oversight. Implementation of the charter at this time would give some heft to patients' rights.

Public health activists also point out that there is no strong institution to license and monitor the ethical behaviour and practices of doctors. In September last year the governing body of the Medical Council of India was dissolved and replaced by a Board of Governors after multiple allegations of corruption and unethical practices emerged.

While the government seems to have taken a step in the right direction by introducing the National Medical Commission Bill, which seeks to create a government body dedicated to regulating medical education and practice across India and creating State Medical Councils, only time will tell how effective such an institution would be. ■



## Harvesting Rain for Profit

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

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

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

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

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JAYANTA KUMAR BANERJEE 1937-2019

# A people's surgeon

Umesh Anand  
New Delhi

WHEN Dr Jayanta Kumar Banerjee returned from England as an FRCS, he went straight to the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital in Dehradun to start his practice. He was accompanied by his wife Shipra, who was an anesthetist.

They could have set themselves up in any Indian city and flourished. A doctor with foreign qualifications was a big thing in the early 1970s as it is today. But Dr Banerjee was deeply inspired by Vivekananda and imbued with the spirit of service.

It was to be a lifelong commitment. When he died on February 2 at the age of 82, he had been one of the leading lights of the Association of Rural

Surgeons of India (ARSI). His wife passed away some years earlier. Both went largely unsung, their contribution as public-spirited doctors being largely unrecorded.

Perhaps finding that the hospital in Dehradun wasn't challenging enough, the Banerjees in 1977 set up a facility with three beds in an abandoned godown in Mehrauli, in the then largely rural hinterland of Delhi. They wanted to reach people who really needed their medical skills and didn't even have the capacity to reach a hospital run by the Ramakrishna Mission.

It was in that shed-like godown the Rural Medicare Society had an idealistic beginning with the opening of the Rural Medicare Centre (RMC) where the very poor could go for surgeries and consultation.

They were joined by Dr S.K. Basu, a gynaecologist, among other doctors, thereby taking good medical skills to the people who desperately needed it.

In five years the RMC had expanded to 11 beds and gone from the shed to a building to cope with the increasing number of patients. It began to take the formal shape of a hospital with an operating theatre, an ambulance and doctors from different specialties visiting.

In 1995, a yet bigger hospital got built. It had 18 beds, two operating theatres, a radiology facility and a laboratory. The land, at Said-ul-Ajaib in Mehrauli, came thanks to the then Lieutenant-Governor of Delhi, P.K. Dave.

The RMC now has 30 beds. Thousands of patients turn up to consult several well-qualified doctors. In the spirit in which it was founded, the fees for an OPD consultation are just ₹130 and an entire surgery is performed for as little as

₹13,000. Very poor patients who can't pay at all are treated free.

We at Civil Society discovered the RMC when Dr D.P.S. Toor, who had been reading the magazine regularly, contacted us in 2006. "Come and see our work," he said.

It was not till January 2007 that we went to the RMC — with a patient, a young woman who had been turned away from other hospitals and was about to die. Dr Toor and Dr Seema Mehrotra saved her life. After a serious surgery and a week spent in the RMC, the bill back then was just ₹16,000!

Civil Society did a cover story: 'Amazing Hospital!' We first spoke to Dr Banerjee for that story and several times after that as he became a friend. With a stroke behind him, he had retired in Dehradun.

"In England I saw what defined a developed economy was equality in access to facilities," said Dr Banerjee. "In India, on the other hand, there are facilities only for a few with the vast majority being forgotten and having to fend for themselves."

It worried him that the benefits of economic growth did not percolate fast enough. "We have eight and nine percent GDP growth these days, but it is only for 20 percent of the population. What does that 20 percent of the population do to enable others to share in its prosperity?"

Rural surgeons reach out to patients, making it easy for the least empowered to access them. They create medical facilities with the least of resources, training local people to be paramedics and performing surgeries with inventive techniques in remote locations under challenging conditions.

Dr Banerjee believed that public healthcare in India called for several small hospitals like the RMC. "You need 30 and 40-bed hospitals staffed with qualified physicians and paramedical staff and sustained by local communities. You also need to train local people," he said.

Conversations with him over the years were invariably on the phone. He waited for a visit to Dehradun, promising good fish, a date we never managed to keep despite many attempts.

Like a good surgeon, Dr Banerjee was clear-minded and decisive. He would tend to be domineering too. But he did nothing to promote himself or his many achievements. So, there were no national awards, no accolades, only the quiet farewell by colleagues and family far from the limelight that a dedicated people's surgeon could have expected. ■



# Gourd from Assam goes south



The Assamese kakrol or teasel gourd on a trellis at CHES

Shree Padre  
Chettalli

A small spiny vegetable from Assam is set to debut in Malnad district of Karnataka. Locally known as *madahagala* or *kartoli* (*Momordica dioica*) in Kannada, its Assamese counterpart is called *kakrol* (*Momordica subangulata*).

The local *madahagala*, a wild spine gourd variety, is grown by just a few farmers in coastal Karnataka and Uttara Kannada district, mostly for their own consumption. Since the vegetable is seasonal it appears in the market once in a while. But the spine gourd is very popular among Konkanis, especially Gowda Saraswath Brahmins, and sells for as much as ₹100 per kg.

In fact, sellers of this vegetable merely have to park at a busy street in Mangalore and wait. Customers turn up to buy it. Hotel Ayodhya in the city makes a deep-fried dish of spine gourd called '*pagila fry*' which is a popular item.

Dr Lachumikanthan Bharathi, head of the Central Horticultural Experimental Station (CHES), Chettalli, has now launched a campaign to commercially cultivate the Assamese variety, which is a teasel gourd. Five thousand plants have been produced for distribution among interested farmers.

"Spine gourd grows very well in Kodagu and the adjoining areas of Malnad. Although demand and price are high, nobody thought of cultivating it commercially. We at CHES intend to campaign for its commercial cultivation from this year," says Dr Bharathi.

"*Madahagala* has high demand in Maharashtra and Kerala too. A farmer can easily earn ₹1 lakh from a quarter of an acre," says Dr Bharathi, who plans to organise a 'Madahagala Day' this June to

propagate the vegetable.

**GROW AND SELL:** CHES is a substation of the reputed Indian Institute of Horticulture Research (IIHR). Before Dr Bharathi was transferred to Chettalli last year, he was working at the IIHR's substation in Bhubaneswar where he carried out extensive research on spine gourd.

Extolling the virtues of the Assamese *kakrol*, Dr Bharathi says it is far superior to the local wild spine gourd. "It is larger in size. The local variety weighs only 30 to 40 gm whereas *kakrol's* weight is around 100 gm. The local variety's underground tuber sprouts only after the onset of the monsoon in June. It yields crops in August and September. But the Assamese variety's tuber sprouts by January or February. It can be harvested for six months, from



April to August. Plant propagation is also easier. You can produce several plants from cut tubers or from tiny tubers that grow around the mother tuber. From the local variety we can produce only a few plants," he says.

Plants can be raised from seeds too. There are distinct male and female vines. A female ratio of 10:1 is recommended for commercial cultivation. But with seed propagation, one ends up with more male vines. One is also unsure of getting true to type mother characters from seeds.

All said and done, the Assamese variety has one weakness. It has to be pollinated by hand. The process is simple but laborious. "Pollination is not that difficult. You have to pluck the male flower and rub it on the stigma of the female flower before 9 am. One male flower is enough to pollinate five to six female flowers. In the peak season, one person will take about an hour to carry out pollination in a quarter of an acre," says Dr Bharathi.

In February 2018, Dr Bharathi got a trellis for *kakrol* erected on the CHES campus. A trellis is a fence-like structure with GI (galvanised iron) wire. A trellis is taller than a fence and has two or three rows of wires with a wide gap so that the vines have room to spread. This makes harvesting convenient. Since *kakrol* requires pollination by hand, a trellis is the right choice for its cultivation.

CHES sold the *kakrol* it raised for a nominal price of ₹50 per kg through its own outlet. From a quarter acre it earned ₹50,000. "It got sold out almost as soon as it reached our sales counter. A few retired people even waited for it to arrive. Local traders approached us to buy it on a wholesale basis. But our rules don't permit us to sell to traders," says Dr Bharathi. In Kodagu market the *kakrol* was selling at more than double this price.

A few superstitions prevail about cultivation of spine gourd. People, mostly agricultural labourers

**Through its own outlet, CHES sold the kakrol it raised at a nominal price of ₹50 per kg. It earned ₹50,000 from a quarter acre. A few retired people waited for it to arrive and traders wanted to buy it wholesale.**

in and around Dakshina Kannada district, believe that those who plant this vine will die once its tuber grows to the size of the cultivator's head! In the past, to prevent this, labourers would cover their heads with a basket, believing the tuber would surely not grow bigger than the basket. "If this belief was true, I would have died a number of times," jokes Dr Bharathi.

**FRUITFUL CAMPAIGN:** CHES is providing interested farmers 100 plants along with knowhow on how to cultivate *kakrol*. Farmers from Kodagu, Dakshina Kannada, Udupi and Chikmagalur districts can contact CHES directly for *kakrol* plants. Preference is being given to farmers who will commercially cultivate *kakrol* on at least a quarter of an acre. The ideal time for planting is February. "We will also teach farmers how to raise new plants so that next year they can, on their own, expand acreage for *kakrol*," says Dr Bharathi.

Instead of using costly steel poles for erecting the trellises, farmers can make them with inexpensive, locally available material. The poles need to be the height of an average man. Three rows of GI wires have to be tied horizontally across the trellis. The first line should be tied half a metre above the ground, and the other two at a gap of 30 cm each.

At the end of the first season, the vine develops underground tubers, and in the subsequent season, vines emerge. The teasel gourd can be cultivated on the same trellis for five or six years. About 1,000 plants can be grown in a quarter of an acre if the spacing is two by two metres.

A few farmers in Dakshina Kannada district have cultivated the Assamese teasel gourd for domestic consumption. Malya Shankara Bhat, who is from near Punacha, is one such farmer. He saw the Assamese variety at a supermarket in Puttur and became interested. He took a few kilos home and planted their seeds.

Bhat confirms what Dr Bharathi says. "Ten to 12 teasel gourds weigh a kg. But our local variety is smaller and you need double the amount to get a kg. There is a slight difference in taste. The Assamese variety is slightly bitter and pollinating by hand is a bit difficult," says Bhat. "But the Assamese variety yields crop almost throughout the year. After one crop is harvested, the vines have to be pruned and manured. In another 40 days, you start getting the next crop." Further studies are required to assess the best months for pruning.

Dr Bharathi plans to hybridise teasel gourd to solve the problem of manual pollination. "We were successful in this experiment in Odisha, but fruit size declined," he says.

More than 25 farmers have booked teasel gourd plants with CHES, Chettalli. Somangada Ganesh Thimmiah, 54, a retired soldier from Ponnampete, is one of them. He has taken 400 plants and is all set to plant them. "I have studied this variety and got all the information I need from CHES, Chettalli. As I grow vegetables organically, marketing shouldn't be an issue," he says optimistically. ■

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# Tribal women show their clout

MANISH SHUKLA



An Ujala Samooh leader examining a member's ration card during a meeting

Drishti Agarwal  
Jaipur

Women from the remotest villages of southern Rajasthan provide a perfect example of what happens when the most marginalised are denied their rights repeatedly. They are only left with a sense of assertion and their knowledge to demand their entitlements. Display of anger is not common among the tribal women of this region, but a century of subjugation of the Adivasis has created a simmering sense of fury.

