

# Civil Society

## MAKING PHCs WORK

**GRAAM helps villages improve services**



### ‘BJP’S FOCUS ON HEALTH AND ENERGY’

Dr Harshvardhan on the challenges ahead of the BJP  
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## MAKING PHCs WORK

Primary health centres in Mysore have been experiencing a new lease of life thanks to the efforts of GRAAM, a voluntary organisation, which has shown people how to demand services.

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# Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

## Reviving a PHC is a big thing

WE tend to give up all too easily on government-run services. The reality is that in spheres like education and healthcare there can be no serious alternative to what the government should be delivering. The challenge is in getting institutions at various levels to perform. But so daunting is the task that we don't feel inclined to even try. Also, those with the skills and education with which it is possible to make a difference mostly move on to easier equations, leaving the less empowered to fend for themselves. But effective interventions, we have seen, can make a whole world of a difference.

Our cover story this month on primary health centres or PHCs comes from Mysore where GRAAM, a voluntary group, has been using information technology and a grassroots campaign to create awareness and demand. GRAAM has shown people what their expectations can be from a PHC and how they can ask for their due. The result is that PHCs long given up for being worthless have sprung back to life. Problems have been identified and solutions designed. Sometimes it is small things like a baby warmer with a battery backup. Or it could be a doctor's timings.

Using mobile phones and an easy response system, GRAAM asked people to identify what they found available and missing at PHCs. This created awareness and expectations. The next stage was for people to seek their due and find ways in which gaps in service could be filled.

Moribund government services often need no more than a push to get them going again. From what we have seen a mix of enthusiasm, technology and managerial efficiency works wonders in bringing an ailing system back to vigour. The answer lies in robust partnerships among the government, private sector and voluntary organisations.

There is an opportunity here for companies that want to demonstrate their social responsibility and make a difference. Some months ago we reported on the Mansi Project in which Tata Steel collaborated with the American India Foundation, Search (an NGO) and the Jharkhand government to create a model for reducing maternal and infant mortality rates in a block. The project has become an inspirational model for the rest of Jharkhand.

There is a need for other such collaborations across the country so that better skills and managerial efficiencies are introduced in situations in which they are lacking. Healthcare initiatives across the world have been mission-oriented. They have brought together agents with a passion to create a system that works for everyone. This magazine believes that handing PHCs over to the private sector is not a solution. But bringing multiple resources together to energise a state-run healthcare system is a great way to go. The GRAAM model deserves closer attention.

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## IN THE LIGHT

by SAMITA RATHOR



## LETTERS



### Bhutan's GNH

Your cover story, 'Bhutan's Guide to Happiness,' was well written and timely. Amidst the cacophony of the Lok Sabha elections and the daily fights on television between warring candidates, it is refreshing to read 365 proverbs on happiness. The cover made us pause and reflect on the futility of anger.

**Sharda Das**

Bhutan is truly paradise on earth. But, as your writer points out, we do

hope that development does not spoil the environment or people's lives. Perhaps in Bhutan people will aspire for a green economy based on equity.

**Tenzin Lamba**

### Low-cost hospital

We are educationists and have set up schools in rural areas. We want to develop a hospital for poor people. We have our own land on which we would like to construct a hospital. Can any like-minded people help us set-up?

**Dr Rajkumar Kolhe** –  
(rajkumarsir1@rediffmail.com)

### Right talent

With reference to your interview, 'Leadership most critical at district level,' I would like to say Ved Arya of SRIJAN has articulated the issue beautifully. However, critically speaking, the entire success of the National Rural Livelihood Mission would depend on how well the non-government staff gel with the government staff and are absorbed in the mainstream government system. There have been some very good results which can be showcased. However, there are states where coordination is still a big challenge and therefore this is affecting the progress of the programme.

**Manish Bijlwan**

In the development sector, individuals are expected to have unconditional commitment to their assignments and stay on within the system to address issues like unattractive pay structure, perks and indifferent attitudes because the cause – the betterment of fellow citizens – is very large. Job-hopping by contractual employees is a major reason why certain governments are still indifferent to staff on consultancy. I would like to know Mr Arya's views on attrition and the minimum gestation contract employees should give to their organisation before they call it quits.

**Molly Pathak**  
(molly.pathak@gmail.com)

### Kobad Ghandy

I knew Kobad and Anuradha slightly and the only time I met them we disagreed sharply. Her death was a direct consequence of her sacrifice of comfort for her beliefs; as is his present suffering. He should be given the status of a political prisoner and if he cannot be convicted of any provable crime, be released.

**Kannan Srinivasan**

### Goa snakes

It was wonderful reading Abhinandita's article, '400 cobras and it's not new.' The interview was quite interesting and full

of knowledge. It is worth noting that the earthworm is anti-venomous. I have heard this but not experienced it.

**Clement Kujur**

### Activist films

It is not entirely true that producers don't like 'activist' films or that audiences are suspicious of films with a 'message'. Shyam Benegal's *Ankur*, *Nishant* and *Manthan*, for instance, were hugely popular and are also considered classics. All three had clear 'messages' in them. I am sure there are many other films that one can list. I would say that there are either good films or bad films. If a film tells a story well, it will be received well.

**Amit Dasgupta**

### Street art

The story, 'A Splash of Street Art,' was inspiring. It's a great idea and the first step to beautify our city.

**Ansar Husain Khan**

Encouraging street art is a wonderful way of prettifying up the city and helping the youth express themselves.

**Raminder Singh**

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# 'BJP's focus will be health,

## INTERVIEW

Dr Harshvardhan

Anuradha Mukherjee  
New Delhi

SOFT-spoken and self-effacing, Dr Harshvardhan is a widely respected leader in Delhi politics. A physician by profession, he is known in public life for personal integrity and fair play. He ran the first successful pulse polio campaign when he was health minister in 1994. By naming him candidate for Chief Minister, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) belatedly succeeded in boosting its fortunes in the last Assembly elections though it didn't succeed in getting a majority. Dr Harshvardhan was subsequently put in charge of the BJP's Delhi unit and will play an important role in shaping the party's fortunes in the upcoming elections. He is contesting the Lok Sabha polls from the Chandni Chowk constituency. In an interview with *Civil Society*, he opened up on the challenges ahead of the BJP, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and why it is necessary to go beyond hype in politics.

### How will you counter the AAP effect?

We don't have any plans for countering AAP. They have exposed themselves. When they contested the Assembly elections, people in Delhi did not know about AAP. I had great hope for Arvind Kejriwal and I even congratulated him on his party's performance. But he works to a script provided by the Congress. And not just Congress, but other forces beyond the Congress. It has been proven beyond doubt that they have connections with Ford Foundation, this person, Brett Lee, who worked for the CIA. Twitter and the social media are full of instances of their lies. They quoted Transparency International to say that corruption has gone down in Delhi (since they came to power). But Transparency International refuted this. They have taken an anti-national stance on issues like Kashmir. If you look into the backgrounds of their leaders, many of them have links with the Rahul Gandhi camp. Yogendra Yadav was part of the Rahul Gandhi system and used to advise him.

### What is your vision for Delhi in case the BJP comes to power here?

We have spoken about our vision during the Delhi Assembly elections. We are aiming at improvements in areas like health, education, the condition of slums. We did speak to the people of Delhi in detail about this during the Assembly polls.

### Can you elaborate on your plans for the health sector since you have been a Delhi health minister?

If I talk about health, one of the premier schemes that have been on my mind is the universal health insurance. We plan to take it to the people in a big way. There are many things in health that need to be taken care of, whether it is new hospitals, or the essential drugs policy, or preventive health strategy,



Dr Harshvardhan: 'Our focus will be on development and our positive vision.'

or the upgradation of the existing structure of the system which has become a little less useful.

### People from entire North India flock to Delhi for treatment. How easy or difficult will it be to open new hospitals, given the paucity of land?

Although there is a need for new hospitals, my focus is on strengthening preventive strategies, making health a social movement because I have always believed that health is prevention. It can be achieved by development of a positive health attitude. It is only a few per cent who actually get ill and they have to be treated in hospitals. If we make huge playgrounds available in most of the city and make it comfortable for children to go and play, we will be contributing to the prevention of diseases by promotion of physical activities. WHO also these days believes that 45 per cent of the disease burden is due to physical inactivity.

### Apart from health, what are the top two areas in which you personally feel the need to intervene?

Renewable energy is one prime area where I would like to work as a passion. If we can put solar panels on top of every house or office building, I think we can really help the environment by getting rid of polluting techniques of producing energy like burning

coal. Moreover, when you get this coal imported, the cost of energy rises. This will also improve the availability of electricity at reasonably affordable rates.

You get subsidy from the central government for the provision of solar panels. The state government can also add to it. So it becomes a little affordable. Then you can ask the banks to provide loans. Normally it takes ₹50,000 to ₹60,000 to install a standard solar panel. So if you get 30 per cent from the central government and the state government provides another 30 per cent, people can organise the rest.

Then there are issues related to women's security. Small inputs have to be added to the city. Even if you look at localised dark spots in the city and illuminate them carefully, you can get rid of 40 per cent of crimes against women. This is the experience of London and New York.

### What about control of the general law and order situation? This brings in the question of control over the Delhi Police.

On the control of the Delhi Police, our party's stand is very clear that there has to be a state government fully empowered to have everything within its domain. Delhi has full-fledged statehood. Simultaneously, the police system has to be



# energy, transparency...'

SANDEEPA VEERAMACHANENI



**'There are many things in health that need to be taken care of, whether it is new hospitals or the essential drugs policy, or preventive health strategy or upgrading the existing structure.'**

strengthened with the use of Home Guards which has become defunct. The beat constable system has to be reinforced.

**But you feel the Delhi government should have certain control over the police?**

It should have. That's essential. In the meantime, at least strengthening has to take place. There should be schools for training young girls in judo, karate.

**What do you mean by strengthening the police system? A bulk of the police force in Delhi is busy in VIP security.**

This could be one aspect of controlling, plus improving access for people in *thanas*, making provisions for online FIRs and improving gender sensitivity among the male police personnel at *thanas*. Lots of things were promised at the time of Nirbhaya. I think they remain unattended. Like illumination in buses at night. Hardly anything is being done with the ₹1,000 crore Nirbhaya Fund.

**It was said by the Sheila Dikshit government that breaking up the MCD into smaller civic bodies would help control corruption. Has that happened? The BJP runs the corporations.**

The good thing that the corporations have done after the trifurcation is that our people have promoted transparency in a big way. All these processes of tendering etc have been put online now after the BJP took over. The attendance of employees is being tracked. You can get most of the services online, including licences. Otherwise there used to be a licence raj where traders were punished.

**There is a lot of corruption on the ground. How do you plan to check it?**

We are constantly trying to plug loopholes. Wherever there is inspector raj, we try to check it by making the system more transparent. I will give you a small example. Suppose there was a video recording of all those meetings where the tenders were finalised, or the development of bridges or big roads, or stadiums were decided for the Commonwealth Games. Today we are talking about corruption to the tune of ₹70,000 crore. We talk about Sheila Dikshit, the government, the ministers and the officers and the Shunglu Committee report. If there were a video recording of all those meetings, we could have had accountability. Transparency is a deterrent to corruption.

**You mentioned the Commonwealth Games scam and the Shunglu Committee report. If the BJP comes to power in Delhi, will you take this issue up and act on it?**

When my party takes charge our focus will be on development and our positive vision. But this does not mean we will compromise on our stand against corruption. The country has a right to know what happened during the Commonwealth Games. The previous government will need to be thoroughly investigated. But like a mad person you can't only be wasting all your time on that and not delivering.

**The AAP government made some promises and changes vis-à-vis water and electricity charges. Kejriwal also ordered an audit of power companies. Will you continue with these measures and look into the performance of the power distribution companies?**

We can't fool people all the time. That's what Kejriwal did. I don't rely on rhetoric and only talk of what we can deliver. Of course we need to strengthen transparency in the working of these firms. But there are other methods for reducing the power tariff like the use of solar energy. We also have to prevail upon these companies to develop a sense of

helping people and not just looting them. Power companies have not upgraded the infrastructure of distribution that they were supposed to over the years except for installing and changing a few transformers here and there.

Even in the case of water, Mrs Dikshit tried to privatise distribution. Water distribution has been privatised in some areas like Vasant Vihar, Nangloi and Malviya Nagar. There is a huge scam there also. Water companies are getting huge benefits at the cost of the people. If you go to those areas you will feel the people's opposition to this step. We have protested against water privatisation since 2004. We launched a 45-day agitation on this. Mrs Dikshit had been very keen about it (privatisation). She got the assets (of DJB) evaluated as peanuts. The price of the property was huge. We saw the experience of the Sonia Vihar Treatment Plant where they had given it to Dagramont for 10 years – a company which was not accepted even in its own country, France.

**What is your plan on improving water distribution and rationalisation because there is a huge gap between NDMC areas and places like Dwarka?**

Before rationalisation, what is required is to actually control theft of water and leakages. In Delhi, 40-50 per cent water is leaked or stolen. It's a huge amount. So it has to be checked in the most stringent manner. And if you can get back that water for recirculation in the system, you can then think of rationalisation.

**There is a huge water mafia in the city, especially in unauthorised colonies like Sangam Vihar...**

I agree with you. They are selling this water through water tankers. Unfortunately Mrs Dikshit, despite being in office for 15 years, never took the initiative to get anybody arrested. And there were stories about the involvement of their own party colleagues in this activity.

**How do you propose to crack down on this activity without any police force?**

If the man at the top is serious and honest, then you don't enter into compromises. You immediately catch the person and punish him. Send a very powerful message to everyone.

**What about areas that don't have water lines?**

It is a tall order to take care of the needs of the city. There is a paucity of funds. But I believe where there is a will there is a way.

**The state government is in limbo in Delhi. The Lieutenant-Governor is in control. How do you perceive this situation?**

This is most unfortunate. Arvind Kejriwal should never have run away. If he did not want to take support from the "corrupt Congress" he could have easily said, "Sorry, Sir". But he never did that. With the type of support he was getting from the Congress, it was Kejriwal's compulsion to keep Mrs Dikshit safe. If he was really keen on actually taking action against her, he could have. But he never did that. He was asking me for proof, despite the fact that I laid proof on the table of the House. ■

# TOYBANK AT 10 IS STILL ALL JOY

**Suhit Kelkar**  
Mumbai

**I**MDAD Sheikh, 11, lives in Meghwadi, a shantytown crisscrossed with lanes in north Mumbai. Space is a luxury here. Large families live in a single room, 10 feet by 10 feet, abutting alleys that are three feet wide. Parks, where children can play, don't exist.

So Imdad plays hide and seek, ducking in and out of alleys with his friends. As darkness descends, the alleys become unsafe. The little boy's father is dead and his mother does *zari* work to earn an income. Imdad has a younger brother, Ahmed, whom he has to keep an eye on while his mother works. There is very little time to play, he says.

Today, however, Imdad sits contentedly on the floor of a charitable crèche in Meghwadi with a box. He takes out plastic monkeys in many colours and brown plastic shapes that he says he will assemble into a tree. Imdad eagerly explains the rules of the game. He is playing board games for the first time.

In September 2013, Toybank, an NGO, gifted 20 board games to Imdad's crèche that is supported by the Methodist Church. Toybank also sent volunteers to teach the 25 children at the crèche how to play those games.

