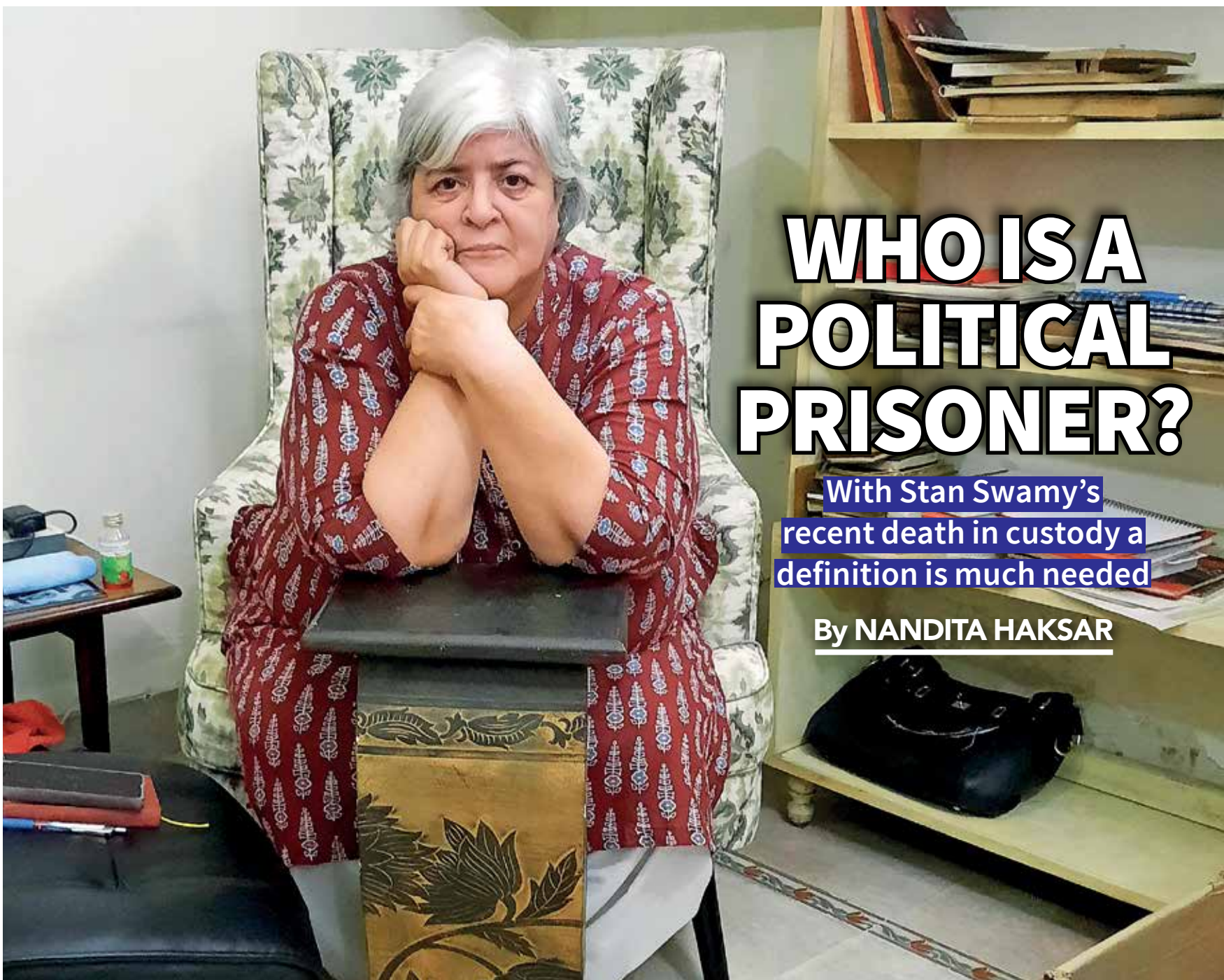


Civil Society



WHO IS A POLITICAL PRISONER?

With Stan Swamy's recent death in custody a definition is much needed

By NANDITA HAKSAR

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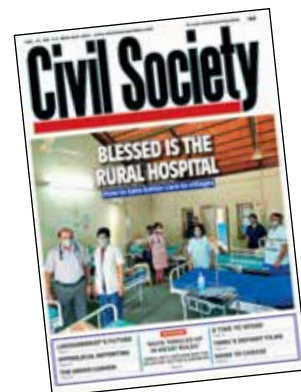
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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Doctor heroes

Thanks for the cover story, 'Blessed is the rural hospital'. A great article which shows the importance of primary healthcare and the difference it makes when skilled doctors commit themselves to reaching out to the community. Such doctors empower and mobilize local people to provide care right at the local level, backed by their support. This model is transformational. I have seen other examples during my time in India. Why doesn't it happen more often? It takes commitment, trust and the willingness of skilled people to empower others.

Robin Thomson

Your cover story was really an insight into how the selfless dedication and passion of highly qualified doctors is making a difference to the lives of rural and tribal people. It is not an easy task to win their trust and faith.

It is all the more difficult in these pandemic times to carry on such work with limited resources.

Anita Varghese

This article featured the real heroes of our country. Such healthcare teams working in rural India are serving the underprivileged in a holistic manner. My gratitude to these doctors who have set up NGOs and who are working in rural hospitals. May their tribe increase.

Evita Fernandez

Hill streams

I read Rakesh Agrawal's story, 'When springs dry up in the hills, PSI brings them back', with interest. I love indigenous culture like that of tribal communities and remote mountain villages. They have genuine

knowledge and are keen to save their environment. Most of our city dwellers lack both knowledge and interest.

But our governments opt for drastic development measures which destroy our Himalayas and impact our ecology and water resources. If such policies continue, then soon we will be left with hollow open cast mines as well as drought, flood, wildfires and climate change

Sujata

Rejuvenating dying springs is a great joint effort between PSI, a non-profit, and village folk who realized the importance of this effort and allowed their land to be used. Spring water should be kept alive wherever possible.

Chandralekha Anand Sio

Farm enterprises

Shree Padre's story, 'Jam, juice, flakes', about how the Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) in Ambalavayal town has been helping farmers convert surplus produce into processed products, highlighted a great initiative. Such a facility should be available in every village so that seasonal products can be converted to value-added products. This way new jobs can be created and wastage of farm produce prevented.

Santha Jayakrishnan

For 20 years I have wondered why neither the government nor the panchayats are doing food processing. Every time farmers have to throw away produce because of low prices, I wonder. I hope these processing centres multiply across the country to somewhat mitigate the farmers' plight.

Mallika

We need many more farmer-producer companies. If farmers can get together they can be trained by KVKs in food processing. Every year, farm produce is wasted. Instead, it can be dried or converted into processed foods. Tomatoes can be canned and sold in places where fresh produce isn't available. I fail to understand why this is not done.

Ritu

Floral delight

I just want to say thanks to Ganesh Babu for his wonderful page on flowers, 'Plant Power'.

The information is unique. But I would also like to know which climatic zone the flower belongs to. A lot of plants die in the hot north Indian summer.

Indranil Banerjee

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When justice is strained

THE problems with our justice system are there for all to see. They have been widely identified through PILs, in reportage by journalists and in the observations by judges themselves in their courtrooms. Most recently, judges in the Supreme Court have questioned the impartiality of the police and expressed concern over the eagerness to make arrests when there seems to be no urgent need to do so.

Perhaps the most tragic example of such excesses is that of the arrest of Fr Stan Swamy, who despite his advanced years and frail health, was picked up in Jharkhand and dumped in prison in Maharashtra. He finally died in custody. There are others in the same case who continue to languish in jail without their guilt being established. Being behind bars under draconian laws, they have to go from one court to the next in the hope of somehow getting bail.

For the justice system to work well, it is necessary for its many parts to work together in harmony. One can't be out of whack with the others as currently seems to be the case. So, while there is an urgent need to reform the functioning of the police and provide easier access to the courts, it is equally important to ensure that the larger framework of values and laws that we cherish as a democracy are defined and clearly before us at all times. To that end, a colonial law on sedition should be jettisoned at the earliest and better protection should be given to the right to free speech and dissent.

Our cover story this month asks the question, Who is a political prisoner? It is our hope that Fr Stan Swamy's death is addressed on a larger canvas. It won't do to treat it as just another example of police excess. There is a bigger issue involved here of the right to hold one's beliefs and principles.

We also bring to you in this issue an interview with Dr Chinmay Tumble who emphasizes the need for reliable official data in a pandemic. He and his colleagues have had to hunt high and low to finally come to the conclusion that some three million have perhaps died from the coronavirus. How reassuring it would be if the government itself put out such numbers.

Doctors For You (DFY) completed 14 years this August and marked the occasion with a party on Zoom with cakes from across the country. With humongous energy and dedication, DFY has built a presence in some 300 districts of the country. Its role during the pandemic has been outstanding. In another health story, we speak to Dr Evita Fernandez on nurses. She has been deeply involved with training nurses and tells us what should be done to empower them and improve their status.

In our Living section we present Cold Love, which makes wonderful artisanal ice-creams and sorbets. We also talk to Noble Sparrows, a funeral service that helps families when loved ones pass away.



COVER STORY

WHO IS A POLITICAL PRISONER?

With activists, journalists, poets, writers being sent to jail it's important to define who is a political prisoner, a debate which even human rights groups have shied away from.

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Chinmay Tumbe on deaths and the COVID-19 jigsaw

‘In a pandemic official data is crucial and we need it daily’

Civil Society News
Gurugram

THROUGHOUT the first and second waves of the coronavirus pandemic, the extent of the tragedy in India was mostly unknown. How many people had really died? Were they men or women? Information was anecdotal and speculative. This April, there were queues at crematoriums and burial grounds, but even as bodies piled up there were no reliable figures to go by.

We now have some figures based on data-hunting by Prof. Chinmay Tumbe and his colleagues. Tumbe teaches economics at IIM Ahmedabad and his co-workers in this effort are well-versed in accessing databases and arriving at plausible assumptions.

Tumbe is the author of *The Age of Pandemics (1817-1920)* which chronicles the cholera, plague and influenza pandemics in those years which devastated India. He is also an expert on migration.

In an interview, Tumbe spoke to *Civil Society* on the importance of data and the story that is emerging of the current pandemic from the numbers that have been garnered.

You have been collating and analyzing data at the Centre and in the states on the coronavirus pandemic. What does this data reveal to you?

Last year, during the first wave, there were concerns that we weren't possibly capturing the full extent of deaths for the simple reason that, to be classified as a COVID-19 death, you needed to be first classified as positive. And that depends on testing. Obviously, testing capacity is a huge function of reported deaths. I was sceptical whether there really were many, many deaths. We didn't see the actual evidence in terms of the visuals, the (crowded) crematoriums, etc that we saw in the second wave. But now we know that even last year there was substantial under reporting because that data has kind of come out.

It is the second wave which is India's biggest demographic shock since the last quarter of 1918. I think *Divya Bhaskar* was the first to really break the stories on deaths in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and so on. So, using the Gujarat data, I pointed out that a lot of excess deaths had happened and since they could not be accounted for they must be from COVID-19. That was in May.

In the last three months, we have five or six studies using different databases, all coming to the same conclusion. I would say the midpoint estimate now among all these different studies is that India has lost about three million people in the pandemic, starting from the beginning to about June 30 this year.

My co-worker, Prabhat Jha, has worked on Indian mortality for almost two decades. He worked with the census office on something called the Million Death Study about 10 years ago. He's a thorough expert on that. Some of my other co-authors are economists and health economists. We are a team of 11.

What are the databases you have examined to arrive at this conclusion?

We have estimates using three different databases. One is the Civil Registration System (CRS), an important one because all deaths in India are registered there. Medical certification of death is very poor in our country. Nine out of 10 deaths in India are registered with this office, but only about 20 percent are medically



Chinmay Tumbe: 'We are slow on all-cause mortality statistics, seroprevalence surveys'

certified. So, the cause of death in the CRS is very poor. That is why researchers look for all-cause mortality. If all-cause mortality spikes tremendously, there's a notion of excess that is happening in that particular time period. The CRS points to a very large number of deaths in the second wave. The CRS also shows that the bulk of deaths in the pandemic have happened in the second wave.

There is another database, the Health Management Information System (HMIS). This is completely different. It is mainly for rural India and is done mainly by the Government of India. They release monthly spreadsheets on deaths which are registered at health facilities. So, this is a subset. The overall deaths that they count is about two million whereas India loses about 10 million people annually in normal times.

It is a smaller sample to work with, but the benefit is that they provide data of all the states for the CRS. For the CRS we are literally scraping. The problem here is no state government has released these figures.

The HMIS is very useful for two reasons. One, you can see the rural-urban split because they give data in that form. But, most importantly, they also give the cause of death. So you can actually start to deconstruct what part of that spike is because of factors that we know of.

Unfortunately, HMIS in their wisdom did not add a line item on COVID-19. But they have 'cause unknown'. What's nice about HMIS is that you can rule out heart attacks, malaria and so on. We have 40 categories of death, and there is 'cause unknown'. We can now say there was some spike in deaths due to hypertension and a variety of known causes. But the biggest spike that happened between April and May this year was under the category 'cause unknown'. So it has to be COVID-19.

We are saying these excess deaths are at some 2.7 to 3.2 million, and the bulk of them are COVID-19 because it overlaps exactly when these waves happened, as was documented and reported.

The third database that we used was an opinion poll survey called the C-Voter. And this is the only survey in India which, since the beginning of the pandemic, pretty much since June last year, asked questions on a weekly basis on COVID-19 infection and death. There is no other survey which does this.

The main thing that all three databases are pointing to is 30 percent excess mortality, which translates into about three million deaths if you take 10 million

deaths on an annual basis in normal times.

Unfortunately, we still don't know the picture for all the states. We will get to know the picture for two big states, UP and Bihar, only one year down the line. The reason is that both the CRS and HMIS have very poor coverage. Their statistical systems are poor. They don't do a good job of reporting even in normal times, let alone in a pandemic.

It is very difficult to infer, but there are surveys. There was a study on Bihar which extrapolates 300,000 deaths based on a small sample. In Gujarat, too, the numbers are very high and these are also based on a range of estimates.

I would say, in terms of transparency, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Kerala have done a really good job. Which means that their undercounting factors are fairly low. It's still high by international counts but relatively low. In other states, undercounting factors tend to be very high.

In our paper's estimate of three million, we are basically saying that the actual deaths are likely to be seven to eight times higher than the reported numbers.

Now, you've studied this historically as well. How important is data to us when it comes to understanding what happens in pandemics?

You know, it is so relevant to have good data and communication of that data. Unfortunately, the Union Government has not really communicated the scale of the disaster to any of us. The Union Government has actually put out a circular shouting down the studies that have been coming out. The government says it has robust systems and, yes, there's some undercounting, but it's not that much. The official Union Government response is shocking, to say the least.

I'll give you a simple reason. Kerala is reporting a high number of cases and a lot of people are upset. There is, of course, a partisan, political agenda in the criticism. But you cannot understand what is happening in Kerala, without understanding what happened in the second wave.

The second wave makes it abundantly clear that deaths were very low in Kerala. The seroprevalence survey shows that Kerala was less exposed to the virus in April and May and it is being exposed now so there is some kind of caseload.

In the popular imagination, believe it or not, Kerala is doing a bad job of checking the spread of COVID-19. That is far from the truth. The other states have let the virus spread much more, had more deaths, but that happened in a very short period of time. So it's like a contrast of a fast burn versus a slow burn. Kerala is, in all parameters, doing well. So data and communication of what happened in the second wave has, bizarrely, not been presented.

Many people think that the second wave started in Kerala or Punjab. We now know that the Delta variant broke in eastern Maharashtra. Even this has not been communicated to the public very well.

But there are two things that we need to do in terms of data. One, a daily release of the all-cause mortality statistics. It's so simple. They have the numbers in most states on the government portal. They just have to release them. This is what the UK is doing. They can mark the last two weeks as provisional data. It will tell us if all-cause mortality is spiking.

The other is a periodic seroprevalence survey for the level of exposure that the population has undergone. Some are questioning that also. When the numbers came out, they said the state-level samples are not representative, you can't do state-level interpretation. We are one and a half years into the pandemic. By now we should be having weekly seroprevalence surveys because then you can see where the virus is more likely to be.

For many of us tracking this pandemic, it is so clear that Kerala will have more cases for the simple reason that it has low exposure, low deaths, and so after they opened up, it was obvious that they would be at highest risk. They don't have immunity from getting the virus, or from the vaccine. So the data is very important and two critical things we are very slow on is the all-cause mortality statistics and seroprevalence surveys.

How would you rate the quality of data from across the country?

I think it varies tremendously. We had been measuring how good data on all-cause mortality until 2018 is, in between surveys. We know, for example, that Maharashtra and Gujarat are states with nearly 100 percent coverage, which means that almost every death is registered. And we also know that in Jharkhand, Bihar and UP that number may be 70 percent. It's much lower.

The statistical system is good in some states, but even in those states they are not disseminating the data quickly. They should be releasing data on a daily basis. Unfortunately, poorer states with weaker health infrastructure systems also have poorer statistical systems. In those states, we just have to do independent surveys.

Would you say there's a strong case for building a more robust data system, not just at state or national level but at district and panchayat level?

Yes, absolutely, and we have the capacity. Look at Karnataka. They have a fantastic dashboard. They actually release the total number of people who died in Karnataka on a daily basis. But they don't do more than that. They don't give you the district-level break-up. It's like just one number on the dashboard. The UK provides data on a fortnightly basis, the all-cause mortality statistics down to the county level. And the last two weeks' data is marked as provisional.

We are on a par with the UK because all this is now online for most people. It's just a matter of somebody pressing a button or signing off on things. Let's disclose this on a daily basis across districts. Ideally, they should also be providing age, gender and so on. It would reveal which age groups have not been exposed, and which are at higher risk in different ways, or who is at high risk, who is at low risk and so on.

You've done this landmark book. What is our learning from history, from the experience of those pandemics? And if today we are planning a system, how should we be learning from the past?

The pandemics of the past, which were curbed by human agency, all relied on better data whether it was cholera or plague. The flu of 1918 was pretty much a story of either the virus mutating to less lethal forms or herd immunity. But its toll was so high, you know, it killed six percent of India's population before herd immunity was acquired. That's a flawed strategy.

But cholera and plague were eventually conquered by better prevention and cure. Vaccination is probably a small part of that story. In cholera they got the

‘The mid-point estimate among different studies is that India has lost three million people in the pandemic starting from the beginning to June 30 this year.’

data. They understood transmission very well. Cholera is no longer a dangerous disease. So good data and trust in science are important. But we need to be much better at data dissemination on a daily basis. The puzzle is how, after one and a half years of the pandemic, we still haven't moved to daily release of information.

How did you collect data on those deaths for your book?

The CRS was started in 1886 in response to the cholera pandemic. Our death registration system owes its origins to a pandemic. We should be using this pandemic to make it better. There is an entire statistical database on deaths in colonial India, digitized and analysed, for my book.

Of course, there are issues with that data. You'd be surprised to know the undercount factor. The British said about five to six million people died in the influenza pandemic. Our estimate is that there were 20 million deaths. Other estimates are there were 18 million deaths. That's probably an undercount factor of three to four. Today our undercount factor is seven to eight. That is truly alarming. The first lesson is: we need to invest in data.

The second one is migration. All pandemics have led to migration. We need to anticipate and prepare for it. Obviously shutting down the railways does not make sense. I think there's a lot of learning from last year to this year. But some good steps, like social security measures, have been taken over the past one year.

Then, of course, mass vaccination, one of our success stories now. That starts in the age of pandemics because India was actually exporting plague vaccines around the world back then.

On the economic front, pandemics have devastating implications. All pandemics typically have worsened inequality. We've seen that in the past year as well. A lot of studies are now available on labour market implications.

The last point is on how we assess regional variations. The politics and the blame-game have to be kept aside. We don't know much about the science on the coronavirus. In parts of India it's not about policy but the ecological condition of cities. That's exactly what happened years ago. Plague hit some parts of India. So did cholera and it turned out to be a seasonal disease. People responded accordingly. It remains to be seen if COVID-19 is seasonal or whether it depends on environmental factors. ■



DFY is 14 with many pretty cakes

Civil Society News
New Delhi

ANNIVERSARIES come with their stories. So, when Doctors For You (DFY) completed 14 years in August with an emotional cake-cutting ceremony on Zoom, it was a birthday celebration and also a reminder of how far this group of public-spirited physicians has travelled.

In 2007, DFY was born in the hostel room of Dr Ravikant Singh, then a young and idealistic medical student in Mumbai. He had wanted to promote the donation of platelets during a particularly severe outbreak of dengue in the financial capital.

He went on to turn DFY into a team of doctors who would, at great risk to their lives, provide medical services during disasters.

And for this birthday celebration, teams joined the Zoom ceremony online from all over the country: Kashmir, Karnataka, Manipur, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Assam....

Its teams now work in some role or the other in 300 districts of the country and there are more than 3,500 people employed by DFY.

During the two recent waves of the coronavirus pandemic, when government services all but collapsed and private hospitals were overwhelmed, it was DFY which put its experience in handling disasters to good use by bringing in doctors and setting up beds where none existed.

In Delhi, for instance, banquet halls and the Commonwealth Games Stadium were transformed

overnight into well-equipped facilities. The capital's biggest COVID-19 hospital, LNJP Hospital, was bolstered by DFY which brought in doctors and paramedical staff.

DFY has similarly worked to handle the pandemic with state governments across the country and built an awesome reputation among its partners and donors for putting in place infrastructure and teams of physicians and paramedical staff at short notice.

"I never thought we would ever become this big," says Ravikant, who stepped down as president of DFY in 2017 and has further distanced himself from the outfit to work with the government to set up a cancer hospital at Muzaffarpur in Bihar.

Shy and self-effacing, Ravikant credits his colleagues in DFY and innumerable doctors who have given their time to his cause for the outfit's success. Chandrakant Patil is one who is always remembered, having died after being struck by

DFY teams now work in 300 districts and it employs more than 3,500 people. 'I never thought we would become this big,' says Dr Ravikant.

lightning during the Bihar floods, the first big disaster that DFY showed up for.

Founders of civil society organizations in India are not known to walk away from their creations. But Ravikant didn't want an organization centred around him. His decision to step down as president in 2017 was in keeping with the rules of DFY that no one can be president for more than 10 years. Leaving the organization completely was largely prompted by his urge to see others take over without being constrained by him being around and build systems perhaps better than he could.

He found the perfect successor in Dr Rajat Jain who had been vice-president and had a natural flair for creating a structured organization with robust management systems.

DFY still has the idealism with which it was founded. It remains a young organization with a median age of 35. Dr Rajat Jain is just 38 and Ravikant is only 41 even as he withdraws and is available only in an advisory capacity.

Rajat as president of DFY is now focused on organization-building so that its energy and valuable experience in working on the ground during disasters is better utilized.

"Doctors For You has been doing fantastic work. There is no doubt about it," says Rajat. "But if we are to cope with the huge responsibilities that are coming to us we need better systems and managerial structures."

Rajat is a radiologist who studied at Maulana Azad Medical College in Delhi. He went to Canada

for a post-doctoral fellowship, but came back to work in a private hospital and then teach at his alma mater.

He also has a successful career in teaching MBBS students online, but currently his day job is to run DFY and take it from being high on adrenalin to a more calibrated use of its many strengths.

"When I took over as president I found that we were doing a lot of things at ground level which I was always proud of, but things were somewhat inadequately organized," he says.