In fact, the category of actors responsible for historically exploiting the Adivasis has broadened. Petty government employees, responsible for delivering people's basic entitlements, have now joined the cadre of exploitative landlords and moneylenders who assume positions of power in villages.

This is an account of rural Adivasi women changing the face of citizens' action by devising new ways to fight the ever-oppressive local administration.

**FOOD RIGHTS:** Last month, 10 women from Deepala and Kalaswa panchayats of Kherwara administrative block decided to collectively address the issue of rations that the women in their panchayats had been facing for two months. The dealer refused to give the women their designated food grains under the Public Distribution System (PDS) on the pretext that there were no rations.

When the issue was discussed in the Ujala Samooh meeting (a local women's solidarity group in the village), 10 women from the group, including the group's leaders, went to the ration dealer in Deepala. They demanded their due rations for the current month as well as the previous month.

The dealer, who had never witnessed such an act of defiance by women, especially those belonging to the tribal community, was shocked. He denied that there was any government provision for receiving two months of rations together. Under the National

Food Security Act beneficiaries of the PDS can collect their rations for two months if they have missed the previous month's ration due to unavoidable reasons.

The women, having anticipated such a backlash from the dealer, refused to leave the shop without taking their full rations. "You can either lock us all inside the shop and leave or we will lock you inside and wait till you agree to disperse the food grains,

**Women's solidarity groups have begun to understand their entitlements and the right channels to access them.**

because we will not leave without our rations today," they told him. The dealer had to comply and give them their due rations.

**WORK ENTITLEMENTS:** In another instance of challenging the otherwise indisputable power of the village administration, women from Saklal panchayat in Kherwara displayed great valour. After repeated denial of work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (MGNREGS) by the panchayat samiti without any valid reason, women workers from the area decided to take up the matter with the panchayat officials.

When the officials at the panchayat refused to hear them out, the determined women approached the panchayat official responsible for allocating work under MGNREGS.

"We have been asking for work for two months, but no one at the panchayat is willing to listen to us," said Kamla, the community volunteer for the women's solidarity group in Saklal panchayat. "Now,

either sanction us work or we will work in your house, we told the official."

"It was difficult to think of any consequences at that time. We started to clean the panchayat official's house, and he just stood there, ashamed," said Kamla. The official had to comply and provide them work under MGNREGS.

**SOLIDARITY GROUPS:** The women's solidarity groups were formed around four years ago in the panchayats in and around Kherwara. The platform gives women an opportunity to meet and discuss their lives, devising responses to everyday challenges. Gradually, they recognised the need to collectively demand public entitlements in their villages.

In the absence of any male members in local families — over 80 percent from southern Rajasthan having migrated to Gujarat or Maharashtra for work — officials in the area handling programmes from MGNREGS to the PDS, have been acting as demigods. Assuming that women do not have any knowledge about their rights or even the courage to speak to the village officials (mostly men), they never regarded women as equal citizens who could demand their rights.

It is only recently that the women's solidarity groups have begun to develop a comprehensive understanding of their public entitlements and the right channels to access them. And they are constantly being tested — from having to make continuous demands of the administration, to developing effective ways to monitor its functions.

**POLITICAL ACTORS:** In Aajeevika's experience of working with the rural Adivasi women through solidarity groups for the last nine years, we saw the women progress from being defenseless to using their agency and rights to overcome challenges. It is through these disruptive methods that the women can be called political beings who are engaging with their surroundings. They are making demands for the rights granted by the State.

Overall, the women show greater comfort and confidence now, in dealing with the men in the community. As related by them, this is in stark contrast to the earlier days, when they were hesitant to talk to men, even their husbands. Now, however, with an elevated sense of their own citizenship, these women refuse to feel small and inconsequential before others. They have been able to convert their previous sense of fear and insecurity into a collective force.

The fact that the women stake claims to the government's schemes gives them the identity of empowered citizens. It is through this ability to lay claims that the women are able to imagine an alternative reality for themselves where they have the right to work and the basic amount of food grains to lead a healthy life.

Together they are able to visualise a reality where they lead healthy and happy lives. The solidarity groups have been instrumental in bringing women out of their sense of helplessness and insecurity to realise the power within. ■

*Drishti Agarwal works with Aajeevika Bureau, VillageSquare.in*



## Harvesting water. Harnessing futures.

In a perfect world, children lead happy, carefree childhoods. They spend their days learning in school, while their free time is spent at play with friends. However, for the children of Nuh in Haryana, this is but a distant dream. The culprit - a severe shortage of potable water.

While most of us cannot even begin to imagine how crippling this can be; the residents of Nuh suffer the consequences every day. Over-salinated water and a lack of safe and assured water supply has created a trail of chronic issues that impact the health and well being of school children. This lack of potable water has affected the attendance rate at schools, with children going back home to refill their water bottles. More often than not, they never make it back to school.

DCB Bank stepped in to support an innovative plan using rooftop rainwater harvesting and bio-sand filters in three schools, which resulted in a number of positive changes. Access to drinking water has led to a decrease in absenteeism from schools. Mid-day meals are also cooked using this water, ensuring the children are healthier and happier.

With the capacity to harvest 3,00,000 litres of potable water a year, Nuh now looks to a hopeful future. One where children are free to learn and lead a normal, happy and healthy childhood.

### DCB Bank Rooftop Rainwater Harvesting Project:

- Set up at 3 schools in Nuh, Haryana
- Four 25,000 litre tanks harvest 3,00,000 litres of rainwater a year
- Innovative, electricity-free bio-sand filter eliminates contaminants
- Nuh's children now have access to clean potable water, daily
- Over 1,000 futures positively impacted



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# DCB BANK



Girls bond with one another at the community centre in Phulwarisharief



Shila Kumari, third from left, has passed Class 10 and wants to study further



Lalu Nagar in Danapur where the AKF has improved sanitation facilities



Games and activities are used to explain menstrual hygiene



Shabnam Parveen teaches a student at her tailoring unit

PICTURES BY SHREY GUPTA

# Girl power in Bihar

## How Project Lehar is bringing serious change

**Kaveree Bamzai**  
Patna

**S**HILA Kumari comes out of her tiny hut on the bank of the Punpun river, her eyes blinking in the mid-morning sunlight. Her hair is oiled, her purple shawl darned but clean, her smile brighter than her red salwar kameez. At 20, she still has the mien of a much younger girl, and she wears her responsibilities lightly. Shila looks after the home, cooking and cleaning from 5 am every day. Ten am sees her trekking to the farm to put together bales of paddy. For every 50 bales, she earns five as payment.

Back home at 5 pm, she cooks for the evening, then studies by candlelight or, if she is lucky, stolen electricity. Having dropped out of school in Class 4, it's been a struggle for Shila to learn the basics all over again but thanks to the Aga Khan Foundation's programme, Project Lehar, she's been able to take the Class 10 National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) exam.

It's not been easy. She's failed twice in Indian Culture, each time losing out by a mark, but this time she is determined to overcome everything and clear every hurdle. Then she hopes to take the Class 12 exam because, as she says, "to achieve something I need to have something to show".

Since Project Lehar reached out to her in 2015, Shila finds herself aspiring to

be an achiever. She hopes she can escape the seemingly endless cycle of poverty in which she has lived in Adpa, an outlying suburb of Patna.

Project Lehar covers the two urban blocks of Phulwarisharief and Danapur in Patna. It came out of a small initiative with a group of 500 adolescent girls in Phulwarisharief in 2013-14 when the Aga Khan Foundation was working in the area on school improvement, early child development and self-help group empowerment. It found that adolescent girls were being overlooked and needed a specific programme of their own.

In Bihar, the situation of adolescent girls is particularly dire. As many as 68.2 percent of girls in the state are married off before the age of 18. Only 39 percent of unmarried women receive any information about family planning and a mere 28 percent have the most basic knowledge about sexually transmitted infections. Domestic violence faced by women is 43.2 percent in Bihar, much higher than the national average of 28.8 percent.

Shila says the change in her life isn't just due to the school run by the Aga Khan Foundation which she attended, after enormous persuasion by community teachers from Project Lehar and despite opposition from her father. It's the life skills she was taught as well — and she uses the specific phrase. She learned to stand up for herself, to choose her own path, to take decisions for herself.

Her father, who drinks through his farm labourer wages, had fixed her

wedding, paying ₹1.5 lakh as dowry to a man Shila discovered was a drunk. She refused to go through with the wedding, leaving her family with the liability of ₹1.5 lakh which the would-be groom refuses to part with now. But she's paid back Rs 1 lakh, and she has another ₹50,000 to go.

Shila runs an Early Childhood Development (ECD) centre in her village, teaching pre-primary children, Monday to Friday, for three hours a day. On Saturdays she teaches for one hour, sometimes giving the students tests, and then plays with the children for the remaining two hours. Her classes include instruction in literacy and numeracy.

The loan balance worries Shila enough to momentarily make her stop talking. Her cheerful demeanour cracks and she suddenly starts crying silently, and rushes inside. So many things weigh on her — her exam, the loan she has to repay, her younger sister's lack of drive, her father's alcoholism. But she still has hope and, more important, ambition.

**STEPPING OUT:** This narrative of transformation, slow, subtle, sustained, is repeated. The two blocks of Phulwarisharief and Danapur are primarily urban slum settlements with a population of 273,000, of which 57 percent are Muslims and Other Backward Castes. The blocks have gradually emerged as migration hubs due to the influx of large numbers of rural migrants into Patna in search of better job opportunities — as wage labourers or in activities like truck or auto-rickshaw driving, auto repairs, electrical repairs, small trading and masonry, and waste collection and sorting. The majority of women do not work and those that do are mostly engaged in occupations like *beedi* rolling, bangle and incense making, vending of old clothes, and as domestic workers in adjoining neighbourhoods. The typical monthly household income averages just ₹3,900.

An in-depth appraisal undertaken by the Aga Khan Foundation in 2007 found high poverty rates, poor performance across several socio-economic indicators and lack of access to basic services among residents of these two contiguous blocks.

**Since Project Lehar reached out to her in 2015, Shila finds herself aspiring to be an achiever. She hopes she can escape the seemingly endless cycle of poverty in which she has lived.**

Professor Razi Ahmed, secretary, Gandhi Sangrahalaya, Patna, blames it on a corrupt political system which uses these communities as vote banks and an uncaring bureaucracy that keeps them unaware of the schemes available for their progress. From girl after girl, you hear the same argument: we failed in one subject and didn't know we could take the NIOS exam.

In fact, even officials of the Aga Khan Foundation didn't know that Bihar runs an equivalent board, the Bihar Board of Open Schooling and Examination, which, says Project Lehar manager Kangkana Bordoloi, has given them even greater flexibility of subjects and timing.

Reena Kumari is sitting quietly, observing a Home Science class in progress with a dozen Muslim girls in the Ishapur community centre, in another part of Phulwarisharief. Most of the girls, 18-year-olds, are preparing for their Class 10 exam after years of having their studies interrupted because of one reason or another.