"Middle-class children hear conversations about scientists, engineers and bankers. But underprivileged children hear only about teachers, nurses or policemen," says Subramanian MV, a trustee of Toybank.

"These children don't have hopes and aspirations," remarks Niraj Ramjiyani, a Toybank volunteer who is an IT engineer. "They are scared of so many things. Some kids are afraid to go home. But once you give them a toy, that innocence surfaces, and then you can talk to them."

Toybank was founded 10 years ago by Shweta Gopalachari, or Chari as she likes to be called. "We work to give children their Right to Play," says Chari. For most NGOs working for child rights, the priorities are food, healthcare and education. Very few promote the Right to Play.

But play is critical for children. It helps the child's well-being, promotes problem-solving, hand-eye coordination and reduces aggression and stress. Children who play, especially between the ages of three to six, learn math and language better and make friends. Play is also a healing tool for emotionally disturbed children.

**SMART TOYS:** Toybank reaches 5,000 children in Mumbai and surrounding cities with games and toys. Around 300 volunteers and four fulltime staffers work for it.

Most games provided by Toybank are basic, but occasionally it gets costly games like Lego, science kits and games that involve assembling toy cars or planes. "Children like games such as Tangrams, Mastermind, and other puzzles, both groups and



A Toybank volunteer makes children laugh

individual," says Amruta Shinde, project officer. Toybank rejects guns and Barbie dolls. Guns, because they promote violence, and Barbie dolls "since they promote size zero and a picture-perfect image that might lead to unhealthy and unrealistic aspirations among children," explains Nerurkar, a trustee.

Children are keen to learn through play, says Chari. "Some of them realise that English is important, so they even want to learn English through play," she says.

Currently, Toybank is in talks with the National Innovation Council to take forward 'Tod Fod Jod,' a project that gives children mechanical toys to tinker with so they learn basic science through experimentation. Toybank is to handle the project in western India.

The NGO has also started a project called 'Scrap Magic' that teaches children to make toys out of scrap. Toybank will try to bridge the rich-poor divide with this project. Richer children will volunteer to teach children in poorer neighbourhoods how to make toys with local material. "Rich kids do not realise that poor kids have the same aspirations that they do," says Chari.

Toybank turns 10 this year and Chari wants to celebrate by donating toys to 20 organisations in poor neighbourhoods. To raise money Chari sold paintings. She roped in art curator Sejal Thacker who organised a sale of paintings owned by private collectors, including one of Mother Teresa by M.F. Husain.

"All the paintings are surreal and childlike," Thacker said. A percentage of the proceeds from the



Toybank's young and enthusiastic team of volunteers

**'Middle-class children hear conversations about scientists, engineers and bankers. But poorer children hear only about teachers, nurses and policemen.'**

sale are marked for Toybank.

Musician and TV channel head Luke Kenny did a commendable job as a crowdpuller. He said, "I learnt how Toybank took toys from privileged kids and gave them to underprivileged kids, which is a mission and vision if ever there was one. For a long time I wanted to bring together Toybank, art and music in one evening." At the exhibition of paintings, Kenny organised performances by contemporary musicians.

Toybank runs on an annual budget of ₹30 to 35 lakh, mostly donations from people and companies. The NGO also does a lot of fundraisers.

**GROWING UP:** How does Chari attract so many people to her cause? She smiles. "It's probably the nature of the work we are doing," she says. "People like children."

Chari was born into a privileged family. "I went to one of the most elite schools in Mumbai. I was a brat surrounded by brats," she says.



## Ramjiyani, who became a volunteer in 2011, works at a play centre in an east Mumbai municipal school. His work at Toybank helps him lead a fuller life.



She got an insight into their lives. She noticed they had toys and random games half-broken. “I thought, there is nothing for these kids to play with.”

Chari decided to brighten their day with music. “I went back to the orphanage with my violin, my Discman, big posters of artists, and spent two hours with them. One day we played cricket. They started talking to me and telling me why they were at the orphanage. I found out that many of the kids were not orphans. They had run away from home for various reasons: mother had died and their father beat them up. These children were eight or nine years old and they knew so much about life. They were growing up too fast and losing their childhood.”

Chari returned a few days later with toys for them. She got friends involved and sent out requests on email for toys.

“We were inundated with toys,” she recalls. They borrowed three cars and a van to shift the toys to an NGO in Andheri. This incident illustrated to Chari that “people want to do good but don’t know where to begin.”

Ramjiyani, who became a volunteer in 2011, works at a play centre in an east Mumbai municipal school. He visits it on alternate Saturdays. Working with children helps him lead a fuller life, he says. “It is a contented feeling to do something totally selfless.”

**BIT OF BLISS:** It’s another Saturday at the Meghwadi crèche. There is eight-year-old Mahek Israr Ansari, soft-spoken and polite in a *hijab*. “Ever since I joined the creche, I have new playmates,” she says.

Mahek is playing a game called Jenga with her playmates. It requires them to jointly arrange wooden blocks in a tower. They have to remove as many blocks as possible without toppling the tower. Jenga is more than fun. It teaches children teamwork, patience, problem-solving and even the concept of gravity.

After playing for 10 minutes Mahek picks up a jigsaw puzzle featuring Disney characters. “I like this game the most,” she says, matching the pieces together briskly.

Mahek’s father, Israr, is a hawker of chocolates. Does she have board games at home? She shakes her head. “No. I play hide-and-seek in the alleys with my friends,” she says.

Ten-year-old Sayyed Faraz chimes in. “I joined the creche to play these games.” Sayyed’s father is a plumber and his mother is a homemaker. Sayyed studies in Class 5 in the nearby SV English school.

Asked about his favourite game, Sayyed says, “I like playing a game called The Rock.” This is a card game involving a WWE wrestler whose trademark gesture is a raised eyebrow. As he plays, Sayyed seems to drift into a brighter world very different from the starkness of his poor neighbourhood. ■



Girls play a game with numbers

Although she grew up without a father, her maternal uncle became her father figure. His tales about Mulla Nasruddin and Zen shaped her values. “Those stories really balanced me out a lot,” she says.

Chari’s uncle also took her to slums. “I was 10 or 11 at that time,” she recalls. These visits sowed the seeds of public service in her mind.

When she was in Class 8 she volunteered to be



Shweta Chari, founder of Toybank

put in charge of social work. “As part of that assignment, we went to Mother Teresa’s orphanage in Parle, a north Mumbai suburb. That shook me. It was a turning point in my life.”

In 2004, Chari did an engineering course. After her final exam she ran out with her unzipped backpack and rang up a friend to arrange a chill-out session. But her friend wasn’t free.

So Chari went to Sneha Sadan, a charitable orphanage near her home that she often passed by and had wanted to visit. She decided then to volunteer.

For the next few weeks she taught math and science to children at the orphanage but she realised she wasn’t connecting with them.

“The kids were bored with me. I was annoyed. I thought, they don’t talk to me properly. So I sat back and observed them.”



## CONFLICT ZONE

# It's life in the dark on Line of Control



CHARKHA

Bulbs are so dim residents have to use kerosene lamps

Musarrat Yasmeen  
Jammu

THE dull orange of the bulb's filament flickers uncertainly as dusk descends in the chilly mountains of the Pir Panchal range. A grimy but warmly-clad figure, limping from a decade-old bullet injury in his leg, ignores the dim bulb and lights a rudimentary kerosene lamp instead. It throws eerie shadows on the mud walls of his two-room hut.

For a visitor, the setting is surreal. But to the slightly bent man with a flowing beard who looks older than his years, it is simply the end of another hard day: life as usual in a village nestled in the Pir Panchal range.

In the distance you can see houses. They are brightly lit. Ah, but those lights are across the river, that indistinguishable boundary, the infamous Line of Control (LoC) that separates India from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

Why does a strategically vulnerable region along the sensitive LoC in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) remain deprived of basic amenities like electricity? It is a moot question. The dream of 100 per cent rural electrification is certainly a long way off.

It isn't about poles and cables or bulbs and bills. In many villages in the Poonch district, along the border, bulbs barely brighten the wires from which they hang in homes dotting the stark mountains.

**'Earlier we would receive a bill of around ₹80 or ₹100, but now, when we do not have electricity, the bill has risen to ₹350 every month! It is difficult for the poor like us to cope,' says Hidayat Khan.**

Ironically, these villages are among the 6,554 villages recorded as electrified in government records. According to the 2011 Census, 85 per cent of households use electricity as their primary source of lighting in J&K.

And so plans to provide free electricity connections to BPL households and similar such plans continue to be formulated and announced, reaching a crescendo during an election year, when the powers that be wake up to the issues of the common man.

The Rajiv Gandhi Gram Vidhutikaran Yojna, a programme to create 'Rural Electricity Infrastructure & Household Electrification,' was started by the Central government in April 2005

with the objective of speeding up electrification and supply of electricity to farflung areas of the country. The scheme wants to achieve complete electrification of villages by 2020. But the question is, will India achieve this objective? Will every Indian village have electricity by 2020?

As recently as December 2013, 60 projects were sanctioned to J&K. The Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Power, Jyotiraditya Scindia, announced that these projects will cover electrification of 234 unelectrified villages, intensive electrification of 3,247 Partially Electrified (PE) villages and release of free electricity connections to 79,991 BPL households.

But tales of life without electricity abound. One such power-starved area is Jammu Shaheed, in the Surankot tehsil of Poonch district. Its population of about 1,500 is proud of the battle they fought shoulder-to-shoulder with the Indian security forces during the peak of insurgency to secure the area. Yet, even after more than six decades of independence, this village lives in darkness.

Describing the situation, Yusuf Shah, 35, says, "The electric poles have reached our area. But when electricity will run through it is another matter." Absence of electricity also affects students since they cannot read once the sun sets. Husain Shah, who lives here, says, "In the absence of electricity, many children are deprived of a good education. When we complain to the concerned authorities about power supply, they simply say, 'Ask the person who gave you the bridge.'"

Hidayat Khan, a local from Mohalle Setha of Balfiyaz, Surankot Tehsil, says, "There has been no electricity for the last two months, although I am expected to pay the bill every month. In fact, earlier we would receive a bill of around ₹80 or ₹100, but now, when we do not have electricity, the bill has risen to ₹350 every month! It is difficult for the poor like us to cope."

When a complaint was made to the Assistant Electrical Engineer, he told the Junior Engineer (JE) to look into the matter. The JE, in turn, sent a man named Tahir to look into the matter. No progress has been heard of since.

People have approached the electricity office many times, but no officer is willing to make a comment or commitment. Rabiya Begum, a local, narrates her experience, "When I complained about the electricity problem to the linesman, he simply said: 'Complain to the officers, I cannot do anything.' And that was that."

It is evident that officers in the Electricity Department are aware of the issue, but seem to be doing precious little to resolve it. Some villages receive power supply for barely two or three hours a day. Farzana Kausar, another local, says, "The electricity bill is very high, although we don't use television etc. We want meters installed." Paradoxically, those whose lands are used to erect electric poles have received neither compensation nor electricity.

Night has settled and the brightly lit border security fence cordoning Indian villages along the LoC forms a glowing line across the mountain range. To the visitor, the irony of the situation is not lost. A spiral of smoke from the kerosene lamp fills the room and the old man coughs slightly, as the *chulha's* fire adds to the congestion in his lungs. Clearly, it will be a while before the dark ages pass. ■

(Charkha Features)



# AAP big draw in hills

Rakesh Agrawal  
Dehradun

**M**OST conversations in Dehradun these days are about the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). The fledgling party started its crusade in the hill state last month. NGO leaders, social workers, intellectuals, academics, journalists, artistes and activists of all hues have joined AAP.

The party is also attracting women. In Uttarakhand, it was women who led the famous Chipko movement and the movement for an independent state. They have always been a fighting force.

“We joined because we want local issues concerning land, water and forests to be taken up. We also want Gairsain to be announced as the capital of Uttarakhand,” explained Kamala Pant, convener of the Uttarakhand Mahila Manch, a statewide forum of women. Dr Shamsheer Singh Bisht, who participated in the Chipko movement, is now the Convener of the AAP State Election Campaign Committee (SECC). Pawan Gupta, Director of the Society for Integrated Development of Himalayas, an NGO in Mussoorie, is also a member of the election committee.

Other noteworthy AAP members include Rajiv Lochan Sah, editor of *Nainital Samachar*, Nand Nandan Pande, ex-Director of the State Board of Secondary Education, folk singer Narendra Singh Negi and Professor Shekhar Pathak, a renowned historian from Kumaon University. Biju Negi, who is associated with the Beej Bachao Andolan, is an enthusiastic supporter.

For the elections to the Lok Sabha, AAP is fielding candidates with a clean image. Kanchan Chaudhary Bhattacharya, India's first woman Director-General of Police, whose life was portrayed in a popular television serial called *Udaan*, is AAP's candidate from Tehri. Harish Arya, the grandson of Khushi Ram, a renowned freedom fighter, is being fielded from Almora. Balli Singh Cheema, a popular folk poet, is standing from Udham Singh Nagar. Another candidate is Anoop Nautiyal, former Chief Operating Officer of

Uttarakhand's 108 service.

“We lack infrastructure, manpower and resources so we are campaigning strategically. We have to match people's hopes as they want a credible, incorruptible and responsible political alternative,” says Sah.

Most AAP members have good experience at the grassroots. So they are planning to launch their campaign from village level, “to ensure that the concerns of the last person, the most marginalised, is heard.”

**Mission Buniyad has begun a door-to-door campaign. The idea is to reach out to people and take up their grievances against various govt departments.**

“The SECC is branching out into the five Lok Sabha constituencies. We will also form Vidhan Sabha Election Campaign Committees and ward-level committees with two members from each ward,” says Pant.

Problems which ordinary people confront will be taken up with the concerned department. Initially, a 30-day deadline will be set for the department to address the problem. If the department does not respond, AAP will write a letter to the official handling the grievance, extending the deadline by a week. Altogether, nine month's time will be given.

“But if they still don't resolve the problem we will begin protesting,” says Bhargava Chandola, AAP's state secretary. People are dissatisfied with the performance of the Congress government. There was deep anger against former Chief Minister Vijay Bahuguna for mismanaging relief and rehabilitation after the flood disaster in June last year. The Congress party grasped the prevailing mood and replaced Bahuguna with Harish Rawat. But it could

be a case of too little too late.

In Dehradun, civic conditions are pathetic. There is garbage piled everywhere and roads dug up two years ago to install sewage pipes continue to be in a state of disrepair. Even roads connecting Dehradun to Kedarnath, the epicentre of the June disaster, have yet to be fixed despite the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank giving huge loans for rebuilding the state's shattered infrastructure.

The Congress and the BJP are suffering from petty infighting. Ignoring objections from their own party workers the BJP announced that it was fielding all three ex-chief ministers from Haridwar, Pauri Garhwal and Nainital and the sitting MP, of royal lineage, from Tehri Garhwal. The BSP's candidate from Haridwar, Haji Islam, is facing hostility from his own party's MLAs. AAP is banking on this chaos.