"So my major focus was to make things more organized and structured. The kind of work DFY had done since 2007 was always inspirational. But one person would be doing multiple things. Someone could be doing something and then would suddenly give it up to take up another piece of work that had been accorded priority," he explains.

"As I put a structure in place, we were able to build a second tier of leadership. Earlier, what was happening was that either Ravikant was taking all the decisions or I was. During the pandemic the single most important thing that has happened is that others in the organization have started taking ownership," he says.

As people have started taking responsibility, it has been possible for DFY to scale up and respond not just faster but in a more organized way.

"Previously, Ravikant would take a decision that we had to respond to a situation in Kashmir. An order would be issued to move 10 people to Kashmir. The work done on the ground was out of this world. But what I have done is to identify a second-tier leadership which could decide what the response of DFY should be. And rather than shifting staff from one project to the next I have created staff at the next place so that the project underway doesn't suffer," Rajat explains.

The need for systems has grown with the number of people DFY employs. It pays salaries to 3,500 people, which is a 10-fold increase over pre-COVID-19 times.

There are 260 vaccination teams that account for about 1,600 people. There are 600 doctors, around 1,200 nurses and the rest are paramedical staff.

PAYING DOCTORS

DFY has always attracted doctors who want to volunteer. There continue to be those who come for one or two weeks or maybe a month.

"Then there are doctors who are joining us on short-term contracts for a four-month period for a specific project. We pay them a salary and they work with us in an organized manner till the project is over," says Rajat.

"In the pandemic I have preferred doctors whom we pay because I realized that what I needed was more accountability. If I am organizing a camp, I can delay the camp if volunteers don't show up. But if I am managing a COVID-19 centre or a vaccination drive I need a commitment because the government needs a commitment from us," he says.

Rajat says he makes sure doctors are adequately paid. It depends on time, experience and commitment. If someone comes to DFY for a short duration they would be paid less. If someone comes for a longer time they would be paid more.

Doctors have been paid between ₹80,000 to ₹300,000 a month. Some doctors have been paid more than ₹300,000 because they were specialists

Photos: Civil Society/ Shrey Gupta



Ravikant Singh with Rajat Jain: A seamless transition



A banquet hall became a well-equipped ward for COVID-19 patients

and didn't just help DFY in one centre, but also helped in training its younger doctors.

DECENTRALIZING

"I am very passionate about creating a structure. I realized that what DFY needed was a structure. I sat with several of my colleagues and we decided that the best thing would be to bifurcate the top management into ground implementation and administration," recalls Rajat.

"What was happening earlier was that administrative people were doing the work on the ground and people on the ground were doing the administrative work. We said it had to be separated so now there is an administrative team whose predominant work is running the administration. Similarly, there is a project implementation team which is focused on projects," he says.

"For every project I have created a director. We

don't have an all-India post of a vice-president. We have separate directors in charge of skill development, COVID-19 response, vaccination, public health, disaster management, finance and human resources," he explains.

An assistant director is added depending on the magnitude of the work and under him a programme manager. For example, the vaccination project is very big so there is an assistant director supported by an implementation team.

"One programme manager doesn't manage more than five to 10 teams on the ground. The programme manager reports to the director or assistant director and the director reports to me," says Rajat.

Has DFY crossed into a new zone? Is all this structure good for it? Or is passion and chaos its real lifeblood? Right now the better systems are working and perhaps on its 14th birthday DFY is a good example of what growing up is all about. ■

‘Nurses should be trained better and get more respect’

Doctors should help empower them, says Dr Evita Fernandez

Civil Society News
New Delhi

NURSES are as important as doctors in delivering healthcare, but look around in India and it may not exactly seem so. From the training of nurses to the roles they should be playing, much remains to be done. The failure to empower them finally weakens the health system as a whole.

The solutions, though they seem obvious, aren't easy to implement. What can be done and where should a beginning be made? To find out, we spoke to Dr Evita Fernandez in Hyderabad.

At Fernandez Hospital, which she inherited from her public-spirited parents who were both doctors, she has invested in imparting better skills to nurses and encouraging them to play decision-making roles. She has also been involved with the training of nurses and midwives for the government.

She says perhaps the most important change that is needed is in the attitude of doctors who should yield more space to nurses and treat their contributions with greater respect.

Excerpts from an interview with Dr Fernandez:

We tend to talk about doctors and we talk about hospitals, now we talk about oxygen, but nurses and the poor standard of training given to them....

The standard of training given to nurses is because of a large number of private nursing colleges. There are some excellent private colleges, but I suspect the majority do not meet standards in terms of quality of teaching and clinical training. So, the quality of the nurses coming out of them is not standardized and a lot of the time is deplorable. There is also a problem with our attitude to nurses. You know, doctors tend to treat them as gophers — go do this or that — and don't give them the respect they should get as colleagues capable of doing much more. As a result, today we have a large group of nurses who should be playing a vital role, but have not been given that opportunity to do their best.

So, it is bad training and lack of empowerment. Yes, absolutely. And the change has to begin with us doctors changing our attitude to nurses.

It's a question of having correct expectations from nurses.

Yes, yes.

And from that would follow better training?

Nurses are a huge network. And there are those who have over the years gained tremendous clinical experience. Sadly, many have not had the opportunity to update themselves on recent practices. But they have the capacity to change if a hospital is driven by protocols. I think the important thing is the quality of training. We just have to up that.

Would you say the numbers we have are adequate for a country as large and diverse as ours?

No, no, I don't think we'll ever have the number we need. And the other important thing that we must remember is they are paid very poorly. We expect them to perform, but when we pay them so poorly how do you build up self-esteem and dignity?

We learnt this in Fernandez Hospital when we began in-service training, which we offered free. We said, just be consistent. And, our first in-service training was a two-year course, and we asked everybody, if I remember this was in 2005, to put down a deposit of ₹1,000. We ran them through the course, had an exam and they passed. The ₹1,000 was given back to them. They had an increase in their salary, having passed the course. But what we saw was amazing. Their self-esteem improved. They felt respected, they felt cared for. They could not believe we doctors gave up a Sunday morning consistently to train them. Since then, we've believed in investing in nurses, training them, pushing them and encouraging them.

Do these courses still happen at Fernandez Hospital?

Yes, all the time. The neonatal course is now online. And we've also chosen three of our nurses to sub-specialize and serve as leaders in the three different units. We also bring them in to teach. With the midwives we've pushed them to taking online certified courses to update their knowledge, encouraged them to become trainers in "hands-on" workshops and "clinical mentors" with the midwifery training of nurses for Telangana. Our vision is to develop leadership and have nurses/



Dr Evita Fernandez: 'We expect nurses to perform but when we pay them so poorly how do you build up self-esteem and dignity?'

midwives involved in policy decisions both in the organizations they work for and at national level.

How many nurses do you have at your three hospitals?

At the moment, I think we're probably around 500 (present total = 502). But we need much more. We need around 180 in each of our hospitals. So we do have quite a deficiency.

And is that because you can't get the people you want?

Two reasons: we are a single-specialty. After a year or two, those who come to us tend to want to go to a multi-specialty so that they get wider experience and then go abroad. Their idea is to go abroad. You can't blame them because what they're paid outside is perhaps five times what they get here.

How much do you pay?

I believe the government gives probably twice what we pay. With us the girls get free housing, free food and a starting salary of around ₹15,000 a month. This is as someone who's just finished their three years in nursing school and come to us. Keep in mind that we spend almost six months getting them to unlearn and relearn the ropes.

A midwife would start at ₹25,000 a month. We have got midwives who are earning ₹90,000 and ₹65,000. We definitely feel the nurses, whether they sub-specialize as neonatal nurses or midwives, need to be encouraged and given a career path. We've told them the opportunities with us are to become director of midwifery and

‘Doctors tend to treat nurses as gophers — go do this or that — and don't give them the respect they should get as colleagues capable of doing more. As a result, we have a large group of nurses who should be playing a vital role, but have not been given that opportunity.’

superintendent of nursing. We invest in them.

Give them a career goal within your hospitals...

Yes, but this is in our own tiny world. This needs to be offered across the board. The Indian Nursing Council should do it.

Does the bulk of training that happens take place in the money-making colleges or are there also enough dependable institutions as well?

Nursing colleges benefit from being attached to large medical colleges or large hospitals where training is good. Let's take our own example, the Fernandez School of Nursing. We excel in OB-GYN and neonatal. For the rest of our subjects, we have to send the students to a government hospital and the girls would see the difference. They could spend a whole month in our government hospital with absolutely no teaching. And on our part we were very much aware that we are producing nurses with good skills in certain areas, but hopeless in other areas. So if we've felt this way, I can imagine the rest

of the nursing schools which are in a situation like ours.

But what about well-recognized institutions?

Absolutely. I mean, Osmania used to have a good reputation. I think you've got some excellent places in Delhi. I think the leading institutes are CMC Vellore and St John's Medical College in Bengaluru. There is RMC in Chennai. You've got CMC in Ludhiana. You've got Holy Family in Delhi. St Martha's Hospital in Bengaluru. AIIMS in Delhi, I am told, has excellent teaching and training. I know that the neonatal department is doing some amazing work with their nurses. You have got Dr Ashok Deorari at AIIMS who is tremendous and invests in nurses all the time.

Does a nursing course begin after Class 12?

It has been a three-year diploma after Class 12, but this is being phased out all over the world in favour of a B.Sc. in nursing. The Indian Nursing Council is going in this direction. So that's why we in 2018

shut down our diploma courses in anticipation of this, and we only run two post-basic diploma courses and that's in neonatology and midwifery.

Currently, nursing schools give a diploma in nursing and midwifery though I can't understand why midwifery was added to it because the nurse in training is exposed to just 12 to 16 weeks in maternity services.

How do rural hospitals manage?

In smaller hospitals and rural areas, the doctors usually employ young ladies and train them. They may not be certified or qualified nurses, or they could take a nurse with a qualification that was ANM or Auxiliary Nurse Midwife and is at present called MPHW or Multi-Purpose Health Worker. These, once again, are ladies who would have finished Class 12, but did an 18-month course. And so that certifies them as having certain nursing skills, but they're not allowed to prescribe, they're not allowed to do some things that a nurse could do. Now, a lot of us, years ago, ran our hospitals with all these ANMs. In Fernandez, we had a collection of ANMs and general nurses when we ran our in-house training programme in 2005. And the ANMs were flying high, because they were so delighted that they were given a chance. And our neonatal nurses, all ANMs, were able to intubate newborns, interpret lab tests and perform basic procedures. In fact, some of our postgraduate neonatologists learnt from these ANMs. So that was another revelation for us. If you give someone absolutely focused good quality training, she becomes top-notch.

We learnt this in South Africa, where at a 60-bed unit the neonatologist simply didn't have the doctors and the nurses so he created an in-house programme.

But today, the NABH (National Accreditation Board for Hospitals & Healthcare Providers) doesn't allow you to have ANMs in strategic places because it is not a quality indicator. So while we have nurses, there are certain clinical areas where the ANMs have proven to be dependable and competent.

Why don't you send them off to be trained or to take a nursing diploma now?

Well, some of them are much older and they can't be bothered going through a three-year course. And the other thing is, if you ask them to do a course where they can't attend classes. You know, this is why we want the Indian Nursing Council to offer online courses for such nurses. They have the potential. But how do you expect them to just stop working, go and spend three years upgrading skills and come back? Who will provide for the family? More so, if she is a single mom and the only bread-winner.

What about primary health centres, district hospitals?

I can give two very good examples. Pavitra Mohan and Sharad Iyengar in Rajasthan have invested in nurses coming from the villages where they are running their health centres. It has worked to an extent. With the midwifery, what we're trying to do in Telangana is to have midwives posted closer to where they live. Women are not unhappy about shifting. So, that has worked very well. We are now training 140 nurses and have told them where they will be posted so they know and they start planning. I think that's important. ■

When figs don't sell they are worth their weight in rolls

Shree Padre
Ballari

LAST year's March lockdown was especially hard on fig farmers in the Ballari district of Karnataka. With 1,800 hectares of fig orchards, the district tops fruit production in the state. The sudden lockdown coincided with summer, a satisfying time for farmers since it is their peak harvesting season. Instead, farmers stared at ruin.

With no transport available, plucked fruits couldn't be sent for sale. Figs have a very short shelf-life of two to three days. As a result, several tonnes of fruit rotted in the next few months. Each farmer lost lakhs of rupees.

Angry and frustrated, a few pulled out their fig plants and opted for crops with longer shelf-life like guava and pomegranate. According to the horticulture department's figures, just 1,100 hectares of fig orchards survived. This means plants in as much as 700 hectares were uprooted.

Yet in just a year the fig farmers of Ballari have achieved a remarkable turnaround. Srinivasapura Camp in Lakshmipura village now has a thick belt of fig orchards. Farmers exude quiet confidence and pride. They have put last year's tragedy behind them. What was the reason for this transformation?

The farmers said they had an exciting new development to share. They had started converting raw figs into fig rolls and thereby adding value. And the fig rolls had received a good response from buyers across several states.

In Srinivasapura Camp alone seven units manufacturing fig rolls had come up in record time. Another one is in the pipeline. This sunrise fig roll industry held many more surprises. All the units are owned by young farmers. Most are women-led enterprises. Despite the ongoing pandemic these ventures have become successful. They were able to sell their products without delay and the returns were encouraging.

LAB TO FARM TO MARKET

The credit for training and motivating fig farmers goes to ICAR Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK), Ballari. Recalls senior scientist Dr Ramesh B.K., "In 2019, before the pandemic, we had conducted a training programme on fig roll production and other value-addition methods in Srinivasa camp. But the response was lukewarm. Once the crisis deepened, they rushed to seek guidance from us. We conducted training sessions for even two or three people instead of waiting for a group to form."

Fig rolls are probably the only value-added product of this fruit in our country. Although dehydrated figs are widely available for around ₹1,200 per kg, they are imported from Afghanistan. Efforts to dehydrate the Ballari red variety of fig did not do well because it isn't suited for drying.

The technology of fig roll production was developed by the University for Agricultural Sciences, Raichur, about four or five years ago. However, it wasn't commercialized until recently. It was Dr Shilpa H., a scientist at the university, who took this knowhow to the farmers of Ballari.

The KVK got a nutritional analysis of fig rolls done at Raichur University's lab. They helped each unit in standardization of the product, in getting FSSAI certification, and with branding, designing and other hand-holding measures. Knowing an experienced KVK was behind them gave the start-ups the confidence to keep going.

A fig roll is a thin, dehydrated mat of fig pulp, similar to *aam papad* or mango pulp candies. After cleaning, the flesh of each fruit is manually scooped out and



Dried fig pulp has been cut and is ready for being made into rolls



Women workers roll out thin strips of dried fig pulp

then ground and boiled after adding some jaggery. The cooked pulp is poured into trays. After drying, the fig mat is cut, rolled and packed.

Figs grow almost throughout the year. If the unit has a dryer, fig rolls can be produced regularly. Out of seven units, four are functioning. Three don't have electric dryers so they suspended operations during the monsoon.

Two young housewives, 27-year-old H. Poojarani Ramakrishna and 25-year-old K. Sudha Manjunath, were the first to plunge into value addition. The two are such soulmates that they are jointly addressed as 'Pooja-Sudha'. They are partners in Lakshmi Sai Products, their enterprise. During training, they learnt to make jam too. "Our first choice was jam making," says Sudha, "because it doesn't need machines or equipment or investment."

They started making fig jam but soon realized that with a low shelf life and no transport they would not be able to sell their product. "So we switched to roll making which Shilpa madam had taught us during training. We felt fig rolls would sell in rural markets as well and thereby expand demand," says Poojarani.

After training at KVK, Pooja-Sudha immediately set up their enterprise in March last year. The figs were dried in the sun. "We had no idea about markets and marketing. We thought, instead of sitting idle let's make an effort," recalls Sudha.

They sent the first few batches of fig rolls, which they named Nature's Fig Rolls, to their mothers in Andhra Pradesh via newspaper vans that were permitted to run during the lockdown phase.

Some cartons were complimentary. They requested their respective mothers to try to sell the fig rolls as well. The response was good. That gave them the confidence to ask fresh fruit buyers in Chennai whether they were interested in fig rolls. After sampling the fig rolls, the Chennai fruit sellers said yes. Pooja-Sudha then began contacting more buyers. They took a private loan and bought two electric dryers. Both Pooja and Sudha work long hours now. They have four women employees.

Lakshmi Sai Products produces 20 kg of rolls every day. Nature's Fig Rolls are marketed mainly in Bengaluru and also sold in Nellore, Tirupati and other



Pooja and Sudha who pioneered the manufacture of fig rolls



The Ballari Red variety of figs and fig rolls

All the units are owned by young farmers. Most are women-led enterprises. Despite the ongoing pandemic these ventures have become successful. They have been able to sell their stocks.

urban areas in Andhra Pradesh. Packed in 250-gm packets, the fig rolls are priced at ₹400 per kg. Pooja-Sudha invested ₹2 lakh in their business and took a shed on rent.

The two have become role models, inspiring other farmers to follow their example.

WORK FROM HOME

The units that have sprouted are home-based industries. All that's required are a dryer, a pulping machine and a shed.

N. Vani Pushpa, also a housewife from a farming family, runs Jayasree Products. The brand name of her fig rolls is Nutri Power. Helped by her husband and two others, she produces 15 to 20 kg of fig rolls per day. On average, they make around 300 kg per month. Their fig rolls are priced at ₹300 to ₹400 per kg. For a few of their customers, they make fig rolls with organic jaggery, priced at ₹450 per kg.

Only two units are bigger. Forty-four-year-old M. Ramesh Babu, owner of Vasavi farm, sells his fig rolls under the MRB brand name. His unit produces 50 kg of fig rolls per day. Twenty-seven-year-old Yeshwanth Sunil Maddipati's Green Mine Organics is the biggest fig roll enterprise in this area. Both units use

solar tunnel dryers backed by electric heaters. They have built a separate building for manufacturing fig rolls and, unlike the smaller units, they have steel trays and racks for drying.

Green Mine Organics produces 200 kg of fig rolls per day. Madipatti has built seven solar tunnel dryers and installed an electric boiler to boil the pulp. The other units are doing this manually, using cooking gas. The hot pulp arrives at the work table through pipes in Madipatti's unit. He has invested nearly ₹2 crore in his venture and his installed capacity is 1,250 kg per day.

All these are start-ups in the agro-processing sector. Led by young entrepreneurs with no experience, they are learning by trial and error. Yet, the marketing efforts they have put in and the response they have evoked in a short time are amazing.

Gangadhar, Vani Pushpa's husband, says they prefer to sell directly without intermediaries. Half their product goes to different cities in Karnataka like Bengaluru and Gangavathi and the rest to Eluru, Rajahmundry and Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh and Hyderabad in Telangana. They send their parcels through cargo services run by government-owned bus companies like KSRTC and APSRTC. "They deliver very fast and without damage," says Gangadhar.

Pooja-Sudha also sell directly. They cater to buyers in Bengaluru and Nellore in Andhra Pradesh. The Bengaluru buyer runs fruit shops and he sends the rolls farther to Tamil Nadu. "Due to the lockdown, demand is constrained. Earlier, we used to dispatch fig rolls every day. But now we send our cartons on alternative days," says Sudha.

RISE OF AGRI-BUSINESS

Both Ramesh Babu and Yeshwanth Sunil plunged into the fruit business after they found middlemen were exploiting them. They also own vehicles that can transport fruits to towns and cities.

Ramesh Babu has two decades of marketing experience in selling fresh figs. He owns 120 acres of fig orchards. He also buys from other farmers and sends the produce to Chennai, Bengaluru, Maharashtra and Hyderabad.

Yeshwanth Sunil has only 10 acres of fig orchards. He too buys from other farmers at a steady price of ₹20 per kg. "Even if market prices come down I pay this rate," he says. The figs are sent to Bengaluru and Hyderabad.

Sunil, who has an organic pesticide business, says he explored the fig roll market for a year before plunging into it. "I sent sample packets of fig rolls to our 350 dealers in south India. I approached dry fruit traders in Delhi, Hyderabad and Mumbai. The kind of response I got built my confidence," he says.

CLIMBING THE VALUE CHAIN

Figs are a delicate fruit and need to be harvested every day. Ripe fruit can't survive long journeys. But buyers in Chennai, the biggest market so far, insist the figs be harvested two or three days in advance to prevent transport losses. Since the city is farther away, the travel time is longer, unlike Bengaluru where freshly ripened fruits are acceptable because the distance is shorter.

Earlier, fully ripened figs had no market. About 10 to 15 percent of fruit used to get rejected. But for fig rolls, fully ripened fruits are needed so now there is less wastage. Says Vani Pushpa, "We need ripe fruits for rolls. The perfect taste of the fruit then manifests itself. If you taste the pre-ripened fruits that go to Chennai, you will realize the rolls made with ripened fruit are far tastier."

Vani Pushpa has six acres of fig orchards. If she runs out of ripe figs, she buys from local traders. "In fact, we use 30 to 40 percent of our figs. The rest we buy from traders. Traders buy these ripe fruits only for us. They can't sell them in the market," she says.

Vani Pushpa and Pooja-Sudha are planning to buy a generator for uninterrupted production. Pushpa is also trying to sell her products on Amazon. She has completed GST registration, a precondition to sell at D-Mart, More and Reliance online stores.

The fig roll manufacturers also need a helping hand. They say deskinning or scooping out the fleshy part of the fig is cumbersome and has to be done manually. "We are looking for a machine to perform this task. I have informed engineers at our Raichur Agriculture University," says Dr Shilpa.

Fig farming in the district is just two decades old. Depending on season, production and demand, the price of fresh figs ranges from ₹10 to ₹40 per kg. Prices are uncertain and controlled by middlemen. Last year's crisis was the worst for them. But, by moving into agro processing and marketing, the farmers have turned around their fortunes.

The net result of KVK scientists and farmers working together is the creation of India's only fig value addition industry. ■

*Woh rishton main vishwas, woh vishwas ki mithaas
Har mithaas jo hai khaas...*



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A trans kitchen in Chennai with a handful of love

Surmayi Khatana

New Delhi

LIFE is ordinarily rough for transgender people. They tend to be socially ostracized, lack education and find it difficult to get employment.

In the pandemic, life is much rougher for the community. With lockdowns taking people off the streets, and shops getting shuttered, there have been fewer streams of income and no food.

In Chennai, help came unexpectedly with the setting up of the Trans Community Kitchen by four young people even as the second wave of infections raged and the situation grew grimmer.

The Trans Community Kitchen operated from two locations in Chennai and both are now closed since the city is back to normal. But between April and June, meals were served to more than 1,000 people a day and 65,000 packets of food were distributed.

It was a self-less operation which rallied cooks and support staff. Funds were collected online. The motto was: “Orupidianbu” or “a handful of love”.

The kitchen was the idea of Srijith and Aruvi, a theatre director and a student of gender studies in Hyderabad University, respectively. They were joined by Sharan and Anish, both local activists for transgender rights.

“As *thirunangais* (transgender), we know what it means to be discriminated against, what it means to go to sleep hungry, and we wanted to do as much as we could to make sure as many people as we could manage didn’t go to sleep hungry,” Srijith told *Civil Society* on the phone from Chennai.

They had been involved in relief measures during the first wave and had been helping members of the community. But the kitchen was a more organized and targeted measure.

The cooks and other workers included 15 trans women of various ages and backgrounds. They were paid for their labour and so the kitchen also became a consistent source of income at a time when no money was forthcoming from other sources.

Funding for the meals and the wages came from donations received online. Whatever they collected they accounted for online to donors.