In the case of Sajda Parveen it was when her family moved to this area, increasing the distance to her school. For Rosy Parveen, it was because she failed in maths and didn't know how to overcome that. Urdu journalist Anwarul Hoda, who heads a local organisation, says the lack of community leadership has ensured that most young women are unable to break out of the cycle of poverty

and ignorance. “There are hardly any schools in these two areas, and even if they are, they are for the rich,” he adds.

Reena’s mother works as a labourer, working on construction sites. The job is hard, fickle, demanding. On a good day she can earn ₹250, on a bad day nothing at all. But she is conscious that she has to feed her family, whatever it takes — Reena’s father has polio and is unable to work. Reena is the first in her family to have ever attempted to study. Her mother supports her, she says, but cannot afford her studies so she pays her way through by teaching younger children.

But the smile on her face is fixed, flickering a little only when she speaks about how hard her mother works for the family. Reena has two brothers, one of whom is married, and three sisters, all of whom are married. One brother works in a medical shop and the other in a garage, repairing vehicles. In 2008, her sister’s marriage forced Reena to quit formal schooling while she was in Class 8 and take over the household responsibilities. For eight years she spent her days doing housework and remaining inside her home, only going out for marriages or special family events. Her home was her life.

Then, in 2016, when the Project Lehar team began the mobilisation process for enrolling girls at the local centre, Reena enrolled. It was not an easy adjustment for her. She had little discipline or respect for her teachers and had trouble making friends with the other girls. Her teachers encouraged her to continue studying, and slowly she got closer to the girls and began enjoying her studies.

A course that she was regular in was the life skills one. Reena learnt about health and hygiene, adopted a better diet after attending the nutrition classes, and her confidence grew. In February 2018, she began tuition classes for children

**Determined to succeed, Janki applied for Home Science and appeared for the exam in July 2018. She got through. Right now she is doing Intermediate at a prestigious college in Patna.**

at one of the Project Lehar centres. Reena charges the students ₹100 per month. Now she manages to pay for her studies and buy food occasionally when she is hungry or a drink when she is thirsty.

Janki, who is sitting alongside her, is also from Harijan Tola Isopur, Phulwarisharief. She was a regular school-goer and appeared for her Class 10 exam from Phulwari High School in the 2014-15 session. However, she could not clear mathematics and hence was failed in the exam. Her parents were unable to afford her taking the exam again.

That was the end of her ambition — until the Project Lehar team met her and counselled her to resume her studies. She took her Class 10 exam again in April 2018, but failed in Home Science this time. Determined to succeed, she waited for her turn, re-applied for that subject and appeared in July 2018. She got through. Right now, she is doing Intermediate in one of Patna’s prestigious colleges — J.D. Women’s College. Janki plans to prepare for the railways exam.

**JOINING THE WORKFORCE:** The Aga Khan Foundation teaches other skills too, from sewing to basic computer skills, from retail and hospitality to caregiving to farming. Shabnam Parveen, a soft-spoken, shy 18-year-old, again from Phulwarisharief, was not allowed to even step out of the house. The 16-year-old attended formal schooling till Class 3 but was forced to drop out due to her family’s financial problems. She continued studying at home till Class 8.

Yet, she always dreamed of studying and making something of her life. Her father is a welder and her brother helps her father with the work, which is seasonal in nature and does not provide much financial security to the family. Shabnam was enrolled in a girls’ education programme run by the Foundation as part of its Project for Enhancing the Quality of Education in Bihar that ran between 2012 and 2015; however, she joined just four months prior to the project’s closure and could not complete the course.

For a year, Shabnam stitched clothes for the community and earned a small income. Then she came to know about Project Lehar and began attending scholastic classes along with classes on life skills. Although she was unable to pass the Class 10 examination, she has used what she learned in the life skills



Kangkana Bordoloi, centre, flanked by AKF teachers Naseem Ahmed and Famida Naaz and their students at the Ishapur community centre



A Lehar team member explains reproductive health

courses to pursue another dream. “I was heartbroken when I learnt that I hadn’t passed my Class 10 exam, I lost all hope and confidence, because I always had the desire to learn and do something more with my life,” Shabnam says.

Through the life skills courses, she gained the confidence to open a centre and share her stitching knowledge with other girls. Attending meetings and using her past experience from a boutique she was formally employed at, Shabnam opened the centre on her own. Now, when the life skills coordinator, Sajida Tabassum, who spent many hours convincing her parents to let Shabnam step out, sees her telling a student how to stitch the seam of a salwar or how to get the



Clean toilets have been installed for the girls

cut of a blouse right, she feels more than a sense of satisfaction.

It is pride as well, and as Shabnam discusses why she needs ₹7,500 to buy a new sewing machine, you can see the emerging businesswoman in her. She charges ₹100 for a salwar kameez and can make upto three a day. In addition, she runs the sewing centre between two and four every afternoon, teaching upto 10 women, whose custom she solicited by going door to door in the neighbourhood.

“I can make a salwar kameez, blouse, jumper, abaya, sharara, even a lehenga choli,” says Shabnam proudly. “Google has made my life much easier,” she adds. She asks a woman in the class to get up and model the abaya she’s wearing. Akin



Students of a government primary school at a health and hygiene session



Students at a newly installed handwash unit

to a long coat with pockets, it is Shabnam’s own design. “I put pockets in everything I make,” she says, “from my salwars to shararas.” So what’s trending right now: palazzos and straight pants. “Once I get my new machine, I will be able to teach better and sew better as well,” she says. Next month, she has promised herself.

For Bordoloi, the magic is in the transformation of the girls. Each girl is a milestone in the change they would like to see across Project Lehar, which aims to increase the capacity of adolescent girls to manage their health and well-being; enhance scholastic abilities of adolescent girls; and improve access to more productive, remunerative employment opportunities.

With funding of ₹3.34 crore for 2015 to 2018, Project Lehar was run in conjunction with the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF). The UN funding has ended now and the Aga Khan Foundation has spent ₹22 lakh on it this year.

Bordoloi has been here since almost the beginning of Project Lehar, having come in from Guwahati, and not a day goes by when she isn’t overcome by tears. Even a basic necessity like a community space where young women can meet and discuss their lives with one another, find in each other their mirror, is something that is a luxury here.

It has been a struggle for Bordoloi too, but the 30-year-old postgraduate in child rights from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences feels alive every minute of her working day. As she says, “Project Lehar has been a life-changing experience for me. It teaches you to be patient and take things one at a time. It appreciates the heterogeneity of adolescent girls and seeks to evolve according to their aspirations, building learning and capacity for learning.” ■

## Cold storages for small farmers

Low-cost machines can run on solar

Shree Padre  
Mangaluru

THIS April, for the first time, the Kunbi tribal community in Joida will harvest their crop of pickling mangoes without a trace of nervousness. They now have a cold storage right in their village where they can keep their mangoes before taking the fruit on a long journey to the nearest market. The mangoes, a local wild variety called *appe midi*, have to be harvested at a tender stage else they lose their value.

Joida, a predominantly Kunbi tribal *taluk*, is very remote and doesn't have basic facilities. From some areas, villagers trudge 20 to 30 km to catch a bus; the nearest primary health centre is 20 km away. Last May, 27 villages got electricity for the first time — for just one day.

But this same *taluk*, with so little to speak of, now has a smart cold storage. It was gifted to the villagers by CoolCrop Technologies, a company which has set out to provide storage solutions for small growers in remote areas. The company had wanted its Joida cold storage to be a hybrid one connected to the grid with solar power back-up. But the Karnataka State Electricity Board didn't allow it.

Built at a cost of ₹4 lakh, it is a low-cost machine which is sheltered under asbestos sheets and attached to the house of a young farmer, Ghanshyam Derekar, as per a decision taken by the *taluk's* Shri Siddhanath Cold Storage Committee.

"We couldn't take full advantage of the cold storage last year," says Jayananda Derekar, a local social activist. "There are a couple of pickle companies which are very interested in buying our *appe midi*. Three farmers, Shashank Derekar, Sachin Derekar and Ghanshyam Derekar, are keen to make full use of the cold storage this year. We grow vegetables like tomato, too. Except in July and August, we will be using the cold storage round the year."

Joida is, of course, famous for its tubers. Last season, the Kunbis stored their prized big tuber called *mudli* (*Colocasia esculenta*) for a few months. During the tuber harvesting season in November and December, the *mudli*, which is much prized by the Saraswath Brahmin community, sells for ₹70 per piece. By February, the price of the same tuber rises to ₹120. Keeping *mudli* in the cold storage enabled Ghanshyam Derekar to earn ₹6,000 extra in December 2017.

"We are focused on building small cold storages that run on grid or solar power for marginal farmers," says 31-year-old Niraj Marathe, founder of CoolCrop. The company's objective is to help



Kendall Nowocin, George Chen and Niraj Marathe (in blue T-shirt) outside the cold storage they built for Joida village

**CoolCrop's objective is to help low-income farmers earn more for their crops instead of selling them at throwaway prices just because they don't have storage facilities.**

low-income farmers earn more money for their crops instead of selling them at a throwaway price just because they don't have storage facilities.

India is the world's second largest producer of fruits and vegetables. But it also tops in food loss and waste. Harvest and post-harvest losses in fruits, vegetables and grains come to a whopping ₹44,000 crore every year. There are large cold storages in big cities and smaller ones mainly for the dairy industry, but rural areas need mini cold storages where fruits and vegetables can be locally stored. It is here that CoolCrop is a pioneer.

**INITIAL FORAY:** Marathe is a postgraduate in solar technology. He did a course on energy entrepreneurship in Germany and won the Siemens Students Award for his concept on solar powered cold storages. An internship from GIZ in Germany enabled him to travel deep into the rural heartland of West Bengal, Bihar and many other states for six months. Wherever he went, he saw wastage of

horticulture crops and sales at throwaway prices.

He felt the need to help underprivileged farmers. As it happened, in 2016, Marathe met Balachandra Hegde Sayimane, a farmer-journalist in Bengaluru. Sayimane was eager to help in Joida's development. So when Marathe told him he was keen to construct a cold storage facility for a needy rural area, Sayimane at once suggested Joida. After several visits to Joida and many rounds of discussion, Marathe's dream turned into reality on one side of Ghanshyam's tiny house in Joida's Deriya village.

"The company is committed to helping underprivileged farmers," says Sayimane. "Kunbis are used to storing their tubers in an underground pit. Convincing them to use the cold storage has been a Herculean task. This is probably the first time in the world that tubers are being stored in a cold storage. CoolCrop couldn't get information on data like best temperature range, not even from Africa."

Since tubers have a longer shelf life than



Ghanshyam Derekar with his tubers in the cold storage



Kendall Nowocin checks out systems

perishable fruits and vegetables the economic viability of the cold storage can be ensured if Joida's other crops, like tomato and mangoes, are stored in it, says Dr Subramanian Ramanathan, retired principal scientist of the Central Tuber Crops Research Institute (CTCRI). *Mudli* qualifies and so do *appe midi* and tomato.