But AAP has yet to begin its 'different' campaign. “I've been entrusted to launch its mass contact programme or Mission Buniyad to apprise the people about the objectives and policies of the party,” says Arya. Mission Buniyad has begun a door-to-door campaign called ‘*Aam Aadmi ke ghar ghar chalo, samasya jano aur samadhan karo.*’ The idea is to reach out to the people, and take up their grievances against various government departments.

“People will be asked to fill a detailed form about their problems and the department concerned. The complainant will keep a copy, AAP will keep another, and a third copy will be handed over to officials of the concerned department,” says Arya.

The party is also attracting small regional political groups. The Uttarakhand Parivartan Party, a fringe political group, has announced its decision to join hands with AAP.

Some voters say their vote will be ‘wasted’ if they vote for AAP. Party workers are tackling this perception too. “People's votes are wasted anyway if the candidates they vote for don't tackle issues that matter to the people and indulge in corrupt, communal and criminal activities. We'll campaign on this line to tell people elect the ones who care for you and don't sell you cheap,” says Sah. ■

## SAMITA'S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR





Balwinder Kaur, AAP's Lok Sabha candidate from Kurukshetra in Haryana

# AAP grows rural appeal

**Shayak Majumder**  
Kurukshetra (Haryana)

AS the sun went down, residents of the Gandhinagar area in Kurukshetra town began gathering around an ashram. They had been invited there by volunteers of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) to see a film on AAP and then meet Balwinder Kaur, the party's Lok Sabha candidate for the Kurukshetra constituency in Haryana.

A makeshift theatre was set up. A car battery was used to run the projector and speakers, and the walls of the ashram served as a screen. Soon, the AAP video started playing loudly, spreading messages of *aam aadmi vs netagiri* (the common man vs exploitative leaders) to around 70 onlookers. This public screening is one of the many methods being employed by AAP's volunteers to reach out to rural voters in Kurukshetra.

The crowd comprised children, housewives and farmers. The women watched images of Arvind Kejriwal and his message of *'swaraj'* with rapt attention. The children sang along with the party's campaign songs. The men chatted about this new party among themselves and discussed whether it was worth their votes or not.

Apart from screening videos, AAP volunteers visit villages daily, talking to farmers, listening to their grievances and trying to win their confidence

by promising that the symbolic '*jhaadu*' will change their lives for the better. At gram sabha meetings, Kaur speaks to villagers about the party and its agenda. At times, street plays and songs are performed in Haryanvi to spread the party's message against corruption.

"Campaigning in a rural area like Kurukshetra is very different from campaigning in urban areas," says Vikram Bajwa, AAP's campaign coordinator. "Over here, you have to speak in the local language and communicate in ways that a simple Haryanvi farmer can connect with."

Winning people's trust is not easy for a new party like AAP. In Kurukshetra, people have traditionally voted for the Congress or the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD). The seat is currently held by Naveen Jindal of the Congress. Jindal is an industrialist with innumerable resources at his command.

But AAP is trying to counter Jindal with the sincerity of its candidate and the enthusiasm of its volunteers. Putting up a local female candidate like Balwinder Kaur works in favour of the new party. Kaur is a simple farmer from Chatuni village. She has been actively involved with AAP for over a year. Her husband, Gurnam Singh, is the president of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), which has an old history of fighting for farmers' issues.

"Since independence, the farmers of Kurukshetra have been voting for the Congress, the BJP or the

INLD. No good came of it. Leaders of these parties would arrive here during the elections, make false promises and then go into hiding for five years," says Kaur. "We make door-to-door visits in villages, talk about *swaraj* and how essential it is to bring about change for the benefit of the people."

Eliminating corruption seems to be the party's topmost agenda. "Getting rid of corruption will help eradicate many problems in governance as it will increase accountability and instil a sense of responsibility among government officials."

The party manifesto also promises to improve the condition of government hospitals and schools, bringing them on a par with private entities. "Land acquisition rules will be tailored to suit the needs of farmers and representation of women will be increased in all sectors," says Kaur.

Kaur looks like a typical farmer, an *aam aurat*, with her smiling face and simple salwar-kameez attire. But that may not be enough to help her muster votes and win. Kurukshetra has been the stronghold of the Congress for the past decade. Here, it is the support of dedicated volunteers that could help Kaur. Their dedication and drive is what powers AAP's campaign. They played a major role in scripting AAP's amazing success in the Delhi Assembly polls. A similar passion is driving AAP's 150 volunteers in Kurukshetra.

They comprise students, farmers, engineers,



PICTURES BY SANDEEPA VEERAMACHANENI



AAP volunteers are trying to go to every household in villages



Volunteers are also invited to gram sabha meetings

musicians and young people from nearby villages.

"I am an agronomist by profession," says Dr Vishal Khubbar, one of AAP's volunteers. "I have been involved in agriculture and the seed business for long. I have seen how poor farmers are exploited by government officers. They demand bribes or 'percentages' whenever they are given a task to carry out. I want to do whatever I can to stop this. I believe AAP can help end corruption."

Senior leaders from AAP train the volunteers in their office located in the Sector 13 market in Kurukshetra. Sandeep Badrahan, a fulltime party volunteer and former electrical engineer, says, "Every day, we report our experiences during the campaign to senior party workers. We figure out solutions and try to incorporate them in our strategies."

The volunteer team has already campaigned in the urban areas of Kurukshetra. According to Bajwa, campaigning in towns is much easier than campaigning in villages. "Urban voters are smart and they are already familiar with the party and its principles. In villages there are many voters to whom we have to introduce AAP and its promises as it is still an alien party for them."

The Kurukshetra constituency comprises 1,200 villages. "We have already covered around 350 villages. Our target is to visit all before the elections in April," says Badrahan.

In the villages of Chandranpur and Futuhpur, teams of volunteers go door-to-door, speaking in a mix of Hindi and Haryanvi. People here are mostly farmers or agricultural labourers. Volunteers interact with residents, handing over handbills and AAP

caps. "In interior villages, we come across people who have not heard of Arvind Kejriwal or AAP. We talk to them in detail about Kejriwal and his stand. We familiarise them with the party's symbol, the *jhaadu*," says Bajwa.

Volunteers also meet people who are vehemently dismissive of the party. Rishi Pal, a farmer from Chandranpur village, said, "We have seen parties come and go. They make promises before the elections and then disappear when they win. We farmers are left in our miserable conditions no matter who wins."

The AAP team then sat with Pal and explained in detail how AAP is different. Volunteer Anukant asked him, "You have voted for other parties over the years. Nothing has happened. Why not give this new party a chance and see what it does?" After a long round of arguments and explanations, Pal finally capitulated. "Okay, I have to give my vote somewhere, so this time I would like to see what AAP does," he says.

Varsha, a young party volunteer, says, "It helps that our candidate is a local village woman. The other village women can identify with her and thus a relationship of trust can be established."

Villagers complain to the volunteers about lack of water and electricity. They say they don't get the seeds allotted to them on time and that the village panchayat is not responsive. "I am 66 years old," says Kesar, a woman in Chandranpur village. "The sarpanch does not give me my pension. He says I am not yet eligible. I need the money to finish building my home which is without a roof."

According to Bajwa, opposition parties put great pressure on the villagers. "The Congress gave many of them menial jobs as sweepers. Earnings from those jobs certainly don't meet their monthly needs but they are under pressure to vote for the Congress."

Caste continues to play a role. Says Vadrahan, "The INLD is led by the Chautala family. They are Jats. Naturally, Jat villagers identify with them and vote for them."

AAP is trying to break the grip local dynasties have on people. The Chautalas and the Jindals have not given any space to new candidates. Villagers are clearly anguished by this fact. Virender, from Futuhpur, says, "We have had enough of the Hoodas, the Chautalas and the Jindals. Young men like me have college degrees and yet we are sitting idle. There are no jobs for us."

"We don't resort to fear politics like other parties," says Vadrahan. "We get reports that after we visit a village or an area, members of the older parties come and harass the residents."

"Elections are decided two days before voting begins," says Bajwa. "That is the time when parties come in with money and alcohol, thus winning over the meek villagers. We find this unethical. We will only rely on our hard work and our messages."

After meeting every household, the volunteers try and organise a gram sabha meeting in the same village for Kaur so that she can answer all questions villagers would like to put to her.

There appears to be strong, silent support for AAP mostly among the youth and women in Kurukshetra.

The men and the elderly appear sceptical. Says Kaur, "One thing is certain. People now recognise the white AAP cap. It has become a symbol of change. Seeing the results of our campaign, we are certain that we will win the election here." ■



# Midday meal goes organic

Savvy Soumya Misra  
Cunoor (Tamil Nadu)

THE holidays have begun but children arrive at the Denalai Upper Primary School, giggling and whispering excitedly. They have come to proudly flaunt their organic kitchen garden where they grow vegetables and herbs for the school's midday meal.

Nestled in the Nilgiris, the school has 38 students. Most of them belong to Denalai, a Baduga village.

and now food, barring foodgrains, can be bought from the local market. But since funds for the midday meal are sometimes delayed, and the prices of vegetables have soared, children end up eating a boring meal of rice, plain *sambhar* with little or no vegetables and an egg.

The students eagerly explain how they have tackled this problem. Their kitchen garden has three terraced patches. These are divided into 15 plots of five by three feet each. A profusion of vegetables is grown – cabbage, white and red raddish, turnip,

tion and the initial labour.

These young enthusiastic farmers have sparked an organic kitchen garden movement in their localities. They have developed small plots in their own homes. In fact, the school's kitchen garden ignited interest in children from other schools. In the same village, another small plot is being taken care of by a bunch of 13-year-olds.

They are students of a private school a little farther away from the village. "Though our school has a bigger campus than the government school we

don't have an Eco Club or plots allotted for kitchen gardens," says Ritik Kanan. "And we don't have midday meals either. But we wanted to grow vegetables like the ones this school grows." Lanky Sivakumar stepped in to help.

The villagers gave in to the enthusiasm of the children and the plot was given to them. These budding farmers grow zucchini, beetroot, cabbage and green leafy vegetables, organically. They, too, have learnt to make their own bio pesticides.

Some houses in the community have their own vermicomposting pits. The manure is handed over to the children who add it to their kitchen garden. They too

have a composting pit on site where households can dump their biodegradable waste.

"There are fields close by that use chemical fertilisers and pesticides. To safeguard our kitchen garden, we have planted shrubs and bushes on its boundaries. We have tried to make a canopy with some creeper vegetables as well," says Monisha. Then there is the customary ring of marigold flowers.

The work is divided. The students tend to their field regularly after school, on weekends and holidays. For the 15 children who labour on the field, the produce is free. The rest of the village has to pay. "We have been trained to market our produce. We keep a tab on the market prices of vegetables and since ours are organic we sell at a premium of ₹5. And it gets picked up too," says Kanan with a toothy grin.

The parents are more than happy. "Pesticides are poison and we don't mind paying extra. At a time when children are moving away from farming, this is a good initiative to bring them closer to the farm and their food," said a parent, noticing the frenzy of activity.

As children mill around Sivakumar, he admits that getting them excited about farming is easier than convincing schoolteachers and principals. But the effort is well worth it. Not only do children get more nutritious meals, they also become progressive farmers. ■

*The author gathered this information as part of research for Greenpeace India*



A student explains the principles of organic farming



A variety of vegetables is grown

The Badugas are a tribal community, primarily cultivators, who are known to have moved from neighbouring Karnataka to the Nilgiris.

Of the 38 students, 28 are part of an Eco Club that zealously nurtures the kitchen garden. They have learnt organic farming from Sivakumar, the 'Eco Club Sir,' as the children, who are mostly between nine and 13 years old, fondly call him.

Sivakumar works for The Earth Trust, a non-profit that assists tribal communities in the Nilgiris. One of their projects is to set up Eco Clubs in schools. Although Tamil Nadu has mandated that each school should have an Eco Club or a National Green Corps, these Eco Clubs are independent entities initiated by The Earth Trust.

The Denalai Upper Primary School is one of 15 government schools in Cunoor block where The Earth Trust managed to convince principals to grow their own food for the midday meal.

The Midday Meal Scheme was launched on 15 August 1995 to tackle malnutrition among children, increase enrolment and reduce the dropout rate. Two-thirds of the cost of the scheme is borne by the centre and one-third by the state.

According to the scheme, a stipulated amount of foodgrains, vegetables, pulses (and eggs in Tamil Nadu) have to be served to the children. While the centre, through the Food Corporation of India, supplies the foodgrains, the state provides pulses, egg, oil and condiments.

Some states have decentralised this arrangement

beetroot, cauliflower, green leafy vegetables, carrot, coriander, curry leaves and a few medicinal herbs.

The beds are neatly bordered with marigold plants. "This is to prevent any pest attack. Marigold, you see, is a natural repellent," the children respond in chorus. Sivakumar says, with multiple cropping chances of pest attacks are minimal. They do have to guard the plots against the occasional simian attack. "Bed nets are useful sometimes to keep the monkeys away," says one of the students.

Infused with vegetables, the plain *sambhar* they ate every day has now become tastier. "The kitchen garden is not likely to meet the complete requirements of the midday meal," says Sivakumar. "But our data suggests that it meets at least 66 per cent of the school's requirements at extremely nominal rates." Besides, the kitchen garden ensures that the children eat nutritious, pesticide-free food.

The organic fertilisers and pesticides used are prepared by the students with Sivakumar's gentle assistance. The Eco Club makes three types of bio pesticides, using materials like cow dung, cow urine, jaggery, neem, garlic and so on.

The school has a small vermicomposting pit which serves as its organic manure supply centre. All the waste from the school is dumped into the pit, mixed every now and then and sprayed with cow dung. The organic manure is ready within a few weeks. Water is not a problem. The Earth Trust provides seeds and training at regular intervals and bears the cost of land preparation, input prepara-



PICTURES BY RAKESH AGRAWAL



Special children are excelling in sports

## Linda's special family

Rakesh Agrawal  
Ranchi

**S**HEELA Linda is 38 and has a pleasing personality. There is no reason for this attractive Adivasi woman to be single. Yet, she has chosen not to get married so that she can raise a large family of children with disabilities.

It was a shocking incident that motivated Linda to devote her life to disabled children. When Linda was 20, her best friend, who worked as a domestic help, was raped by her employer.

"She was deaf and dumb," says Linda. "Although she could tell who the criminal was by using sign language, no one understood or believed her and she never got justice. I decided not to marry and to work for physically and mentally challenged children." Her family tried their best to dissuade her. Her five sisters all found suitable grooms and settled down. But not Linda. Her parents then wanted her to adopt a child.

She indeed adopted. Not one child but 34.

Linda started teaching them essential skills. "These children face a lot of discrimination. Their parents see them as a burden and society thinks they are useless," says Linda. In 1999 she started a small NGO called 1999. Along with a group of dedicated community volunteers, special children in the Hatia area of Ranchi teach 34 special students to study, and learn income-generation skills like candle-making, sewing, embroidery and handicrafts.

"Our mission is to provide training and rehabilitation services to special children who live in the slum and rural areas of Ranchi district. We organise awareness camps for the rights of differently-abled individuals. We help them form advocacy groups. We also work with other NGOs in the development

sector to promote inclusive development," says Satish of Prakash Kunj.

Emphasis is placed on sports and athletic skills. Linda is a qualified physical trainer. Many of her children have excelled in sports. Sunil Bando, a Class 10 student who is hearing-impaired, won a gold medal at the Jharkhand State Games for the disabled in Jamshepur in June 2013. The games also put the spotlight on Linda as she has been nur-



Sheela Linda in her centre

turing these children.