“Some of the older members of the kitchen are like mothers to us, they have been in the local area for a long time. Trans folk live together in communities. If someone has run away from home, the community becomes their family. These folks guide us,” explains Aruvi.

There was much learning as they went along. From Maya, a Sri Lankan from a refugee camp, whose work in the kitchen was outstanding, came

the idea of relaxing of gate timing rules with regard to volunteering.

Having got the kitchen going first at Porur, it was decided to serve meals also at Ernavur. Cooks were kept in isolation and workstations sanitized.

A local store delivered groceries for the Porur kitchen, which were divided into portions. Planning and division of groceries for days in advance became key to running smoothly for consecutive meals. Priya, one of the volunteers, kept an inventory and planned logistics.

At Ernavur, Kala Amma travelled in a *meen body vandi*, a three-wheeled vehicle, to the Kothal Chavadi market, one of the few vegetable markets functioning during the lockdown. She took with her a list from Ramya, who maintained an inventory.

The kitchens learnt from each other’s experiences, shared ‘one-pot’ recipes, and exchanged inventories at their mid-week meetings.

Shankari Akka put together the menu, keeping

‘A chain of trust forms. People would put faith in us and contribute a small amount. We would deliver and keep them updated.’

nutrition and taste as priorities. Breakfast included meals like *khichdi* or *pongal*. For lunch there would be *brinji*, which is a rice dish, tomato rice, sambhar rice, along with eggs. For dinner there would be wheat *rava khichdi*, *upma*, *vada*-curry and masala macaroni. There was dessert too: *rava kesari* or *gulab jamun*. *Biryani* made an appearance on the menu on some days.

INSIDE THE KITCHENS

Fresh groceries, mineral water, and high-quality oil were used for cooking. Most of the menu included single-pot dishes to be able to manage a large amount of food in a short time.

For COVID-positive families the menu was crafted differently, with eggs, pickles, and a focus on immunity-boosting foods. “A chain of trust forms. People would put faith in us and contribute a small amount. We would deliver, keep them updated, and after seeing our work they would continue donating to us and introduce other individuals to us,” says



Volunteers packing food



About 65,000 packets of food were distributed

Aruvi, highlighting the importance of accountability. The kitchen still maintains a mailing list of all donors, informing them how each rupee is spent.

“Most of our donors have been folks who care about trans rights and want to contribute to someone they can trust to do the right work in the right places,” they say.

SERVING EVERYONE

“The Trans Community Kitchen was started on the principle of serving everybody in sight without asking any questions,” says Srijith.

While trans individuals and women with disabilities were the kitchen’s principal beneficiaries, it also served multiple tribal communities such as the Narikuravars and Boom Boom Mattukaran.

They also served small communities of migrant workers, “all the people with occupations that had become impossible in the lockdown,” including tea vendors, food stall owners and so on.

As the kitchen continued serving communities,



The team

the aid receivers pointed them in the direction of other communities in need, spreading their ‘handful of love’ to a larger number of people.

The Porur kitchen served frontline workers at Ramachandra Medical College, cemeteries in Kattupakkam, the Porur Toll Gate, the Porur Gopalakrishna Theatre and 28 other areas.

Initially, the Ernavur kitchen at Tsunami Quarters served around 100 individuals — trans women, working class individuals, and disabled women living in the housing board.

As the kitchen grew, with experience as well as funds, it began to also serve frontline workers at Stanley Hospital, Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital, Omandurar Hospital, cemeteries on Mint Street, and other areas that were not covered by the Porur kitchen.

DELIVERY RUNS

After the initial days of basic precautions like masks, gloves and shields, with the rise in cases and increased interaction with COVID-positive individuals, the team began delivering in full PPE.

“One of the effects was that the full weight of being on the very frontline of the pandemic hit us very heavily,” says Srijith. He and Aruvi recall Priya coming back from a food delivery run in tears, feeling depersonalized driving in an empty city in a PPE suit.

After this episode, Srijith began accompanying the volunteers on the delivery runs, cracking jokes to lighten the mood during deliveries, singing songs together and stopping from time to time to scold people without masks.

“We turned a costume of death into something of a clown costume for that brief duration. In another sense, the PPE costume gave us a sense of dignity in our work, and renewed our purpose and knowledge that we’re doing something not just crucial, but something we could take pride in,” he says.

While the kitchen has ceased operations due to lifting of the lockdown in Chennai, it continues to raise funds and donations to pay bills for groceries bought in advance and rented utensils. ■

You can follow their journey on social media (@transcommunitykitchen) and donate by contacting transcommunitykitchen@gmail.com.

Samita’s World

by SAMITA RATHOR



TRIBUTE

The Vir Chopra we knew

UMESH ANAND

"I AM Vir Chopra," said the very fit-looking and fair-skinned man of medium height, putting out his hand. "I would like to get in touch with you." I offered him my card and said, "Sure, anytime."

We had just completed an episode of Gamechangers, a series in which we were bringing alive cover stories of *Civil Society* for audiences at the Habitat Centre in New Delhi. This one was on zero-emission housing and it had drawn a packed house.

After the show, there were people who wanted to say hello. Some were our friends and others regular readers who were happy to meet us in person. There were also those who had never come across us before.

I, being an ignoramus about commercial cinema, didn't know Vir Chopra was the producer of his brother, Vidhu Vinod Chopra's blockbuster films like *Parinda*, *1942: A Love Story*, *Parineeta*, the *Munnabhai* series, *3 Idiots* and so on.

I quickly moved on from him to meet others. But the next day, a Sunday, my mobile rang and it was Vir getting in touch. We agreed to meet and from then on began a close friendship which grew over almost a decade till he passed away on July 5 from COVID-19. He was 72, but always looked much younger than his years.

Vir was happy being anonymously famous. It was the kind of style I liked and was comfortable with. He was an insider to the razzle-dazzle world of cinema. But home for him was a nondescript bungalow in Bijwasan on the fringes of Delhi where he lived with his wife, Namita, and their two lovely daughters, Ananya and Saumya.

He seemed to value personal freedom more than fame. It was completely in character for him to look up the programme schedule of the Habitat and on impulse attend our Gamechangers event on zero-emission housing — occupying a seat in the hall like anyone else.

It was also in relative anonymity that he died in some nondescript hospital room in Mumbai, having been flown in at the last minute for treatment from the Maldives. News of his death was also brief and fleeting. There were no grand memorial services or lengthy tributes.

But he lived a very interesting life. He funded *Parinda* from his personal earnings while working in the UAE. Earlier, he had been in the Tata Administrative Service and worked with the Taj, setting up hotels as part of Camellia Panjabi's team in those early days of the Taj's expansion.

He moved on from the Tatas to work in the UAE and excelled as a manager of diverse businesses, putting together in the process the funds needed for his brother's filmmaking, the first really big success being *Parinda*.

But neither films nor money satisfied him. He was keenly interested in society and governance. He was an observer of politics and the processes of change. So it was that he enrolled at the London School of Economics and Politics and earned a proper Ph.D. It was on political leadership in India. He was rightfully Dr Vir Chopra.

As we knew him, he was sincere and serious-minded about everything he took up. When I asked him to deliver the keynote address at the Civil Society Hall of Fame, he at first demurred. He said he didn't know enough about Hindi cinema, which was the subject I had requested him to talk about.

When I persisted, he thought hard and came back with the topic, "Gandhigiri and Citizengiri". It was an interesting address in which he dwelt on a definition of civil society and used clips from *Munnabhai* to show how citizen action was beginning to matter and could be Gandhian in spirit.

Vir wasn't one for taking shortcuts. He agreed to come to the Habitat the night before the Hall of Fame event to check out sound and visuals and deal with umpteen hiccups that needed to be attended to. He was there in the auditorium until late, allowing us to set up systems for the next day. He was in no hurry and didn't seem to mind.

Every year, Vir would religiously block dates for the Civil Society Hall of Fame event and make sure he was in Delhi for it. He would come with Namita and sometimes their two girls as well. It was a touching gesture.

Photos: Civil Society/ Lakshman Anand



Vir with wife Namita at the Civil Society Hall of Fame event



Vir makes the keynote address on 'Gandhigiri and Citizengiri'

Vir had a super calm demeanour. But he also had the restlessness of an entrepreneur. He ran a software company and there was a resort in the Maldives. At first there was a resort which was on lease and then one which was his own. Turning an island into a hotel is no small task and when managers failed to deliver, he stepped in himself to rescue the situation. He was unflappable, no matter what the odds.

Because they looked so alike, often his brother's fame as a successful film director robbed him of his anonymity. When he and I went off to Sikkim to check out rural homestays, which *Civil Society* had done a cover on, people would spot him and ask: "Are you Vidhu Vinod Chopra?" Vir would reply deadpan that he wasn't and move on.

A Bohra Muslim family from Mumbai on vacation in Sikkim was especially persistent. In between upbraiding the young Sikkimese man at the reception for not having their rooms ready and asking for halal chicken, they spotted Vir and me having a cup of tea in a corner. The entire family descended on him like a line of bees.

"You are Vidhu Vinod Chopra," they said, pointing at him almost menacingly.

"I am not," said Vir, calmly.

"But you look exactly like him," they insisted.

"I assure you I am not Vidhu Vinod Chopra," said Vir without batting an eyelid.

We remember Vir for his simplicity and values. He had the pragmatism of a successful entrepreneur and was amused by my efforts to run *Civil Society* as a business. But there was much idealism in him too. He was a family man and believed that we needed to hand over a better India to future generations. Social fissures and tensions of recent years had him worried about the direction in which the country was headed. This was the Vir Chopra we knew and will miss. ■

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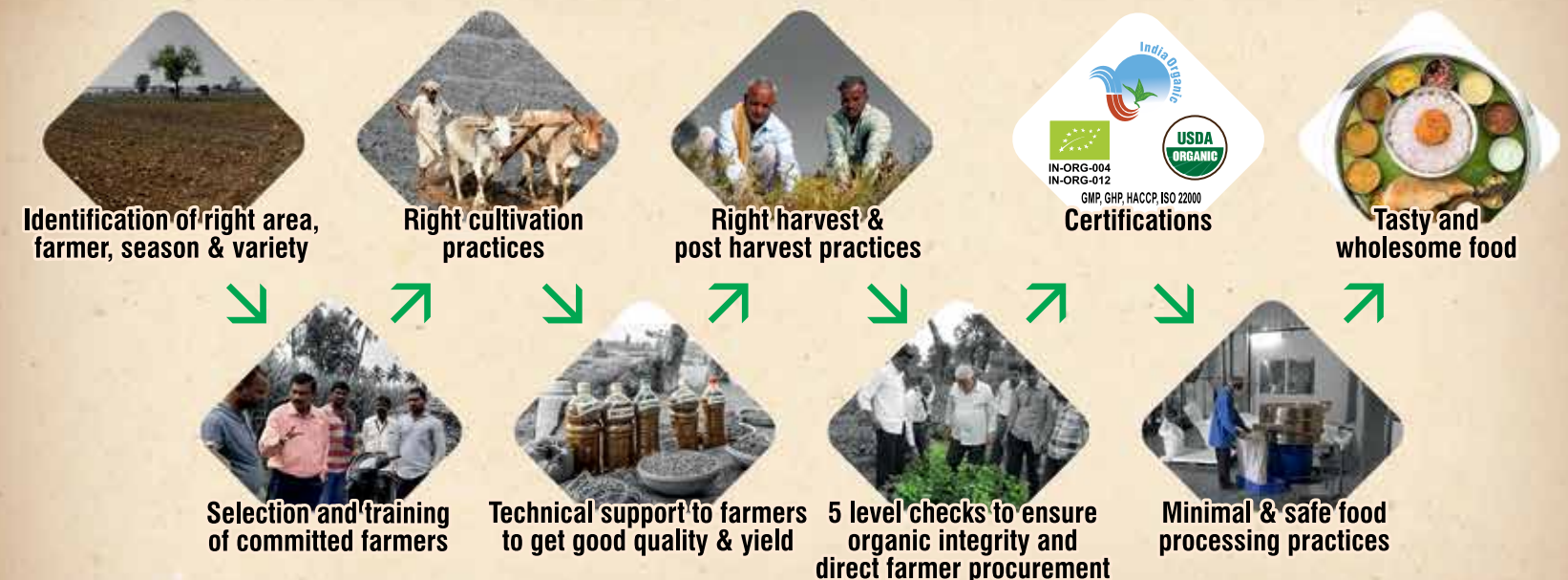


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Workshops were conducted on best practices in the street food business

Upscaling the street vendor

Raj Macchan
Chandigarh

SONU, a 33-year-old street food vendor, sells *channa-bhatura*, tea and assorted eats near the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER) in Sector 12, Chandigarh. Business had dipped drastically due to the coronavirus pandemic but things are now looking up. These days Sonu is attracting new clientele due to a new approach to his business after attending training workshops on health, hygiene, and other related areas under a programme run by the Chandigarh Municipal Corporation (CMC) in collaboration with PGIMER's Department of Community Medicine and School of Public Health.

In the first phase of the programme, training and capacity-building workshops were conducted for 600 street vendors. The second phase, which aims to cover over 3,000 vendors, is now underway. The civic body has allocated a budget of ₹49.40 lakh for the exercise. The workshops are being conducted at chosen locations around the city on weekdays with specific time slots for vendor groups.

"I attended the one-week programme and it has helped me adopt best practices in the street food vending business," says Sonu. "Earlier, I used to serve food in steel plates at ₹30 per plate. The trainers told us to use disposable plates and cups. These are preferred by customers as well. People are ready to pay ₹5 extra for these plates and food packets."

Vendors are also given training in personal hygiene, quality products, garbage management, and better understanding of rights and by-laws of the Street Vending Act, 2014. "The training for our group was conducted at PGI. It generated good interest and people were very regular in attending the workshops," says Sonu.

CMC officials say that the training and capacity-building programme is being conducted under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojna-National Urban Livelihood Mission (DAY-NULM). It is part of the CMC's objective to make Chandigarh a model



street-vending hub. The training package involves multiple stakeholders including members of the Town Vending Cell, officials of CMC, social development agencies, child and women welfare agencies, officers from financial institutions, faculty and experts from food safety, nutrition science, hotel management institutes, NGOs, medical, and public health officials.

Chandigarh Municipal Commissioner K.K. Yadav says that the training programmes were in keeping with the proactive approach of the Municipal Corporation towards resettlement, rehabilitation, and socio-economic upliftment of street vendors. "We have taken every possible step in bringing innovation, building the capacity of street vendors with respect to post-COVID-19 measures, financial inclusion, digital on-boarding, and socio-economic profiling. These steps have shown positive impact on the life of street vendors," he says.

The training modules are designed to enhance the knowledge and skill level of the vendors to empower them to provide quality services, especially healthy and hygienic street food, to city residents. Authorities contact the registered vendors individually. The interactive training workshops involve presentations, live demos, role plays, lectures and quiz sessions. Female street vendors are made aware of their rights and the special schemes designed for their welfare. The trainers have

developed prototypes of smart food carts, with features like solar panels and fire extinguishers for live demonstrations.

Says Vivek Trivedi, Social Development Officer, CMC, "The training programme is in line with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals. Street vending contributes majorly to self-employment of the weaker sections of society. However, the majority of them are not educated, and do not have access to credit and marketing skills. This makes them highly vulnerable to economic upheavals. The training package aims to overcome these challenges. The first phase of the programme was a success and efforts are on to make the second phase even more so."

The programme also provides health assurance plans, including free medical aid, to registered vendors under the aegis of PGIMER and its dispensaries in the city.

Says Pawan Kumar, a 38-year-old street food vendor who sells edibles such as *rajma-chawal*, omelettes, fast food, juices, and drinks near Elante Mall in the city's industrial area, "The workshops gave me fresh insight into doing business. Now I wear a cap, apron, and gloves while serving. We maintain social distancing. This has raised the comfort level of our customers. I have put up a table as well."

Chandigarh has over 10,000 registered vendors plying various trades throughout the city. Of these 6,625 are categorized as those providing non-essential services such as selling fruits and vegetables, fast food, *parathas*, juices, cold drinks and ice-creams. The essential service providers include cobblers, milk/bread/egg sellers, tea vendors, cycle/rickshaw repairers, *dhobis*, barbers and massagers. Each of the registered vendors pays a monthly fee ranging from ₹300 to ₹2,000 and is allocated a fixed spot to do business.

The municipal authorities had earlier implemented a Street Vending Plan in February 2020. The plan aimed at identifying, registering, and issuing vending certificates or licences to vendors in the city. The registered vendors now have the right to do business from the spots allocated to them in the 46 vending zones around the city. The registration process has come as a step towards bringing order to the highly disorganized street vending segment with removal of illegal vendors and checking other malpractices.

"Most of all, it has made us aware of our rights. The unorganized nature of the business led to rampant corruption in the system. We had to pay up every time officials came for the so-called surprise checks. The issuance of licences will do away with the corruption to some extent," says a street vendor. The city earlier had over 20,000 vendors doing business on its streets. With the implementation of the Street Vending Plan, almost half of them have been declared illegal and prohibited from doing business.

Trivedi says that the adoption of the vendor programme has resulted in a marked change in the approach of the authorities towards the vendors. "The focus has shifted from issuing *challans* and taking punitive action to encouraging vendors to get themselves registered/licensed, form Self Help Groups, and join skill development and financial assistance plans. The programme will gradually cover the entire vendor community in the city." ■



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The fight for forest rights in Kashmir

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

WHEN Articles 370 and 35A were abrogated in 2019, most central laws were implemented in the new Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). However, some were not. Among them was the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

It was finally implemented at the end of 2020, after a struggle, which actually began in 2006, when the law was passed by Parliament but could not be introduced in J&K because of the special provisions under which the state was governed.

The law gives forest dwellers rights over their homesteads and minor forest produce and recognizes that they have an important role to play in the protection of forests.

The driving force behind the demand to implement the FRA has been Zahid Parwaz Choudhary, president of the J&K Gujjar Bakerwal Youth Welfare Conference (JKGBYWC).

He is a Ph.D. student at the University of Kashmir. He was born in the village of Dodasan Balla of Rajouri district where he spent his childhood studying in the local school.

He then completed graduation in Srinagar. He has a postgraduate degree in Persian and a B.Ed. and M.Ed. But it is to the uplift of tribal communities that he has dedicated himself.

“The government of J&K had a very lackadaisical attitude regarding this law. Due to this we were forced to hit the streets and carry out protests in support of our demands. The eviction of forest dwellers was going on in full swing, especially in Jammu division,” says Choudhary.

It has been a longstanding demand of forest dwellers that their rights be recognized. They have all along wanted to play a role in the protection of forests and manage the resources on which their livelihoods depend.

He said community members have been raising their demands through different means such as protests, rallies, dharnas and conferences. Hundreds of young people have got involved and become robust activists for the cause.

“During our struggle we got a chance to visit Delhi and meet some forest rights activists. They told us to draft legislation on forest rights in J&K and then get it introduced in the state assembly.

This advice fired up Choudhary and his team. They worked on getting the bill drafted and it was introduced in the assembly by Chaudhary Qamar Hussain, the legislator from Rajouri, and a member of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP). Hussain has since joined the Apni Party led by Syed Mohammad Altaf Bukhari.

“When the bill got introduced in the assembly, we were upbeat. We thought it would be passed and become a law. But that was not to be. The PDP’s ally,



Zahid Parwaz Choudhary (centre) has been working consistently for tribal communities in Kashmir



The FRA guarantees protection of forests and alongside empowers village committees to take stern action against people who cause damage to a forest in any way.

the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), opposed it tooth and nail. The BJP’s Bali Ram Bhagat was given the forest ministry portfolio and there was no let-up in the eviction of forest dwellers. He was replaced by Lal Singh, also of the BJP, and members of our community continued to suffer,” recounts Choudhary.

Disappointed, the forest dwellers came out on to the streets of Jammu and carried out a protest along

with their livestock. They tried to march towards the Civil Secretariat but were stopped by police. The then chief minister, Mehbooba Mufti, ordered the eviction drive to be stopped.

It was at this time that the Asifa rape and murder case made headlines and the implementation of the FRA was put on the backburner.

When Articles 370 and 35A were abrogated, people assumed all the central laws would be implemented. But that was not to be and the FRA was one of the central laws that was not implemented.

It was only at the end of last year that the law got implemented when a drive to evict forest dwellers became an issue before the District Development Council elections.

Choudhary explains that the FRA guarantees protection of forests and alongside empowers village committees to take stern action against people who cause damage to a forest in any way. He says that village committees have been empowered to such an extent that forest smugglers cannot get away scot-free any longer.

“Under the FRA, tribals can use dried and useless timber for domestic purposes. They are also entitled to pick up dry grass, leaves and medicinal herbs found in abundance in the forests. Community members can also cut branches of trees and this, in turn, will ensure longevity of trees in forests,” says Choudhary.

He points out that denudation of the forest cover could have been minimized had the FRA been implemented in 2006. He has also been instrumental in ensuring hassle-free sanctioning of scholarships for Gujjar students.

Choudhary says the FRA agitation in the J&K owes much to the support it has got from Dr Ghulam Rasool, who has been a driving force behind the right to information movement in the state.

However, implementation of the law has been poor across India. It remains to be seen whether people get such rights in J&K. ■

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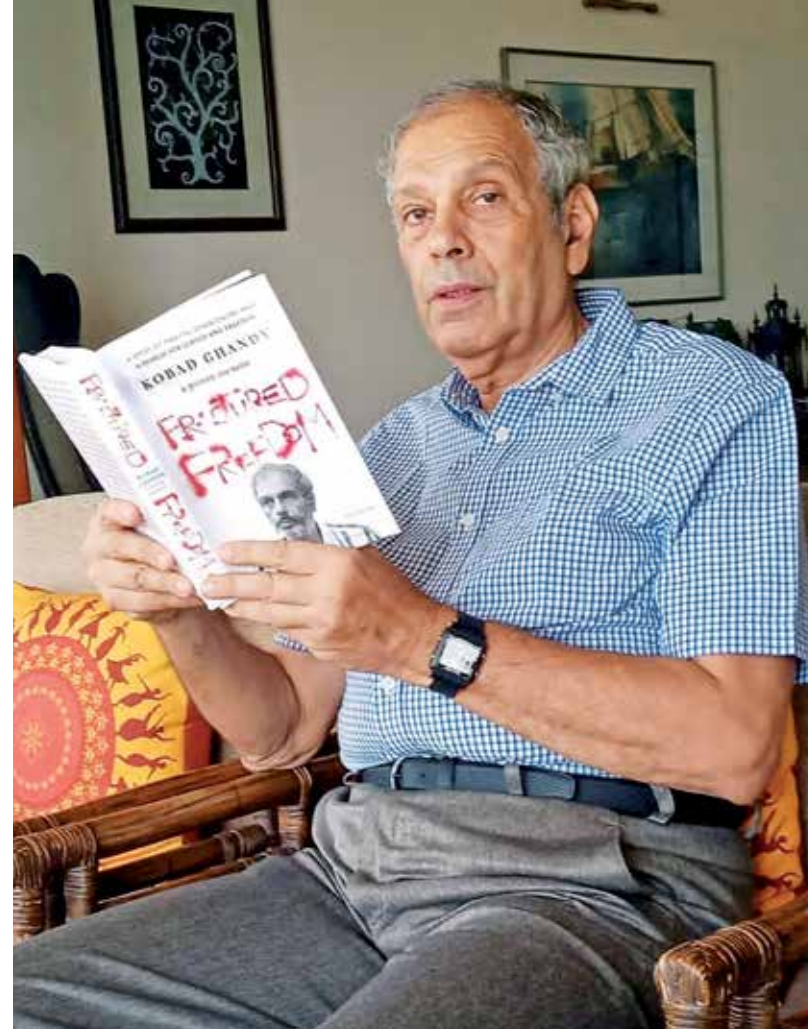
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Stan Swamy, the elderly Jesuit who died in custody



Kobad Ghandy, accused of being a Naxalite, spent over a decade in prison

Who is a political prisoner?