The size of the cold storage is determined after studying the cultivation and harvesting pattern of the region. The Deriya model's size is 10x8x6 feet which creates a capacity of 500 cubic feet or three to four metric tonnes. Joida can now store 500 to 600 *mudlis* and earn an additional income of ₹25,000 by waiting for the price to escalate during the off-season.

Temperature and humidity in the cold storage can be adapted to different crops. Tomatoes can be kept for three weeks under 7 — 10 degrees Celsius. Cabbages will last for three to six weeks in 2 to 4 degrees Celsius. Tubers can last for three to four

months. Electricity consumption for the Joida cold storage, which is a three to four metric tonne model, is just 10 to 12 units for 24 hours, when it is filled with produce.

**PILOT PROJECTS:** CoolCrop has a five-member team. While Marathe is CEO, Kendall Nowocin, who is American, is a co-founder and Chief Technological Officer. He visits India once in two months. George Chen, another co-founder from the US, collects data on the prices of crops for the past 10 years and helps to build the xcompany's market information system. Srinivas Marella is sales consultant. Alok Das works in Odisha and looks after systems and marketing data collection. Wei Ma, also from the US, is an intern who assists Chen.

After the Joida project, the CoolCrop team didn't sit idle. They identified two more deprived farming communities, one in Odisha's Banki in Mukundpur village, and another in Gujarat's Chitral village, in Vadodara district. CoolCrop constructed a cold storage in each of these centres. The third one at Vadodara was built a few months ago.

In Banki, Pravat Kumar Nayak, a social activist, facilitated the construction of a mini cold storage for a Farmer Producer Company (FPC) called Sakshyam. The facility stores multi crops.

Nayak says three farmers of the FPC, Saratchandra Behera, Maheswar Nayak and Koshalchandra Mohapatra, took full advantage of the cold storage. "The farmers stored four tonnes of pumpkin for three months and earned an additional income of ₹12,000," says Nayak. Storage of cauliflower and potato helped them earn a profit of ₹13,000. In short, the cold storage increased their bargaining power."

"For any mini cold storage to be financially viable it should store at least 10 to 15 tonnes of vegetables in phases for six to seven months, if not for the whole year," says Marathe.

A five-tonne mini cold storage running on grid costs ₹4.5 to ₹5 lakh to build. Cost of construction doubles if it runs entirely on solar power. CoolCrop's

cold storages have control modules that can be programmed and monitored with an Android phone. Marathe says their patented controller saves around 20 to 25 percent of electricity. "This is a marketing edge for us, over conventional cold storage systems," he says. Energy consumption for a five-tonne cold storage would be around 10 to 12 units per day for 24 hours, when full.

Another customer-friendly feature is the use of Poly Urethane Foam (PUF) panels that make the cold storage modular. After a few years of use, if the capacity of the cold storage proves inadequate, its area can be easily extended by dismantling and restructuring the PUF panels. So creation of more space does not increase costs very much. For example, if a three metric tonne cold storage costs ₹3.5 lakh, an upgradation to 10 metric tonnes will work out to only ₹6 lakh.

To help farmers take the right decision on when to sell, CoolCrop has invented a software which is still at an experimental stage that predicts the prices of crops for the next 15 to 30 days.

CoolCrop's tracking module keeps tabs on crops inside the cold storage. It informs farmers when the quality of their produce is about to change, how long it can be stored and cooling energy consumed. It alerts the user if their produce is not in an idyllic environment. Both the market information facility and crop management platform are apps that can be downloaded on a mobile phone.

It wasn't as if the villagers had demanded a cold storage facility. CoolCrop took the initiative and since all three cold storages were pilot projects, the company did not charge the villagers anything.

A grant they had painstakingly obtained from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Expo Live Dubai, enabled them to bear the ₹12 lakh cost of the pilot projects.

CoolCrop met its own expenses of travel and incidental expenditure, like processing their proposals and travelling to Dubai to submit their presentation to the two agencies supporting them.

**STORAGE GAPS:** India has huge cold storages of 1,000 to 2,000 tonne capacity, all in big cities and owned by big traders and farmers. They charge ₹1 to 2 per kg per day. Small and medium farmers can't dream of storing their produce in them. In fact, storages don't even exist in areas where there is a lot of fruit and vegetable wastage. The best example is tomato-growing. But even onion, brinjal, cucumber, chillies, lemons and jackfruit suffer from lack of storage facilities.

Not that India is bereft of small cold storages. There are ones with five to 10 metric tonne capacity. But these are generally constructed and used by ice-cream companies or dairy companies. Small-scale cold storages exclusively for fruits and vegetables aren't made. CoolCrop is filling in the lacunae with its inventively designed mini cold storages ideal for villages.

Marathe says it's a tragedy that states which produce large quantities of vegetables just let them go to waste. Odisha, for example, produces a huge amount of tomatoes during the season. But after March and April, Odisha has no tomatoes. People wait for tomatoes to arrive all the way from Karnataka. The same farmers who offloaded their tomatoes during the peak season for as little as ₹5 or

Continued on page 24

Continued from page 23

₹6 per kg pay as much as ₹25 to buy a kilo of tomatoes during the off-season. While cold storages can correct such market distortions, Marathe says it's also important for farmers to plan production and diversify into agro-processing aided by cold storage facilities.

Transport too hikes costs for farmers. According to CoolCrop's data, farmers in Bihar and West Bengal pay as much as ₹1 to ₹2.5 per kilo of produce for transport since these are perishable crops and need to reach markets quickly.

"If there is an aggregation facility like a cold storage in the village, transport expenses can be minimised. We want to establish cold storages as a



The CoolCrop team outside their cold storage facility in Odisha



Niraj Marathe at work

critical part of the agricultural chain," says Marathe.

He suggests that groups of farmers in rural areas opt for a mini cold storage of three, five or 10 metric tonne capacity. After two years, if they use it and need more space they can easily extend it for a modest sum.

"Our product will not immediately bring big money to farmers. But over a period of time it can help them gain more money if used judiciously. A five to 10 metric tonne cold storage, if used for a minimum period of seven months in a year, will pay back in three and a half to four years," he says.

Marathe explained what he meant by judicious use. "Taking advantage of a cold storage facility isn't just about storing your crops for a few months and selling it later. Farmers have to be innovative in crop selection. They must grow high-value crops instead of sticking to traditional crops. They should also be able to make good decisions on when to market their stored crops," he says.

**BUSINESS MODEL:** CoolCrop is now focusing on generating revenue from the cold storage projects it plans to construct. Marathe is keen to switch to a for-profit model. "We won't build more cold storages using grants. They tend to be unsustainable. The stakeholder community doesn't own the facility and there is no motivation to make the project viable," he explains.

In July 2018, CoolCrop received the prestigious Challenge for Change award from the Rajasthan government. The award brought them orders worth ₹25 lakh. The initial cold storages or technical pilot projects gave CoolCrop valuable insight on how to proceed further.

From now on Marathe and his colleagues have decided to construct cold storages on service-mode rather than on a profit-sharing basis. The company will instal the cold storage with a partner, either a local NGO, an FPO or a government agency. Social motivation, regular operations, paying electricity bills and general upkeep will be the responsibility of the local partner who will pay CoolCrop a prefixed rent on a per kg basis of crop stored. On an average, charges will be around 20 paise per kg per day. The partner will also facilitate technology adoption, inspire farmers to grow high-value crops and create awareness about marketing.

"At Joida, we wanted to help farmers figure out what is best. But we can't force them to grow capsicum to use the cold storage and get very high returns," says Marathe. "We are solution providers. Infrastructure alone isn't enough. After installing five cold storages, we are aware of our limitations. For a project to be successful, creating the right partnership and operational model is as important as technological intervention."

CoolCrop now has 10 confirmed orders for cold storages. Two are for the Tata Trusts in Gujarat, two for the Bihar Agri Growth and Reform Initiative and six for the Rajasthan government which is offering 50 percent subsidy for cold storage structures. Proposals for 15 more cold storages in eastern India — in West Bengal, Sikkim and Odisha — are under process.

"Agriculture has also to be seen as part of business. Just because you inherit land you don't have to become a farmer. You need to have decent savings at the end of the day," says Marathe who believes cold storage facilities can be a tool to increase, even double, farmers' income.

In the next five years, Marathe's target is to instal 500 cold storages all over the country. "Even if we achieve 200, that's not bad. You can't work unless you are an optimist. We have to take every failure as a lesson," he says. ■

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# BAMBOO'S INCENSE STICK CONNECTION

## Local growers can meet rising demand and replace imports

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

**A**FTER it went from being a 'tree' to a 'grass' and got freed from the over-protective clutches of the forest department, the opportunities with bamboo have been increasing.

The National Bamboo Mission sees in its wider cultivation a trigger for driving up farmers' incomes. If used for value-added products like furniture, for which there is growing global demand, the hope is that it will lead to the acquiring of skills and provide much needed jobs.

Bamboo's untapped potential is really quite huge. The *agarbatti* or incense stick industry, for instance, needs an endless supply of good quality bamboo splinters for making its sticks.

*Agarbatti* makers in India use 80,000 to 90,000 tonnes of processed bamboo a year. Business has been growing at a brisk pace every year. There is also a premium market internationally for organic incense sticks which has expanded along with the interest in yoga and meditation.

But around 60 percent of the bamboo the Indian *agarbatti* industry needs is imported from China and Vietnam. This is because the bamboo splinters for making incense sticks have to be of a certain quality and standard. They also have to be processed before they reach manufacturers.

The problem in India is that the cultivation of bamboo is disorganised and the produce consequently is uneven in quality. Growers have traditionally served the paper industry where the bamboo is needed just as biomass.

Indian bamboo growers haven't been shown how to meet specialised needs. The result is a whole lot of lost opportunities all the way up the value chain from cultivation to processing and manufacture.

The All-India *Agarbatti* Manufacturers' Association (AIAMA) through its president, Sarath Babu, a Bengaluru-based entrepreneur, has been pitching hard for a policy that recognises these opportunities.

"We want the bamboo policy in the country to be oriented to the *agarbatti* industry because of the opportunities that will be provided to growers and those involved with processing and



Sharath Babu

**The bamboo that the *agarbatti* industry needs should have nodes which are one foot apart. Tissue culture can ensure this and make bamboo easier to process.**

value addition," says Babu.

"We currently provide employment to large numbers of rural women who work in production units with flexible timings. There is much scope for increasing household incomes through more such employment," he says.

"The consumer accepts only the finely finished round bamboo which we are now sourcing from Vietnam and China. We know we have the resource but we need the people who will convert it and give it to us," explains Babu.

Imports result in Indian *agarbatti* makers taking a hit of ₹450 crore or so in a year. Better local production would make them more competitive.

"Growing bamboo and converting it into an *agarbatti* stick is a value-added service and can support a small-scale industry or rural households anywhere in India. We can provide livelihoods to

many people scattered across India who have access to bamboo," says Babu.

But, first, greater sophistication is required. Bamboo grown in the wild cannot be processed because the yield is very low and it is not economically viable. The cultivation has to be made more scientific.

"When we grow bamboo using tissue culture and other techniques it can be as per our requirement. Since the end-users needs are being met, bamboo processing as a business becomes more viable and profitable," explains Babu.

The bamboo that the *agarbatti* industry needs should have nodes which are one foot apart. Tissue culture can ensure this. Bamboo grown scientifically is also easier to process.