Nine out of 34 special children from Linda's NGO took part in the National Meet for the Disabled, organised by the state unit of Special Olympics Bharat. It was a three-day event held at the JRD Tata Sports Complex in the last week of June 2013. Bando also participated in the National Para Sports Meet 2013 in Sikkim and again won a gold medal.

More laurels were in store for Linda. One of her students, 12-year-old Neelu Bhaga, a physically challenged girl, has been selected for the cycling competition to be held at the next Paralympics.

Her modest NGO works with very little

resources. "The gram panchayat gave us a room in 1998 from where we worked for nine months. You can see its condition," says Linda. They now have two rooms in a community centre with no electricity or computers.

But lack of resources and dismal infrastructure is no stumbling block for her. In fact, she finds the dingy community centre quite appropriate. "There are slums all around with mentally and physically challenged children. Many are deaf. They can come here without any difficulty or hindrance," she says.

Parents of these children approach Linda for help. She takes them under her wing. Those who are deaf are taught lessons via sign language. Bando has now passed Class 10. Some of the older children who are now adults make a living working under MNREGA projects.

Linda herself lives alone in a small room. She sells candles, paper bags, incense sticks, *rakhis* and so on to generate funds for her NGO. "My students are involved in making these products. I require ₹10,000 per month to run my centre. We somehow manage with our meagre earnings. We have never received any aid from the state," she said. She also does weaving and stitching to supplement her earnings.

Linda finished school but didn't opt for college. "Poverty and the plight of children in Hatia moved me. I was inclined to go for higher studies but decided to do something for the cause of special children," she explains.

Her colleagues like Sapna Devi find her an inspiration. "She is a role model for us. Very few in today's materialistic world would devote their lives to the cause of the disabled," says Sapna. Satbir Singh Sahota, Assistant Area Director of Special Olympics Bharat, also salutes her. "She is a very brave woman," he says.

Says Meghnath who runs Akhra, an NGO that works on culture and communication: "In Ranchi, in fact, in entire Jharkhand, training and rehabilitation services for children with special needs and their families is really lagging behind. By teaching sports to such children Linda helps them feel proud and provides them an identity." Meghnath has made a moving documentary on the achievements of Linda's children.

Neither the state government nor NGOs in Ranchi have tried to address the needs of special children in slums or rural areas of Ranchi district. The situation was far worse in the 1990s when workers from Prakash Kund began their efforts. They have now identified nearly 850 mentally and physically challenged children in slums and rural areas in and around Hatia. The findings of the survey showed that mentally and physically challenged children were looked down upon and stigmatised by their families and by society. One major reason was that parents had no access to resources for the training and rehabilitation of their children.

Today, many such children have become a part of mainstream society. Kumud Tikon, a girl in Class 6, who is suffering from cerebral palsy, is now a regular student. So are 13 other children who attend 'normal' school and are quite happy, "Thanks to Linda Aunty, I now attend Class 12 in a government school," says Monika Barla with a big smile.

This broad smile is the lamp that lights the heart of Linda. ■

# Kolkata's green warrior

**Subir Roy**  
Kolkata

**S**UBHAS Datta, who has come to be known as Kolkata's foremost green warrior, is currently chasing at least three issues. He has moved the National Green Tribunal (NGT) to stop the environmental degradation of Puri, the seaside resort town of Odisha with its ancient temple. Currently several environmentally harmful practices prevail, like cooking *prasad* in wood fires in the open and cremating dead bodies in nearby Sargadwar with the soot being wafted by the wind on to the *prasad*. The tourism infrastructure grossly violates the country's coastal regulations. Apart from the heritage temple, what makes it important to save Puri's ecological character is its sweet groundwater despite being on the seafront. (Mumbai and Chennai have to get drinking water from miles away.) Foremost, drain water discharge into the sea next to the beach has to be stopped.

Datta also wants a uniform idol immersion code for the whole country so that rivers do not get polluted by this ceremony whose actual religious sanction is questionable.

His third agenda is to rid the Maidan, which is the green lung of Kolkata, of massive political rallies which bring in millions of supporters and create a major pollution burden. Even if a polluter fee of ₹1 per rally participant is levied as an interim measure till an alternative rally site is found, the state will earn crores of rupees every year which can be used for environmental action.

Till now Datta has moved around 70 main matters before the Calcutta High Court, Supreme Court and the NGT with most of them securing relief on diverse issues. The most well known among them are: being able to rid Kolkata of aging polluting automobiles, restoring the greenery around the Victoria Memorial by moving the annual book fair, which left behind a dirty mess, to a different location, and having in place measures to protect the Maidan from degradation.

Fit and slim in his mid-sixties ("I always climb several steps at a time"), Datta's family came to Kolkata as refugees from the then East Pakistan in 1950. The government made space for them in a slum (30 people shared one toilet) in adjoining Howrah, the family at times surviving by him selling paper bags made by his mother from waste paper. He went to a vernacular medium school where he consistently failed in English.

Datta eventually became a chartered accountant but found there was a tremendous mismatch. "If you are true to your profession, then you cannot survive." He says its top practitioners should be put behind bars for "pioneering, assisting and monitoring the financial corruption in the country." He does not know how he came to have such a mindset but remembers an uncle who played a leading role in the refugee movement to secure their rights. Early life in poverty did the groundwork for an attitude which prompted him to pick a fight or two almost every day when he saw some public wrong taking place, setting him off as a social activist. One

takeaway is 15 criminal cases – two for murder and one for molestation!

As an activist since 1977, Datta has worked with the Ganatantrik Nagarik Samity of Howrah, taking up a myriad social and environmental issues. He was disappointed with the results of the first 10 public interest litigations (PILs) on issues affecting Howrah he launched at Calcutta High Court with the help of lawyers. Then a fellow activist and law student who went on an educational trip to Delhi

When he heard the order in court he did not realise its full import but when he saw the next morning's papers he realised that history had been made.

Another memorable PIL was the one he launched in 2000 when there was a major controversy in West Bengal over whether the floods that year were the handiwork of nature or man. To prepare the brief he visited five districts and six dams and barrages, interviewed 800 people and took 400 pictures, using 200 in the petition.

SANDEEPA VEERAMACHANENI



*Subhas Datta has filed a spate of landmark PILs*

and visited the Supreme Court gave him the idea of linking social and environmental issues and taking them to the Supreme Court. This turned out to be a gamechanger.

Datta eventually prepared a 468-page brief with hundreds of pictures for a PIL taking in 21 issues affecting Howrah and presented it before the Supreme Court personally. Knowing his lack of experience in arguing a case, he took the brief and a tape recorder and went out of town to spend a few days in seclusion, rehearsing, playing back his own deposition and trying to improve. As he went through the mechanics of registering the PIL at the Supreme Court, he made friends with a court employee from Kolkata who heard his deposition and said it was good and he should not be nervous.

A bench with Justice Kuldeep Singh heard him for over a year, asking the bar council to help and thus securing for the petition good advice from reputed-lawyers like Kapil Sibal and Fali Nariman. The court eventually issued an order that the case should be transferred to the Calcutta High Court which would find it easier to monitor the work on court orders in Howrah with instructions that the matter should be heard by a separate bench so that it would not get buried.

Thus was created the first environment bench, popularly known as the "green bench," in the country in 1996 – an important feather in Datta's cap.

The story Datta unearthed was amazing. It rained heavily in the catchment area and the water level in the dam increased rapidly. But it was a puja day and after the celebrations at the site most of the senior people went off to Kolkata, leaving the operations in the hands of juniors. When they found the rapidly rising water level threatening the safety of the dam, they opened the gates quickly without being able to warn the people downstream.

Hence, the floods and the destruction. The court appointed an expert committee which validated his points in the petition and the court issued orders accordingly.

Over time, as he secured positive orders from the courts, his confidence increased. He attributes his success to the homework and legwork that he does in preparing a brief. "PILs are mainly based on facts and not points of law and often a tip-off has alerted me on an issue. I go myself to collect facts, take pictures and then make the draft. I don't rely on newspapers. I don't follow them. They follow me. I have adopted the style and language that the courts understand. Hence my petitions have logic and sequence."

They are also pointed. Datta recalls telling the court that the Howrah Maidan would turn from geography into history. When he played there as a child it was part of geography, he said, but it was in danger of disappearing and his son would only read about it in history books. ■



# Delhi rooftop solar under tariff cloud

Savvy Soumya Misra  
New Delhi

THE Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) is installing its first 500 kwp (kilowatt peak) 'Roof Top Solar Power Plant' at the Dwarka Sector 21 metro station, becoming the country's first mass transit system to do so. The plant is expected to be functional in six months. The solar power produced will be used for the station.

By 2017 Delhi's electricity demand will grow by 65 per cent – from 20 billion units in 2002 to over 33 billion units. To reduce its dependency on other states for power, Delhi needs to look at renewable energy sources. With several months of uninterrupted sunshine, Delhi is solar energy's paradise.

The city's built area or raw rooftop space that is potentially available for solar power generation is around 119 sq.km. Out of this, the estimated actually available solar-suitable rooftop space (unobstructed and shadow free rooftop) could fit 2,557 MW of solar power. This is 45 per cent of the city's peak demand.

In November 2013, the Delhi Electricity Regulatory Commission (DERC) drafted its proposal on net metering and connectivity for rooftop solar PV projects. The central government's support for rooftop solar has been successful but limited.

Initially support was pledged only for 100 MW (124 MW has actually been installed in India). According to Greenpeace India's Bridge to India report released in 2013, support was available only for off-grid systems.

Though DERC's net metering policy is a revised effort from 2011, when Delhi had drafted a rooftop solar policy to promote rooftop, small-scale, decentralised solar power generation to meet its solar Renewable Purchase Obligation (RPO), its restrictive clauses are likely to dampen such efforts. The 2011 policy failed to take off because it was economically unviable.

The 2013 net metering-based rooftop solar policy facilitates the self-consumption of electricity generated by the rooftop project and allows for feeding the surplus into the network of the distribution licensee or the grid. This was supposed to incentivise the customers but its clauses seem to be favouring the discoms instead. Among the objec-

tionable clauses added was the 15 per cent capacity addition limit, making the household dependent on discoms for most of its energy need.

The proposal sets a limit on the capacity of rooftop solar PV to the sanctioned load of the consumer, which means that there will only be self-consumption and nothing can be fed into the grid. Another clause seeks to provide the lowest applicable tariff across all slots for the consumer to feed



**A limit was set on the capacity of rooftop solar PV to the sanctioned load of the consumer. This means that there will only be self-consumption and nothing can be fed into the grid.**

solar electricity into the grid.

"This is another objectionable provision in the proposal which acts as a disincentive for consumers to go in for rooftop solar. It also contradicts global standards. General norms in global best practices are to provide the highest available tariff to encourage consumers to go for solar electricity generation and feed into the grid at peak time," said Abhishek Pratap, senior campaigner, Greenpeace India.

The policy caps electricity generated from a rooftop solar system at 90 per cent of the electricity consumption by the eligible consumer at the end of the settlement period and provides no carry forward provision to the eligible consumers. This, many feel, is heavily loaded in favour of discoms and will discourage consumers from adoption of rooftop solar.

**WHY SOLAR:** Burning coal to light up our homes is economically unviable and financially unstable.

"Land availability is going to be a problem. So grid interactive rooftop PV installations are clearly the way forward," said Ashwin Gambhir, senior research associate, Prayas Energy Group, at the Anil Agarwal Dialogue on Energy Access and Renewable Energy organised by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE).

Germany, the leader in solar energy, has most of its solar PV installed on rooftops. About 1.3 million households have installed 30,000 MW worth of solar PV panels – either feeding it to local grids or consuming it domestically. With large-scale rooftop installation, Germany has brought down the price of solar energy by 70 per cent in the past 10 years.

As per the 2011 census, one-third of households – about 400 million people – do not have access to electricity. In June 2013, India had an energy shortage of 4.1 per cent and peaking shortage (when the electricity is needed the most) of 4.5

per cent. To put it bluntly, the power scenario in India is bad. Nearly 60 per cent of India's power requirement is met by thermal power plants and renewable energy contributes about 12 per cent. The question then is: can we up the ante on renewable energy?

"There is a need and scope to give a push to all forms of renewable energy – wind, solar, biogas. The mini grids have to be grid-ready and interactive with the main lines," said Chandra Bhushan, deputy director general, CSE. At the moment, wind constitutes about 74 per cent of the renewable energy pie, followed by biomass, hydro power and, finally, solar at seven per cent.

Solar power has surpassed its own expectations in the 11th Five Year Plan – the target for connecting solar to the grid was 50 MW but by March 2012 it was feeding nearly 900 MW into the grid. The price of generating electricity by solar power plants has crashed substantially to ₹5-6 per unit (kWh) from ₹18-20 per unit in the

last five years. The increase in demand will help reduce the price further.

According to the Integrated Energy Policy, 2006, India is projected to have 30,000 MW of wind and 10,000 MW of solar power by 2031-32. The 12th Five Year Plan document has projected a four-fold increase in the installation of renewable power by 2021-22. The resource allocation in the 12th FYP reflects the priority accorded by the government to renewable energy. Of the total plan outlay for the energy sector – ₹10,94,938 crore – during 2012-2017, the outlay for MNRE is ₹33,003 crore, or about three per cent of the total plan outlay. However, this is not enough.

"Renewables are expensive compared to fossil fuels today, but they will become cheaper tomorrow. The benefits of moving to renewables are immense – energy security, climate protection, reduced pollution and health benefits," said Sunita Narain, director-general, CSE. ■

# MAKING PHCs WORK

## GRAAM helps villages improve services

**Shree Padre**  
Mysore

**H**URA is a sleepy village in the Nanjanagud taluk of Mysore district. There is nothing in its nondescript landscape to attract people to the place. So there are no tourists and only occasional visitors from afar because buses and taxis don't want to ply the distance.

Villagers in Hura are either small farmers or agricultural workers. Till recently, this region was so backward that women delivered their babies at home. That was the norm. A Primary Health Centre (PHC) existed but it was ramshackle and nobody knew what purpose it served. It was just a building that stood there like a sore thumb.

But that was till the Grassroots Research and Advocacy Movement (GRAAM) arrived in Hura to carry out a research project on public health. GRAAM is part of the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM), an NGO in Mysore with an outstanding social track record.

GRAAM's project, called Arogyashreni (ranking healthcare), mobilises villagers to assess and monitor the functioning of PHCs. A PHC is ranked according to the facilities and services it provides. As people rate their PHCs, they begin to realise the services it can provide. In the second year, community members told GRAAM that they wanted their PHCs to function better. So GRAAM began training them in advocacy to get the local healthcare machinery to perform better.

With public pressure mounting, PHCs in the Nanjanagud taluk have begun to offer enhanced services and facilities. The Hura PHC today records the highest number of deliveries per month in the entire district. Increased awareness created by an Asha (Accredited Social Health Activist) and a functioning PHC has encouraged villagers yet further to access services here. A water filter has been installed to ensure clean drinking water. A toilet has also been constructed for *anganwadi* workers with NREGA funds.