With Stan Swamy's death a definition is much needed

By Nandita Haksar



THERE has been a great deal of anguish, angst and anger expressed at the death of Stanislaus Lourdaswamy (1937–2021), popularly known as Stan Swamy, an Indian Roman Catholic priest, a member of the Jesuit order, and a tribal rights activist for many decades.

Swamy was the oldest person to be accused of terrorism in India. His supporters say that his death was hastened by the conditions in the prison where he was incarcerated. The repeated denial of bail resulted in deterioration of his health and he finally died of COVID-19 complications on July 5, 2021. Knowing that the end was near, he had asked to be allowed to die in his home in Ranchi rather than in jail.

Swamy was arrested on October 8, 2020 and charged by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) for his alleged role in the 2018 Bhima Koregaon violence and links to the Communist Party of India (Maoist).

His death has drawn focus to the cruelty of the system which denied the right to die with dignity to a senior citizen who was suffering from Parkinson's disease. However, the imprisonment of Stan Swamy and other political prisoners, including poets, journalists, bloggers, women activists, students, Dalits and

Muslims, raises crucial questions. It is not just a humanitarian issue but a political one.

At least one veteran human rights activist, Sumanta Banerji, says we should not merely condemn the State but firmly demand it be accountable. He suggests human rights activists demand: (i) punishment of the NSA officials who framed Stan Swamy in a false case; (ii) penalizing of the jailor and warders of Taloja jail where he was deprived of medical facilities that led to the deterioration of his health by putting them behind bars and imposing fines; dismissal of the concerned judges for gross misconduct in denying bail to the bedridden octogenarian and their permanent ouster from judicial ranks.

Banerji, now well past 80, was himself a Naxalite prisoner. We were both active in the People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR), being its secretary at different times. The post-Independence human rights movement began with the demand for release of all political prisoners arrested during the Emergency in 1975.

The political prisoners included people of divergent political views ranging from Kuldip Nayar, the veteran journalist, to Prabir Purkayastha, a student of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), Vijay Prasad, a Delhi University student and a socialist by conviction, Shankar Guha Niyogi, the legendary trade union leader, and hundreds of Naxalite prisoners to members of the RSS who had opposed the Emergency.

The 1970s saw a rise in the number of political prisoners all over the world.

One writer has described the decade not as a Golden Space Age but as "a new era of barbarism." In an article published in the *Saturday Review* in June 1974 titled "Geography of Disgrace" based on an Amnesty International report, the author estimated that there were between one million to two million political prisoners all over the world. By "political prisoners" he meant those incarcerated solely because of their political views.

During the same period in India, the number of political prisoners grew. In West Bengal it was estimated there were some 30,000, mostly either members of the new CPI (ML) party or sympathetic to its demands. Amnesty International brought out a report in 1974 on the political prisoners imprisoned in the jails of West Bengal.

The Amnesty report quotes the minister for jails of West Bengal, Gyan Singh Sohanpal, as stating on February 21, 1974, "The West Bengal government will convert Barasat sub-jail in 24-Parganas district into a correctional institution to bring about a psychological change in the behaviour of the 'misguided youths', mainly Naxalite prisoners."

According to Sohanpal's statement, the Naxalites were to be regarded as "psychopaths and in need of psychotherapy to get rid of the extremity of mind."

My own political activism began during the post-Emergency days and that is why I have always felt deeply about the plight of political prisoners. When I became a lawyer I took up cases of political prisoners. In the course of my thirty years of working as a human rights activist I took up cases of dozens of political prisoners in at least 18 states, from Bihar to Punjab, Nagaland, Manipur and Goa. I also took up cases of foreign prisoners, mostly refugees, who were political dissidents.

NEVER AN EASY TASK

This was never an easy task. Many times, I disagreed with my clients' views, especially on the question of women. In one case, my clients were Arakan freedom fighters whose anti-Rohingya views were very disturbing. Then there were those who shared the Taliban's ideology but had been deliberately framed as terrorists.

I took up the cases of all those whom I considered to be political prisoners, irrespective of their ideology. I was in part inspired by the growing body of prison literature. Prison literature is taught as a course in many American universities. It is the poems, memoirs and fiction written by prisoners, and most of them are political prisoners.

These include the letters of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg to their sons before they were executed in 1953, the memoirs of Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, the rich Afro-American prison literature such as the writings of Angela Davis and Malcolm X, and, more recently, Moazzam Begg's *Enemy Combatant: My Imprisonment at Guantanamo, Bagram and Kandahar*. There are powerful novels like *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn about conditions in the Siberian camps in the Soviet Union which won a Nobel Prize.

In India, too, there is a growing body of literature by prisoners including Mary Tyler's *My Years in an Indian Prison* (1978), Ifitkar Gilani's *My Days in Prison* (2009), Arun Ferreira's *Colours of the Cage: A Prison Memoir* (2015), Mohammad Aamir's *Framed as a Terrorist: My 14-Year Struggle to Prove My Innocence* (2016) and Kobad Ghandy's *Fractured Freedom: A Prison Memoir* (2021). And then there is a moving account, the memoirs of Sunil Gupta, warden of India's biggest jail, co-written with Sunetra Choudhury, *Black Warrant: Confessions of a Tihar Jailer* (2019).

These prisoners belong to very different ideological commitments, but all of them were political prisoners. Yet, often, when a demand is made for the rights of political prisoners it is repeatedly made on the basis of ideological affiliation. For example, in an open letter to the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, dated December 23, 1994, the Naxalites belonging to the CPI [Marxist-Leninist (People's War Group)] demanded that "activists of all revolutionary parties who are in jails as undertrial prisoners and convicts, should be recognized as political prisoners". The demands also included imprisonment in a separate block, lifting of censorship and surveillance by intelligence officers and other demands pertaining to their daily needs.

While the Naxalites articulated their demands in the language of human rights, their view of human rights was instrumentalist and there was never any debate on who is and who is not a political prisoner. But the liberals too did not agree on a definition of who is a political prisoner. There are academic debates on the problems of defining a political prisoner.

Christoph Valentin Steinert, writing in the *Journal of Global Security Studies* (September 2021) on the subject of who is a political prisoner, suggests that the



A protest against the arrest of Stan Swamy and other social activists in Ranchi, Jharkhand. Below: People paying homage to Stan Swamy after his death



The imprisonment of Stan Swamy and other prisoners, including poets, journalists, bloggers, women activists, students, Dalits and Muslims, is a political issue and not just humanitarian.

definition should be based on the conceptualizations of the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (UN-WGAD) and of the Council of Europe so that it is grounded in international law. Based on this reasoning, political prisoners are individuals who are convicted in politically biased trials and incarcerated. Trials are deemed politically biased if they are endorsed by the government and (a) lack domestic legal basis, (b) violate principles of procedural justice, or (c) violate universal human rights.

AMNESTY'S DEFINITION

This definition is consistent with Amnesty International's definition of a political prisoner. It campaigns for a fair trial for all political prisoners but it does not campaign for their release unless they can be categorized as what Amnesty calls "prisoners of conscience". The latter category are those who do not advocate or support armed resistance.

This is the reason Amnesty International never adopted Nelson Mandela as a prisoner of conscience through the 27 years he was in jail because, as a member of the African National Conference, he supported armed resistance. Subsequently, Amnesty did put forward an explanation for its stand.

Cosmos Desmond, the director of the British chapter of Amnesty International,



The ailing Telugu poet, Varavara Rao, was imprisoned for his left-wing ideology

The demand for a fair trial, proper procedures and transparency ensures not only justice for the prisoner but also the integrity of the criminal justice system.

wrote a scathing attack on Amnesty International's policy on political prisoners in a book which is not easily available now, *Persecution East and West: Human Rights, Political Prisoners and Amnesty*, published by Penguin in 1983.

NEED FOR DEBATE

Unfortunately, in India the human rights movement has not engaged with these debates even though it has focused on the plight of political prisoners. Why is it necessary to have a debate and discussion on who is and who is not a political prisoner?

The first reason is that the conversation will separate the debate on political prisoners from whether or not one agrees with their ideology. It brings back the focus on political prisoners and not their individual ideological stands.

For instance, Jaithirth Rao, an Indian businessman, has written a piece on Stan Swamy, "Marxist Jesuits are not for tribal welfare", suggesting that priests should not be Marxists. Apart from the fact that it is misinformed on the place of liberation theology, the article tries to undermine the relevance of the debate on the plight of political prisoners. Personal attacks and criticism of a political prisoner's viewpoint are used as an argument to deny the status of political prisoner to a person.

Secondly, a political prisoner has a right to access international organizations or international advocacy campaigns.

Thirdly, a definition of a political prisoner would ensure more transparency and accountability in the system. The lack of legal definition allows the government to manipulate the debate and justify the continuous corruption of the entire criminal justice system.

The demand for a fair trial, proper procedures and transparency ensures not only justice for the prisoner but also the integrity of the criminal justice system. When I took up the campaign for S.A.R. Geelani, the Delhi University lecturer accused in the Parliament attack case, I said defending Geelani is defending Indian democracy.

The hate and prejudice generated against Muslims in general and Kashmiri Muslims in particular meant that a Kashmiri Muslim was vulnerable to being framed and may have been hanged if we had not intervened. Our campaign did not only save one man but built bridges with Kashmiris in the Valley, showed the possibility of justice in Indian courts and made the police accountable to the public. The gains of the campaign were wiped out by subsequent events, showing that human rights campaigns have an important but limited

role in changing the political system.

There is no data on the number of political prisoners in the country. In response to a question in Parliament, the Ministry of Home Affairs replied that there are no records of the arrests of civil rights activists. This response comes in the wake of a press release by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights citing an increase in the restrictions on NGOs and arrests of civil rights activists in India.

The minister of state for home affairs, G. Kishan Reddy, said that the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) does not maintain any specific data on arrests/detention of civil rights activists.

CRIMINAL OR REFORMIST?

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) should maintain a database on the arrests of people who fall in the category of political prisoners.

According to Angela Davis, the Afro-American feminist and Marxist scholar, "There is a distinct and qualitative difference between one breaking a law for one's own individual self-interest and violating it in the interests of a class or a people whose oppression is expressed either directly or indirectly through that particular law. The former might be called a criminal (though in many instances he is a victim), but the latter, as a reformist or revolutionary, is interested in universal social change. Captured, he or she is a political prisoner."

This definition has relevance when we look at the latest prison statistics released by the National Crime Information Bureau which shows that the number of Muslims, Dalits, and tribals incarcerated is disproportionate to their population.

Muslims make up only 14.2 percent of India's population but 16.6 percent of convicts, 18.7 percent of undertrials and 35.8 percent of detenus in Indian prisons are Muslims as of December 31, 2019.

The statistics for Dalits is equally skewed: Over 21.7 percent of convicted inmates, 21 percent of undertrials and 18.15 percent of detenus were Dalits. Their share in the population is, however, around 16.6 percent.

At the end of 2019, tribals made up 13.6 percent of convicts in jails, while 10.5 percent of undertrials and 5.68 percent of detenus were from the Scheduled Tribes. They comprise 8.6 percent of the population as per the 2011 census.

Why are there so many Adivasis, Dalits and Muslims in jail? Are they criminals or are they people who are at the receiving end of prejudice, hate and a skewed development policy against which they find themselves pitted and when they protest they land in jail?

Davis's definition of a political prisoner is unlikely to be accepted by the system, but it is not impossible to have a definition of who is a political prisoner.

In October 2012, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) became the first major intergovernmental organization to approve concrete criteria for what defines a political prisoner. According to PACE guidelines, a person is a political prisoner if he or she meets any one of the following criteria:

- The detention violates basic guarantees in the European Convention on Human Rights, particularly freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom of expression and information; and freedom of assembly and association.
- The detention is imposed for purely political reasons.
- The length or conditions of detention are out of proportion to the offence.
- He or she is detained in a discriminatory manner as compared to other persons.
- The detention is the result of judicial proceedings that are clearly unfair and connected with the political motives of authorities.

So, who will decide who is a political prisoner? This is important as, most often, international rights organizations and intergovernmental bodies like the International Red Cross, the United Nations, and the European Union will accept recommendations by trusted local rights groups operating in the country of interest as to who constitutes a political prisoner.

It is imperative that all of us who care about the future of Indian democracy campaign for a definition of a political prisoner and build our data on political prisoners irrespective of whether we agree or disagree with their views.

This is a task as urgent under the present government as it will be under the next. The issue of political prisoners is central for building any inclusive, democratic movement for justice and equity in a country where the fundamental rights guaranteed to citizens have no meaning for a vast majority of citizens. And in that campaign the demand for the release of political prisoners will have to be the central demand, not only on humanitarian grounds but on the grounds of political justice and constitutional guarantees. ■

Nandita Haksar is a noted lawyer and human rights activist

'We went from beekeeping to serving hot meals'

The best-laid plans were thrown into disarray by COVID-19. We begin a series of conversations on how CSR teams in companies pivoted to stay relevant.

Civil Society News

New Delhi

BANKS tend not to go to villages and small towns until they are nudged into doing so. But this is not the case with DCB Bank, it would seem, since it has 155 of its 354 branches in rural areas where it enthusiastically promotes local prosperity and well-being.

As the pandemic began to unfold in March last year, DCB Bank's CSR partner teams were setting out to hold courses in natural beekeeping and water use. The bank supports sustainable livelihoods and sponsors the planting of trees in degraded forest tracts. It also helps communities with waste management, which is a growing peri-urban challenge.

But with the pandemic and subsequent lockdown all these activities came to an abrupt standstill. Towns and villages were sealed off and though bank branches were open, there was little possibility of community engagement.

What followed was a rapid change in direction in keeping with the requirements of the pandemic. DCB Bank swung from beekeeping and such activities to whipping up 15,000 hot meals a day and reaching out to migrant labour. It began working with hospitals and the police.

In Rajaji National Park it teamed with WWF to help 750 families dependent on daily wages with rations and items for personal hygiene.

DCB Bank's partnerships with NGOs came in handy. For instance, it was working

with Goonj in six states. There was the Giants Group in Mumbai from whom the hot meals came. It helped that it had long honed its ability to engage with communities as an extension of its banking activities.

The bank's long-term focus has been on sustainability and conservation. In the past four years, it has been instrumental in planting 400,000 trees, many of which are now beginning to be young clusters. This year it will plant another 100,000 trees, of which 60,000 will be grown using the Miyawaki method for rapidly raising micro-forests.

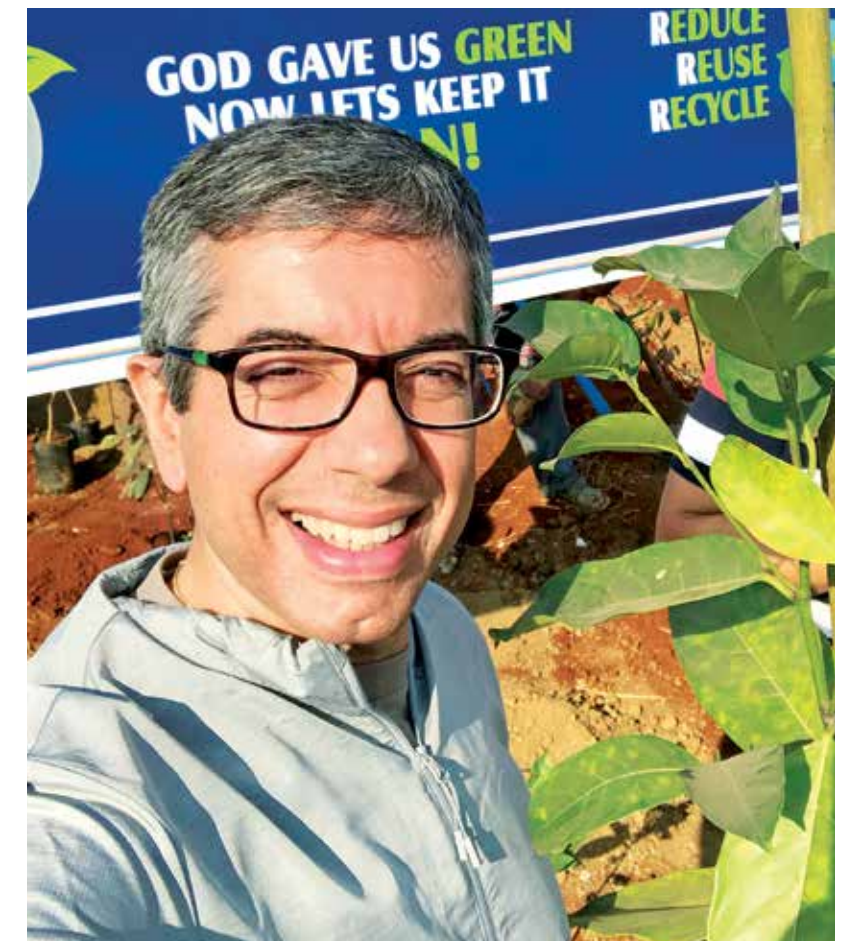
In cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru, these micro-forests will serve as much-needed sinks for air pollution. Mumbai already has three locations where the Miyawaki method has been used and there is important learning from the experience here. In Delhi, a micro-forest is being planted a kilometre from the Ghazipur landfill adjoining a residential colony, in partnership with East Delhi Municipal Corporation.

Gaurav Mehta, who helms CSR at the bank, among other roles in marketing and investor relations, spoke to *Civil Society* about the experience during the pandemic and what lies ahead.

In terms of the pandemic, what has been DCB Bank's story?

The initial story of the pandemic was of a break or a hiatus in all projects. Like others, we were stumped. Our project teams that were in the field could not access villages or organize village leadership groups. They could not organize meetings of farmers.

We had training programmes lined up for natural beekeeping in Chhindwara, and Narmada district. But panchayats had stopped entry of city people or



Gaurav Mehta: "We moved into working with the police and local administrations"

outsiders into their areas. If we go back to the first wave, or the first phase of the pandemic, there was confusion initially as to what was to be done.

More or less, it was a complete stop for a lot of our projects that were focused on developing sustainable livelihoods for communities. Plantation activities came to a standstill. Training programmes, not just for beekeeping, but also for water-use groups in Aurangabad, came to a stop.

But we pivoted around to include disaster relief management as one of our CSR thrust areas, at that time, which meant that we could jump right into COVID-19 relief programmes. That was an important pivot because a lot of communities who we were working with for skill development and other projects also needed help to cope with the pandemic.

We moved into working with police forces, with local administrations, with government hospitals. This happened with the government hospital in Jodhpur and Sassoon Hospital in Pune.

When you say you were working with the police and/or local administrations, what actually were you doing?

I'll point to a project that we did with World Wide Fund for Nature India, and the Uttarakhand Forest Department in the Rajaji National Park. There are quite a few communities who either live in the territory of the forest, or live in a part of the periphery of the forest that is not accessible very easily from the Haridwar

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side. They do need local transport. Since transport came to a halt, these populations had very few options to even bring basic rations home. And a lot of those people were daily wage-earners. Many of them were stuck, away from their homes, and the homes were vulnerable.

We moved into the area with the forest team and the forest department helped out with local transport. We were able to provide medical supplies, rations. Basic cooking inputs, even salt, sugar, *atta*, *dal*, ghee, tea, had to be moved in. There were around 750 families that were vulnerable at the time.

Another initiative we worked on covered Junagadh in south Gujarat, Palgarh in Mumbai and New Delhi. We rushed in food for migrants in Palgarh. I remember we worked with Giants Group of Mumbai who were cooking food in Byculla. And, just for comparison's sake, that's like cooking food in Delhi, say, in Lajpat Nagar, but shipping it to Manesar. With the roadblocks, the lockdowns, police permissions, and trying to arrange supplies so that you could cook 15,000 meals a day, it was a huge task. It may not be a big deal to provide 15,000 meals during normal times. But when everything is under lockdown, shipping hot meals to people every day is a challenge.

We worked with a group of entrepreneurs in Delhi who operate Subway outlets. And these business guys had gotten in touch with the Delhi government and the Delhi government allowed them to open Subway kitchens to cook food. We tied up with one of the five Subway kitchens that were reopened. And hot meals were prepared and shipped to the Anand Vihar Bus Depot to help migrants who were congregating there to go home.

It was different things for different people in different places — PPE, masks, sanitizers, basic personal hygiene items, wherever people required help. We were trying to assess the credibility of the agencies on the ground, and at the same time help speed up the delivery of relief, because at that time, speed was of the essence. Migrants were walking home, they were congregating and trains weren't working. So, a lot of pivoting did happen. The CSR projects that we were traditionally doing in sustainability, biodiversity, water recycling and waste management were paused and instead we focused on what we could do in terms of relief.

And now, we have started moving back into our project areas. In Taloja, in Mumbai, we're working with local societies to regenerate protected forest areas in the Taloja hills. There's a watershed programme there. We were working in Hyderabad on protecting the lake and the local community is back as are our employees at project sites.

For a bank, you show a lot of interest in and concern for rural areas and small towns. What drives this?

What drives this is a plain and simple realization that if we do not work now to conserve sources of water, to conserve biodiversity or to build back better, or to regenerate our lands, our future is in peril.

Our branches are in rural areas. Our staff are there, our customers are there and our future clients are going to be there. And there is this big realization that natural resources are in peril. We work with communities and that way we are able to do much more in areas where we have the space to do more. On groundwater development or watershed development we have projects ranging from two acres to six acres to 30 acres, going up to 100 acres.

In Banki, in Cuttack, Odisha, we have revived a very old and decrepit water source, which is a spring. We've got the sarpanch and everyone involved. They're doing *shramdan*, they're contributing tractor trolleys to excavate the silt. In another six months, we hope to have that project ready. It's going to help in the cultivation of rice and growing of fruit trees by local communities over a 100-acre range. Now, that sort of impact is not possible in the city.

As much as 50 percent of your presence is in rural areas.

Yes.

And in an active way, not just in a token way.

In a very active way, you are very right. DCB Bank has a way of ensuring that we make each branch relevant. So it's not a flag presence, it's meaningful banking. Even in villages or in branches that will have less than 2,000 individuals to cater to, it's meaningful banking for them.

You have plans for growing micro-forests in urban areas using the Miyawaki method. It is hugely important to stressed cities to have urban forests.

I'll start by saying that the bank has a target that it set for itself, three or four years ago, to plant 100,000 trees every year. We wanted to make a meaningful difference and we have planted over 400,000 trees.

One of the ideas was that planting trees would give DCB Bank employees an opportunity to put their hands to the soil. We have DCB Social, a volunteer group for employees who want to contribute to CSR activities. If you have a school that wants to do tree plantation, our social team will engage with them — college, medical centre, police station, you name it. As long as it's not private land, where we believe that the trees will be at risk later on.

Over time, while this greening effort picked up and we came across a plethora of options for tree plantation, we got into mangrove regeneration at Kanyakumari and we have done 25,000 mango saplings along the coast. We worked with the local fishermen's community there.

Then we stumbled on the Miyawaki method. It was a major leap of faith because it sounds almost magical that trees can grow 10 times faster. A 100-year-old tree cover of a regular forest can be created in, say, 10 years. It sounds like a good marketing plan, you know, with everything happening on steroids.