"We have been working with people who do tissue culture of bamboo and provide saplings to

the paper industry and companies that grow bamboo to be carbon neutral. So there are people who can give us the tissue culture sample where the length between two nodes is one foot which is what we require," says Babu.

"Bamboo growing and processing should be seen as an industry in itself. When it is grown and given to a big industry like the paper industry it is just the biomass that is being given. But when it is processed and cut into smaller pieces like *agarbatti* sticks the value addition is very high. And whatever remains of the bamboo can also be sold off as biomass," he says.

Currently there is no reliable figure for bamboo grown and purchased in India. But the *agarbatti* industry knows that it imports 60,000 tonnes in a year. And given that its requirement is about 90,000 tonnes, it can be deduced that 30,000 tonnes or so is purchased locally. Most of it is bought from the northeastern states and Madhya Pradesh.

The opportunity lies in promoting organised and scientific methods of cultivation. Babu believes it is easy to produce 45 to 50 tonnes of bamboo per acre in a year. Out of that would come 6,000 kg of *agarbatti* sticks worth about ₹3 lakh. A farmer growing bamboo on wasteland, in addition to other crops, could hope to make ₹30,000 to ₹40,000 per acre in a year.

Bamboo takes about four years to grow from the time it is planted. With superior saplings using tissue culture it takes two and a half to three years. There is, therefore, no substitute for a sustained and planned effort.

"In other countries they grow bamboo to meet the needs of different industries like bamboo for *agarbatti*, bamboo for paper, bamboo for furniture. They do scientific farming by having 30 to 35 plots. They use one plot for one year and shift to the next one and so on. So after 30 or 35 months they would come back to the same plot," explains Babu.

After the Union government came up with a policy to promote bamboo, it is the states which have to take over. But the response has been patchy.

Some states like Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Maharashtra have come forward and started making farmers aware of the potential of growing bamboo. But it is not enough and Babu's pitch to the Union government has been to take up one project and make it successful so that it can serve as a model.

It is beyond manufacturers of *agarbattis* or any other product to establish all the linkages from growing bamboo to processing it. But a single successful initiative supported by the government could show what is possible. It would encourage entrepreneurs, voluntary organisations and investors to get involved in bringing together the many segments of a successful bamboo economy. ■

## Do ministers matter?



**DELHI  
DARBAR**

**SANJAYA BARU**

TIME was when Hyderabad had become famous for being home to the largest council of ministers. More recently it has been in the news for hosting the country's smallest cabinet! Chief Minister T. Anjaiah had the misfortune to induct over 60 members of the state legislature in his council of ministers so as to ward off any dissidence. His was dubbed a jumbo ministry, given its size. By that token, Telangana chief minister K. Chandrashekar Rao had, for over two months in office, a 'scooter' sized ministry — with only a CM and a deputy CM in office.

Telangana Rashtra Samiti spokespersons have said that the delay in putting in place a full ministry was on account of Mr Rao's plan to restructure departments. The media speculated that it had something to do with astrological constraints. Even so, Mr Rao has proved during his first two months in office, after re-election to a second term, that a government can be run by two ministers.

Technically, the government can be run by one — the CM. All other ministries can be run by secretaries to the government who take their instructions directly from the CM. The problem is that the Constitution does not permit that. The Constitution says that the Union government shall have a "council of ministers headed by the Prime Minister" and State governments shall have a "council of ministers headed by the Chief Minister". This phraseology requires that there be more than one person in the council. Mr Rao, therefore, inducted one more person.

In trying to deal with whatever political exigency or astrological prediction he was faced with, Mr Rao has proved that governments do not require large ministries, even if the council of ministers has to have more than one person. This situation is a far call from the days when CMs and the PM had to form jumbo ministries to accommodate all manner of political constituents and their eager requirements.

It was in response to the ever-growing size of the council of ministers at the state and central level

that the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government moved an amendment to the Constitution in 2003, inserting clause (1A) in Article 75 that said that the council of ministers should not have more than 15 percent of the members of the Lok Sabha in it. Since the Lok Sabha has 545 members (543 elected and two nominated) the Union government cannot have more than 82 ministers. The second Manmohan Singh ministry set the record with as many as 79 ministers and the Narendra Modi government has not lagged behind with 78 members in the council of ministers.

Both the PM and the CMs have gotten over the restriction imposed by the 15 percent rule by inducting members of Parliament and State



Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao had a 'scooter'-sized ministry for over two months

legislatures into positions that enable them to acquire all the perks and privileges of being a minister — a government house, with several aides and assistants, a government-owned vehicle or two with fuel paid for, air and train travel at government expense and so on. Thus, many state governments have inducted MLAs into government with the title of 'parliamentary secretary'.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh got over the 15 percent rule by liberally giving cabinet and minister of state rank to chairperson and members of the various official commissions and committees he appointed. In the past this privilege was enjoyed mainly by the Planning Commission whose deputy chairman had cabinet rank and members had MoS rank. But during the tenure of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government not only was this privilege extended to the National Advisory Council, headed by Sonia Gandhi, who enjoyed cabinet rank and privileges, but to a large number of expert committees like the National Knowledge Commission, headed by Sam Pitroda, the National

Commission for Enterprises in Unorganised sector, chaired by Arjun Sengupta and so on.

Over the years many chief ministers have given cabinet rank to various MLAs heading some committee or the other, or some public enterprise or the other. An MLA chairing a committee and enjoying cabinet rank would ensure that his letterhead said so — chairman of so-and-so committee (with Cabinet Rank)! After all, at the end of the day, being a minister is mainly about perks and privileges, isn't it. Most of the work is done by the permanent civil service.

Normally, the size of a ministry should not have administrative and governance consequences apart from inflicting a fiscal burden on the exchequer.

However, there has been a negative fallout of the creation of more ministries than required. After all, the number of issues a government normally deals with are limited. So what does a CM or a PM do? Bisect, trisect and split ministries. Thus, instead of a Ministry for Education, we have a ministry for school education, higher education, technical education, and so on. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi thought he would end that splintering by creating a Ministry for Human Resources Development, but there is the office of the MoS to accommodate junior MPs.

Many experts have urged successive PMs to ensure a coordinated energy policy for India by having one cabinet minister for energy. Even Narendra Modi has not been able to ensure that.

Thus we have different ministers for oil and gas, coal, renewables, nuclear and so on. The same with transportation and industry. Moreover, since more ministries means more secretaries to the government the bureaucracy too acquires a vested interest in the creation of multiple ministries.

The only amalgamation of ministries that has been done in recent times was when the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) succeeded in wresting a post back from their Indian Administrative Service (IAS) counterparts by integrating the ministry for overseas Indian affairs into the external affairs ministry. A "foreign travel" job of the IAS was taken back by the IFS!

In the end, ministers matter in a political system in which they bring not only their experience and political judgement to a job but also ensure dispersal of power within a political party. However, if all political power is centralised with the PM and CM, how does the size of a ministry matter, beyond its fiscal impact? ■

Sanjaya Baru is a writer based in New Delhi

## Fixing some fundamentals



**BACK TO  
SCHOOL**

**DILEEP RANJEKAR**

WHEN I was a child, a cousin posed a riddle to me. He asked: "How many rotis can you eat on an empty stomach?" I enthusiastically replied: "Seven rotis!" My cousin laughed wickedly and retorted: "Nobody can eat more than one roti on an empty stomach because after one roti, the stomach is no longer empty."

I can ask a similar question about toilets in government schools. How many children can use the toilet in a government school? The answer could well be the same — one at the most! Because, after that the toilet would be unusable since there is no running water in most toilets. In my earlier columns I have already described the state of toilets in our government schools.

Many times, I have found even the toilet attached to the office of the principal of a District Institute of Education Training (DIET) unusable — because the pipe of the urinal is broken and the toilet does not have water.

Many states have enterprising bureaucrats who launch very ambitious initiatives. They invite some good people from across the country to join these missions and they hold several meetings to finally draw up strong recommendations on several developmental issues.

Sunidhi (name changed) was one such bright mind who was appointed coordinator of such a committee in a particular state. She was well-meaning, energetic and knowledgeable about the work entrusted to her. During one of my visits to the state capital, she was very keen to meet me. But I was tied up with our own field meetings so she offered to meet me in our office, over lunch. We met briefly and she described the new, large (125,000 square feet) building they had commissioned which she said I must visit and see. I smiled. She asked me the reason for my smile. I asked her whether she had visited the toilet in our rental office premises. She confirmed having used it and being pleasantly surprised by its cleanliness. I said that even if she visited us 10 years later, our toilet would still be the same. And the reason I smiled was that I knew that the government was famous for creating excellent infrastructure but invariably failing to maintain its premises. She concurred.

Many of the Azim Premji Foundation's Teacher Learning Centres (TLCs) are on government premises. The government is kind enough to allow

us to use a few rooms in some of their large schools or offices to create a learning and resource space for teachers which they voluntarily visit after their working hours. One such TLC is situated in a Block Education Office. The toilet of this TLC is on the ground floor — next to the toilet of the Block Education Office. I was very amused to note that most of the government office staff preferred to use our toilet because it was cleaner and more comfortable.

What is the difference in the toilets? There are three critical points: First, we have marginally repaired the tiles and fixtures. Two, we have a housekeeping person who visits and cleans the toilet twice a day. And three, probably the most important, we have running water.

For any infrastructure to be maintained well, we need budgets, a system of supervising maintenance and some decent culture for appropriate usage of



For any infrastructure to be maintained well, we need a budget and a system

the facility. In my extensive travels across various states, I come across schools, DIETs and Block Education Offices that do not have basic facilities. It is high time we fix this problem of inadequate or substandard amenities in government schools and offices. It is high time we stop treating some 200 million children in government schools as second class or third class citizens of this nation. Here are some basic issues to be fixed:

**INFRASTRUCTURE:** In school after school, children are made to sit in classrooms that are unsafe, unhygienic and not conducive to learning. Walls are peeling off, painting has not been done for years, benches do not exist, even the floors on which children are required to sit are uneven and uncomfortable. The quality and adequacy of education access needs dramatic improvement. We must provide safe, hygienic, cheerful, well-ventilated, non-leaky classrooms — at least one classroom per grade. We must provide decent benches, blackboards, painted walls and ceilings. The Right to Education Act has defined certain infrastructure and facilities in schools which must

be provided for meticulously. Boys and girls must have separate toilets with running water at all times.

**TEACHER-PUPIL RATIO:** The Right to Education Act has very clearly prescribed an appropriate teacher-pupil ratio for different levels of education. While at the state level, the teacher-pupil ratio appears to be within prescribed limits, at school level, it is quite inadequate. In several districts of various states, as many as 40 percent of schools are single-teacher schools and almost 10 percent have no official teacher at all. The Block Education Officers make unofficial arrangements to ensure that the schools have at least one teacher. As a result, almost 70 percent of our schools have unplanned multi-grade teaching-learning situation. If we have to ensure the prescribed teacher-pupil ratio, thousands of additional teachers will have to be appointed. And this needs significant commitment of budgets.