In three years, the PHCs in some of the most backward villages in Nanjanagud taluk have begun to slowly turn around. In fact, GRAAM received the prestigious Manthan Award 2013, instituted by the Digital Empowerment Foundation, in New Delhi, for its Arogyashreni project.

"Earlier we did not pay much attention to the functioning of our PHC. Honestly, we did not know the kind of facilities it was meant to provide. Neither were we aware of its various rules and regulations," recalls Nagarathamma, Vice President of the Hura panchayat.

"But, thanks to GRAAM, we now have a clear working knowledge of the role



*The PHC in Hura now records the highest number of deliveries in the district*

of the PHC. Health has become a subject of discussion in the village. We are sad that this useful project is now coming to an end." The project ended in March.

Standing outside the clean, transformed PHC, Dr Jagadish, the Medical Officer, explains enthusiastically: "The community discusses the PHC. They understand the administration's limitations and problems. To resolve them they come up with local solutions."

Take, for example, the absence of an ambulance service. The nearest hospital is in Nanjanagud, 26 km away. People had to pay around ₹500 to take a patient to hospital. Seeing the efforts of the people to improve the PHC inspired Nagaraju, a young auto-rickshaw driver. He volunteered his services. Villagers can phone him and he arrives at their doorstep with his auto-rickshaw. His charges are nominal. In fact, boards stuck on his auto and at the PHC say his services are free for delivery cases.

Arogyashreni has taken local people from being indifferent to engaging with and making demands on government health services.

Getting government health services to perform needs to be a priority. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), 80 per cent of health infrastructure is in the public sector, but only 34 per cent people use it. On the other hand, just 20 per cent of health infrastructure is in the private sector, but 66 per cent of the population uses it.

**NRHM AND GRAAM:** GRAAM began by closing the gaps in the Union government's National Rural Health Mission (NRHM). Apart from creating a cadre of Ashas at village level, the NRHM mandated that committees be formed to ensure people's participation. So Hura has committees for health, sanitation and nutrition. It also has an Arogya Raksha Committee (ARS) and a Planning and Monitoring Committee (PMC).



*Women and children wait outside a PHC*





A health worker checks a woman's blood pressure



A young doctor with the monitoring committee at the Hanasoge PHC



The ward at Hanasoge PHC is now clean and better equipped but suffers from a shortage of medical staff



**‘We shouldn’t just stick to the restricted meaning of public service, that getting services from PHCs is our right. We should see things in a wider perspective: how can we strengthen our PHCs to get better services?’**

Villagers were selected as members of these committees. But they didn't know what exactly they were supposed to do or why they were there in the first place. So, in reality, these committees existed on paper.

It was this gap that GRAAM sought to plug. “Many of our public servants aren't very clear about why they are called public servants. Similarly, citizens assume that ‘public service’ means services meant for the public. That's it. In reality, public service means rendering service using the taxpayer's money. The meaning of democracy would be clearer if this concept was understood,” explains Dr R. Balasubramaniam, Executive Director of GRAAM and founder of the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM). He is a doctor and a social entrepreneur. The SVYM runs the Vivekananda Memorial Hospital, a 90-bed hospital in Sargur, in the backward HD Kote district adjoining Mysore.

“We shouldn't just stick to the restricted meaning of public service, that getting services from PHCs is our right. We should see things in a wider perspective: how can we strengthen our PHCs to get better services?”

In the 112 rural taluks of Mysore district, GRAAM skillfully used a computer-aided software called the Interactive Voices Response System (IVRS) to capture the people's perspective of healthcare available in their PHCs. The community is given a card to assess its PHC on the quality of service provided and hence the project's name – Arogyashreni.

Says Dr Balasubramaniam, “We thought just giving grades won't suffice. The PHCs should be ranked. This is because comparison makes health providers think critically about why they are lagging behind.”

Basavaraju, Deputy Director of GRAAM, recalls that when they started in 2011 the PMCs (Planning and Monitoring Committees) existed only in name. “We wanted to ensure community participation in health services and provide policymakers with practical evidence to improve services at the grassroots.”

There were doubts, however. “We wondered whether rural communities would be able to use technology to transmit their views. We also wondered if they could bring in the changes that were required,” says Chandrika Shetty, project coordinator.



**In the second year of the project, people began telling GRAAM that they didn't just want to answer questions about PHCs. They wanted their PHC to improve.**

**THE TECH TOUCH:** GRAAM's office in Mysore has a staff of 17 and nine resource persons in the field. After a great deal of research and discussion, it was decided that the views of the community would be systematically and periodically documented. The IVRS digital technology was created by the Bengaluru based Mahiti Infotech, an organisation that develops technology and communication for social change.

To assess the PHC, five members from each of the PMCs were selected as Arogyashreni representatives (ARs). An awareness meeting was organised of the ARs from all 112 PHCs. In answering the questionnaire these selected members were to visit the PHC, monitor the available services and understand the issues bedeviling the PHC from the doctor and the PHC staff.

A toll-free number service for the IVRS was installed. The selected members were to call up this number through their mobile phones and record their answers by pressing numbers on the phone. For instance, 1 if the answer was yes, and 0 if the answer was no.

A set of 36 questions was given to them. These included: "Is clean drinking water available in your PHC?" "Is ORS given to children suffering from diarrhoea?" and "What are the emergency services provided?" There were questions on reproductive and child health too.

Based on the answers recorded PHCs were ranked. Printed rank cards were sent to ARs, PHCs, gram panchayats, NRHM officers, MLAs and the MP. This process was repeated every three months.

In the second year of the project, people began telling GRAAM that they didn't just want to answer questions about PHCs. They wanted their PHC to improve. So GRAAM added advocacy training to the Arogyashreni project. It created a forum for PMC members to discuss with doctors the problems facing PHCs and how these could be resolved. Eventually 34 PHCs were selected for the advocacy programme.

Asha workers, village elders and political activists were also involved. In these workshops, they were informed about the facilities that the PHC should provide and what the rights of the people were.

"We simply pointed out the democratic options in front of them. We never advised them on what they should do," says Chandrika.

Periodic and intensive capacity-building workshops were conducted for GRAAM's resource persons working in villages. Printed handbills with appropriate information were distributed to them and they kept updating PMC members.

After discussions with the PHC staff, PMC members found that three issues plagued PHCs: an acute shortage of doctors and staff, of medicines and of infrastructure. Their persistent lobbying with the district health administration and the panchayat began to yield results.

**THE NEW PHC:** "Thanks to community engagement 25 out of 34 PHCs have been successfully improved," says Chandrika.

N. Shivakumar, a resource person with GRAAM, coordinates 13 PHCs. "Earlier there was no interaction between the community and the PHC staff. Now the PMCs meet once a month and a lively discussion takes place between the two."

The PHC in Mulluru village, for instance, was declared a 24x7 one under the NRHM. It was supposed to provide emergency services like deliveries and accident cases. But they didn't have a single dedicated doctor. At the advocacy meeting, the in-charge doctor, Haleem Pasha, explained that he had a tough time attending to two PHCs, an *anganwadi* and various field visits. He appealed to the PMC members to demand a permanent doctor. The members lobbied with the zilla parishad and the health administration. A permanent doctor was eventually appointed. Medicine for an emergency like snakebite wasn't available at the PHC. It was bought with ARS funds.

Hanasoge in KR Nagar taluk is another 24x7 PHC. Deliveries are conducted here regularly and neonatal care is available. During discussions PMC members found that the PHC required a baby warmer. Power shortage was another problem. There was a shortage of nurses and ANMs (Auxilliary Nurse Midwives) and of routine medical supplies like cotton, ointments and so on.

The PMC held an advocacy meeting with the doctor and members of the gram panchayat. A baby warmer was bought with the ARS fund and so was a UPS to run the baby warmer and preserve vital medicines. Dog bites are a prob-



*The Badagalapura PHC is the oldest. It was built in 1943*



*The GRAAM team: The voluntary organisation received the prestigious Manthan Award 2013 for*

lem and now anti-rabies medicine is being kept in stock.

Bettadapura, another 24x7 PHC, faced an acute scarcity of water. "When deliveries take place a lot of water is required. This problem was raised at a gram panchayat meeting and ₹30,000 was sanctioned. A bore well was dug. But it was a failure. Finally, the gram panchayat arranged water supply from a public pipeline," says Ravi C.S., community coordinator, GRAAM. "This is a significant change. Earlier, health issues and PHCs were not subjects for discussion at gram panchayat meetings. Drainage, housing and so on were the only things discussed."

Bilugali village has a Primary Health Unit that is now called a PHC. It had a little laboratory facility inside its small premises. But the lab wasn't working because the lab technician was transferred to the taluk hospital that was facing a shortage of technicians. During discussions, the doctor explained to PMC members that he couldn't do anything about the non-functioning lab. PMC members called up the Taluk Health Officer (THO) and requested him to allow the lab technician to visit their PHC lab at least twice a week. The THO agreed and the Bilugali laboratory now functions twice a week.

The Badagalapura PHC in Heggadadevana Kote taluk is one of the oldest. It was started in 1943. Sahukar Lingayya, a local *zamindar* donated land and money for the building. It caters to 32 villages. A substantial number of these are tribal villages.





Nagaraju, an auto-rickshaw driver, volunteered to transport emergency patients in Hura



its Arogyashreni project

There has always been a sense of local ownership at this PHC because of its unusual history of the land coming by way of a donation.

It was past 6 pm when one visited the PHC. Predictably, it was closed. But within minutes villagers appeared and opened the PHC for us. That unusual act symbolised the good relations the community had with the PHC staff.

“Out of ₹1 lakh our ARS receives every year, ₹75,000 is spent on various development purposes,” said B.C. Ravi, member of the PMC.

A compound wall was built around the PHC at a cost of ₹4.5 lakh under NREGA. To prevent trash from being dumped in an open well, villagers got together and built iron grills to close the well’s opening.

After discussions, the PHC has been helped to equip its laboratory. It has bought blood and sputum testing equipment. If there is a shortage of medicines, they are bought from the ARS fund. “As the quality of service has improved, the number of patients accessing the OPD has increased from 15-20 to 60-70 a day. There are days when this PHC handles as many as 120 patients per day,” says B.C. Ravi, PMC member.

The PHC also conducts a religious ritual called *seemantha* for women in late pregnancy stage. They are given an allowance of ₹750, bedsheets and a kit. Says B.S. Gangadhar, a PMC member, “For the first time we got 60 beneficiaries from

tribal colonies for this function.”

There is a critical shortage of staff, transport and roads to take patients to district hospitals. Villages like Badagalapura are located near dense forests inhabited by wild elephants and tigers. At night, people avoid driving down this route. “The ambulance service is 40 km away and the roads are pretty bad. By the time the ambulance arrives and picks up the woman, she delivers the baby in the ambulance itself,” said a villager.

Faced with a staff crunch – in Mysore district alone, 40 per cent of doctors’ posts and 35 per cent of ANM posts are vacant – villagers suggested ‘doctorless’ facilities. “Send us a doctor once or twice a week from the PHC in the next village and we’ll gather all the patients on those specific days,” was one suggestion. As a result, four PHCs started getting doctors twice a week.

“We can have a demonstrative effect,” says Dr Balasubramaniam. “But filling vacant posts is the government’s responsibility.”

Says N. Shivakumar, “The major visible change in the mindset of local communities is that they have started considering the PHC their own property and have begun realising the importance of keeping it well-equipped and efficient.”

**PRIVATE OR PUBLIC? :** Dr Balasubramaniam’s advice is not to privatise public health, especially PHCs. “Don’t hand over PHCs to the private sector,” he warns. “Instead, infuse the system with social accountability. This is not for profit. The public health system can be more efficient. After all, the government hires only qualified doctors, nurses and other staff.”

At least 70 per cent of routine ailments can be successfully treated by PHCs if they are well-equipped and efficient. Patients can be sent to the district hospital only if further investigation is required. This saves time and trouble for villagers and reduces the workload of district hospitals.

“Clinical medicine is different from public healthcare. Out of the eight major responsibilities entrusted to PHCs, clinical care is only one, let doctors attend to that. Healthcare doesn’t need doctors.”

Dr Balasubramaniam points out that two government cadres are needed – one for public health and the other for healthcare. “We had such a system 20 years ago. We are now lobbying with the government to revive the public health cadre and appoint District Health Officers and Taluk Health Officers. Though some colleges offer a two-year Master of Public Health (MPH) degree, only doctors are eligible.”

“We are lobbying with the government to demystify these courses the way the US did and allow science graduates to apply for public health courses,” he says.

Getting doctors for rural PHCs is a major headache for the government of Karnataka. It recently issued an ordinance making rural service mandatory for MBBS graduates. The ordinance has been awaiting the President’s assent.

“Don’t legislate, provide incentives instead,” says Dr Balasubramaniam. “You can start a three-year course on primary healthcare. Assam has a four-year course for rural doctors. Tamil Nadu provides an incentive to attract doctors to rural areas. Medical graduates who serve for five years get preference in the quota of post-graduate seats in medical colleges. Kerala has introduced a similar incentive.”

GRAAM’s project also has wider connotations. It could be used to assess other public services at the grassroots, for instance, ration shops and schools. “It’s cost-effective, fast, has very low error margin and can be done without much manpower, as compared to manual surveys,” says Dr Balasubramaniam.

In fact, Karnataka’s Commissioner of the Department of Food, Civil Supplies & Consumer Affairs is interested in conducting a similar exercise in Raichur district, says Dr Balasubramaniam. “The bureaucracy has taken note and wants this experiment to go ahead. This is a real sign of recognition.” ■



Dr R. Balasubramaniam

**‘Infuse the system with social accountability. This is not for profit. The public health system can be efficient.’**



# BUSINESS

ENTERPRISE | CSR | ICT | GREEN TECH

## The Dream Weaver family

Company hires women, makes green garments

PICTURES BY R. SAMUEL



Denise Huffton (right), founder of Dream Weaver, in her workshop

**Jency Samuel**  
Chennai

**S**USHMITA, in her late teens, deftly folds a piece of cloth and runs it through her sewing machine. There are other women on the shop floor with her, many with a troubled past. This job with Dream Weaver is what keeps them going. It provides them money, dignity and a feeling of camaraderie.

Latha, who began as a part-time tailor when the company started, used to earn a salary of ₹1,500 per month. She now draws ₹5,500. "I will surely get more money if I go to a big export garment company. But then, I will have to forego the care, concern and freedom that I enjoy here," she says. Everyone nods in agreement.

Based in Chennai, Dream Weaver produces biodegradable single-use garments for hospitals and wellness clinics. The women are so absorbed in their tailoring work that all you hear is the whirr of machines. They do have pleasant interludes, teasing their boss, Denise Huffton, when she pretends to teach them what they already know. It is obvious that the bond between them and her is more than a typical employer-employee relationship. "We are treated like family," is a sort of refrain that one hears from almost all the employees of Dream Weaver.

Dream Weaver has entered a niche sector in a short span. It produces aprons, masks, undergarments and so on for spas and hospitals. Unusually, the company was started by a mother-daughter duo with no business background and its workforce consists entirely of underprivileged women. Also,

nobody else produces such garments in any of the southern states.

Denise Huffton, who founded Dream Weaver, got this idea when she was in the final year of her undergraduate course in business administration. At that time, Denise attended a friend's wedding where she noticed disposable napkins being used. She started exploring the possibility of using this nonwoven material for other purposes. She spent weeks listing products that could be used by spas, beauty salons and hospitals. Eventually, she identified aprons, caps and masks as products that would most likely be used.