But the compelling story is that these forests do exist around the world. They have been planted and seem to thrive. And it was time, we thought, that we tried it out here because, if you remember, we spoke about going to rural areas to work on projects since they still have land available. You can do large-scale projects. When we came across Miyawaki we were very excited because this allowed us to do exactly what you said, create micro-urban forests or create micro-urban wooded areas.

Purists may not like the word forest to be used for Miyawaki. We have no problem with what word you like to use for this clump of trees, you want to say it's a forest, or a green area, woodland, a secondary forest.... We are happy with any definition because the beauty is, you do not need large spaces for this, and it fits straight into an urban situation in cities like Mumbai or Bengaluru or Delhi which are space-starved and the green cover has disappeared.

Miyawaki fits into this. Small, manageable, and after two years, you can let the trees grow on their own, without intervening in terms of watering them or trying to take extra care. So that's where we are with Miyawaki.

Mumbai has been a very successful experiment. The project is two years old and we have over 25,000 trees. We've created three very large plots. The saplings that were planted two years ago are nine feet tall. The only input that's been given is water at a regular schedule, and we're putting Jeevamrit, which is an organic fertilizer, to encourage microbial, fungal and bacterial growth in the soil. And that is all that we have done. We have not used any chemical fertilizer.

You have 25,000 young trees?

We do and let me point out that these are indigenous trees. They are not exotic varieties. The way we go about it is, our project team and our project partner will survey the area for indigenous trees. We refer to written material about what indigenous trees are native to that place. Because while we will use Indian species, some trees do well in the coastal area.

The two large projects in Mumbai are with the Navy in INS Hamla, so they are protected against foraging animals and against vandalism.

So two are with the Navy and the other with?

The Bhandup Pumping Station which is with the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation.

Is it a piece of learning that it is better to work in places where you can make sure your plants are going to survive because that's a challenge?

Indeed, survivability for the first two years is very important. And that's a big learning, that we should partner with institutions that can assure protection, at least against foraging animals. If that is ensured, project teams will ensure watering of plants, Jeevamrit application, etc. That is not a problem. The issue is creating a safe haven for plants for those two years. After two years, the concept of Miyawaki is that the roots of plants become strong enough to survive on their own. So the project withdraws from that area. ■

'In Mumbai, we have planted over 25,000 trees very successfully. We've created three very large plots. The saplings, planted two years ago, are nine feet tall.'



Sourav Roy: 'The team rallied around the spirit of service. This was not the time to step back'

'Listing farmers on Zomato to sell their crops was a first'

Civil Society News

New Delhi

SOCIAL initiatives at Tata Steel are known to run deep. The company invests in them over the long term with people and funds. Efforts in healthcare, education, agriculture and social empowerment are designed to bring transformational change. Partnership with government ensures scale, bonding with communities engenders trust.

When the pandemic arrived, these were great strengths to have. But in themselves they were not enough. The virus provided new challenges in the infections it was causing and the lockdown.

Quickly turning around a large ship like the Tata Steel Foundation was not easy. The foundation, set up in 2018 to bring all social initiatives under one umbrella, has some 800 people. Leading the effort was Sourav Roy, head of CSR, who spoke to *Civil Society* on how a balance was struck between ongoing programmes and the demands of the pandemic.

When the pandemic broke, what did it mean for Tata Steel's CSR team and your ongoing programmes? How much did you have to pivot to remain relevant?

I remember first convening a meeting of our own leadership and then following it up with meetings all the way down to the last person in the field. Internally, there was no dearth of communication.

We are about 800 people under the Tata Steel Foundation and we needed to get a sense of what would be a safe and correct alternative for our people in terms of reaching out. There was also the concern that we could end up being the spreaders, you know. So, safety was a big thing.

But the conversations we had resulted in rallying the team around the spirit of service. This was not the time to step back. We needed to take decisions and reach out quickly.

When you talk about the spirit of service, was your focus entirely on the communities you normally work with? How did you define your catchment?

The first thing was internally as a team to raise our hands and say that this was a time to be counted, which we did.

Externally, we looked at it in two ways. First was, you know, to have a clear eye out for who was the worst affected, whether from the lockdowns or in medical terms from COVID-19. That was part one.

Part two was that we had made long-term promises to communities under our programmes in health, education, agriculture and so on. We knew there would be setbacks but we didn't want to just walk away and come back six months later to recalibrate. Obviously, between the two there was an overlap.

In 20-odd days after the beginning of the lockdown on March 22/23, we actually came up with what is the 10-Point Combat COVID-19 Agenda. It consisted of 10 programmes. Very interestingly, right till the end of the first wave, we did not feel the need to add an 11th programme to the agenda. We just deepened the 10.

What were the initiatives in the 10-point agenda?

Three broad buckets, if you will. One was to meet deficits in well-being among people. It could be medical care, shelter, food or information.

A second bucket was meeting economic deficits such as resulting from the loss of livelihood.

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Koizumi's question



ON his first visit to India in 2005, Japan's Prime Minister, Junichiro Koizumi, asked his host, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, an interesting question. Observing that India is situated right in the middle of the vast Asian continent, Koizumi said that the part of Asia to India's east had emerged as an arc of prosperity, while the Asia to India's west remained mired in instability. The Japanese leader wanted to know which way India was headed.

Prime Minister Singh offered an optimistic view that India was increasingly 'looking East', learning from East Asia and integrating with it. The Indian economy was on a rising growth curve and India's trade with East and South-east Asia was on the rise. Indians travelled increasingly to countries in the region, working and studying there. In short, suggested Dr Singh, India was well on its way to linking itself with the 'arc of prosperity', even as it continued to deal with the challenges posed by the Asia to its west.

Fifteen years later, an East Asian cannot be faulted for once again posing Koizumi's question. Which way is India headed? Viewed from the East, India once again appears increasingly like its western and north-western neighbours, and less like the countries of the Far East and South-east Asia, with the exception of a couple of unstable entities like Myanmar. The India that was 'looking East', learning from it and hoping to catch up with it, has now been replaced by a more inward-looking India, obsessed with its internal contradictions. To the extent there is any interest in looking out within the Indian middle class, the gaze is once again turning West.

One must enter a caveat. Those familiar with Indian history, geography, society and economy have long recognized a distinction between two Indias. Not the usual divide defined by urban-rural and India-Bharat differences, but a divide between peninsular, sea-facing India and the India of the northern plains. Whatever the claims of Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and his acolytes and despite changes of government across the Gangetic belt from Uttarakhand to West Bengal, India north of the Vindhyas remains not only economically less developed compared to

peninsular India but also socially backward.

Seven years of the Narendra Modi government in New Delhi and five years of an Adityanath government in Lucknow have pushed the region further back in terms of social, political and economic stability indicators. The widening communal divide is only making matters worse. The recent anti-Muslim demonstrations in the nation's capital once again draw attention to these divides and, more importantly, the social and cultural attitudes that underlie these divisions.

Seen from afar, this economically and socially retrograde India appears to East Asians as being more akin to Pakistan and Afghanistan than Thailand and Indonesia, not to mention Japan and



Junichiro Koizumi and Manmohan Singh: Which way is India headed?

South Korea. Most of my East Asian friends have said to me over the years that they feel more comfortable in Chennai, Kochi and Hyderabad than anywhere in the Hindi-speaking region. Bengaluru still has its appeal for East Asians but its increasingly communal politics and social conservatism could easily damage its global brand.

Mumbai, once viewed as "India's Shanghai", has become an increasingly provincial city in place of the global city it used to be and aspires to be. One would think the sea-facing and globalized Gujarat would have appeared as attractive to an East Asian as Tamil Nadu or Kerala, but it is not always so. While Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka remain the more developed states, the political and social trends in these states may slow down their journey towards modernization of the East and South-east Asian variety. Hyderabad and Chennai remain cosmopolitan and hence popular with visitors from the East.

Many may question my assertions and I am open to correction; however, the fact remains that some parts of India are doing better than others and the divide may in fact be widening. Riding on improving economic, social and political indicators, peninsular India is continuing to link itself with Asia's 'arc of prosperity', but northern and north-western India appear increasingly to be qualifying for membership of Asia's 'arc of instability'.

Going beyond purely economic, social and political factors, one must also consider the role of what may best be described as cultural factors. Peninsular India has acquired, with time, a culture of work and living that East and South-east Asians feel more comfortable with. Call them 'rice cultures'

or what you will but there is a greater comfort factor there that is not yet visible in the non-rice cultures of the north and north-west. Indeed, all societies falling within the 'arc of prosperity' are essentially rice-based. All societies in India's north, north-west and to India's west are essentially wheat-based. If one were to divide Asia into rice and wheat-based societies then too India would be bang in the middle of Asia, with India's rice-based regions advancing faster than its wheat-based ones.

Given the emphasis that state governments in southern India are placing on development, on the one hand, and the communal preoccupations of the governments in the Hindi belt, on the other, there remains the challenge of bridging the gap between these two Indias. Migration has emerged as a bridge between the two. The data on migration shows an increase in the movement of workers and employees from the north, north-west and north-east to peninsular India in search of employment. Would there be positive feedback on social and cultural attitudes from peninsular India to the Hindi heartland as a consequence, or would the regressive politics and conservative culture of the north percolate down south?

The world is watching where India is headed. Between 1991 and 2014 it had come to accept as given that India was closing the gap with Asia to its east. Prime Minister Modi's enthusiastic outreach to Japan, South Korea and Singapore and his declaration that India would graduate from 'Look East' to 'Act East' generated much hope and optimism at home and overseas. However, during Modi's second term in office events have taken a different turn and once again the Koizumi question is being asked, and not just in Japan. ■

Sanjaya Baru is a writer and Distinguished Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses in New Delhi.

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And a third was actually creating platforms for concerted public action. We clearly saw the need to get into distributing food. So there were about 60,000 meals a day, you know, which would have been cooked and distributed to the worst-off such as daily wage-earners. It lasted for about two and a half months.

Where was this? Around your plants? Was it in Jamshedpur city, Jharkhand, Odisha...

Primarily Jamshedpur, but also in the panchayats in and around our operating assets in both Jharkhand and Odisha. Primarily, it was Jamshedpur. You know, one of the points of concern that we had was whether a model like this would create dependencies. To be very careful, in certain places we did not do cooked food, we did dry rations instead. In a place where we knew that the food issue existed but didn't think we should create a dependency, we actually created a 'cash for work' programme.

I think by end of March we realized that there was an issue around mental well-being. Suicide helplines were already working in Jamshedpur and in large parts of our operating area. We offered to support them with whatever they needed whether it was volunteers, counsellors, phone lines or publicity material.

These were helplines that were already running? Or were you helping set up helplines?

They were existing helplines. In Jamshedpur there is an organization called Jeevan, which runs a suicide helpline. We offered to help increase their capacity in terms of additional phone lines, additional space to operate out of, whatever it might be.

Also, in certain cases, capability. We had our own volunteers who were trained over two weeks by people already managing a helpline. We didn't want to get into untrained counselling. The volunteers would then free up the core team of the organization to handle the more complex cases.

Very innovative.

Many things we actually did, we were the first, I think, across the country, though I can't validate that for you.

For instance, we actually saw huge crop losses around us because markets were closed. So, what we did was we tied up with Zomato, and actually set up what is probably Zomato's first straight farm-to-home supply chain.

Zomato had just come into Jamshedpur and some other areas and we saw an opportunity in leveraging their delivery capacity and also keeping delivery boys employed.

Since we have extensive agricultural programmes, we knew where the pain points were. We set up nodal collection centres and enabled direct registration with Zomato through farmer-producer organizations. The Tata Steel Foundation didn't come in between and the money would go straight to the farmers. I think we did a few thousand tonnes of vegetables at a good profit to the farmers and without supernormal profits, as that might be. And that became very popular in Jamshedpur.

How would this work out? You would get it picked up by Zomato and delivered to the customer or what?

Let's take Jamshedpur, for example. We had three nodal points here, where every morning vegetables from 600 farmers would arrive. The vegetables would be sorted, graded, washed, but not sanitized of course.

Was the picking up of the vegetables done by you or by Zomato?

From the farmers, by us.

From the fields of 600 farmers you would be picking up the vegetables and bringing them to the nodal points?

That is correct. Our team would oversee it. But we wanted this to be a farmer enterprise. So there were two farmers' collectives that were involved. All the financial dealings, everything, were done through the collectives. We also saw it as an opportunity to build their capacity.

Zomato had created a specific space on its app called 'From The Farm'. Each of the three nodal points was listed as a restaurant equivalent on Zomato.

If you clicked on, say, X, a full list of vegetables would show up. You could place your order and then the Zomato guy would pick it up and deliver it to you.

The money would go to the farmers' collective and then on to the farmer?

Yes, on to the farmer. Each morning, the prices were determined by the farmers' collective and the farmers in a participatory process. At no point did we want the Tata Steel Foundation to fix prices. But we enabled the process.

The farmers' collectives registered themselves as vendors on Zomato. So whatever the customer would pay Zomato would be transferred to the farmers' collectives which would pay the farmers. Zomato retained a margin because the delivery boys had to be paid.

As with farmers, there are many other programmes that Tata Steel's CSR initiative has been running over the years. MANSI, which has to do with rural health, is one of them.

Oh, absolutely. I think we found a huge amount of very organic synergy and symmetry between what we have been doing and what that has meant for a COVID-19 response.

With MANSI, we have been working in about 12 blocks. It's currently being expanded to cover three districts. We have Operation Sunshine, which is a digital platform for tracking high-risk pregnancies till they are addressed.

I think the immediate obvious question that came up was, if there is a high-risk pregnancy, forget high-risk, if there is a pregnancy, and if there are travel curbs and hospitals are not working, then what is to be done.

One of the earliest things that we did from April onwards was to start what we call an Expected Date of Delivery or EDD tracking system for expecting women.

We went back to a database of 3,000 pregnant women. We started tracking when is the expected due date, created all clearances, road movement clearances, paperwork, factored in an additional day, created financial support to make sure that they go to an institution.

Our experience in MANSI was critical in tracking the high-risk cases. Normally, 92 percent of the high-risk cases are successfully addressed. In the six months that COVID-19 was happening, the first wave, the number went up to 97.5 percent. It was purely because there was more vigil. It was because of the Sahiyas or frontline health workers.

How many ASHA workers or Sahiyas, as you call them in Jharkhand, do you work with?

We work with about 6,000 Sahiyas.

That's a very large force.

Correct. We work very closely with public systems. You know, even distribution of relief material was actually guided by ASHA workers, because they knew at village level which families were in strife.

We introduced a cash-for-work programme for Sahiyas. We said that, other than your regular work, why don't you do wall paintings with public service messages? We gave them ₹500 for every wall painting.

It went really well. I think we created at that time about 3,500 wall paintings which doubled as public service messages most of the time in the local languages. When villagers get together and say a particular message should go out, it has a strong resonance.

You know, today in the second wave, using the same MANSI cohort, we have this whole programme that we've done on COVID-19 awareness and on vaccine hesitation. There was vaccine paranoia that was happening. And our Sahiyas were meant to go out and get people to register and get people to take their vaccines.

Every year we do a programme in tribal languages. Around 26,000 youngsters learn six Adivasi languages through our programme. As a result, we have this entire network which came in very useful because it is deeply embedded amongst tribal communities in Jharkhand, Odisha and parts of West Bengal. So these synergies were available.

Very interesting.

The synergy is also sometimes in the messaging and how you customize a message for a certain community. Circles of trust are built through invoking symbolism. ■

Why scientific temper matters



**TECH
TALES**

KIRAN KARNIK

NEVER before has science touched the lives of more people than it has in the last few months. “Touched,” literally: thanks to the Covid vaccine, now already administered to about three billion people around the world, including over 400 million in India. The near-ubiquitous mobile phone has, after more than two decades of widespread availability in India, reached about a billion people; a figure that may be overtaken within a year by the number of those vaccinated.

The successful development of multiple vaccines in under a year is one of the greatest triumphs of science. Scientists from academia and research laboratories in various countries worked with business organizations and hospitals to first develop and then test the vaccines, before rolling them out for general use. In an increasingly protectionist world, science has demonstrated the power and necessity of global cooperation and collaboration. It has also highlighted the importance of science, of creating and nurturing scientific talent, and of investment in R&D. A key element in this, one that underlies the success of science, is scientific temper.

Yet, in a negation of scientific temper, even as the country seeks to ramp up the vaccination rate from five million jabs a day to 10 million, there are signs of “vaccine hesitancy”. Based partly on a few cases of severe after-effects, this hesitancy is largely driven by vague fears, rumours and stories. Such reluctance and refusal to be vaccinated is limited but world-wide, including amongst the educated in “developed” countries. Despite the extensive use of the products of science in our daily life, a fair number of people lack a scientific temper.

In recognition of the importance of scientific temper, our Constitution says: “It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry.” But what exactly is scientific temper? The concept was popularized in India by Jawaharlal Nehru, who defined it (in *The Discovery of India*) as: “The scientific approach, the adventurous and yet critical temper of science, the search for truth and new knowledge, the refusal to accept anything without testing and trial, the capacity to change previous conclusions in the face of new evidence, the reliance on observed fact and not on pre-conceived theory, the hard discipline of the mind. All this is necessary, not merely for the application of science but for life itself and the solution of its many problems.”

Clearly, scientific temper — especially to question, search, and to be guided by fact rather than preconceived theories — is essential for the progress of science. However, it is the last part of



Its emphasis on questioning, debate and dissent, with a constant search for verifiable truth, is of essence to the progress of society.

Nehru’s elucidation that is particularly important, with scientific temper serving as a guide to our daily lives. In a recent paper, eminent scientist and thinker Dr Raghunath Mashelkar, former Director General of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), puts it well: “Scientific temper is a way of life, in terms of both thinking and acting. It consistently uses the principles embodied in scientific method. It involves the application of logic. Discussion, argument and analysis are vital parts of scientific temper. Elements of fairness, equality and democracy are integrally built into it.”

Dogma and theology are the very antithesis of scientific temper. They abandon logic, thinking and questioning, depending instead on given and eternal truths. If science followed this path, we would yet believe that Earth is flat, it is at the centre of the universe and the sun revolves around it. If dogma ruled, science would be dead, as would the agency and freedom of individuals.

Yet, even when we decry superstition, it is necessary to apply the scientific method. Thus, to those who believe that walking under a ladder is inauspicious, it is better to understand and explain that this must have originated from a few actual experiences of ladders falling on people. It is, therefore, scientifically wiser to go around — rather than under — the ladder. So also with much of

superstition: given limited knowledge and data, certain behaviours or practices may have been appropriate. Now, with new findings and information, they must change.

In some areas there are “holy groves” or particular trees considered sacred. This must have originated from the need to protect trees, and in days gone by this was most easily achieved by either religious sanction or a feudal firman. This short-cut method may have saved many trees, but at the cost of obstructing thinking, understanding and science. It is, therefore, not a sustainable approach, nor one that can lead to a broader appreciation of ecological imperatives. Little wonder that we see massive cutting of trees and the denudation of forests with increasingly disastrous consequences.

New ideas and theories, experiments and validation, new technologies and products — all are the result of the method of science, or scientific temper. Its emphasis on questioning, debate and dissent, with a constant search for verifiable truth, is of essence to the progress of science. It is also key to the progress of society, and a country without a widespread scientific temper is unlikely to lead in science or in societal innovation and well-being.

Despite many official pronouncements and much lip service, we are yet a society imprisoned by dogma and blind superstition. In recent years, with increasing emphasis on religion across communities, scientific temper has taken a big hit. Humility, openness and doubt, which stimulate questioning and dissent, have all been smothered and replaced by the smug and arrogant certitude of theology and dogma. This hardly bodes well for our progress.

Correctives are desperately and quickly required, if the country and individuals are to fulfil ambitious goals. ■

Kiran Karnik is an independent strategy and public policy analyst. His recent books include *eVolution: Decoding India's Disruptive Tech Story* (2018) and *Crooked Minds: Creating an Innovative Society* (2016). His latest book, *Decisive Decade*, is on India in 2030.

The young and change



**LET'S
TALK**

ARUN MAIRA

SOME students in Classes 11 and 12 in elite urban schools turned to me for counsel a few months ago. They were distressed by widening economic inequalities in India and the world, and the continuing deterioration of the natural environment. They had created an online forum, The Youth Policy Collective, some 80 strong and growing, in several Indian cities, to get the voices of young people heard in policy circles. What inspired me was that, while their cohorts in school (and they too) were busy with preparations, such as SATs and college counsellors, to study in colleges in the West, their hearts were here. They had three questions for me. One, how could they learn new ideas to shape policies that would make a difference? Two, how should they expand their voluntary, student-led movement for change? Three, how could they include other young Indians, who were not as privileged as themselves, in their movement?

The cliché that the future belongs to youth who must be in the vanguard of change is sterile. Children are pushed in front by their elders, with slogans and cute placards, to tug at emotions, because it is their future, and demand that their elders give up their old ideas. My young friends are not satisfied with this token role. They want to learn what role they can play in the formation of new ideas.

During the long pandemic, my spirits have been lifted by many young people forming movements for change. Many had stepped out to physically assist with distribution of food and medicines. Many also took the opportunity to meet on Zoom, to analyze the systemic problems that had become so visible and search for new ideas. For example, young alumni of the new Indian School of Public Policy created a forum, Samavesh, in which students and thought leaders have met every Sunday evening for over 70 weeks now.

I have listened to hundreds of speakers around the world during the pandemic, which I could not have if I had to fly around to seminars as I used to. Like many during the pandemic, I too have been infected by “zoomitis”. Weariness, when it comes, is not from the numbers of meetings, but their lack of richness, and the repetitions of the same old ideas. Fortunately, while locked-in at my study in Gurugram, Zoom has also enabled me to tap into

the energy of many youth-led movements for change around the country.

Another group of remarkable young people in Punjab has created a movement, which commenced before the pandemic and has grown through it, to assist youth to become change agents in their local communities. They convene meetings in community places, such as gurudwaras and local schools, which are now attended even by senior government functionaries. Their movement is entirely voluntary: no offices, no big budgets. They have also created a learning forum, Sanjhi Sikhya, for young change-makers to introspect and develop their capacities for systems thinking and deep listening.

The Indian School of Democracy (ISD) has launched the first cohort of its ‘Good Politician’

their own power to bring about change in their own villages and towns. The ISD’s models of good politicians are catalysts for change within their communities and localities, and not ‘netas’ competing for people’s votes, rallying them with powerful promises.

What inspires me about these young leaders of movements of young Indians for change is:

- Their humility, and refreshing open-mindedness and willingness to learn.
- The rigour with which they manage their learning: they are vast readers of serious texts, Western and Indian, and have pointed me to many excellent books on philosophy, politics, economics, and governance that I had not read.
- Their determination to bring about change. They are young, and they have the stamina to run a

marathon, which a process of transformative change always is.

- Their commitment to their own self-development as catalytic leaders of change.
- Their deep interest in bottom-up people’s movements for change, rather than the scaling up of large organizations; and also the role models they admire — Gandhi, rather than Bezos.

India is approaching the 75th anniversary of its independence. Have we met our “tryst with destiny” that Jawaharlal Nehru said we would on August 15, 1947? Have we achieved “Poorna Swaraj”, that Mahatma Gandhi said was every Indian’s birthright, when every Indian, rich or poor, Hindu or Muslim, Brahmin or Dalit, man or woman, can have all three freedoms — political, social, and economic?

In a world “not broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls; and where every mind is without fear and every head is held high”, in the memorable words of Gurudev Tagore, who also wrote our national anthem?