**SCHOOL PRINCIPALS:** Research has repeatedly established the criticality of school leadership in ensuring the quality of schools and yet a very large percentage of schools either don't have a principal or have a temporary in-charge. The same is true of principals of DIETs in several districts. Without the appointment of principals, the DIETs are rudderless. The role of DIETs is critical for improving the quality of education in a district. That purpose is not achieved owing to several DIETs not having the prescribed strength of faculty or prescribed training and residential facility including IT support and libraries.

**MID-DAY MEALS:** The mid-day meal programme was made mandatory in 2006 and existed even before that. The primary objective was to provide hot, cooked meals to every child covered by the scheme to ensure 450 calories of energy, 12 gm of protein and micronutrients. We need to seriously evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of the mid-day meal programme including the adequacy of the budgets provided. Thousands of school principals spend money from their own pockets to buy vegetables, condiments and other material needed for providing a decent meal to children. The reimbursement of such expenses is delayed for several months. The overall budgets of this scheme simply do not allow its objectives to be achieved.

How can we aspire to achieve quality education in India if we don't address these basic issues and don't create enabling conditions for schools to achieve their education goals? How can we sustain a highly inequitable situation where about 25 percent of schoolchildren in the country study in superior conditions, including air-conditioned schools, and 75 percent of our students suffer the ignominy of pathetic conditions in which they receive education? ■

Dileep Ranjekar is CEO of the Azim Premji Foundation

# Why Gandhi still inspires



VILLAGE VOICES

R. BALASUBRAMANIAM

THE entire nation will be marking Mahatma Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary throughout 2019. For many like me, born in independent India, Gandhi and his life were introduced to us as part of our school curriculum. To us, he was the 'father of the nation' whose birthday we celebrated each year and remembered for securing us our freedom from the British. This limited view of Gandhi is what I carried for a long time until I began to understand him, his life and his message a little more deeply.

My life's work in the space of human development, especially amongst the indigenous tribals of Mysuru district, was inspired by the transformational message of Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi. If Swami Vivekananda asked the youth of India to observe *seva* (service) and *tyaga* (sacrifice) as our national ideals, it was the message of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *satya* (truth) that drew me to Gandhi. I saw in him someone more than the freedom fighter my teachers had described him as. He was a politician, a strategist, a philosopher, a humanist, a spiritual seeker, a scientist, a shrewd manager, a difficult husband and father, a social worker, an activist, a saint and a patriot all rolled into one. It was difficult for someone like me to comprehend the magnitude of his life, his personality and the fact that he meant so much to so many different people. Einstein's words that people in the future would scarcely believe that such a person in flesh and blood walked upon this earth, resonated with me.

For Gandhi, the ideals of *ahimsa* and *satya* were not just something he borrowed from the scriptural wisdom of ancient India. For him, practice of these values was spiritual *sadhana* on the one hand and political action on the other. The shrewd strategist that he was, he fashioned the practice of them into powerful weapons to be used in his fight against the British. Gandhi's demanding expression of these ideals that he believed in, made him someone easily admired but rarely emulated. He redefined political morality and public probity with such high standards that the politicians of today pale in comparison to what he stood for. Gandhi believed that morality was not a fancy aspiration but an essential ingredient for the exercise of political leadership.

For Gandhi, human existence was an extraordinary opportunity not to be wasted in ordinary pursuits. Seeking God was the very purpose of such existence and he uniquely transformed his own personal spiritual journey into a quest for societal progress. Gandhi understood

that 'man' was the building block of society and ensuring a value-driven existence at the personal level would necessarily translate into a healthy society. He used symbolism to very powerful effect in communicating the centrality of this message. Whether it was the *charkha* and homespun *khadi*, natural medicine, his concepts of need versus greed, his food habits or daily tasks reflecting self-reliance — he ensured that one needed to start with oneself before expecting any major social transformation. Today, what we are left with are the symbols — bereft of the philosophical message Gandhi gave us.

Gandhi intelligently addressed the issue of inspiring people to engage in social upliftment and national reconstruction. His famous quote, "The best way to find oneself is to lose yourself in the service of others", wonderfully captures this intent of his. To the more discerning, he made living for 'others' a 'spiritual pursuit'. The transience of human achievement and the impermanence of material wealth were of critical consideration to this thinking. What he attempted to demonstrate by his lifestyle was to show us a higher reason to live and a higher state to reach within the limitations and boundaries of human existence. He has, in very simple terms, given us a higher ideal to strive for and in this striving he found answers to the material problems of the suffering millions too. In doing so, he assured us that an indomitable power would come to us and we would be able to throw away all our concerns for ourselves and place ourselves as servants of society and use our inner energy and will to transcend the problems of our human brethren.

Gandhi believed that poverty was the worst form of violence and wanted the person in the last mile to participate in the economic well-being of the nation. When we are celebrating India's growth story, we need to understand that our dream for India should not be mere 8 percent growth alone, but development that is inclusive, participatory and encompasses India's rural areas. Without romanticising Gandhi, we need to understand how rural India has been left out of our growth story and how the Indian economy today has become urban-centric and urban-driven. While Gandhian cottage industry has lost much of its relevance, his economic belief in small being beautiful has not. We now need to integrate his thoughts in making sure that the toiling millions are not left off the economic

bandwagon. His ideas on micro-enterprises need to see the light of day as rural social business units that are driven by the land-based economy. Beyond mere economic growth and creating jobs and business ownership, such enterprises will also ensure improved social status of rural communities, reduce urban migration and enhance the quality of life in rural areas in line with what Gandhi had hoped.

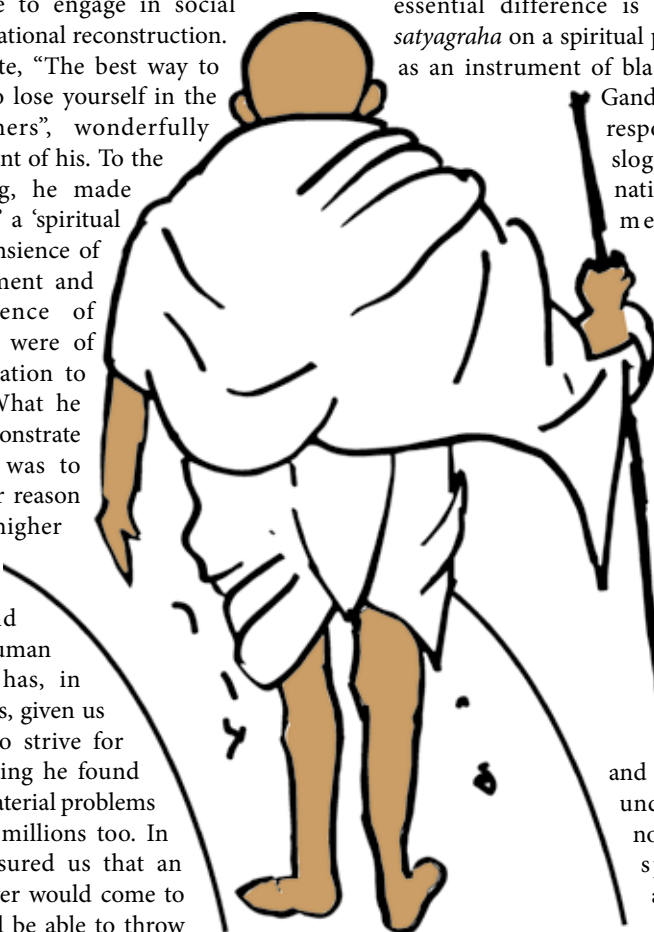
Another oft-repeated cliché in today's India is *satyagraha* and many have started equating ordinary street protests and narrow political dissent with one of Gandhi's most powerful methods. The essential difference is that Gandhi based his *satyagraha* on a spiritual platform and never saw it as an instrument of blackmail or manipulation.

Gandhi saw it as a demanding responsibility and not mere sloganeering or waving the national flag. He saw it as a means of moral transformation and self-purification. In Gandhi's view, a true *satyagrahi* lived his values from within and displayed no hatred or dislike towards any person or system. All that the *satyagrahi* has is a deep and engaging love for truth and he keeps expressing his views until he can achieve his intended end by not just peaceful means but also by constant self-analysis of his methods and actions. In the Gandhian understanding of peaceful non-violence, there was no space for self-aggrandisement or for the theatrics that we keep seeing in the public arena

today. Gandhi was clear in not just the meaning but also the spirit of *satyagraha* and was always conscious that *satya* and *agraha* went together.

The 150 years milestone is an apt time for us to go beyond mere intellectualisation of Gandhi and his message or building a Swachh Bharat. Keeping aside petty political debate over who are the natural inheritors of his philosophy, it is time for our politicians and people to pause and reflect on what made Gandhi, the Mahatma. We need to be constantly aware of our commitment to love, peace, non-violence and truth on an individual level and strive to live it in the small actions we perform. Living his message on a daily basis for all our lives is the only way to realise the India of Gandhi's dreams. And that can happen only when we awaken the Mahatma in each one of us. ■

Dr R. Balasubramaniam, founder of the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement, Mysuru, is a development activist and author. [www.drbbalu.com](http://www.drbbalu.com)



# An Afghan Charlie Chaplin

Parwana's puppet show is a laugh riot

Rwit Ghosh  
New Delhi

THE room is crowded with eager children waiting for the puppet show to begin. Onstage is Abdulhaq Haqjoo whose puppet plays the role of a zoo owner. He has a vacancy, he says. His zoo needs a zookeeper. Where are the resumes, he demands. Haqjoo's voice is expressive and his audience is enthralled. The applicants line up. They are all children who have come with their own puppets to demonstrate their ability to run a zoo. But none makes the grade.

In walks Charlie Chaplin — he is an Afghan but has the trademark moustache, baggy pants, bowler hat and cane. He eagerly hands over his resume to the zoo owner propped on Haqjoo's hand. A brief conversation follows. Afghan Charlie Chaplin gets the job. He is now zookeeper for a range of animals. What follows is a series of rib-tickling adventures and gags as Afghan Charlie Chaplin goes about feeding the animals.

A synergy of theatre and puppetry, Afghan Charlie Chaplin brought the curtains down on the International Ishara Puppet Festival held at the India Habitat Centre in February. Puppeteers from Germany, the UK, Italy, Tunisia and Iran performed a variety of shows that were hilarious, moving, adventurous and socially uplifting.

The creator of Afghan Charlie Chaplin, Haqjoo, is a professor of theatre at Kabul University. In 2007, Haqjoo, then a second-year student at the Faculty of Fine Arts in the university, attended a workshop on puppet-making in Berlin through a scholarship he received from the Goethe-Institut. Haqjoo's dream was to work with puppets. While in Berlin, he applied to the Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts. He spent two weeks prepping for the exam by doing short pieces on object theatre, public speaking and drama, and was accepted. Only 11 out of 1,000 applicants generally make it.

Back in Kabul after his course, he continued to perform for adults and children, incorporating puppetry in theatre. He founded the Parwaz Puppet Theatre in 2009 and subsequently, the Parwana Cultural and Artistic Theatre, with which he tours various countries.

The role of Afghan Charlie Chaplin is performed by 25-year-old Karim Asir. "When I was a child, I had a motorbike accident and because of that I can't keep my legs straight," explains Asir. "I grew up watching Charlie Chaplin movies for fun but as I grew older I realised that he was also delivering powerful messages without using any language."