Denise was keen to ensure that personal hygiene did not come at the cost of pollution. The spun material that she came across at the wedding seemed the ideal choice since it was biodegradable. She told her mother, Cheryl Huffton, that she was



going to start a business in producing single-use medical and salon disposables and that Cheryl was going to be her partner.

When Denise was confident of the market potential of her business, she asked her mother, a teacher, to quit her job. Since Denise was keen to go abroad, she did not want a break in her career. But Cheryl, whose world was confined to her school and home, was apprehensive. Floored by her daughter's passion and creativity, Cheryl finally agreed.

Yet a bit of reluctance lingered. She wondered if it was wise for her to quit her government job as a teacher. If she did, she would forego not only her regular income but benefits like her pension. Her colleagues did not make it any easier. They teased her that she was going to sell "women's undies" instead of teaching children. Surprisingly, it was the plight of Prema, who worked as a maid for the Hufftons, that finally made Cheryl make up her mind.

Prema had worked for Denise's paternal grandparents too. She had been a nanny to Denise and her brother, Darren. Prema and her daughter used to stay in the Huffton home. Later, when Prema started working in a leather garment factory, diabetic complications led to her leg being amputated. She had to quit her job. She faced the likely loss of her home too, following a misunderstanding with her son-in-law. Citing Prema, Denise was able to convince her mother that they could employ destitute and underprivileged women. Thus, not only would her business be a sustainable one, it would also provide an income to many troubled women.

The Huffton women invested just ₹500 to buy a sewing machine and a few metres of cloth. They dutifully followed all governmental procedures, licence requirements and regulations. Although it was a family business, they registered Dream Weaver as a partnership firm, with Denise and her mother as partners.

They started their unit in the verandah of their rented house in 2008 with Prema as their first employee. The initial months were very difficult. Meeting owners of spas and beauty salons and convincing them to buy Dream Weaver products was a tough task. Such single-use products were unheard of in the southern states. But Denise and Cheryl were undeterred and their persistence paid off.

Ayush Spa became their first customer when Gunjan and Vinu Gowda of Unilever decided to try Dream Weaver's products. Completely satisfied, they placed another order and within a year of starting operations, things began to fall in place for Dream Weaver.

Soon the team had to expand by buying another machine and hiring more women. Devi, a young widow with two children, became their next employee. None of the women had any work experience. Initially, Denise trained them. Now, the experienced women teach the new entrants.

The Hufftons bought a small house but its verandah was too tiny to accommodate their machines. They built a third floor and set up their manufacturing unit there. Anthony Ammal, a young girl in her twenties, fell very sick and could not climb up to the third floor. Madhelena and 66-year-old Philomena who joined around the same time also found it difficult to climb so many stairs. So Cheryl rented another ground floor. While the raw material, sorting of stitched items and packing are done here, the third-floor workshop houses 10 machines and only the stitching takes place here. Though this

means additional expenditure, Cheryl has the welfare of employees foremost in her mind. She doesn't want to depart from her initial mission of hiring underprivileged women.

There is a small crèche in the store-cum-sorting house for babies. Little Anushya, Arokya Mary's granddaughter and Anthony's niece, plays on her baby mat. The baby's mother is employed elsewhere. Arokya Mary attends to her grandchild now and then. Cheryl has given her employees flexi-time options, keeping in mind their household responsibilities. Some work for four hours, others for six hours and so on. She gives them permission or leave when they have to attend to personal matters such as parent-teacher meetings, visits to hospital and so

They have started supplying bedsheets to the burns wards in many hospitals. Their products are also customised according to the specific needs of clients. Kits required for a specific process, such as motherhood kits and spa kits are also being supplied.

Lack of money forced Sushmita to discontinue her studies in a polytechnic. Thanks to the money she now earns from Dream Weaver, Sushmita is now pursuing a degree course through distance education. Cheryl has allocated a small house below the shop floor to elderly Vidyamma and her visually challenged son. Jothi, Vijaya and all the others relate similar stories. Prema found it hard to walk due to problems in her other leg. Since she can't go to the sorting house, one of the women brings the



*The women are very loyal to the company and work without supervision*

**Dream Weaver started with T-bands, undergarments, aprons and masks. Denise is constantly identifying more products they could produce. She has designed industrial masks, doctors' gowns, ear caps, pillow wraps, baby aprons, body wipes, briefs and more.**

on. This has made her employees very loyal and conscientious. They work without any supervision. Cheryl just tells them what is required. But for the occasional quality check by Cheryl's husband, Dennis, the women take care of everything.

The Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) directed Cheryl and Denise to Bharat Yuva Shakti Trust (BYST), who in turn, helped them get bank loans to purchase more machines. BYST also arranged for a mentor, D.K. Raju, for them.

Their yearly turnover has now increased to ₹25 lakh. Denise, working in Dubai, is exploring the overseas market. The company has started exporting to Dubai and Singapore. Dream Weaver started with T-bands, undergarments, aprons and masks. Denise is constantly identifying more products they could produce. She has designed industrial masks, doctors' gowns, ear caps, pillow wraps, baby aprons, body wipes, men's briefs, short pants, headbands, slippers and more.

material to Prema's house. Prema cuts the cloth or sorts and folds finished garments.

Prema's house, the Hufftons' house, the sorting house and the shop floor are all a 10-minute walk from each other, making it convenient for Cheryl to run the show. Cheryl has recently introduced a monthly prayer session with the help of her church pastor so that all of them can bond, share their personal concerns and support each other in prayer.

Dream Weaver is a humane and novel business. It is also ecofriendly. Denise and Cheryl are providing a livelihood and dignity to differently-abled and underprivileged women. Due to these factors, Denise's business was one of three shortlisted for the Prince of Wales' Youth Business International Award.

In five years, Dream Weaver has grown to serving 40 clients. The company's growth reflects in the welfare of the employees. They get medical benefits. And every year, they get an increment, besides bonus for Dussehra and Christmas. ■

# More plants, cheaper drugs

**Jehangir Rashid**  
Srinagar

THESE is a growing shortage of herbal plants that can be converted into medicine to cure a range of diseases. Unfortunately, cultivating plants for their medicinal properties has not caught on commercially. As a result, the cost of medicines made from herbal plants has been spiralling. But a ray of hope has emerged from the Kashmir Valley. An effort is being made by the Jammu and Kashmir Medicinal Plants Introduction Centre (JKMPIC) to lower the cost of such medicines by growing plants that combat diseases in profusion.

Sheikh Gulzaar, a resident of Pampore in South Kashmir, has taken the initiative to preserve medicinal plants and send them to research institutions to find out their medicinal properties. A postgraduate in botany from Dehradun, Gulzaar specialises in producing fruits and medicinal plants. He has an annual production of 50,000 plants.

Gulzaar, along with some of his family and friends, set up JKMPIC in 1992 in Azizabad village of Pampore in Pulwama district of South Kashmir. Along with Gulzaar, Dr Sheikh Rafiya Bashir, Masrat Gulzaar and Sheikh Ashraf are key members of the JKMPIC team.

"Ours is a family-run institution. We had an annual turnover of ₹17 to ₹19 lakh in 2012-13. At JKMPIC we produce a range of organic high-value fruit plants. These include *Corylus avellana*, *Lyceum barbarum* and *Actinidia deliciosa*," said Gulzaar.

The list of medicinal plants that Gulzaar and his team nurture is impressive. Included are plants like *Taxus baccata*. "Research has been carried out on *Taxus baccata* and the findings are great. It has turned out to be an amazing anti-cancer drug. In the US, Taxol is made from this medicinal plant. A dose of this drug costs ₹3 lakh. We have an abundance of such plants in our state. If these can be developed



BILAL BAHADUR

Sheikh Gulzaar in his medicinal farm

then the cost of such a drug would come down drastically to ₹3,000," said Gulzaar optimistically.

JKMPIC mainly supplies its products to Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru. It also exports *Taxus baccata*, *Viola odorata*, *Bixa orellana* and fruit and medicinal seeds to North America. "We exported *Ginkgo biloba* to Pakistan and are planning to export it to Gulf countries," says Gulzaar. JKMPIC's medicinal seed production capacity is 200-500 kg per year.

"There are two technicians with high school qualifications working on the production of plants. We have two plant introduction centres at Ramban and Kishtwar. A qualified biotechnologist manages them. We also have five regular employees," said Gulzaar.

JKMPIC plans to foray into large-scale production of fruit and medicinal plants at Pampore. Gulzaar says that they have introduced ready-to-use medicinal plants along with fruit plants. They are not averse to venturing into uncharted terrain in medicinal plants if it serves society, said Gulzaar.

"We have till date supplied such plants to about 34,000 research institutions and individuals. It has helped researchers by providing them ready research material. Our institution has earned name and fame and trained so many educated youth who are now able to earn a livelihood," said Gulzaar.

The JKMPIC is affiliated to the Organic Farming Association of India. The centre is the first from J&K to get recognition and be listed in biology for NEET and other Medical Entrance Examinations. JKMPIC has received about 7,880 applications since 1994, asking for full descriptions of such plants and their identity, birth, botanical information, medicinal benefits and family structure.

"We have been given letter of originality, phytosanitary information and letter of authenticity. This has helped research fellows to carve out a niche in research and they are now taking up more and more projects. I have secured hundreds of seeds from Europe, the Middle East and Africa and planted them in different areas. I have obtained seeds as well as medicines. But it is difficult to raise these seeds since they will only grow in a particular environment," said Gulzaar.

He says since high-tech greenhouses are not available, many valuable plants die due to excessive heat or cold. He has requested the government to provide space near high altitude areas in the hills so that it is possible to cultivate medicinal plants, wild flowers and fruit plants of other countries here.

"Till date the state government has not helped us. We don't have any laboratory to carry out research. This is our biggest handicap. The tourism department has asked me for a proposal. Hopefully, there will be a breakthrough this time. There is land available which can be used for such research programmes," said Gulzaar optimistically.

He feels there should be a dedicated plan to cultivate medicinal plants in the Himalaya in J&K. There are plants out there that can cure both cancer and tuberculosis, he points out. ■

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# INSIGHTS

OPINION | ANALYSIS | RESEARCH | IDEAS

## AAP is like Laker Airways

VIR K. CHOPRA

LAKSHMAN ANAND

SOME have said that the failure of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) would be detrimental to political culture in India because it will be seen as a failure of any reformist movement. The result would be that people would go back to the old corrupt forms that prevailed before because the perception would be that there is no real alternative.

I hold a different and in many ways an optimistic view.

In order to explain I want to take the reader back to two unrelated experiences in the past two decades.

The first is 'Laker Airways.'

Sir Freddie Laker set up the first long-haul 'low cost-no frills' airline in 1977 because he saw the opportunity when all scheduled carriers were becoming high-cost monstrosities with utter disregard for the convenience of passengers or the increasingly prohibitive cost of travelling. Laker Airways started off brilliantly and Sir Freddie sent a strong signal to the airlines industry that it needed to change or suffer reverses.

Unfortunately, Laker Airways did not survive the general recession that hit the economy in the early 1980s. But it did serve an exceptionally important purpose – it sowed the seeds of an idea and a business model which became the inspiration and guiding factor for several newcomers in later years.

These newcomers learnt from the mistakes that Laker Airways made and by avoiding similar errors these newcomers made successes of their businesses even when taking the same path of no frills, low fares and buying meals on board that Sir Freddie Laker had attempted.

Sir Freddie then was a pioneer who did not succeed himself but paved the way for many others to reach where he had aspired to go himself. His actions changed the rules of the game and gave a new direction to the long-haul air transportation industry. The biggest contribution of Laker Airways was it set the industry free from the regulatory grip of IATA and various governments.

The second case is Kerry Packer. Kerry Packer was an Australian business magnate who saw beyond Test matches and perceived the potential of cricket as a mass entertainer, including the possibility of making it big on commercial TV.

When he could not strike a deal with the cricket authorities about telecast rights, he decided to challenge the existing order by creating a breakaway competition, 'World Series Cricket,' and he lured away talent from all countries. By paying much better than the entrenched cricket organisations, he actually got several big names to come and join him.

This was the first time that greater emphasis was



**The AAP experiment has given out strong signals that it is possible to fight the system and win... that corruption is not unchangeable.**

placed on one-day cricket rather than the traditional five-day Test. It was also the first time that cricket matches were played at night in lit-up stadiums.

The World Series Cricket of Kerry Packer in itself could never match the popularity of official Test cricket at that time but it was seen as enough of a threat for the cricketing world to initiate far-reaching changes. The World Series Cricket did not survive but one-day cricket (and its further evolution into T20s), day-night matches, coloured uniforms, big and glamorous direct marketing campaigns started by Kerry Packer's rebellious initiative, have all today become a part of cricket culture. The players gained dramatically and a whole new breed of fit and hungry players came into existence. The game has considerably benefited. Cricket itself got a new lease of life.

I have chosen these two examples to illustrate that a good idea may not be successful in the first place because of several reasons. The biggest is the pioneering nature of these ideas. There is no previous experience and you have to carve out a path as you go along. Sometimes, the learning curve may be simply too long for the idea to survive at that time.

The other major challenge is to change to the

established rules and practices. A whole new mindset needs to be created, not just in the general populace (this is easy sometimes) but in the structures of governance (which is the real test). And, as the Kerry Packer example shows, the initial attendance at the WSC games was poor when compared to Test cricket at that time, but compare that with today and you know that once an idea becomes part of the general mindset, it simply works. On autopilot.

The way AAP is shaping now, it seems unlikely that it can survive the test of governance. It is still a rag-tag assembly of well-meaning but clueless individuals who have great values in mind but do not know how to survive the Machiavellian politics of the day and, more important, they do not know how to govern and produce tangible results.

The idea that just find good people and all politics will be good rests in a dream world because the system and the political individuals are in a high-level interactive relationship. Both influence each other and so far we have experienced that it is the system that has an upper hand.

This is what happened during the JP movement in the 1970s. For those who may not be familiar, some corrupt names in today's political arena, e.g., Lalu Prasad Yadav, are the product of the JP movement. They came in on the platform of changing the system and ended up being incorporated into it, in a most corrupt fashion.

Why? Partly because the system compromised them but importantly because JP's ideas of total revolution, of a liberal democracy and clean effective governance for the people, had not seeped into their psyche and culture. They remained immersed in

*Continued on page 28*

# Bengaluru's heady elections

V. RAVICHANDAR

If aliens were to visit Bengaluru they could think that the only preoccupation of the city was with an area called Bengaluru South where an ex-technology titan-turned-politician was slugging it out with a veteran five-time incumbent politician to determine who will represent the constituency in the forthcoming Indian Parliament! So any view about the national elections seen from distant Bengaluru has got to start with a discussion about the electoral prospects of the challenger, Nandan Nilekani against the incumbent, Ananth Kumar.

The challenger is stressing his considerable track record in business and working with government (the Bangalore Agenda Task Force and the Unique Identification Authority in particular) and appeals to the electorate that he is best placed to improve Bengaluru and give a voice to them in Parliament. There is hardly any mention of Delhi and the Centre, the implied messaging being 'please look at my record' and vote. The incumbent, in contrast, is a five-time winner from the constituency with nothing significant by way of local performance. His appeal to the voter is that a vote for him gets them the government they desire in Delhi and consequently an implied messaging of 'don't look at me, see what you can enable through me!' In effect, this is a mini Nilekani vs. Modi contest within a contest.