My young friends say we are far away from our founding visions. We became distracted along the way by markers of “India Shining”: goals of five-trillion-dollar economies and India as a huge market for foreign brands, while most Indians do not have decent incomes nor minimal social security; visions of Indian multinationals and entrepreneurs becoming billionaires very fast, before every Indian has access to healthcare; world-class scientists sending rockets into the universe, before every child has access to a good education.

But I have hope: my young friends give me hope. They are like little fireflies who, with their own little lights, are creating change in the world around themselves, and inspiring millions more fireflies, like themselves, to rise together and create a better world for everyone. ■



Many young people stepped out to help with distribution of food and medicines. They met on Zoom to analyze systemic problems.

programme on August 15, Independence Day, this year. Many young Indians aspire to lead change. ISD’s young founders have created a learning process for them. Their thesis is that democracy cannot be limited merely to electoral politics, which has been corrupted around the world by money and ‘party politics’.

Real democracy is people using their own power to make changes in their localities, not becoming dependent on representatives in distant Parliaments. Good politics is the art of helping people to harness

Arun Maira is author of *A Billion Fireflies: Critical Conversations to Shape a New Post-pandemic World*

Bad bill, good policy in UP



GENDER RIGHTS

POONAM MUTTREJA

THE population issue has been a predominant political and electoral subject of speculation for decades. With one of the oldest family planning programmes in the world, India has always been guided by the philosophy of development being the best contraceptive. Inspired by the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action, the National Population Policy (NPP 2000) was adopted by the Government of India in 2000 and focused on a rights-based approach, empowering women to determine the size of their families and calling for addressing the social determinants of health. Several states have, ever since, released state-specific population policies which have echoed the principles and vision of both the NPP 2000 and ICPD.

On July 11, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh (UP), the most populous state, released the UP Population Policy (2021-30), on the occasion of World Population Day. The policy has been drafted in keeping with the principles of choice, quality, autonomy, and dignity. It has laid out clear objectives to increase access to quality family planning and abortion services; address maternal mortality and morbidity; end preventable child and infant mortality; and improve adolescent sexual and reproductive health and nutrition. It also focuses on improving the health and well-being of the elderly, reflecting the needs of people across all life cycle stages. The cornerstone of the policy is that every child is wanted, healthy and educated with a focus on assuring gender equality.

However, in a parallel process, on July 7, 2021, the UP Law Commission announced the draft Population Bill, (The Uttar Pradesh Population (Control, Stabilisation and Welfare) Bill, 2021). Several provisions of this controversial bill are in contradiction of the UP Population Policy, 2021-30. The bill proposes stringent measures for population control in the state, calling for incentives for those who have two children or less and disincentives for non-adherence.

The draft UP population bill is a reflection of the many myths and misconceptions that continue to prevail about India's population. Despite global evidence that a stable population (defined as a population with constant rate of growth and age

composition) is critical for a country's sustainable growth, a general perception is that India's population is 'exploding' and we need to 'control' it as resources are limited. But the truth is more nuanced.

We must acknowledge the sharp drop in the Total Fertility Rate or TFR (the average number of children born to a woman during her lifetime across all social groups and regions) ever since the adoption of the NPP 2000. India's TFR has declined substantially from 3.2 in 2000 to 2.2 as per the 2018 Sample Registration System and all communities have witnessed a fertility decline. The state of UP has made impressive progress in reducing fertility and slowing down population growth. According to Census data, since 2001, UP witnessed a sharp



UP needs to learn from Kerala and Tamil Nadu which have shown the way by ensuring provision of basic services, development opportunities and appropriate investment in girls' education.

decline in its population growth rate from 25.85 percent in 1991-2011 to 20.23 percent in 2001-11, the period during which family planning and healthcare services have substantially expanded under the National Health Mission and other flagship programmes. According to data from the third and fourth rounds of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS 3 2005-06 and NFHS 4 2015-16), UP has made significant progress on critical health and development indicators. The state's TFR declined from 3.8 in 2005-06 to 2.7 in 2015-16. The maternal mortality ratio improved from 216 in 2015-17 to 197 in 2016-18. UP's Infant Mortality

Rate (IMR) which stood at 84 in 2000 dropped to 41 in 2017. The Technical Group on Population Projections for 2011-36, constituted by the National Commission on Population (NCP) under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in July 2020, has projected that UP will achieve the replacement level of TFR, i.e. 2.1, by 2025. Sustaining this momentum, with greater attention to quality of service delivery, and last mile coverage would enable the state to achieve population stabilization.

The UP Population Policy 2021-2030, with its focus on improvements in the empowerment of women, health services and education, will enable population stabilization in the state. However, in contrast, the incentives and disincentives included in the draft population bill lay out measures that are not implementable and could have potentially disastrous consequences. Stringent population control measures can lead to an increase in sex selective practices and unsafe abortions given the strong preference for sons.

Haryana and Punjab's implementation of a two-child policy provides us with strong evidence on the unintended consequences of such a policy — a highly skewed sex ratio. Limiting subsidized rations to only two children will impact the nutritional status of the most vulnerable, particularly girls. The bill also provides incentives based on sterilization only, which leaves out individuals who have only two children and may wish to adopt other methods of family planning, such as long-acting reversible methods.

The use of family planning methods is already skewed; in UP, female sterilization constitutes 55 percent of all modern contraceptive use among married women. Measures proposed in the bill will promote overdependence on female sterilization. Further, as seen in China, bringing in population control norms can be detrimental to the population structure and significantly undermine the country's future economic growth.

As India's most populous state, developments in UP have implications for the entire nation. UP needs to learn from states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu which have shown the way ahead by ensuring provision of basic services, development opportunities and appropriate investment in girls' education to stabilize their populations and ensure a decline in fertility, irrespective of culture or religion. It will take concerted efforts from the government, civil society organizations and the private sector to translate the vision of the UP Population Policy (2021-30) into a robust operational plan and realize the objectives set out in the policy document. ■

Poonam Muttreja is CEO of Population Foundation of India

CINEMA

REVIEWS | RATINGS | FESTIVALS | STREAMING



Pan Nalin's *Chhello Show* is inspired by his own childhood

It's the year of personal stories At big festivals praise for directors with a difference

SAIBAL CHATTERJEE

IN early 2020, when Arun Karthick's critically acclaimed Tamil film *Nasir* was making waves at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam (IFFR), FTII-trained sound designer Nithin Lukose was in the midst of the shoot of his directorial debut, *Paka: River of Blood*, in his hometown in Kerala's Wayanad district.

A year and eight months later, *Paka: River of Blood* premiered at the 46th Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF, September 9 to 18), continuing the good run that Indian independent cinema has had thus far in terms of global exposure during a protracted pandemic that has spared no country.

In an unsettled period that saw multiplexes across the world pulling down their shutters, streaming platforms moving into the breach, and festivals going hybrid or entirely virtual, Bollywood and Hollywood blockbusters all but disappeared from sight. A steady stream of deeply personal films from

directors working outside India's mainstream industry has, however, helped the world's largest movie-producing nation stay firmly on the international radar.

Between *Nasir* and *Paka: River of Blood*, and between the 77th and 78th editions of the Venice Film Festival, one of Europe's 'Big Three', India has had Chaitanya Tamhane's *The Disciple*, Ivan Ayr's *Meel Patthar*, P.S. Vinothraj's *Koozhangal*, Pan Nalin's *Last Film Show*, Irfana Majumdar's *Shankar's Fairies*, Aditya Vikram Sengupta's *Once Upon a Time in Calcutta* and Ritwik Pareek's *Dug Dug* play in the world's major film festivals.

While several of these films are by first-time directors, almost all of them have sprung from very personal impulses and spaces. Lived experiences yield insights that have a way of travelling far and wide. No film reinforces that belief as strongly as *Chhello Show* (*Last Film Show*), Pan Nalin's Gujarati film completed in the middle of the ongoing pandemic.

Nalin is, of course, the most seasoned of the Indian filmmakers in the above mix. *Chhello Show* premiered at the Tribeca Festival in New York, an entirely physical event held in June. The semi-autobiographical story of a nine-year-old boy from a remote village on the edge of the Gir forest who discovers the magic of movies in a period of great transition has instantly touched a chord.

"*Chhello Show*," says Nalin, "is directly inspired by my childhood and the people I knew as a kid." He is, however, quick to add that the decision to turn the spotlight on himself did cause some turmoil in his mind. "After all, who cares how I grew up? But with the disappearance of 35mm films and the arrival of the digital era, I felt maybe I should tell the story of how I first encountered cinema, what it did to me, and how it turned my life upside down," he says.

"Years ago, it was an era of cinema, when phones were not smart, the Net was not Flix, the box was

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not an office and the movies were not content,” says Nalin. “These are strange times for someone who grew up loving cinema.... The more writers and directors we train in the film schools the more we are flooding the world with manufactured emotions....”

Chhello Show is obviously Nalin's response to the “deeply saddening” commodification of cinema — it is an ode to the purity of the medium seen through the innocent and inquisitive eyes of an adventurous village boy. The tremendous response that the film received at Tribeca was “a dream come true” for the writer-director of *Samsara*, *Valley of Flowers* and *Angry Indian Goddesses*.

“The idea had started germinating well before the pandemic hit us and luckily the production was wrapped up as the world went into lockdown,” says Nalin.

“It wasn't easy,” he adds, “for an independent film like ours to go on during the pandemic. Every step of the way was affected by lockdowns and the budget went haywire. But once we completed *Chhello Show*, we decided we would premiere the film only in a physical festival, on a giant screen and in front of real spectators.”

Nalin achieved that end. The strategy has paid handsome dividends. *Chhello Show* has been picked up for distribution in the US by Samuel Goldwyn Films, in Japan by Shochiku, in Russia by Capella, in Italy by Medusa and by a slew of other companies in Germany, Spain, Portugal, Taiwan, South Korea, Turkey and Israel.

The uncertainties related to the coronavirus pandemic continue to dog Indian filmmakers but stories, mercifully, haven't deserted them. In September 2020, it was possible for Tamhane and Ayr to travel with their respective films to Venice. This year, however, travel to Italy is banned for Indians. “I am not sure how it will go,” says Sengupta, writer and director of *Once Upon a Time in Calcutta*, which is in the 78th Venice Film Festival's Orizzonti competition.

Sengupta, whose *Asha Jaoar Majhe* (*Labour of Love*) premiered in Venice Days in 2014 and won the Best Debut Film award, has, with his most accessible film to date, made the cut yet again at the festival that ‘discovered’ him seven years ago.

Everything in *Once Upon a Time in Calcutta*, says the filmmaker, has been derived from “first-hand experiences”. It is a plot-driven drama about individuals whose actions and mindsets add up to a piercing and poignant portrait of a city in constant flux.

“The film is about the city and it is about people... I wanted to capture the city through people and their mindsets, which is why I had to get into in-depth characterization and dialogue,” says Sengupta, “instead of getting into the lanes and the architecture of the buildings, the physicality of it.”

A former actress tries to break free from a past represented by a personal tragedy, estrangement from her husband and other regrets and resentments. A man wastes away, holed up in a theatre that has fallen into disuse.

“The theatre in the film is a real space where I interacted with the person who owned it. He lived all alone and in worse conditions than the character on the screen,” he says. That apart, Sengupta gives a



Paka: River of Blood is rooted in the director's hometown



Chhello Show is Nalin's response to the commodification of cinema

‘Years ago, it was an era of cinema, when phones were not smart, the Net was not Flix, the box was not an office and the movies were not content,’ says Nalin.

literal spin to the state of the city and its people — a statue of a dinosaur that has to make way for a flyover to come up is a key element in the plot.

“I have been absorbing this city for years. It is my most comfortable zone. Grasping its texts, subtexts and layers comes naturally to me. Calcutta is home — the people, the spaces, the smells, everything is me, everything is in me,” says Sengupta. “The

different characters in the film are from the same external world, but they have very different worlds within them. That is what I am interested in exploring.”

Debutant Ritwik Pareek, whose Marwari-Hindi film *Dug Dug* was part of TIFF 2021's Discovery section, has also made his first foray into filmmaking with a story set in a world that he knows best. Inspired by Jodhpur's Bullet Baba shrine where people offer liquor to the deity, the film is a satire about faith and its often bizarre and life-altering manifestations.

Says Pareek, a former ad agency art director and self-taught filmmaker: “It isn't like a usual satire in which irony is exaggerated for effect. In *Dug Dug*, the rural Rajasthan setting and the characters are very real, but the situations are such that it all feels surreal.”

“The storytelling,” says the Jaipur-born, Mumbai-based filmmaker, “is visual and there is very little dialogue in the film but it is funny (at least I hope so).” Interestingly, he attributes the self-produced independent film's “grand sweep” to the inspiration



Dug Dug is about a shrine in Rajasthan where people offer liquor to the deity



Once Upon a Time In Calcutta is a personal recollection of the city

he drew from spaghetti westerns. “I have been passionate about cinema since I was in school,” says Pareek. “I have been subconsciously training myself by watching films from around the world.”

Nithin Lukose's debut film, too, is rooted in the director's hometown, but his grounding in cinema happened in Pune's Film and Television Institute of India (FTII). His film, *Paka: River of Blood*, based on stories his grandmother told him, homes in on a violent, inter-generational feud between two families that migrated from central Kerala to cold, misty Wayanad between the 1940s and the 1970s.

Paka: River of Blood, took shape in Lukose's mind when he attended a Church festival in Kallody in 2019. “The next year, we filmed the climax at the same festival,” he says. The film was shot between mid-January and mid-February of 2020 with a mix of professional actors and amateurs from the town.

“This is the place where I grew up. I know the people, the culture, the river that runs through the town,” says Lukose, whose credits as a sound designer include the Kannada film *Thithi* and Dibakar Banerjee's most recent film, *Sandeep*

and *Pinky Faraar*.

One of the key characters in the film is played by a local schoolteacher (“a friend of my father's,” says Lukose), while another is essayed by his 88-year-old grandmother. “She told me a lot of stories about the past. Many of the characters in the film are from those stories,” says the writer-director.

He credits his film institute orientation for the shape his debut film has taken. Lukose says: “The film has a mix of what I studied in FTII, the films I saw and the notion of working with non-actors. These lie at the base of my desire to make something different.” But, above all, it is Adoor Gopalakrishnan who is the young filmmaker's inspiration. “He saw the first cut and really mentored me during the edit process,” says Lukose.

First-time director Irfana Majumdar's *Shankar's Fairies*, which premiered at the Locarno Film Festival in August 2021, is based on the memories of the filmmaker's historian mother, Nita Kumar, who has written the screenplay besides serving as one of the producers.

Shankar's Fairies, set in early 1960s Lucknow in



Shankar's Fairies is an intimate portrait of a family

***Shankar's Fairies* is based on the memories of the filmmaker's historian mother, Nita Kumar, who has written the screenplay besides serving as one of the producers.**

the home of a senior police officer, is an intimate portrait of a family, a newly-independent nation and a cloistered milieu. It sees the world from the point of view of a nine-year-old girl, Anjana, who forms a bond with a servant, Shankar, who works for her parents, having left his family behind in a village.

The girl's imagination is ignited by Shankar's magical stories of fairies and djinns and the film examines the world that she seeks to conjure up in her mind and create her own reality. But beyond the innocence and purity of a child's understanding of the world, *Shankar's Fairies* lays bare the exploitation entrenched in a social structure that divides master from servant, the rich from the poor, the adult from the child, and the city from the village.

Says Majumdar, a theatre practitioner based in Varanasi: “The film has been shot in the bungalow where I spent a lot of my childhood. This is where my grandfather retired. My mother spent her childhood in similar bungalows as her father moved from one small Uttar Pradesh town to another.”

In the pre-production phase, Majumdar worked closely with her husband, Gaurav Saini (actor and casting director) and her mother. “Once the first draft of the script was ready, we worked for two to three hours every day for three to four months to develop the idea,” she says.

The distinctive quality of *Shankar's Fairies* — it is a film of a strikingly restrained timbre that couches its sharp critique of class schisms in a minimalist style — is doubtless a product of the process that enables the personal and the political to intermingle and yield much more than what is immediately visible on the surface. ■

SEVEN GEMS TO SEE

In the glut of Indian films that flooded the streaming platforms during the ongoing pandemic, a bunch of titles stood apart from the crowd as much for their craft as for their thematic soul. Here is a selection of seven quirky gems that are still playing and are worth your time



EVERYTHING IS CINEMA / English, Malayalam
Streaming on MUBI

1 A whimsical rumination on life, cinema and a megacity, Don Palathara's *Everything is Cinema* is about Chris, a director from Kerala, who arrives in Kolkata with his actress-wife Anita to make a film aimed at extending Louis Malle's 1969 documentary, *Calcutta*. A few weeks into the shoot, the coronavirus pandemic scuttles the proposed film and he is forced to quarantine in an Alipore apartment.

The camera now discreetly films Anita — an exercise that exposes a marriage that simply isn't working. The indoor shots are all black and white while the portions that are filmed in the streets, *ghats* and neighbourhoods of Kolkata are in colour — a device that suggests the dreariness of life in forced confinement. Chris isn't seen. We only hear his voice and get glimpses into his thoughts which expose his disdain for the woman whom he once loved and married — but the camera is focused on Anita. While images of the city recall the harsh realities that Malle's film captured 50 years ago, the indoor sequences reflect the male gaze and lay bare Chris' misogyny and patronising views of his wife.

In a span of only 70 minutes, Palathara packs a great deal into *Everything is Cinema*. The film raises questions that have no easy answers, whether you see it as a man, an artist or a woman trapped.



CARGO / Hindi
Streaming on Netflix

2 Life, death and everything in between sneaks into Arati Kadav's incredibly inventive sci-fi film *Cargo* and enriches its effective homegrown synthesis of dark comedy, provocative philosophy and

emotional richness. The director employs understatement and measured exploration of quirky ideas in a film set in a dystopian near future.

Decades have elapsed since the Homo Rakshasas — descendants of the demons of Indian mythology — have made peace with the human race and found a higher purpose. *Cargo* imparts to the VFX-heavy genre a fully-realised indigenous spin. The notion of incarnation is neatly dovetailed into the concept of inter-galactic travel and cross-planetary communication.

The film subverts the human-demon hierarchy. The rakshasas have evolved and mastered behavioural and cognitive attributes of a high level while humans have regressed into a state of uncertainty into which doubts and fears gnaw at their vitals.

Kadav's screenplay, marked by fearless flights of fancy that are rooted in logic, is well supported by steady performances (by Vikrant Massey, Shweta Tripathi and others), great camerawork, evocative production design and a soundscape that serves to enhance the impact of the visuals.



PHOTOGRAPH / Hindi
Streaming on Amazon Prime

3 Rafi (Nawazuddin Siddiqui) is a street photographer. He clicks pictures of tourists at the Gateway of India. When his grandmother (Farrukh Jaffar) pesters him to get married, he sends her a picture of a young, beautiful stranger from his album and passes her off as his fiancée. An excited granny decides to pay Rafi a visit.

The latter tracks down the girl in the photograph, Miloni (Sanya Malhotra), an accountancy student in her 20s, and requests her to pose as his would-be wife. An improbable proposition? But this is Mumbai, a city that never ceases to surprise. Ritesh Batra's *Photograph* is an austere, pensive love story that captures the minutiae of a megalopolis and the gentle ebbs and tides of an accidental relationship across a difficult-to-bridge social chasm. It is steeped in nostalgia not only for a well-worn narrative device but also for a city caught at a point in time when life wasn't as frenetic as it is today. The subtleties that Nawazuddin Siddiqui brings to bear upon his performance and the ease with which Sanya Malhotra slips into her role ensure that *Photograph* is more about tremulous, uncertain yearning than all-consuming passion. A treat all the way.



RAMPRASAD KI TEHRVI / Hindi
Streaming on Jio Cinema

4 *Ramprasad Ki Tehrvi*, actor Seema Pahwa's directorial debut, is a keenly observed slice-of-life family drama. Even as she expertly orchestrates the emotional flow and tonal shifts of the story, the writer-director employs remarkably unsentimental means to portray bickering members of a large family who congregate in their Lucknow home when the patriarch passes on. They wait out the 13 days leading up to the post-death religious ceremony. Tensions brim to the surface as long-suppressed truths and misgivings begin to reveal themselves.

Naseeruddin Shah has a crucial cameo in the film. That apart, Pahwa assembles a fine cast of actors, including Supriya Pathak, Konkona Sensharma, Vikrant Massey, Vinay Pathak and Parambrata Chattopadhyay. This could be the story of any Indian family where parents are objects of unquestioning reverence. Sons and daughters have to perform their filial duties come what may. Daughters-in-law have to fall in line quickly. But when individuals are inevitably swayed by self-interest, things threaten to spiral out of control. *Ramprasad Ki Tehrvi* examines fraying familial bonds with a mix of empathy and caustic humour.



THE ILLEGAL / English
Streaming on Amazon Prime Video

5 *The Illegal*, written and directed by Danish Renu, is a sobering take on the perils of chasing one's dreams in a faraway land. Suraj Sharma (*Life of Pi*) plays the lead in this disarmingly simple yet highly insightful film that offers a felicitous and moving portrait of a young man as a struggling immigrant. The man's dreams take a backseat when duty and material needs paint him into a corner.

At the outset, a talented and ambitious Daryaganj boy appears to have everything under control. He is on his way to join a Los Angeles film school. But once he lands in the US, life doesn't pan out quite the way he expects it to. He learns the hard way that a plunge into the unknown is fraught with grave risk. Hopes of finding a new horizon evaporate quickly and dispiriting dead-ends get in his way in an alien land.

The Illegal is a well-acted film — its cast includes Adil Hussain and Neelima Azim as the protagonist's parents — and it is executed with an unwavering eye for detail. The sure-handed direction and the proficient lead performance lend the film impressive consistency.



AHAAN / Hindi
Streaming on Netflix

6 *Ahaan*, directed and co-written by first-timer Nikhil Pherwani, is an unusual cinematic endeavour. The film has an actor with Down syndrome — Abuli Mamaji — playing the role of a special needs youngster. He develops a bond with an older neighbour with OCD. The latter's wife has left him.

The instantly endearing young man knocks on his door to deliver the cookies that his mom makes. The friendship isn't instant. The focus of this unpretentious but deeply felt film is squarely on the eponymous character who, despite a genetic disorder, is determined to lead a normal life, find a job, get married and raise a family.

But his father is averse to letting the boy strike out on his own. Pherwani probes the conflict between what the protagonist desires and what society will concede to him. He does so without succumbing to gratuitous sentimentalism. He, however, informs the languidly unfolding tale with unfailing empathy and sensitivity. The film encourages the audience to accept a character who does not, and need not, be what we expect a 'hero' to be. But there is no question that Abuli Mamaji enjoys being in front of the camera — the joy that he exudes makes *Ahaan* a truly warm movie experience.



SKATER GIRL / Hindi, English
Streaming on Netflix

7 *Skater Girl* is a lively, scintillating drama that has had an instant impact on Khempur, the nondescript Rajasthan village where it has been filmed. The hamlet, 45 km from Udaipur, now has a community skatepark of its own.

Helmed by debutante Manjari Makijany, *Skater Girl* is a heartwarming sports movie that steers clear of the clichés of the underdog-fighting-all-odds genre. It revolves around an impoverished tribal teenager (newcomer Rachel Saanchita Gupta) who discovers skateboarding and sees in it a means of liberation. The girl drops out of school because she cannot afford textbooks. Her father is hell bent on marrying her off.