Haqjoo recalls that when Asir first joined his theatre classes, he found it really frustrating to teach



Afghan Charlie Chaplin with the zookeeper and a lion he has to feed



Director Abdulhaq Haqjoo holding up his puppet flanked by Abdulkebar Haqjoo and Karim Asir

him. "I would teach students how to walk, how to be onstage and so on. With Karim Asir I had problems because of the way he walked." In exasperation Haqjoo told Asir that he was just like Charlie Chaplin down to his hair, his mannerisms and his movements.

For Asir, this was a eureka moment. Here was his

chance to embody his favourite actor. "When my teacher (Haqjoo) told me not to walk like Charlie Chaplin, I asked him if I really walked like him. It struck me I could use make-up, wear Charlie Chaplin clothes and see how I looked in the mirror. When I did this my classmates really appreciated it."

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From then on, for the next two years, Asir immersed himself in studying everything related to Charlie Chaplin, his biography, his background and why he did what he did.

Early in his career Asir acted in small spots for a private television channel in Kabul, addressing social issues like littering on the streets. He now seriously began to learn how to act like Charlie Chaplin.

"At first, I was scared because I was not sure

**'One of my goals is to show the world that here is an Afghan guy who is ready to bring a smile on your face.'**



Abdulhaq applies makeup on Asir's face before his performance



Children with their puppets wait for the show to start

whether I really looked like Charlie Chaplin or whether I could actually be Charlie Chaplin because those are two different personalities. Acting and being someone else are two different things," he explains. In the course of a year, with Haqjoo's help, Asir perfected his technique. He devoted his time initially to simply learning how to walk like Charlie Chaplin. "It was like a seed inside me that was growing," says Asir.

Performing in Afghanistan has not always been easy for the theatre group. Haqjoo narrates an incident, to illustrate the kind of situations they

contend with. The *mullahs* of the Taliban came to one of his performances which had live music and asked him to shut it down. Haqjoo instead invited them to sit through the performance and if they found anything questionable, they could feel free to order him to shut it down.

"There were six *mullahs* and after five minutes of the performance they were laughing loudly. I was filming the show but whenever I aimed my camera at them they would assume straight faces," says Haqjoo. "After the show they apologised to us. They said they had learnt a lot and not to stop what we were doing."

Afghanistan has for decades been stereotyped globally as a country that is war-torn and miserable. But Haqjoo and Asir just want to make people laugh and draw their attention to some key social issues.

"I've been searching for a way to show people outside Afghanistan that art is alive in my country. The media portrays us as a country ravaged by war, but we do have art and theatre. One of my goals is to show the world that here is an Afghan guy who is ready to bring a smile to your face, make you laugh and forget about all your issues for a while," says Asir with a mischievous glint in his eye.

This is the second time the Parwana Cultural and Artistic Theatre is performing in India. They had come in 2016 but this is the first time they presented the Afghan Charlie Chaplin.

"People in Afghanistan are always thinking of war. I love to divert children's thoughts from war to being happy, to laughing with each other and, most important, to being human and loving each other," says Haqjoo. "For me the most important trait is humaneness. I tell all my students, if you aren't a good human, your art doesn't matter — it has no impact on society. Be a good human and you will be a good influence on people."

The Ishara Puppet Festival started in 2001 with a grant from the Ford Foundation. Initially, only puppeteers from India took part. Over the years it has evolved into an international festival. "Next year we are holding the festival from February 14 onwards and already a couple of groups have applied," says Dadi Pudumjee, managing trustee.

Some of the countries which participate consistently highlight socially relevant issues. Iran, for example, has always brought performances relating to social change as well as war, peace, kindness and love. Others, like Parwana, bring shows that delight children.

Last year, the Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust started a five-month foundation course on puppetry. For three and a half months students are taught the intricacies of puppetry. After that, they intern either with a puppetry troupe or in schools for a month and a half. Gagan Kumar, a 23-year-old, has just completed the course and is looking forward to combining puppetry with pedagogy. ■

## Maestros to *shaadi* bands at music museum



A medley of instruments

Susheela Nair  
Bengaluru

THE Indian Music Experience (IME), India's only high-tech interactive music museum, is Bengaluru's latest cultural hub. Sprawled across 50,000 square feet, the museum is an encyclopedia of Indian music, presented in an engaging manner for audiences young and old.

It has nine interactive exhibition galleries, a Sound Garden with 10 musical sculptures, a learning centre for serious learners and hobby enthusiasts, a cafe, a gift store and a lot more. The music museum celebrates the best of architecture and design.

It is the brainchild of M.R. Jaishankar, chairman and managing director of the Brigade Group, one of India's leading developers. An art lover, Jaishankar was inspired by the Experience Music Project he saw in Seattle, in the US.

Explaining the concept of the museum, Dr Suma Sudhindra, director, outreach, says, "This is a one-of-its-kind museum which tells the entire story of India's vast and varied musical heritage through digital content and cutting-edge technology. We have researched and documented musical treasures from across the country. The museum runs on the formula of 'see, hear, touch and discover'. Here one can play songs, touch the instruments, listen to the music, read about the artistes and know their work."

We begin by going to the Sound Garden which features 10 installations like wind chimes, tubular bells, flower gongs and singing stones which introduce visitors to the principles of sound. Manasi Prasad, museum director, explains, "One can explore the principles of sound through 10 specially designed 'playful' musical sculptures. Through different materials, we have created installations that will engage people so that they can understand sound



Flower gongs in the Sound Garden



The music museum has an airy cafe



The marriage band also finds space

and vibrations and feel the concepts of resonance, vibration, pitch, frequency and timbre come to life. At the Sound Garden, anyone can be a musician!"

A digital replica of an 18th century Rajasthani painting that celebrates feminine beauty leads us into the exhibit gallery. Inside, after watching a brief introductory film, I set out to explore the nine galleries. In the first gallery, titled Contemporary Expressions, I took a stroll down a busy street in Bengaluru and relived the early days of independent 'indie' rock music in India. Hybrid sounds, Daler Mehndi's performance costume and auto-rickshaw mini-theatres are the highlights of this section.

From there I moved on to the Living Traditions Gallery where I learnt what the basic concepts of *sruti*, *raga*, *tala*, *gharaa*, *dhrupad*, *khayal*, *kutcheri* really meant. I got first-hand experience of Carnatic and Hindustani music through interactive touchscreen displays. In the Music of Devotion, Living Traditions Gallery, which celebrates India's diverse and rich cultural heritage, I caught a glimpse of the myriad forms of devotional music across the

**The museum tells the entire story of India's vast and varied musical tradition through digital content and cutting-edge technology.**

country. 'Songs of the People' is all about folk and tribal communities of India, their songs and the contexts in which these songs are sung. It also features *kaavad*, an oral tradition of storytelling in Rajasthan. The *kaavad* box — a colourful painted wooden box with several doors that unfold to reveal new chapters of the story — grabbed my attention.

The Instruments Gallery has a stunning floor-to-ceiling display of 108 Indian musical instruments, with an interactive display that provides information on their origin, craftsmanship and sound. Each of the 108 instruments exhibited here has a history. The gallery showcases Vidwan Manjunath's *ghatam*, Dr M.L. Vaasanthakumari's *tambura*, a peacock-shaped *mayura veena*, and intriguing metal horns, leather drums, stringed wooden creations and a variety of mouth harps. The curious visitor can dig deeper into each instrument and musical tradition through a digital interface with audio and video clips.

There is also a Songs of Struggle gallery which explores music from India's national movement, from Gandhi and his *bhajans* to songs of protest and patriotism in pop culture. Over 35 versions of "Vande Mataram", a replica of Mahatma Gandhi's letter to M.S. Subbulakshmi, and patriotic songs from Hindi films across the ages are the highlights of this gallery. It takes one back into a time when ethnic music influenced the prevailing political environment.

Melting Pot is a narrative of the influence of Western music on Indian music and vice versa. One

can cherish vignettes from different eras of Hindi cinema displayed on inset screens in the Stories Through Song gallery. It transports one back to a time when travelling 'bioscopes' were used to screen films. Here one can discover the landmarks and legends of Hindi film music and find the diverse influences of various genres of music in film songs.

In the eighth gallery, I traced the journey of recorded sound in India and learnt about the pioneers of recording. From the gramophone to the mobile phone, the way that music is recorded and disseminated has evolved. The highlight of this Reaching Out gallery is an aesthetically designed and memorable photo-op featuring a Bengali household from the 1920s where the gramophone occupied pride of place. At the Recording Studio, one can sing by choosing a background track, record oneself and select the album cover, and finally email the final track to oneself. It is an experience that no music buff would want to miss.

The Stars gallery or The Hall of Fame at the IME features 100 legends of Indian music from different genres. Occupying pride of place are precious memorabilia that once belonged to Bharat Ratna musicians. They include the *shehnai* of Ustad Bismillah Khan, the *tambura* of Vidushi M.S. Subbulakshmi and the concert attire of Bhimsen Joshi.

I rounded off my musical tour with a visit to the gift shop which features exclusively designed IME merchandise such as posters, postcards, T-shirts, key chains and more. ■

### FACT FILE

**Getting there:** Brigade Millennium Avenue, Opp. Woodrose Club, JP Nagar 7th Phase, Bengaluru  
**Visiting hours:** Tuesday to Sunday, 10 am to 6 pm  
**Contact:** +91 96866 02366



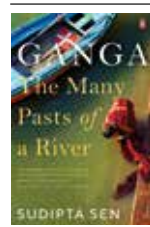
# Dark waters of holy Ganga

By Sudhirendar Sharma

THE Ganga strangely represents the physical manifestation of an accepted mythological duality — to be divine and vulnerable at any given time. Revered as a goddess, the river is endowed with two contrasting characters: one as an eternal deity of flowing waters, the other as a carrier of accumulated human misdeeds. This beguiling duality has allowed the river to be worshipped and neglected at the same time, regardless of its worth as a finite and tangible resource. Flowing through the heart of an ancient civilisation, the unholy alliance between purity and pollution has kept this enigmatic cultural icon on the very edge of survival. It continues to survive nonetheless!

In an insightful account of the myth, religion, history and development of the sacred river, Sudipta Sen, a historian from the University of California, delves into the duality of approaches adopted to ease the Ganga of the vexing problems afflicting its purity and flow. While attempts to cleanse the river of its pollution load have been victims of their own top-down ambitious scope, the mythological history of the river makes it difficult for multitudes of Indians to accept that the river may be in imminent danger. Despite the evidence of an unprecedented ecological decline, the unstinted faith in the divine powers of the river makes it easy for a vast majority to espouse confidence that the Ganga will never go dry like the great Yellow River of China.

But can the Ganga's miraculous powers heal its



Ganga: The Many Past of a River  
Sudipta Sen  
Penguin  
₹799

own scars? Sen lets mythology speak for itself to serve a possible clue. During her descent to the world, an anxious Ganga had asked King Bhagiratha: where shall she cleanse herself after people wash off all their sins in her waters? In his unexpected reply, the king had expressed confidence in the moral obligation of all upright mortals to carry out the unenviable task of expiating the sins of the world. Such is the power of mythology that it continues to inspire faith that the collective power of the sinners will rise one day to restore the river to its pristine state. Will it?