Nilekani's entry into politics has been welcomed by many as a brave, necessary step for good people with resources and a track record to enter politics. Ironically, middle-class voters have opined privately and on online forums that Nilekani is the right guy in the wrong party, indicative of the anti-Congress sentiment that exists. In my view, this misses a key point: that we need good candidates to join all hues of political parties and these are personal choices that individuals need to be left to make for themselves. In

Nilekani's case, many admired his courage and conviction to win on the streets for a party that has given him a platform over more sinecure options.

At the time of writing, the Bengaluru South contest is expected to be a closely fought one and could be expected to get more heated over the next month. One imponderable at the time of writing this piece is the likely Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) can-



Nandan Nilekani campaigning in his constituency

didate from the constituency. This is expected to make Nilekani's task harder since they tend to take away more votes from the Congress than the BJP. This writer felt that if the professed aim of AAP was to defeat named candidates (as spelt out in their allegedly most corrupt list) like Ananth Kumar, their goals would be better served by not fielding a candidate. This would inject a positivity that has been missing in their national campaign thus far. The AAP campaign is perceived to be negative and, given that their chances of winning outside of select areas in North India are low, they would have been well served by endorsing good candidates that they would like to see in Parliament.

Talking of AAP, Bengaluru like many other urban centres outside Delhi, has seen the love of the middle class for AAP ebb after its 49-day sojourn in power. Even their natural positioning as 'anti-corruption'

crusaders has not cut much ice with the major parties and the BJP in particular has gone ahead and re-inducted Yeddyurappa, based on caste consolidation computations. Till now, AAP, Karnataka, is largely invisible and their presence is yet to be felt. The local AAP leadership has folk with a non-AAP persona – considerate, reasonable folk who are loathe to take to the streets, unlike their northern counterparts. No one gives them a chance of winning any seat in the state though they could end up determining who loses in select constituencies.

Bengaluru has been a crucible for alternative politics parties. The Lok Satta has been around for a few years and contested the Assembly elections with about a seven per cent vote share. They were also active in the India Against Corruption movement. Unfortunately, AAP, Lok Satta and the newest entrant, Navbharat Party, could not find common ground for a united fight against the mainstream parties. A combination of the *josh* of AAP with the sobering wisdom of Lok Satta could have been a harbinger of the kind of alternative political options the country could do with. These parties could end up playing a major role in the city's Municipal Corporation elections due next year.

There are a few other trends visible in Bengaluru in the forthcoming elections – the entry of business folk with an emphasis on improving their local language skills, MP candidates making pitches to improve local conditions rather than their role as legislators, the Congress primaries experiment in Bengaluru North and the apolitical Bengaluru Political Action Committee kicking off funding candidates with a ₹10 lakh cheque to Nilekani. A final word about the young techie population, many of whom will be first-time voters. With the elections due on Thursday, 17 April, ahead of a three-day Good Friday weekend, one hopes they cast their precious vote before fleeing the city! ■

V. Ravichandar, Chairman, Feedback Consulting, is hoping the politics being played out makes his city a better place

Continued from page 27

the ubiquitous authoritarian culture of India in which they had grown and matured. Once in positions of power, they simply became local feudal lords and quickly chose the path of public loot and abuse of power.

This is the reason why the AAP experiment will fail the test of governance because AAP, till it has a feasible alternative structure of governance, will be forced to play the game by existing rules if it has to govern, and this is against the whole existence of AAP. How can they ensure at this nascent stage that their ideas, much like JP's vision, will seep into the psyche and culture of the persons they recruit? There will be failures from which to learn. They have already found out that governance and agitation do not belong together.

But here is the reason for my optimism. The AAP experiment has given out strong signals that it is possible to fight against the system and win. It has

given a signal that corruption is not an unchangeable and a given phenomenon. It can be challenged successfully. It is the strong 'Freddie Laker' signal to the political establishment that it must change or suffer serious reverses.

AAP has actually created an AAM (Aam Aadmi Movement). The result is that a whole new political awareness is being spread that can demolish established corrupt practices. This has to result in the existing order also taking note and for its own survival help in changing the rules of the game.

This will also now create hope in the minds of a whole lot of young idealistic persons fired with commitment toward nation-building. I am sure that a new breed of politicians will be created and this time the guys who come in will be prepared with a blueprint for repairing the system so that the system becomes conducive to attracting good politicians and dispelling the bad ones through a twin headed strategy: a) making corruption risky with exempla-

ry punishments for the guilty, and, b) undertaking systemic reforms to eliminate the easy opportunity that pervades the system today for politicians and bureaucracy to make illicit gains.

This new breed of politicians will have a vision and a plan, if not a blueprint, for good governance. Things will perceptibly begin to change. To me this is the start of an irreversible process. Depending on events and circumstances of the day, things may move slowly but move they will.

I believe AAP's actions and limited success will pave the way for others to follow along the same path but with a better business plan (so to say). Even AAP will learn from its own experience and AAP (version II and later) will come through with greater grasp of reality and greater preparedness. And when that happens only good can come out of it. For India.

This is the greatest service that the AAP experiment has provided us. So AAP (version I) may fail but AAM is here to stay. ■



# Media missing Gujarat story

HIMANSHU THAKKAR

IT seems large parts of the mainstream national media have gone underground these days. If you view most English news channels and some Hindi ones or most English and Hindi newspapers, you will suddenly find a proliferation of reports favouring Narendra Modi and the BJP. The repeated highlighting of doctored pre-poll analysis without attempts to do an in-depth investigation into the credentials of the agencies doing such predictions is only one troublesome part. But even in reporting the news, there is a clearly discernible pro-BJP tendency and an attempt to blackout, under-report or misreport news about the BJP's rivals, particularly news about the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). This was most evident in reporting AAP's trip to Gujarat in the first week of March.

Any objective viewer will have no doubts that AAP's trip punctured the well-crafted balloon of Gujarat's development image. To many Gujaratis like me, this was not such big breaking news. The media, that is supposed to report realities in an objective manner, should have been happy reporting this significant development. Arvind Kejriwal's hour-long speech in Ahmedabad at a hugely attended meeting should have been reported extensively. Strangely, large parts of the mainstream media, both print and electronic, almost blacked this out.

This, no doubt, reflected poorly on the media that has been accepting the claims of Modi and the BJP as gospel truth. An independent media should have exposed the reality of these claims on its own through trips like the one the AAP members made. The speech in Ahmedabad on 8 March was a good opportunity for the media to correct its own failure. Instead, by not reporting or under-reporting or misreporting, the media has further discredited itself.

This reminds me of an episode in Gujarat not long ago. "One morning some years ago, Gujarat's residents found a newspaper on their doorstep. They hadn't subscribed to it, and it carried a vaguely familiar masthead. It was called *Gujarat Satya Samachar*, to make it resemble the state's largest circulated newspaper, *Gujarat Samachar*. It was produced by Gujarat's information department (a portfolio held by Chief Minister Narendra Modi) and contained reports of the state government's achievements," wrote Aakar Patel, former editor of *Divya Bhaskar* (the Gujarati edition from the Bhaskar group) in his column in *Mint* on 1 March.

The reason the state government resorted to bringing out *Gujarat Satya Samachar* was "belief that the local media was either suppressing stories about the government's successes or was critical of Modi to the point of antagonism." The *Gujarat Satya*

*Samachar* did not last more than a couple of issues since the Gujarati media quickly fell in line, the way the government wanted it to. In fact, this episode should not give readers the misleading picture that the Gujarati media was depicting the realities of Gujarat's development before the government resorted to *Gujarat Satya Samachar*. Far from it.

While travelling through various parts of Gujarat, I have seen the frustration of the *aam* Gujarati about

industrial zones and corridors.

While travelling through tribal areas near the Sardar Sarovar dam, Savitaben Tadvil of Indravarna village told us about the repression they faced while peacefully opposing the Garudeshwar dam on the Narmada river, which has neither any valid approval nor any impact assessment or consent from the affected villages located upstream or downstream. Lakhan Musafir of Umarva village took us to the washed-out portion below the Sardar Sarovar dam, including the viewer's park, about which there is so little information in the public domain. Rohit Prajapati of the Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti, showing the proposed site of the Statue of Unity, publicised as the world's highest statue, just downstream of the Sardar Sarovar dam, related how the foundation stone was laid on 31 October 2013 by arresting the tribals peacefully opposing the project that neither has any impact assessment, nor any of the statutorily required approvals. As Nandini Oza, after travelling for over 1,000 km in Gujarat recently said, "You can actually smell development at Vapi, Ankleshwar, Baroda and several other industrial areas!"

BJP's prime ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi, who as chief minister, resorted to *Gujarat Satya Samachar* to show the slightly critical Gujarati media its place and succeeded in arm-twisting them, has been resorting to less than *satya* in his electioneering. Just to illustrate, during his trip to the northeastern states, he did not mention his support for either large hydro projects or interlinking of rivers, which are facing huge opposition in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and other states.

But during his speech the following week on 26 February in Madhya Pradesh, he talked about the northeast region being "heaven for hydro power generation." In that same state of Madhya Pradesh, his party's chief minister flashed full-page advertisements (at public expense) for three straight days about the Narmada Kshipra link as the harbinger of the ILR dream of former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. In reality, it is just a pipeline water supply project with questionable viability and justifiability, without even impact assessment or participation of the people of the Narmada or Malwa region. There is already opposition to the project from farmers of the Narmada Valley.

The trouble is, a large part of mainstream media has blacked out all this critical news. This situation is no doubt very bad for Indian democracy. As a senior journalist from a financial paper told me, whenever there is an extraordinarily positive report about any company or political party, the first question that arises is: how much has the reporter been paid to write such a story! Media should be wary of such a perception. ■



Women in Gujarat protesting against land acquisition

the way the state is ruled since the past decade and more. Repeatedly, during my numerous trips to the state, common people on the street have told me about corruption, the breakdown of regular basic facilities like schooling (everyone, it seems, has to go for tuition). "Then what are the schools for?" one frustrated auto-rickshaw driver told me. There are complaints about electricity and water and the pro-big industries bias of the state establishment. Intellectuals and independent observers have talked about the huge gap between the claims of the state government of Gujarat and the stark reality for long.

Ahmedabad is supposed to be shining with the development of the Sabaramati riverfront. But if you go a dozen kilometres upstream or downstream you realise that this is just for the benefit of the city's real estate developers. The state of the river elsewhere is as bad as the Yamuna in Delhi. Even the water you see flowing in the Sabarmati is through a fraud. This water is from the Narmada project. Not a drop from it was planned or allocated for Ahmedabad city or the Sabarmati river.

The project was proposed and justified for drought-prone areas of Kutch, Saurashtra and north Gujarat. They are not getting this water. Instead, the farmers of Saurashtra are fighting FIRs and cases for using Narmada water! Farmers everywhere feel discriminated against when the state government favours big industries at their expense and without transparency or due justice or their participation. The tribal belt is not only neglected, it is facing the prospect of more and more displacement and deforestation in the name of dams, river-linking projects,

# Rivers that talk

KANCHI KOHLI

RIVER stories have been on my mind, many of them – some happy, others thoughtful, some knotted and others flowing freely. There are stories of rivers that roar in the Himalaya or run across a busy city, rivers that irrigate the plains and those that merge into the sea.

Rivers also have many vivid memories for me. The soothing sight of a river after an arduous trek or dipping my feet into its waters or listening to the sound of the river as it flows past, with hornbills, driftwood and fragile boats for company.

But, on the flip side, there are unpleasant memories too: of damned, polluted, embanked, diverted, filled up and built over rivers. Waterscapes continue to be the focus of large-scale human transformations. Rivers have been mapped, coerced into dams, fought for on the streets, argued for and against in courts and been part of many citizen clean-up drives.

Today, I touch upon a few river journeys.

Teesta, a river that has inspired many a poet, continues to be in the midst of the hydropower conundrum. In India, it flows through the states of Sikkim and North Bengal and has been in the midst of the evidence building around faulty impact assessments, massive people's protests, political negotiations and regulatory failures. Sections of the river have already been tunnelled or diverted.

The 2011 earthquake shook the state of Sikkim and rekindled the debate around damming the Teesta. For a while, the rush for hydropower generation waned as tremors were being repeatedly felt in the upper reaches of the Himalayan state. That seems to be behind us now with the 520 MW Teesta IV hydroelectric projects being granted environment clearance by the present Union Minister of Environment and Forests, Veerappa Moily.

At home, here in Delhi, flows the Yamuna. In 2010, just before the controversial Commonwealth Games (CWG) was to be hosted in the city, the river sent a sharp warning signal. Unprecedented rains lashed the city and the Yamuna floodplains were overrun with water. Fast-track expressways were on the verge of being flooded. Water had to be released upstream.

Bang in the midst of this narrative was Delhi's

**Rivers have been mapped, coerced into dams, fought for on the streets, argued for and against in courts and been part of clean-up drives.**

CWG "village" where the city was to host international athletes.

This complex had come up despite several persuasive arguments that it was indeed being built on a floodplain, an ecologically unsound site for such construction. But then, the courts and scientific experts had gone on record to say that the Yamuna's floodplains had ceased to be what they were. Thereby, the real estate dream was realised. The Yamuna, back then, had obliged and retreated with only a warning. The CWG went ahead, and its village continues to stand tall over all the illegalities.

It's been a while since I went to Kelo in Raigarh district of Chhattisgarh. When I was there last, the discharge from a nearby coalmine and steel plant had taken over much of the river's life. Water for drinking and irrigation had been impacted. The condition of the river was symbolic. Many other similar rivers near industries are dying because

there is no sensibility to protect these important water bodies. The reservoir of the dam built on the Rihand river in the Uttar Pradesh half of Singrauli has effluents flowing straight into it. The impact of power plants and coalmines nearby is yet to be ascertained fully in these parts of the country.

More recently, my river expeditions have been around the Kutch coast. The creeks in the Mundra taluk have been filled up and the mangrove cover right next to it wiped out. These creeks are important feeders to the rivers in this vast inter-tidal area of the Gulf of Kutch. The construction of ports, special economic zones and land parcelled off for private railway lines and other smaller industrial operations has meant that the creeks have been made to disappear from this complex coastal ecosystem. The ones which are there are either facing the same fate right now, or are earmarked for the future.

"The river runs backwards, you know, when they turn on the pumps," says a quote in a paper by Heather Goodall in the book titled, *Words for Country: Landscapes and Language in Australia*. What is being referred to here is the impact of irrigated cotton on the Darling river floodplain in New South Wales. It had impacted fishing and pastoral livelihoods in a big way.

River stories are many. Rivers have built and destroyed civilisations. They carry with them the histories of people. Travelling with colleagues near the famous Athirapally waterfalls in the Kerala Western Ghats, I remember a resident saying, "If we had not sat in *satyagraha* against the dam, different colours would have become part of the river. The water would have been laden with cement, silt, and muck. And finally the Athirapally would have become just a tiny trickle."