Skater Girl is the story of an unlikely rebel who surmounts patriarchy, poverty and prejudice to zip her way out of a conservative society that will not allow girls to dream. The skateboard under her feet is her ticket to a new life. A seamless blend of realism and measured drama makes this a consistently watchable film whose efficacy and reliability are enhanced by its unshowy, uncluttered approach to the task. ■



Nandan seems to be regaining its arthouse tag

Saviour for small films?

SAIBAL CHATTERJEE

NANDAN, the West Bengal Film Centre in central Kolkata, is a complex unlike any other in India. In August, as movie halls reopened after the devastating second wave of the coronavirus pandemic, the state government-sponsored 'multiplex' began screening two non-mainstream Bengali titles — *Binisutoy* (*Without Strings*) and *Runanubandha* (*The He Without Him*). Both drew full houses.

Nandan, 36-years old, has served as an outlet for independent films made in Bengal and elsewhere in the country. However, for well over two decades now, it has screened commercial fare as well to the consternation of those who believe that, in doing so, Nandan has diluted its stated purpose.

It is in this context that the decision to play the experimental *Runanubandha* must be seen. "I was happily surprised," says Amartya Bhattacharyya, the film's writer and director, "when I learnt that the Nandan screening committee has given the go-ahead to my film."

Runanubandha, which tells the story of a girl who arrives in Kolkata in search of her missing father, is an uncompromisingly independent film that steadfastly defies the norms of regular narrative cinema. It deals with alternative realities and multiple layers of experience as it follows the protagonist's quest.

Does Bhattacharyya see the selection of *Runanubandha* — it is playing in Auditorium 2 — as a sign that Nandan is back to playing the role of a saviour for small films seeking exhibition outlets? "I hope so," says the Bhubaneswar-based filmmaker who has a day job with an Indian IT behemoth. "Ideally, these are the types of films that Nandan should screen much more than it does," he adds.

Nandan was inaugurated in 1985 by filmmaker Satyajit Ray, who was actively involved with the planning of the film centre. He also designed its

logo and is believed to have had a say in its architectural plan. In its first decade, Atanu Ghosh, writer-director of *Binisutoy*, points out, "Nandan was a regular hunting ground for members of Kolkata's numerous film societies that brought films from across the world to the city."

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Cine Central, Kolkata's leading film society, would screen all its films either in Nandan 2 or the nearby Sarala Ray Memorial Hall. Ghosh, as a young man, was a Cine Central member and a regular at those screenings.

'There was a time here when audiences would watch films in absolute silence. Anybody who dared to speak would be shouted down.'

"There was a time when audiences would watch films here in absolute silence," says Ghosh. "Anybody who dared to speak or make any noise during a screening would be instantly shouted down by the others in the auditorium. But then, as commercial films began to find space in Nandan's year-round screening programme, the audience profile underwent a change. Lay film fans not acquainted with the viewing etiquette cultivated in Nandan in the early years became a part of the audience."

Nandan lost its arthouse tag in the bargain. "Some of the films that made it to the screens here were definitely not the sort that Nandan was created to promote," says Ghosh.

Binisutoy is Ghosh's eighth narrative feature. The genteel, lyrical, life-affirming drama revolves

around a man and a woman from Kolkata's stratified corporate world whose paths cross as they seek to escape the drudgery of their structured lives by creating alternative identities for themselves in a bid to reconnect with their inner selves and the world around them.

The enthusiastic response that *Binisutoy* has garnered from the Nandan audience has, at the time of writing, led to its run being extended beyond the second week. "We've had several houseful shows in Nandan 1 (the film centre's biggest auditorium with nearly 1,000 seats)," says the National Award-winning director.

Since 1995, the year the Kolkata International Film Festival (KIFF) was launched, Nandan has been the principal venue of the annual event. While the Rabindra Sadan-Nandan-Sisir Mancha cultural complex continues to be the KIFF fulcrum, it no longer has the honour of being the site of the festival's star-studded inaugural function.

In 2011, soon after Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress ended the Left Front's unbroken 34-year rule in West Bengal, the KIFF opening ceremony was shifted to the cavernous Netaji Indoor Stadium to accommodate the fans of Bollywood megastars led by Amitabh Bachchan and Shahrukh Khan, who are in attendance every year.

That is a far cry from the principles that went into the planning of Nandan. The foundation stone was laid in 1980 by the then Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, during the first term of the Left Front government. It was one of India's first multiplexes. Nandan had two screens to begin with. A third one was added a few years later.

When Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, information and culture minister in Jyoti Basu's Cabinet and a cinema aficionado, became the state's chief minister, the film centre received a bit of a boost but, at the same time, fell into a pattern that prevented it from evolving into a true cinemathèque-like institution on the lines of the one in France that Satyajit Ray had a special fascination for.

"The launch of KIFF definitely enhanced Nandan's importance," says Ghosh. Filmmakers of the stature of Michelangelo Antonioni, Fernando Solanas, Krzysztof Zanussi, Miguel Littin, Jafar Panahi and Catherine Breillat, among others, have passed through its portals over the years. But the increasingly populist aims of Nandan and KIFF have, to a certain extent, deflected it from its original course.

In the 1980s, Nandan screened films such as *Carmen*, Italian director Francesco Rosi's version of Bizet's opera, Govind Nihalani's Doordarshan mini-series *Tamas* (as a four-hour feature) and Jiri Menzel's Czech cinema classic *Closely Observed Trains*, among other notable works of the cinema. Post Satyajit Ray's demise in 1992, Nandan began to deviate from the exclusive aim of promoting independent cinema. It turned into just another screening facility that embraced commercial films from both Hollywood and Bollywood.

There have, however, been honourable exceptions in more recent years. First-time director Manas Mukul Pal's *Sahaj Paather Gappo* (*Colours of Innocence*), an adaptation of a Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay short story about two boys from an impoverished family in rural Bengal, was released in Nandan, where it ran for many weeks and found the audience it was seeking. Had he been around, Satyajit Ray would have been pleased no end. ■



Aditya Tripathi has conjured up some unusual flavours for his ice-creams and sorbets

Try some Jamun Sorbet

Cold Love is here with artisanal ice-cream

SURMAYI KHATANA

WHEN you decide to move on, what can sweetly put the past behind you? Ice-cream, for one. Gorge on it, make it yourself, get others to eat it and finally make a business out of selling it.

This is what Aditya Tripathi, 52, did after two decades of working for companies and then building and exiting from his education technology start-up.

He set up Cold Love, an artisanal ice-cream company with an array of personally curated offerings such as Salted Butter Caramel, Jamun Sorbet, Chocolate Fudge-A-Licious, White Chocolate and Green Chilly, Spiced Walnut & Rum, Dark Choc & Orange and Vanillaah.

It all started with Tripathi knocking around in his kitchen with money and time to spare. One thing led to another and he began making ice-cream,

reminded of how as a child he had seen homemade ice-cream being cranked out of a machine. It was such fun to see it being made and great to eat it fresh at home.

Tripathi injected a bit of his childhood into his early retirement. He began gleefully making ice-cream and dishing it out to friends and family who were all as delighted as he was with his new hobby. It was wholesome and grainy ice-cream and came in combinations which sounded happily corny and tasted so very different.

The best ice-creams are personalized and come out of kitchens like Tripathi's. They are handmade, have character and are produced in small batches — unlike factory-made ice-creams which are smooth, made by the tonne and have a long shelf-life.

Artisanal is the term for Tripathi's kind of ice-cream because there is craftsmanship involved. It has the stamp of the creator and is produced with

passion and pride. Wholesomeness and purity are its hallmarks. It contains no essences, artificial flavouring, stabilizers or additives.

As Tripathi's ice-cream passed muster in his close circle, he decided to go to market with it. It was one big step out of his kitchen but Cold Love was born in the belief that if friends and family liked what he was conjuring up more people deserved to have it.

Experimenting in "completely the wrong season", Tripathi set up a stall at the Christmas Mela of the German Embassy in New Delhi. The two-day event brought with it confidence, as not only did people love the ice-cream, they came back asking where they could order more.

After a few other smaller events across December, a website for Cold Love went live for orders and deliveries. Tripathi soon took the leap from his home kitchen to a professional kitchen, with

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Salted Butter Caramel



Jamun Sorbet



White Chocolate and Green Chilly



Chocolate Fudge-A-Licious



Dark Choc & Orange

support from a close friend, Samir Kuckreja, who has worked as CEO for Nirula's.

Cold Love was set up in January 2020. Although the pandemic that hit the following March restricted them to deliveries, they have started moving towards a hybrid of deliveries, parlours and cafes.

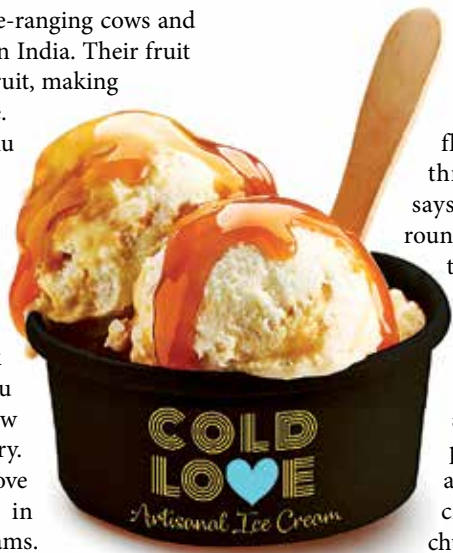
Functioning out of their kitchen in Lajpat Nagar, in south Delhi, they now deliver and have freezers in Hyderabad, Lucknow, Jaipur and Jodhpur. Cold Love sells around 100 litres of ice-cream a day.

While not formally trained in the making of ice-cream, Tripathi has kept improving and learning on the go. He now has a trusty team of chefs who treat the making of ice-cream like a science. His experimentation mixed with their expertise works as a great combination.

The milk is sourced from free-ranging cows and all ingredients used are grown in India. Their fruit ice-creams are made of actual fruit, making the ice-cream seasonal in nature.

This makes for a dynamic menu that is constantly changing. Currently, they offer 16 flavours including sugar-free ice-creams, experimental flavours, seasonal fruit ice-creams, and a vegan option called Vegan Almond Milk Coffee. They update their menu often to give their customers new flavours to look forward to and try.

What sets outfits like Cold Love apart is the intimate manner in which they make their ice-creams.



Milk is sourced from free-ranging cows and all ingredients are grown in India. Fruit ice-creams are made of real fruit so the ice-cream is seasonal.

The close attention given to the making as well as the delivery process and storage, provides a curated experience as unique as the flavours.

"The development of a new flavour is about a two-week, three-week process," Tripathi says, highlighting the multiple rounds of feedback and testing in the kitchen with the chefs, testers, friends and the rest of the team.

After a flavour is finalized and the precise measurements are noted, the ingredients are prepared, melted, chopped and aged for 24 hours. The ice-cream is then put into a hot churner with a high temperature.

Immediately after it is put in a cold churner where it is mixed. The thick semi-frozen liquid is then put in a blast freezer which transforms the liquid into ice-cream that is ready to be delivered. This process ensures the smooth texture and no crystallization.

Along with well-thought-out flavours, the process of updating the menu and the flavours draws on consumer feedback.

Their bestseller, Salted Butter Caramel, made by caramelizing sugar on low heat, has seen reformulations thanks to customer responses.

"In the end, the final judge of a flavour and how well it will do is the customer. We test our unique flavours in farmers' markets, cafes, etc and take feedback," says Tripathi.

Tripathi at first shies away from naming a favourite flavour. "It is like asking a parent to choose a favourite child," he says. But, prodded, he says he would go for Jamun Sorbet, which is really an ice minus the cream.

"I have phases with the flavours, I am enjoying the Jamun Sorbet not only because of the taste but also the colour which was a feat for us to achieve," he says.

The Jamun Sorbet, which is a frozen dairy-free dessert made with water and fruit, was brought back owing to popular demand and specific requests from customers.

While we think that their Spiced Walnut & Rum ice-cream is an acquired taste, we are true fans of their Chocolate Fudge-A-Licious, Dark Choc & Orange, and the Jamun Sorbet.

The product, being perishable, required large amounts of research on delivery and storage; the process of making it was just half the work. In the NCR, Cold Love only delivers fresh ice-cream. So, we are told, what you order online is what you will get from the batch of the day.

But there are also ice-cream parlours in Noida and Jodhpur. Recently, Cold Love has opened a cafe in Connaught Place with Blue Tokai, serving affogatos, waffles, crepes, coffee, and of course, ice-cream. You can buy Cold Love in Hyderabad and Bengaluru too.

To these distant locations Cold Love ice-creams take a train ride with dry ice, which keeps them from melting up to 72 hours from the Lajpat Nagar kitchen in New Delhi. ■

SANJAY RAMACHANDRAN



Regi Mathew at his unique restaurant, Kappa Chakka Kandhari

The most authentic Kerala meal

800 recipes from 265 homes and 70 toddy shops

SUSHEELA NAIR

IF you want to figure out Malayali food, how should you go about it? One way would be to spend three years crisscrossing Kerala, visiting home kitchens and toddy shops, to learn the traditional ways of cooking just like Chef Regis Mathew did.

Mathew took along his close friends John Paul and Augustine Kurian and when they were through with their culinary odyssey the three of them set up a restaurant, Kappa Chakka Kandhari (KCK) in Chennai and now also in Bengaluru.

Mastering traditional recipes requires patience and knowing where to look. Invariably the best kept secrets are in homes where they are passed on from one generation to the next. But in Kerala, there are also toddy shops, where apart from intoxicating fermented palm sap, spicy snacks and meals are served.

By the time they were done, Mathew and his friends had visited 265 home kitchens and 70 toddy shops. They had a hoard of close to 800 recipes.

"As a prelude to the launch of our restaurant, we



Puttu with fish curry

organized familiarization food yatras in Chennai, Bengaluru and Dubai to showcase the food we had tried. It helped us select dishes for our menu besides acquainting people with the concept," says Mathew.

In every way, they were breaking new ground with their restaurant. The unusual name, Kappa Chakka Kandhari, refers to the three indigenous ingredients that are central to the cuisine of Kerala, namely tapioca, jackfruit and bird's eye chilli.

The first KCK came up in Chennai in July 2018 and then in Bengaluru in December 2019 just before the pandemic which put an end to dining in until recently.

"The menu pays homage to the food from God's Own Country by reviving family recipes that have stood the test of time. At KCK, we follow our mothers' cooking styles. It is indeed a culinary ode to mother's cooking and fond childhood memories," says Mathew.

With a team of professional chefs and cooks from homes and toddy shops, Mathew curated dishes based on concepts such as 'Nadan Memories', 'Toddy Shop Memories', 'Ammachi Specials',

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The Ammachi non-vegetarian spread



Traditional vegetarian dishes

‘Monsoon Magic’, to name a few.

They use the open-vessel, slow-cooking method in *urlis*, *chattis* and cast-iron traditional cookware in a separate kitchen with Malayalam songs playing in the background. The kitchen finds ample use for other traditional cookware like *appam chatti*, *puttukutti*, *idiappamachu* and a meat mincer.

“You will find unusual dishes never found in other restaurants. We are trying to practice culinary social responsibility by conserving recipes that may soon die out, sourcing vegetables and ingredients directly collected from farmers and staying true to the culinary wisdom of generations of mothers and grandmothers. Everything is about freshness and no stored food is used in our restaurant,” explains Mathew.

“While travelling through Kerala, we heard stories about food that are not written down but passed down from mother to daughter. One of them is Ayikoora Nellikka Masala Fry, which has its origins in Agasthyamalai, where tribals marinate fish with bird’s eye chilli, green peppercorns, wild herbs and sundried gooseberry and bake it on heated river stones, with minerals providing the salt content,” says Mathew.

Every dish has a story — Ramapuram’s *pidi* (tiny rice dumplings cooked in coconut milk) with country-style Kozhi curry is offered to devotees at the Ramapuram Church on feast day. The Ramassery

‘We are conserving recipes that may soon die out, sourcing vegetables and ingredients directly from farmers and staying true to culinary wisdom.’

idlis are equally interesting. They are not only unique in size, shape and taste, but melt in your mouth and leave you craving for more.

A unique steaming technique uses muslin cloth, netted clay rings, earthen pots and *plachi* leaves. Once they are cooked, the idlis are served hot with fiery coconut chutney and sambar. Chammanthypodi, the spicy powder made out of roasted rice, pepper, broken black gram, red chilli and coconut oil is the ideal accompaniment.

Eating at KCK in Bengaluru, was started off with *goli* sodas and also tried a spicy drink made of Kandhari chillies. The spicy Kandhari

Ice Cream was equally good while the Cloud Pudding (tender coconut pudding), curated by the chef’s mother, was outstanding.

Other traditional dishes served are tapioca, served with a fragrant chutney of small onions, chillies and coconut oil and *Pazham Kanzhi*, really a poor man’s meal, which is fermented rice gruel, with traditional accompaniments. The sweet and spicy *Pineapple Nendram Masala* or ripe *nendrapazham* (bananas) with spice, mustard, curry leaves and coconut oil, is a must-try on the menu.

Vegetables that seldom find fame at mainstream restaurants are used here. For instance, dishes such as *kadachakka* curry, made of dense breadfruit cubes; *vazhaipoo* cutlet, a cakey banana flower patty; *kappa vada*, made with tapioca root and *chenda kappa*, where the steamed root is served naked with oil, roughly cut shallots and Kandhari. *Koorrka Ularthiyathu* or Chinese potatoes, found only in central Travancore, which have a slightly more fibrous texture, were roasted in pepper and mild spices. Prawn *kizhi*, a delicious pocket of prawns steamed with coconut masala in banana leaf, reminded one of *kizhi* (poultice pouches) used in Ayurveda.

SOURCING INGREDIENTS

“Ingredients play a very critical role in ethnic food. For an authentic dining experience, the spices and ingredients are sourced from their native regions from across Kerala. During our travels in Kerala, we also learnt about the ingredients used in certain dishes of some regions. We learnt how these ingredients are grown, where the best ingredients come from,” says Mathew.



All these items are sourced directly from farmers, avoiding middlemen. This adds to the flavour of dishes at KCK. The curry leaf, ginger and peppercorns are sourced from Pulpally in Wayanad, jaggery from Marayoor, fish from Cherai, elephant yam from Thrissur, fresh tea leaves from Munnar, cardamom from Idukki, coconuts from a place near Thrissur, cinnamon from Kannur, tapioca and jackfruit from Pala and cold-pressed coconut oil from a homemaker’s collective in Ernakulam. As for the famed Kandhari chillies — those come from Thiruvananthapuram. ■

A fitting farewell with Noble Sparrows

SURMAYI KHATANA

SUNK in grief after losing their loved ones to COVID-19, many families had to undergo the painful process of performing the last rites in stultifying circumstances. Crematoriums in India are in abysmal conditions and there is also cumbersome paperwork to be done. At a time of grief, one is left to figure out the logistics of a grim ritual.

Trying to ease the pain is Noble Sparrows, a funerary service that takes on the paperwork, ensures a dignified goodbye and allows the bereaved family to spend the last moments with their loved one in peace.

Set up in January 2021, Noble Sparrows has organized over 1,000 cremations in the past eight months. “We cannot reduce the pain of losing your loved one but we can take care of you and give a respectful farewell with complete rituals,” says Jatin Bhargav, who founded Noble Sparrows. “Our mission is to help people during such an emergency when empathy and care are most needed.”

Noble Sparrows, a 24x7 service, takes care of all aspects of the funeral, from transportation, embalming and cremation to obituaries and prayer meetings. A slot at a crematorium or a burial ground is booked right after a call from the family or friends of the deceased.

A state-of-the-art ambulance or hearse arrives to carries the deceased to the venue or home.

After that the Noble Sparrows team, with certified professional embalmers, prepares the body for the last rites. Bathing, clothing, and make-up are all taken care of. Priests, pandits or maulvis for religious rituals and prayer meetings are arranged as well. At the crematorium or burial ground, the acquiring of materials like wood, water and other requirements is handled by the team — affording the family time and space to grieve.

After facing bereavement himself during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic, 43-year-old Bhargav, a resident of Gurugram, realized the critical need for funerary services in India. “In my hour of need, I faced many issues which my organization now tries to address. Everything is chaotic and everyone is clueless at such a time. We end up relying on family and friends who might live far away,” says Bhargav.

After a 20-year career in the services and events sector, working with brands like Samsung Electronics and Citibank, Bhargav proposed the idea of starting a funerary service to his friend,



Noble Sparrows takes care of all aspects of the last journey



Jatin Bhargav has himself performed the last rites for families who couldn’t be present

Ujjwal Sarin, an entrepreneur. Sarin came on board at once. They both recognized the need for funerary services in metropolitan cities since so many people migrate from towns to big cities and live in nuclear families.

On special request, Noble Sparrows makes calls on behalf of the grieving family. They also help organize online and offline prayer meetings. The team takes all COVID-19 precautions, especially since their occupation requires them to be in proximity to people who have been infected. All employees are fully vaccinated and wear PPE kits. Everything, including the vehicle, is sanitized in front of the family.

During the pandemic, due to family and friends either recovering or suffering from the infection, the team gladly went beyond the call of duty to get bodies discharged at hospitals or even carry out funeral rites and rituals like *asthi-visarjan* or collect

the ashes after cremation. Bhargav attended almost every cremation personally and performed the last rites for around 100 of the dead whose families could not be present.

The organization has expanded rapidly and now has staff in Kolkata, Ahmedabad, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Delhi-NCR, Chennai, Hyderabad, Chandigarh, Lucknow, Patna and Indore. The website has complete details.

The Delhi team has seven members. Each city has ‘city managers’. Bhargav travels to help organize services with the local teams and train them.

“We are very careful about the people we choose. Empathy is more important than being a business. We do not want any family thinking that ‘yeh toh business kar rahe the’ (these people were just doing business). We want the family to feel at ease and realize that everything was taken care of.”

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WHERE ARE WE BEING READ?

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Kutch, Porbandar, Chamoli, Bhavnagar, Ahwa, Tiswadi, Amritsar, Sabarkantha, Valsad, Sirsa, Hamirpur, Aizwal, Kinnaur, Dhanbad, Dumka, Palamu, Chamarajanagar, Haveri, Madikeri, Malappuram, Jhabua, Amravati, Kolhapur, Osmanabad, Bishnupur, Dimapur, Rajsamand, Mokokchung, Mayurbhanj, Bathinda, Fatehgarh Sahib, Barmer, Hoshiarpur, Jhalawar, Auraiya, Farrukhabad, Lakhimpur Kheri, Pratapgarh, Burdwan, Murshidabad, Pauri Garhwal, Cuddalore, Ireland, Sivaganga, Kancheepuram, Varanasi, Bellare, Erode, Ramanathapuram, Kanyakumari, Lohit, Perambalur, Pudukkottai, Shahdol, Goa, Tiruvannamalai, New York, Nalgonda, Domalguda, Bhutan, Tezu, London, Thailand...

Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

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Noble Sparrows also offers freezer services to ensure family members living far away can pay their final respects. One can even plan one's own funeral in advance with the pre-planning services.

Coordinating with local police stations in Delhi-NCR, Noble Sparrows also arranges a dignified farewell for unclaimed and unidentified bodies. "Just due to sad circumstances of death, a person should not miss out on a dignified cremation," explains Bhargav.

They offer cremations for pets as well. Given the lack of infrastructure, they have tied up with burial grounds in South Delhi, West Delhi and Gurugram. Their service offers planting of a tree in memory of the pet.

Another important decision made by the team at the outset was to not charge for funerals of infants or children below two years of age.