Within the study of the significant historical moments that shaped the river, the book offers two parallel but inter-related threads that connect the mythical and historical with climate and ecology in getting a sense of the cumulative consequences of human activity from the past to the present. Far from learning any lessons from its rich history, argues the author, the uneven contours of the past are very much at work today. The purest of all rivers continues to remain the most polluted. And, there is no getting away from the fact that the great cultural

icon is in trouble, suffocated by dams, encroached by overcrowding and desecrated by discharge.

Ganga contains, for anyone interested in how a river shapes human culture and its history, stimulating multilayered interpretations on its metaphysical threshold. It is an ambitious undertaking that blends geography, ecology, mythology and religion in presenting an intimate biography of a most sacred and beloved river. It is as much a celebration of its glorious past as a mourning of its pathetic present. It is a scholarly treatise

which, by the author's own admission, took 12 years to write, and is essential reading for those interested in understanding a river from its diverse social, cultural and spiritual perspectives.

The book offers no quick fixes on redeeming the river from the civilisational onslaught. It instead asks why the Ganga, held in such reverence across a multitude of religious traditions, remains hostage to the promise of development and risks of degradation. It provokes the discerning reader into grappling with the river's rich past and its most uncertain future. At a time when the cleansing and the purification of the Ganga have become an urgent and much-vaunted national priority, the book offers a nuanced understanding of the river from a cultural and civilisational perspective. A river which has watered and nurtured an entire civilisation from time immemorial cannot be left contaminated, carrying an unbearable burden of silt and detritus. Sen argues that it is time we identify what stands in the way of tangible progress toward a cleaner and healthier river. The time to act has never been as urgent! ■

Dr Sudhirendar Sharma is an independent writer, researcher and academic

BOOK EXTRACT/ COMING OUT AS DALIT

# A secret life in school

In *Coming out as Dalit*, Yashica Dutt skilfully weaves her life story of growing up as a Dalit with the history of the Dalit movement in India. Dutt's father was an excise officer and her mother worked at several jobs to make ends meet. All their earnings were invested in their children's education. Dutt writes how she hid her identity all through school and college and the tremendous sense of liberation she felt when she finally made her background public. Dutt is now a journalist based in New York. An extract from her book.

Most parents who grow up underprivileged, especially Dalits, cherish the life-changing quality of good education. They make do with the bare minimum or sell properties they have painstakingly bought over the years to pay for their kids' tuition. For many Indian parents, their children's education is their greatest achievement. If they happen to be Dalit, it means even more — educating their children after previous generations were cruelly denied any form of learning becomes their life's work. It's also far more challenging since most Dalit children can't really afford quality education.

In addition to the financial barriers, Dalits also face hostility from upper-caste society, even more so when girls are being educated. Delta Meghwal's father, Mahendra Meghwal, faced similar opposition because he sent his daughter to a distant town to study. Delta was seventeen when she was allegedly raped by a teacher and murdered at the polytechnic she attended in Bikaner, Rajasthan. Bright and ambitious, Delta was the first girl from her village to complete high school and leave to study outside. Even as his neighbours in the village blame her education for her death, Mahendra Meghwal, a Dalit educator, remains proud of her achievements.

A similar sentiment drove us to stand in front of the principal's office at Mussoorie Public School. Mum held onto my hand tightly; she must have felt as nervous as other Dalit parents who took an immense leap of faith for their children. She was taking a huge financial risk and had no support from anyone else, except Dad, who kept himself in the background. We didn't have the money to pay the fees, yet we hoped that my sister and I would secure admission. Mum knew she had to convince the principal to allow that. I knew I had to be good enough for him to do that. Before I went in for the interview, she looked at me and asked: 'Ho jayega, na?' (You will get in, right?). I had no option but to say yes, and make it happen somehow.

They gave us three weeks to return with school uniforms, rain boots, bedsheets, evening uniform

and the bulkiest winter clothes I had ever seen. This time, Mum openly told me to hide my caste and answer 'Parashar Brahmin' when asked. She wasn't worried about my sister, who was much paler (and could pass for upper caste) and barely three years old at the time.

We arrived deep into the spring session, weeks away from the quarterly exams. Even then, we didn't have the fees in full. My grandfather knew he had no choice but to agree to sell the Jaipur property, but dragged his heels. The school administration, that had already done us a huge favour by agreeing to let us pay after the due date had passed, balked when we couldn't pay it in full. We spent the morning and afternoon

Mum returned to check on us and sat next to my sister, baby brother and me, her face bloated from crying for hours, I wanted to scream: 'I don't want this!' Except, my screams never made it past my throat. As I sat there, watching the circus of their humiliation with mute horror and shame, I knew I did want the admission as much as Mum did. I knew this education would change my life, and I was willing to let my parents grovel for it.

Eventually, Mr Katyal gave my parents six weeks to pay the rest of the fees and agreed to admit us. By then, the shame had turned into great bitterness. I knew no matter what I achieved, it would be because I had let my mum plead and cry to make it happen.

That's why, when weeks later, the same principal, Mr Katyal, called me on stage to announce to more than 400 students and teachers that I had scored a high rank in the exams with fewer than 10 days to prepare, I felt nothing. To my mind, if someone like me could score so well, then this school couldn't be all that great. For years after that, this sentiment persisted — no institution that accepted me could be all that good. I was never good enough for anything, and once I became good enough, it stopped being good enough for me.

For the next two years in Mussoorie, I remained an 'outstanding' student, debating, quizzing and even, at nine, hosting important school functions. Yet, I never saw that as anything more than dumb luck or lack of competition. My understanding of caste was only half-formed at the time, but I knew there was a very real need to hide my caste. What I knew for sure was that no one expected a Dalit to be bright. So it wasn't enough for me to be bright, I had to be the 'brightest' to convince them, and essentially myself, that I was their equal. When I wasn't the best at everything I did — which was most of the time — I feared that everyone would easily see through the smoke and mirrors I was working so hard to hide behind.

In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates, one of the most acute commentators on race in America, writes about the need for black kids to be 'twice as good'. He describes how black boys and girls have to work twice as hard as white kids to make it as far, and still many of them are short-changed — paid less, judged on their appearance, targeted for police violence — because of the systemic racism in the country. Many Dalit kids are conditioned similarly. I had to work harder so 'they' could overlook my 'inferiority'. I couldn't pause to recognize my 'triumphs' or take it easy every now and then because then I would fall behind and they would stop respecting me. ■



Coming out as Dalit; Yashica Dutt  
₹599  
Aleph



Yashica Dutt

**For the next two years in Mussoorie, I remained an outstanding student, debating, quizzing...Yet I never saw that as anything more than dumb luck or lack of competition.**

going in and out of offices and waiting to see the school principal, a silver-haired educator in his late fifties, P. K. Katyal.

On his way to lunch, he agreed to meet Mum and Dad, only to tell them he couldn't help. Mum shuffled out of his office wiping her red eyes with the corner of her olive green chiffon dupatta. She had come so close...to be turned away at the gate.

Throughout the afternoon, Mum and Dad visited every officer who was in the school administration office, hoping one of them would understand how important this admission was to us. Each time

# Linking people with government

THE 1980s were probably the NGO sector's most idealistic phase. Young, middle-class people, often with a blue chip education, went into rural India to work with poor and marginalised communities. One of them was Gautam Vohra who started Development Research and Action Group (DRAG) in 1988 after a stint in Cuba. He decided to work for the Katkari and Thakkar Adivasis in Pen taluk of Raigad district in Maharashtra and courageously set up his NGO first in Roha taluk.

The book consists of a series of reports by his field workers, committee members, other NGOs and himself of the many issues an NGO in a forested terrain dotted with hamlets and populated by Adivasis, has to confront.

DRAG's agenda at that time was to ensure that schemes and benefits meant for tribal communities under the Integrated Tribal Development Programme (ITDP) and the Integrated Rural

Development Programme (IRDP) actually reached them. Tribal communities in Pen and Roha didn't have basic facilities like water, housing, electricity, schools or livelihood options.

It was tough for the NGO to work in a hilly region with no roads or public transport. Field workers had to trudge through rocky forests and squelchy fields and cross streams with dicey bridges, taking care not to step on snakes or leeches. Once the sun set, there was no light. Naturally, it wasn't easy to hire staff or keep tabs on them.

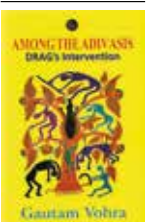
The administration wasn't cooperative either. Vohra spent much time writing letters and chasing elusive officials. The official in charge of the ITDP programme made endless excuses not to start an *agarbatti* making programme for the women though the government had sanctioned the money. The district adult education officer dragged his feet over a request for non-formal education for children

and an adult literacy programme. Getting clean drinking water for hamlets perched on a hill, reforesting denuded hills, or rearing fish in ponds required tact, patience and persuasion.

Vohra is upfront about DRAG's successes and failures. He doesn't brush anything under the carpet. DRAG had differences with other NGOs, as well as a city-based funder who couldn't see its point of view.

Yet DRAG did manage to get some things done. It organised the women and youth into groups, and got schools and the adult literacy programme going; the *agarbatti* programme got underway, small loans were disbursed and, under one scheme, the Adivasis got animals like goats and buffaloes, all without paying a single bribe. Also, he writes, the Adivasis became aware of their rights and interfaced with the administration.

DRAG now runs a school in Delhi for underprivileged children, a vocational training centre for women and an organic farm in Manger village in Haryana. ■



Among the Adivasis  
Gautam Vohra  
Har-Anand Publications  
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**PRODUCTS**

**Organic bounty**

SANGITA Punjab Khobragade and her husband, Ravinder, are the proud owners of a 10-acre organic farm in Amaravati district of Maharashtra called Nirmal Natural Organic. "About a decade ago I decided to go organic," says Ravinder. "My fields were soaked with chemical fertilisers and costs were spiralling."

The Morarka Foundation came to their assistance. They taught them how to switch to organic farming and also bought their produce. The Khobragades now grow pulses, turmeric and sugarcane. Their neat farm has inspired their neighbours and, as a result, 300 hectares in their village have now gone organic. The village has a key asset—an agricultural extension service that helps farmers transit to organic cultivation. Most farmers have opted for soya bean, pulses and turmeric.

"We need marketing support," emphasises Sangita. "Every three months the government should organise a *mela*, like the women's organic *mela* in Delhi, for farmers. We then get to sell directly to consumers and make the most money. Secondly, the government should link us with exporters or teach us how to sell in global markets. We should also be given loans to buy trucks." The Khobragades say they make enough money from their organic farm. "We have a *pucca* home, a TV and the children go to school," says the enterprising couple. ■

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KOKO Girl manufactures inexpensive sanitary pads in very soft, hygienic, organic cotton. The pads feel light, airy and comfortable and are being made in three sizes: extra-large for heavy bleeding, medium for normal bleeding, and small for the last days of the period cycle. The extra-large and medium pads are called Librelle and the small ones Wisey. The pads are reasonably priced but are yet to be sold in the market. "We have just recently started manufacturing and selling our pads in small batches. The response has been excellent," says Simran Vansal, who is in charge of marketing. "Our large pads have an absorption rate of 360 mm. All our products are biodegradable and therefore ecofriendly." ■

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