I leave this page today by recalling the braided channels of the Lohit river in Arunachal Pradesh, a critical tributary of the mighty Brahmaputra in northeast India. Poised at a very crucial juncture of interstate disputes around hydro power and its downstream impacts, this river lives on and awaits the future. Its story is yet to be fully written. ■

*Kanchi Kohli is an independent researcher and writer*

KANCHI KOHLI



The Lohit river



## The boatman's fate

Ko:Yad is visually stunning and emotional

Saibal Chatterjee  
New Delhi

IT is not very often that the everyday struggles of the marginalized and dispossessed become the central theme of an epic film produced in India. Assamese filmmaker Manju Borah's critically acclaimed and much-awarded Mising-language film *Ko:Yad* (A Silent Way) is nothing if not a tale of extraordinary dimensions.

What makes it even more exceptional is that its visually stunning, emotionally wrenching story is woven entirely around the tough life of an ordinary man who cannot escape his destiny no matter how hard he tries.

*Ko:Yad* (a Mising expression that means whirlpool) goes where no Indian film has ever done – to a scenic part of Assam where life literally floats on water.

The film narrates the compelling story of a poverty-stricken but dogged boatman from a tribal community whose travails have rarely been portrayed on the big screen so vividly.

Misings reside in some districts of Assam (besides parts of Arunachal Pradesh). They are the state's second largest tribal group after the Bodos. But their numbers are not big enough to make a film in their own language commercially viable.

"I made *Ko:Yad* because I felt the urge to take the lives of the Mising people to a wider world," says Borah, whose filmmaking career began in 1999 with the widely lauded *Baibhab*.

*Ko:Yad* is Borah's seventh feature film, but the first that she has not made in Assamese.

Not surprisingly, it remains unreleased in the state. "It is difficult to find takers for a film like *Ko:Yad*," says the screenwriter-director. But cineastes around the country have had many opportunities to catch the film at festivals and on Doordarshan.

"*Ko:Yad* had its premiere on Doordarshan on account of being a National Award-winner and an Indian Panorama selection," adds Borah. It has also won awards at film festivals in Bengaluru and Ladakh.

The film was screened in New Delhi in early March as part of a three-day 'Best of Indian Cinema' festival organised by Doordarshan in association with the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.

From the first frame to the last, *Ko:Yad* is tinged with a sense of gloom, but Borah etches out a central figure that is endowed with great dignity as well as an irrepressible zest for life that survives a series of setbacks.

The man performs impressive deeds all in a day's work, and even as the changing times push away the



A still from *Ko:Yad*. The film tells a compelling story of an impoverished boatman

**Manju Borah etches out a central figure that is endowed with great dignity as well as an irrepressible zest for life that survives a series of setbacks.**



Manju Borah

ground from under his feet he seeks solace in the turbulent rivers that sustain him and his ilk.

He drinks, bickers and repeatedly laments his fate, but he returns to his boat at the crack of dawn every day to resume the battle for survival with renewed vigour.

The protagonist of *Ko:Yad*, Paukam Mili, is a plucky man indeed. He lives with his family in a

small house on stilts on the banks of a river. The only belongings that he trusts are the two rivers, Disang and Brahmaputra, and a boat inherited from his father.

He collects firewood from the waters for a living and his life is propelled by an unshakeable belief that the boat and the two rivers will always provide for him and his family even if the rest of the world were to desert him.

Paukam encounters betrayals from very early in life. His mother is abandoned by his father for another woman. She is compelled to return with her son to her parents' home, where she is physically assaulted by a man old enough to be her father. She commits suicide.

Paukam's father takes the orphan back with him, but his stepmother treats him with contempt. Before he passes away, his father gives Paukam the family boat, which provides a new direction to his life. He grows up, marries a local girl, Taksiri, and raises a family. But all this is by no means the end of his woes.

With his meagre earnings, Paukam educates his

*Continued on page 32*

# Folk music gets a helping hand

**Bharat Dogra**  
Tilonia

SOME of Rajasthan's most accomplished folk singers and musicians converged at the three-day Lok Utsav (Festival of Folk Arts) held at the Barefoot College in Tilonia village of Ajmer district.

The fest was special this year since it was the first one taking place after the launch of the Khamayati project that aims to protect Rajasthan's rich and colourful tradition of folk music and songs.

Under the overall guidance of well-known social activist Aruna Roy and with the close involvement of communities of folk musicians and singers, the Khamayati project will also promote folk musicians and singers and encourage the next generation to take to this tradition.

"It is equally important that skilled artisans who make folk music instruments should be helped to continue their intricate craft and pass on their skills to the next generation, otherwise some of these instruments will also be endangered," says Carol Barker, a writer and illustrator from London, who has been closely involved with the Khamayati project.

In 1997 Barker visited India for the first time. She says she fell in love with the country, with Barefoot

College and with Rajasthan's soulful folk music. When she heard about the hardship singers and artisans faced she returned to London and approached her son, Julian Dunkerton, to donate generously so that something could be done. Her son agreed and thus was born the Khamayati project.

"Look at a folk musical form like Marwari khayal which is so powerful but nevertheless faces a crisis of survival. So something really needs to be done on an ongoing basis to protect this rich heritage of folk music, or else much that is invaluable will be lost," says Aruna Roy.

Ramniwas, a grassroots activist, says some of them went to remote parts of Barmer, Jaisalmer and Jodhpur to collect information about 300 folk musician families and the problems they faced. "We've held several workshops with them," he explains. "One of our efforts is to make audio-visual recordings of the work of great musicians and singers, particularly the more elderly among them so that this can be preserved for posterity."

Shveta Rao, another activist involved in these



Musicians at the Lok Utsav

efforts, adds, "We've created a website on folk singers, [khamayati.org](http://khamayati.org), so that folk artistes can be contacted directly and don't have to depend on middlemen."

So rich documentation is already available, particularly on the Langa and Manganiyar folk singers and musicians from Western Rajasthan. But there are other poor and marginalised communities like the Kalbeliyas who have a rich tradition of music relating to snake-charmers and the Kanjar community that is well known for its *chakri* dance.

Aruna Roy says, "These communities, some of whom have led nomadic or semi-nomadic lives, need wider welfare measures and specific steps for the protection of their music and arts. These should be integrated with wider welfare steps for these communities." ■

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eldest son, Migam, but the latter, once he is close to acquiring a degree in medicine, turns his back on his destitute family.

His other son, Setlai, now married, is perturbed by Paukam's drunken fits of temper. He decides to separate from his parents and demands a division of the property. Paukam's daughter, Oisiri, too, elopes, leaving the ageing couple all alone and distraught.

Paukam takes every blow on the chin until the boat, his only life-saver, capsizes in a whirlpool.

Borah invests this grim human battle against poverty, fate and the elements with impressive visual and narrative sweep.

In the environment that Paukam inhabits, nature is breathtakingly beautiful, but it is also ruthlessly unforgiving.

The boat and the two rivers are projected as principal characters in the story, a constant presence in the life of Paukam. In fact, the protagonist is often seen talking to the inanimate boat, especially when the chips are down and things seem to be drifting out of control.

In capturing this daunting landscape on the screen, Borah had the services of two of India's finest technicians – cinematographer Sudhir Palsane and film edi-

tor A. Sreekar Prasad. While one captures the vistas with unflinching precision, the other lends the 90-minute film a pace that approximates the rhythms of life in this part of Assam.

But Borah has been best served by her actors, all of them amateurs. So real are they in the way they look and carry themselves that they hardly ever appear to be playing scripted roles.

"I chose to work with non-actors because they are all integral parts of the landscape. Only they could have ensured the kind of authenticity that was needed to make *Ko:Yad* work," says the director.

She admits that initially she did consider hiring professional actors for the key roles, but decided against it when she realised that they would be ill at ease in the swirling waters of the rivers.

To bring the actors up to speed, Borah organised a 40-day workshop. "I faced no problem at all in getting them to sink under the skin of the characters," she says. "In fact, what is truly amazing is that none of the actors was ever conscious of the camera."

The lead actor of *Ko:Yad*, Sewan Singh Yein, is a local schoolteacher who took a little while to get into the swing of things. "Once he did, there was no stopping him," says Borah. "He after all grew up here and took to the waters like a fish."

The actress who plays Paukam's wife, Tarulata Kutum, is a popular Mising singer who has since played the female lead in another Assamese film, Arup Manna's *Adhyay*.

*Ko:Yad* has earned unstinted accolades wherever it has been shown across India. But for the sake of the people that the film is about, Borah had hoped for wider international exposure. That may not have happened as yet, but it does not take anything away from the scale of the achievement that *Ko:Yad* represents in the context of both Borah's individual career and Assamese cinema history. ■



Paukam, the boatman, takes every blow on the chin



# Carnival with social message



SUSHEELA NAIR

A float denouncing corruption and child abuse



SUSHEELA NAIR

Another colourful anti-corruption float



SUSHEELA NAIR

Hindi film stars at the fest

**Susheela Nair**  
Panjim

IN February, Goa's sandy beaches and streets burst into four days of festivities before Lent, a period of religious observance preceding Easter. This carnival is marked by colour, culture, dance, drama, masquerade, Goan cuisine and entertainment. There is a breathtaking display of floats, colourful parades and lively processions.

Tourists arrive in droves to feast their eyes on this spectacular fiesta of light and sound, just before the 40-day abstinence period before Easter. The streets sport a vibrant look with draped flags and festoons, welcome arches, streamers, multi-hued ribbons and illuminated buildings. The Venetian masks decorating landmark buildings and colourful bunting add to the montage of hues.

Uniquely Goan, the carnival is celebrated nowhere else in India except in the four cities of Goa: Panaji, Mapusa, Margao and Vasco. In rural Goa, the carnival is more distinctive with villagers dancing to the beat of drummers around an oil lamp and singing songs to appease their ancestors. Floats with varied folk themes make their way through the streets.

The genesis of this visual extravaganza can be traced back to more than 500 years. Considered a farewell to the pleasures of the flesh before the start



SUSHEELA NAIR

Masks on display

of Lent, the carnival, like its international counterpart in Brazil's Rio de Janeiro, is celebrated before the holy season of Lent and was introduced in Goa by the Portuguese. Its character is preserved till date. The carnival epitomises the fun-loving culture that is characteristic of Goa.

A carnival implies a complete holiday dedicated to fun and frolic, a break from the daily routine and stress of everyday life. The word 'carnival' originates from a Latin word 'carnevarium' meaning 'removing the flesh' or 'raising a gala storm'. It is also believed to be derived from Carrus Navalis, the naval float used in processions on rivers which were supposed to mark the final victory of the spirits of spring over the demons of winter and cold.

Another version is that the word originated from the horse-drawn, boat-shaped carriage that was paraded during the Roman festival of Saturnalia, in honour of Saturn. It ferried men and women in fancy dress, wearing masks and singing obscene songs. Though carnival may be a Christian celebration, Goa's fiesta is a juxtaposition of Hindu and Western traditions. It is cross-cultural hedonism at its roaring best.

The float parade in Panaji heralded four days of joyous festivities. The celebrations start with hordes of carnival enthusiasts watching parades and floats making their way down the main streets of Panjim. King Momo, the carnival's mascot and his tableau, lead the parade that comprises colourful floats and troupes of revellers attired in gorgeous costumes, singing and dancing to live music.

Tourists jostled for space to have a peek at King Momo in his colourful regal attire, flanked by his queens atop the leading float. The frenzy of merriment starts with the arrival of King Momo and his entourage in Panaji on 'Fat Saturday' (Sabado Gordo). On that day, King Momo begins his mock rule of three days of pre-Lent festivities in Goa and proclaims his decree to 'eat, drink and be merry'. As he waved to the crowds, the revellers greeted him with chants of 'Viva Carnival' and danced with delirious joy and ecstasy.

It was a visual extravaganza with 30 colourful floats. Each had a different theme. The floats drifted down the streets in a kaleidoscope of colour and sound. There was strumming of guitars, whirling dances, elaborate costumes, headdress plumage soaring skyward, faces doused with paint, revellers with masks and inventively designed floats. While the floats typically depict aspects of the culture, traditions and lifestyle of the Goan people, the floats highlighted social themes like environmental consciousness, safety, women's empowerment, say no to drugs and so on. All eyes were on them. Social messages such as an anti-smoking campaign made their presence felt amidst the light-hearted celebrations. A float with a dinosaur warned voters to be wary as 'political dinosaurs are back'. It exhorted people to vote for 'corruption-free candidates'. This float stole the show. With elections round the corner, it seemed highly appropriate.

Besides these parades, people participate in many cultural shows organised by local clubs. The Red-and-Black Dance at the Clube Nacional in Panjim is the most popular. At the food fest, there was an assortment of food, wine and a liquor stall to ensure that visitors were well-fed and light-headed. The merriment concluded on Tuesday. ■

**TIPS:** Check with the Goa Tourism Development Corporation Ltd for the dates of the carnival celebrations in Panaji, Mapusa, Margao and Vasco so that you can plan your trip accordingly. Book your hotel accommodation in advance to avoid disappointment. **Contact details:** Goa Tourism Development Corporation Ltd., Trinora Apartment, Dr. Alvares Costa Road, Panaji, Goa- 403 001  
Tel: 91 832 2424 001/02/03 [www.goa-tourism.com](http://www.goa-tourism.com)  
Email: [reservations@goa-tourism.com](mailto:reservations@goa-tourism.com)





## Fun cushions

AAPENS Crafts makes cushions appliqué with cartoons, flowers, dolls and all things bright and cheerful. Perk up your child's room with these fun cushions.

Davinder Kumar, a craftsman from Delhi, is the proprietor of Aapens Crafts. He says he is not a traditional artisan. "Becoming a craftsman was a career choice," explains Davinder. "I used to make products with jute, helped by the National Jute Board. I got this idea of making fun cushions from cartoons my children watch on TV especially the serial, *Chotta Bheem*."

Davinder works exclusively with jute and natural fibre. His pretty cushions are made of cotton in his factory at Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh. Davinder says he also works with an NGO that outsources some of his cushion-making activity to village women. The appliqué is done on felt cloth and then stitched on the cushion. Colours are fast, assures Davinder, who also sells his cushions to exporters.

He says he makes cushions according to specific designs. He is the recipient of an award from the Delhi Government.

**Contact:** Aapens Crafts, WZ-59, Rattan Park, Opp. Kirti Nagar, New Delhi- 110015  
Phone: 09811053319, 011-65701867 Email: appencraft@yahoo.com



## Shell stuff

It's amazing the things that seashells scattered on a beach can be turned into.

Kamal and Amal Sahu convert them into spoons, soap dishes, salt and pepper shakers, jewellery, bowls and more. The delicate colours of the shell are embellished with brass work and paint to enhance their appeal. The bracelets, for just ₹250 each, attract college girls. Housewives haggle over the bowls and spoons. Kamal Sahu resignedly gives a discount.

His small business, Kadambari Art, is located in Digha, a seaside resort in West Bengal, where he has a small shop. "My father taught us this craft. For six months we do shell work and for six months we grow paddy on our small field. I wish we had a Kolkata Haat like Dilli Haat," he says wistfully.

**Contact:** Amal Sahu: Village Haldia, Post-Haldia Patna, PS Ram Nagar, Dist Purba, Midnapur, West Bengal  
Phone: 9811717716, 9266714096, 9015225735