On special request, Noble Sparrows makes calls on behalf of the grieving family. They help organize online and offline prayer meetings.

The team organized a free funeral service for a rickshaw-puller in Lakshmi Nagar. "If someone is grieving we don't say no. If someone needs us, we will be there, no matter what," says Bhargav.

With Noble Sparrows, Bhargav hopes to improve the standards of the funerary industry in India and make it less chaotic and unstructured.

There are many problems like crowded and unhygienic crematoriums in cities. Urban housing is also not well designed for funerary services. "There would be times when elevators in high-rise buildings could not accommodate a stretcher," says Bhargav.

Being in a grim business, Bhargav has to ensure his staff remains positive and sees their work as not just a job but a mission. "I believe that God gives us the strength to be a pillar of support for the family in their hour of need," he says. ■

Reviving memories of lost tribal languages

CIVIL SOCIETY REVIEWS

HOW do you bring dying languages back to life? That, too, languages spoken by ancient tribes living on an island forgotten by the world? But that's what Anvita Abbi, a researcher in minority languages who taught linguistics in Jawaharlal Nehru University for 38 years, succeeded in doing. She's probably the only person in the world who knows the Great Andamanese language.

Language is invaluable because it isn't just talk. It isn't just about words and grammar. When a language dies, the community's identity dies and along with it a profound knowledge system of culture, tradition, biodiversity and environment. It's well known that during the tsunami of 2004 the Andamanese tribes saved themselves because their knowledge system told them that danger was brewing.

The Great Andamanese tribes — the Onge, Jarawa and Sentinelese — are India's only surviving pre-Neolithic tribes who migrated from Africa 70,000 years ago. They settled on Great Andaman, Little Andaman and North Sentinel islands and lived in isolation for centuries. The British in the 19th century colonized their islands, bringing in settlers and epidemics, followed by the Japanese invasion and then, eventually, their islands became part of independent India. The Government of India forcibly removed the tribes from their islands and relocated them in the 1970s to Strait Island, now an isolated tribal reserve.

In this unthinking shift the tribes lost their languages. They now speak pidgin Hindi and Great Andamanese, a mixture of four languages

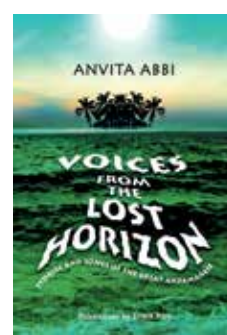
belonging to the Jeru, Khora, Bo and Sare tribal communities who were relocated from North Andaman Island. The government encouraged the tribes to intermarry since their numbers were small, so what finally emerged was a bilingual mix. It was a daunting task for Abbi to find people who could speak the original language.

Abbi arrived in the Andamans in the nick of time. The oldest speaker of the Bo language, Boa Sr, was 84. She hadn't spoken in her own language for nearly 40 years. She has now passed away and so has another valued raconteur, Nao Jr, who was suffering from liver cancer.

The outcome of Abbi's effort, *Voices from the Lost Horizon*, contains 10 stories and 46 songs in the native language of the Great Andaman tribes. It has nicely drawn illustrations and pictures. Each chapter has a QR code which you can scan and then watch and hear the original singer and song. In this way, Abbi has preserved Boa Sr and Nao Jr's voices and ensured their contribution is duly recorded.

To travel to Strait Island you need permission. Abbi and her two colleagues got help from a tribal welfare group, the Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti. They stayed in a ramshackle government bungalow with no windows, two hours of electricity and no basic services. Battling insects and mosquitoes, dodging crocodiles and snakes, the team had to eventually become hunter-gatherers and fish for food.

It was also painstaking work. But they made friends with the tribes, who were at first sceptical. Eventually they began to look forward to their interactions with Abbi and her team. The tribal communities said they could only remember



Voices from the Lost Horizon: Stories and songs of the Great Andamanese / Anvita Abbi / Niyogi Books ₹995



Anvita Abbi with Reya and Renge, daughters of the queen of the tribe

words. So Abbi began noting down names of birds, trees, fish, reptiles and she soon had a dictionary of words. She coaxed them to talk about hunting, naming a child, boat building, and so on, and as they began to remember it struck them that this was their language and it was being revived.

The first story was related by Nao Jr. It required patience and tact to piece it together. For Nao Jr too it was an emotional moment to recall stories of a bygone era of life on a pristine island. This story is called "The Great Narrative of Phertajido" and it's about the first man of the Andaman Islands.

More stories followed: "The Tale of Juro", which provides an insight into death rituals practised by the community; "The Tale of Maya Lephai", a story

of infidelity; "Maya Jiro Mithe", about a boy who is swallowed by a fish; "Dik and Kaunmo", about an evil man who is chastened by his wife; "Dik the Demon and the Fish," a story narrated by Boa Sr who contributed mainly songs.

The stories are straight from the heart, simple and enjoyable, and provide valuable insights into the lives of the Great Andamanese tribes before they were sent to Strait Island.

There are translations of the songs too. Abbi couldn't, despite her best efforts, resuscitate ritual songs. Her book is a labour of love and an amazing revival of a language that might have died. She has given back to the Great Andamanese tribes a valuable marker: their identity. ■

Tracing the colonial curse of partition in Bengal

BENGALIS, whether in West Bengal or Bangladesh, share the same language, culture and history, so was Partition an inevitable tragedy or was it a malevolent plot to divide the state by the British?

It is this investigation that Bhaswati Mukherjee, a seasoned diplomat, embarked on. She has collated her research and her reading of historical events to write a book, *Bengal and Its Partition: An Untold Story*.

"Bhaswati has been able to add a new layer of meaningful context to the events that led to Bengal's Partition and the dismantling of its syncretic culture, creating a highly readable narrative," said Hardeep Singh Puri, union minister for

petroleum and natural gas, at a discussion with the author at the India International Centre (IIC) on August 20. Puri was Mukherjee's colleague in the Indian Foreign Service.

Mukherjee says that while serving as a diplomat, she found Bangladeshi colleagues were taken aback by her fluency in Bengali, her closeness to her culture and its folk music. That seemed strange to her. Language and cultural identity define the people of Bengal more than religious identities, she emphasizes.

In her book she takes readers back to the Battle of Plassey in 1757, a skirmish the British East India Company won through deceit. A series of steps followed to strip Bengal's economy, beginning with



Bengal and Its Partition: An Untold Story / Bhaswati Mukherjee / Rupa ₹845

the Permanent Settlement and the ruin of weavers. The divide and rule policy and the Communal Award of 1932, which provided for separate electorates on the basis of religion and caste, deliberately deepened the schism between Hindus and Muslims. The competition for economic resources between communities was exacerbated by acute poverty.

Appalled by the widespread admiration for Churchill, Mukherjee also writes about the Great Bengal Famine of 1943, reminding us of the racist policies that led to the death of millions.

Questioning whether there can ever be closure when it comes to the Partition, Mukherjee said, "There are things the people of India need to know and discuss about Bengal's Partition, because we have forgotten." She said these conversations need

to take place to understand the lessons of the Partition. Bengal's Partition is often written about with ambiguity, she pointed out.

She said it was also important to write history from an Indian or South Asian perspective instead of constantly referring to what scholars from the West had to say. Such writings often depicted just one aspect of history, she emphasized.

With August 14 named Partition Horrors Remembrance Day, Mukherjee's book is a reminder of colonial apathy, exploitation and the lasting impact it has had on the people of South Asia.

With roots in Bengal, Mukherjee has served as India's ambassador to the Netherlands and permanent representative at UNESCO. She has a postgraduate degree in history from Delhi University. ■

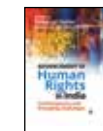
RANDOM SHELF HELP



Renewable Energy in India: Economics and Market Dynamics
Pramod Deo, Sushanta K. Chatterjee, Shrikant Modak
SAGE/ ₹1,095

Renewable energy generation technologies are now at a tipping point. They have exceeded expectations and are poised for large-scale commercial generation. But they need policy support. The current debate focuses on how renewable energy should be priced and integrated into markets. This book examines aspects of pricing, regulatory oversight and rules governing the market for electricity generation from intermittent renewable energy sources and associated green products. It discusses various policy and regulatory initiatives for renewable power generation technologies in India by comparing them with similar measures in some of the leading countries of the world.

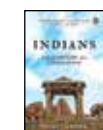
The book advances current scholarship on green energy, the dilemma facing policymakers and the possibility of achieving a level playing field for renewable energy through market mechanisms.



Advancement of Human Rights in India: Contemporary and Emerging Challenges
Debarati Halder, Shrut S. Brahmhatt
SAGE/ ₹1,395

This is a study of recent trends and challenges in human rights in India with a focus on the gains made by judicial activism and the gross violation of these rights by the government and private stakeholders.

The book contains critical discussions on the legal rights of women, children, forest tribes, disabled individuals, prisoners, and other socially disadvantaged groups whose welfare has been neglected and needs to be urgently addressed. It also addresses current debates on consular access, privacy, paternity leave and food security. Progress in the fight for human rights is acknowledged along with solutions.



Indians: A brief history of a civilization
Namit Arora
Penguin-Viking/ ₹599

Namit Arora has written an engrossing book on 5,000 years of Indian history. Instead of sitting in a library, he actually visits the historical sites he writes about and talks to people who live there. Arora begins his journey with the surprisingly modern and well-planned city of Dholavira, a Harappan site, and goes on to the Ikshvaku capital at Nagarjunakonda and then to Nalanda, Vijayanagar, Hampi and Varanasi. He also peruses the chronicles of travellers who came to India during those days — Megasthenes, Xuanzang, Alberuni and Marco Polo. Arora's is a people's history. He brings the era alive with descriptions of the way people lived, of how things actually were in those days. His book is also significant because he sees Indian history down the years through the prism of current debates and punctures a few myths. ■

Small producers and artisans need help to reach out to sell their wonderful products. They can't advertise and they don't know to access retail networks. *Civil Society* happily provides information about what they have on offer, their skills and how you can get to them.

PAINTINGS, PUPPETS

Sreenivasulu was busy making another pair of puppets to add to his assortment of puppets on display at his stall in Dilli Haat. A national and state awardee, he uses goatskin and natural colours to make eye-catching wall hangings, puppets, lamps, and more. To add to his income, Sreenivasulu says he performs puppet shows at weddings, birthdays, festivals, and other occasions. He also teaches his art, called Chitrakala, in schools and when invited to do so.



"It is a tedious job that requires precision and stability. I have been in this field for over 20 years but recently, due to COVID-19, our sales have fallen tremendously and impacted our livelihoods," he says. Many artisans are struggling to keep their art alive despite the meagre remuneration it fetches. These are family traditions and unique to India's cultural and artistic heritage. **Contact:** K. Sreenivasulu – 8897291616/ 9963307693.

VRINDAVAN'S PAPER ART

Vijay Soni is a Sanjhi artist. Sanjhi is a traditional art that originated from the temples of Vrindavan and Mathura to celebrate the cult of Krishna. Delicate and intricate, these designs were used in the past for rangolis and ritualistic ceremonies. Sanjhi stencils now add beauty to household products.



Soni is excited to showcase his art to customers, pulling out his custom-made scissors and cutting paper. This fine art is framed and used as wall hangings, from picturesque landscapes to deities, in all sizes. But customers are now few and days go by with no sales, he says.



Contact: Vijay Soni – 09917317445, vijay.soni@mathurasanjhiart.com

FRESH FROM THE HILLS

Saras Naturals is an online organic food store which specializes in produce from Jammu and Kashmir. Started during the first lockdown by Atharava Ansil Chowdhary and Saraswati Chhabra, Saras sells Badarwahi *rajma*, basmati rice, saffron, pink tea, *aam papad*, Kashmiri *kahwa*, walnuts and almonds.

Also available is a diverse range of dry fruits, including dried peaches and cranberries. Saras Naturals sources from local producers and delivers pan-India.

Their bestseller, the traditional Kashmiri noon-chai or pink tea, brews into a magenta pink liquid and has a rich flavour. They also offer ethically sourced organic Kashmiri saffron honey from the Kashmir Valley.

You can order a variety of Kashmiri products from their website.

Contact: Atharava Ansil Chowdhary – 9858772234
Email: support@sarasnaturals.in
Website: <https://www.sarasnaturals.in/>



ATTRACTIVE CLOTH BAGS

Paalaguttapalle Bags are produced by Dalitwada women from Paalaguttapalle, a small village in Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh. They stitch a range of different types of cloth bags and cushion covers. They also make hair accessories, and spicy traditional pickles. The enterprise was set up as a means of livelihood by the women to sustain their families after agricultural activities suffered due to drought.

A variety of designs is available. The women of Paalaguttapalle recently learnt mesh-screen printing, adding to their skills. Kalamkari art, a traditional block-printing technique from Andhra Pradesh, also features on their beautifully stitched bags. Drawstring bags, compartment bags, backpacks, tote bags, among other types, are available. They are open to bulk orders and custom orders, or you can choose from the many designs and types available on their website.

Contact: Aparna – 938159808, Email: paalaguttapalle@gmail.com
Website: <http://paalaguttapalle.com/>



So you want to do your bit but don't know where to begin? Allow us to help you with a list especially curated for *Civil Society's* readers. These are groups we know to be doing good work. And they are across India. You can volunteer or donate or just spread the word about them.

PROTECT STREET CHILDREN



CHETNA

Street children are extremely vulnerable to mental and physical abuse, trafficking, homelessness and more. CHETNA—Childhood Enhancement through Training and Action—is a grassroots non-profit which helps such disadvantaged children. CHETNA works for the fundamental rights of children—the right to survival, development, protection and participation. CHETNA works in Delhi and neighbouring states on multiple projects that combat child labour, provide education, reduce harm and promote the well-being of street children. It runs a 24/7 helpline, 1098, with Childline for children who need help and links them to services run by the state. CHETNA also teaches street children essential skills. Its vision is to achieve a child-caring society that respects child rights. You can work as a volunteer or donate for one of many programmes at CHETNA.

www.chetnango.org | info@chetnango.org
011-41644471, 41644470

ASSIST PRISON REFORM



TURN YOUR CONCERN INTO ACTION (TYCIA)

Turn Your Concern Into Action (TYCIA) works on prison rights, tribal rights, children and youth. Their programmes include Second Chance, a 12-month fellowship under which fellows hold workshops for inmates at Tihar Jail, Delhi. Their Better Life Prison School helps at-risk youth receive education and skill training. Project Unlearn helps in context-based education and life skills training for people at Tihar.

You can 'Adopt a Child' by sponsoring the education of a child under their Pathshala programme for children of migrant workers in Delhi. You can also volunteer or apply for their fellowship. TYCIA accepts contributions of used printers, books, computers, and furniture.

www.tyciafoundation.org
tyciafoundation@gmail.com | 98711 92983

PROTECT TREES AND WILDLIFE



AARANYAK

Aaranyak works to protect nature and its resources including India's rich biodiversity, wildlife, wetlands and water systems. It believes that the welfare of communities is intricately linked to nature. Established in 1989 by a group of young enthusiastic environmentalists, Aaranyak is also a member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Its maiden project was to save the white-winged wood duck from extinction. This was followed by efforts to restore the riverine habitat of Gangetic dolphins and other initiatives.

The organization's mission is to conserve the biodiversity of northeast India through research, environmental education, capacity building and advocacy for legal and policy reform. You can help by donating or informing. <https://aaranyak.org/default.asp> | info@aaranyak.org | (0361) 2230250

FIRST PERSON

Sivani, student

'I LOVED WORKING FOR ORPHANS AT MAD'

I ALWAYS wanted to study something that would let me get into teaching. Unfortunately, circumstances made me an MBBS student. I regret the decision. For this reason, I joined Academic Support Volunteering at Make A Difference (MAD). This helped me stay linked to my passion for teaching. I have been a volunteer for two years.

My first motto was to teach, but once I began fieldwork, it was a different experience altogether. The children I was teaching were all orphans living in shelter homes. They had no involvement with the outside world. I was their pathway. The innocence of these kids was very refreshing. When they say they aspire to become like me and the other volunteers, our happiness knows no bounds.



I am not a social person. But volunteering helped me socialize. I would keep waiting for the weekends to arrive so I could teach, interact and play with the kids. The kids would wait for us to come so that

they could clarify their doubts about their schoolwork. It gave me immense pleasure and something to look forward to every week.

It wasn't only about me teaching the kids. I also learnt since I had to go back to learning the basics of all subjects. It was not easy to handle the kids. In the process, I incorporated a lot of patience. I have evolved as a person by volunteering.

I believe everybody has a little free time in their busy schedules. There are kids around who would want you to spend some time with them and share your knowledge. It doesn't always have to be on a monetary basis. Your support will help the kids transform into better people and make you evolve as a better person too.

www.makeadiff.in | contact@makeadiff.in

SUPPORT CHILD WELFARE



ABHIVADAN

Abhivadan is involved mostly in child welfare in Delhi-NCR. They run a Meri Pathshala project, which provides schooling, educational supplies and digital skills to children without access to education. Under their 'Vitaran' project, they organize donation drives and provide food, medicines, stationery and other household items to underprivileged people. Since 2017, they have helped more than 1,000 individuals.

You can donate or volunteer or help children access education. www.abhivadan.org.in | abhivadan.ngo@gmail.com | Contact: 9882694125

menstruation. Girls and women are encouraged to use safe sanitary napkins and not towels and rough unsafe substances. Under their Mukti Program, Nidaan educates girls about menstruation in schools. Nidaan provides easy-to-use and cost-effective machines which make sanitary napkins. www.nidaanngobilaspur.com
nidaanngo24@gmail.com, nidaanngo15@gmail.com | 7024572403, +91-8818979007

HELP THE DISABLED



AAINA

Aaina, set up in 1998 in Odisha, works for the specially abled with the aim of including them in the development process and helping them become a valued asset to society. In the past two decades, the organization has set up schools for the specially abled, enabled accessibility, advocated for inclusion and provided community rehabilitation. <http://www.aaina.org.in> | info@aaina.org.in (0674) 2360630, 2360631

TALK ABOUT PERIODS



NIDAAN

Founded in 2015, Nidaan, an NGO in Chhattisgarh, does remarkable work in helping to eradicate the stigma around

PLANT POWER

Flowers and plants almost always capture our attention. We wonder what their names are, where they originate and what they could be useful for. There are rare plants we may never see. Ganesh Babu, a botanist, is our guide.

Maha Drona

Maha Drona, scientifically known as *Anisomeles malabarica* (L.) R. Br. ex Sims, belongs to the *Lamiaceae* family, or the mint/basil family. Maha Drona reaches a height of one to two metres. Its stems are four-angled and blunt, white and hairy. Flowers are pink with white streaks or entirely white, up to two cm long.

Maha Drona is reportedly one of the best remedies for knee pain. The leaves of the Maha Drona are filled in half a mud pot and gingly oil is poured into three-fourths of the pot. The mouth of the pot is tied with a cotton cloth and kept in a sunny place for a month. After 30 days the Maha Drona leaves soaked in oil are heated and the warm oil is applied gently on the knees.

Maha Drona is a moderate shrub which looks nice in any garden. It can also be placed in containers to flank front doors or patio steps. It attracts tiny birds and butterflies too.

Wild jackfruit

Wild jackfruit is a relative of the common jackfruit tree that comes under the family *Moraceae* and is botanically known as *Artocarpus hirsutus* Lam. Wild jackfruit is a lofty evergreen tree which exudes milky-white, sticky latex when injured. Dense branching and finely textured foliage make this tree a winner as a specimen or a standalone tree. While fruiting, it renders a graceful appearance with cute little jackfruits. Its upright branches and roundish canopy provide expansive shade, making it an awesome avenue and walkways tree and should be the prime choice for city and town planners.

Wild jackfruit yields fruit that is primarily medicinal and tastes delicious. Fruits are also reported to be aphrodisiac. The ripe fruit is edible. The tree's leaf, bark, ripe fruit and latex are used as medicine. Its fresh leaves are fodder for elephants. The fallen leaves make good organic mulching material. The tree's wood is used for house construction, boat building and furniture.

Begonia

Begonia malabarica Lam, belonging to its own family *Begoniaceae*, is a beautiful and sturdy houseplant that can be planted in shaded summer beds since it is not finicky about being outdoors. Unlike other native wild plants it is ideal for indoor environments and can even add colour to bathrooms as this species loves humidity!

Tuberous begonias will die every year but the wild one doesn't. It offers attractive, year-round asymmetrical foliage with colourful streaks on dark green leaves and stunning seasonal male and female flowers. Its deep red colour beneath its leaves makes it adored by plant lovers. As an outdoor garden plant, native begonia can be used as a colourful and compact edging for flower beds or to ornament window boxes and fill hanging baskets.

This is the only species with leaves that have all five different tastes. When chewed, its leaves are first sour followed by bitter, sweet, pungent and finally an astringent taste! The leaves are used to treat blood cancer, heart diseases, skin infections, diarrhoea and respiratory complaints.

Kailash Taru



Sacred trees are usually planted in and around temples or places of pilgrimage. The tree which is planted at the heart of the temple is known as Sthala Vruksha or sacred element. One such sacred tree is Kailash Taru or Nagalinga Pushpa. It is believed that the Kailash Taru has been in India for more than 3,000 years. It is scientifically known as *Couroupita guianensis* Aubul and belongs to the family *Lecythidaceae*.

This tree is known for its unusual flowers and fruits. The main trunk is ornamented with hundreds of drooping racemes with fragrant flowers which are large, showy, 6-10 cm long, yellowish-red outside and pink inside. The tree's flowers produce two types of stamens — the fertile ring stamens and the sterile stamens on hood-like structures. In Hindu mythology, the hooded sterile stamens are seen as 100-headed snakes and the style at the centre is seen as a Shivalinga, hence the local name Naga-Lingapushpa. The bark, leaf and flower have medicinal properties and are used for scorpion stings, dysentery, piles, scabies and other skin diseases.

Shalmali



Shalmali or *Bombax malabarica* L. is a huge tree with a straight trunk which reaches 25 metres. It is usually found in India's deciduous forests. Shalmali is a gloriously tall tree, native to India, which flowers abundantly and blooms profusely in summer. It has large, showy, scarlet flowers which appear before its leaves sprout on the branches. Hence, during flowering it is leafless! While in bloom it has a profusion of red lotus flowers adding pizzazz to any landscape.

Shalmali's unripe fruit, green in colour, mimic the size and shape of unripe bananas. Its tap root, bark, gum, flowers, fruit, seeds and silk cotton possess medicinal value and are used against dysentery, diarrhoea, piles, cough, menorrhagia and leucorrhoea. The cotton obtained from its fruit capsules is used in pillows to induce better sleep. Shalmali's common name is red silk cotton tree.

Crepe ginger



Crepe ginger or *Costus speciosus* (Koen. ex Retz.) SM., of the family *Costaceae*, is a member of spiral gingers. It is a shrubby perennial, well-known as an outstanding medicinal plant used in almost all systems of Indian medicine. Its rhizomes are horizontal and creeping. Stems are sub-woody at the base and covered by purplish leaf sheaths. The leaves, around 30 cm long and eight cm broad, are spirally arranged, with velvety soft texture underneath, furry to touch.

The crepe ginger is an exciting landscape plant with shining green leaves spiralling on its stalk. It adds beauty to lush green lawns and looks stupendous along water bodies. A water body can be created with crepe ginger islands. This plant is easy to grow and doesn't attract pests. The rhizomes are used to treat boils, constipation, diarrhoea, headache, giddiness, earaches, leprosy, skin diseases, fever, bronchial complaints, inflammations, intestinal worms and anaemia. ■



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