

Civil Society

THE NEW WOMAN IN INDIAN CINEMA

Exciting fiction on offer



A scene from 'Angry Indian Goddesses'

HALL OF FAME EVENING

Pages 6-7.....

MODEL CODE FOR NGOs

Pages 8-9.....

SHELTERS FOR HOMELESS

Pages 14-15.....

SPECIAL FOCUS

WHY ODISHA'S FARMERS ARE TAKING THEIR LIVES

Pages 10-11

COMPANIES LACK LEADERS

Pages 22-23.....

SINGLE-TEACHER SCHOOLS

Page 27.....

OLDEST NATIONAL PARK

Pages 32-33.....

CONTENTS



COVER STORY

THE NEW WOMAN IN INDIAN CINEMA

In a growing trend, films are being made by independent directors in Mumbai on the woman's point of view. The stories they tell are humorous, rebellious and sometimes tragic.

18

Cash-free farming	12
Fire sets back Goonj	15
Talking to the patient's family	16
Schools for the tribal child	24
Splitting up in Bengaluru	25-26
Norms go from pre to post	28
Theatre to fight stigma	29-30
'Time for a new forest service'	31
A green bazaar	34

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Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

Films as a mirror

WE have been reporting on new trends in Indian cinema and this month's cover story is in keeping with the interest we have shown in the past. It is good to be first with coverage of directors and films — especially because those which are new and different tend to go unnoticed in the beginning. We like to be the first to latch on. It is the thrill a publication fishes for. But that is not the only reason. Another reason for us is that films mirror society. Those that come from the fringes of the industry tend to explore less-understood realities. They deal with emerging concerns and identities. The women in the films we have written about are asserting themselves — both in the characters in the stories and through the making of the films. The emergence of women in post-liberalisation India isn't adequately studied and understood. Nor is the decline of patriarchy. But it is clear that there is an emerging shift in equations. We at *Civil Society* notice it all the time — in big cities of course and, more significantly, when we travel out to the smaller places. These films are built around fictional stories. They aren't documentaries. Fiction is their strength since it is often more nuanced and revealing than cold fact.

From Odisha we bring you a story of agricultural distress. Farmers have been taking their own lives, plunged as they are in debt in the midst of a failing rural economy. It is at great peril that we continue to ignore the needs of the farm sector. The message from Odisha is the same as from elsewhere in the country. Lack of irrigation, overuse of pesticides and fertilisers, absence of a cold chain, poor market access, no jobs for the young, missing linkages between rural and urban, banks that won't lend in time — it is the same list of issues. What is needed is clearly a mission-oriented approach to find solutions and improve processes quickly. Farmers big and small need the same attention nationally that the government gives industry.

We have two interesting interviews in this issue. Mathew Cherian has recently taken over as the chairperson of VANI or the Voluntary Action Network of India. Mathew will be working to build bridges between the government and the voluntary sector. There is need to promote better understanding of the creative role that the voluntary sector plays. It is equally important for voluntary organisations to be transparent and accountable.

On sustainability and the corporate sector we spoke to Bimal Arora of the Centre for Responsible Business. He has been working for long with companies in this space. The interview coincides with a conference in New Delhi on the subject. At the core of sustainability is self-regulation and reporting. The Indian corporate sector has a long way to go. Right now it is stuck on CSR, which is not the same as sustainability. What is lacking — advocacy, regulation, leadership? For all their global connectivity, Indian companies, by and large, don't seem to be able to learn from others and leapfrog.

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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Nutrition for the poor

Your November issue carried an interesting story titled, 'Nutrition for the very poor.' The initiative taken by Dr Samir Chaudhuri is exemplary and deserves to be replicated elsewhere in the country. I would like to compliment you and your team for taking up such issues and highlighting them in your magazine.

Anil Swarup

We appreciate the efforts of CINI to combat malnutrition by inventing a low-cost health food. We need a range of nutritious foods that are easy to cook for children. These could be easily made available through ration shops for those who would like to buy them.

Ritika and Gyanendra Singh

Hall of Fame

The Hall of Fame is such an inspirational, hopeful and reassuring event.

My congratulations to all who were recognised and to you for making this possible. Anupamji was at his best and so was Arunaji. It was just wonderful.

Kabir Vajpayee

Artocarpus

We enjoyed reading Shree Padre's story, 'Jackfruit finds a factory', in your November issue. Kerala needs many more such companies to avoid the criminal wastage of jackfruit. When jackfruit is not in season, other fruits can be processed. Since jackfruit is a low glycemic food it should be in high demand in India, especially in Kerala which has become the diabetic capital of the country.

Jissy George

This enterprise can help thousands of tribal people in Odisha. In our local forests a lot of jackfruit is just allowed to rot. Instead, Artocarpus can buy jackfruit from tribals and help them earn a good income. If required, we are ready to extend our support and cooperation to Subhash Koroth.

Mangaraj Panda

I would like to thank Shree Padre for his detailed article on Subhash Koroth setting up Artocarpus, the first jackfruit manufacturing company in India. I salute Koroth for investing his money into making jackfruit products. Nobody else would have dared to take this step. I met Subhash in Trivandrum and took a few samples of his products. I have

started creating awareness about the medicinal value of jackfruit in seminars and I am now marketing jackfruit products.

C.K. Asari

I am very happy to know that Subhash Koroth, an electrical engineer, is manufacturing jackfruit products. I would also like to thank Shree Padre for his tireless efforts in campaigning for this humble and long ignored fruit. We need to put our heads together and find sustainable ways of feeding our population which does not increase pressure on land.

Udaya Kumar

Grassroots leader

The tragic news from Baran district of Rajasthan is that Motilal, the secretary and founding-member of Sankalp, died in the middle of all his work very suddenly on September 23.

Sankalp played a leading role in fighting against hunger and bonded labour in Baran district of Rajasthan. It enormously helped the Sahariya tribals of the region.

Till his last moments Motilal was engrossed in work relating to the welfare of the Sahariyas which was dearest to his heart. He was closely involved in drought-relief work and food security. He campaigned tirelessly for land and forest rights of tribals. Motilal was involved in initiatives to improve media coverage of grassroots news in remote villages. As director of the 'Doosra Dashak' project in Baran district, he made an immense contribution to education too.

Bharat Dogra

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An evening to remember

THE Civil Society Hall of Fame 2015 recognition ceremony was a memorable evening of inspiring stories and great music at the Amphitheatre of the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi on October 30.

The annual ceremony draws a packed house and this year was no exception. It was also once again an engaged and receptive audience that applauded the new entrants to the Civil Society Hall of Fame as they recounted their various journeys.

It has become a hallmark of the ceremony that it draws people from diverse walks of life. There were activists, executives, government servants, police officers, politicians, small businessmen, code writers from software companies, homemakers, journalists and students. It was an audience representative of *Civil Society* magazine's diverse readership.

Entering the Civil Society Hall of Fame this year were Sudha Sinha, an oncologist; Archana Godbole and Jayant Sarnaik, conservationists; Puli Raju, a teacher who has been recording suicides by farmers in Telangana; Sumoni Jhodia, tribal leader from Odisha; Indraani Singh and the Literacy India team for educating poor children and promoting livelihoods and Dr Sitanath De, a rural surgeon from Jhargram in West Bengal.

Anupam Mishra of the Gandhi Peace Foundation delivered the keynote address. He emphasised the need for tolerance and pluralism in a multicultural India. In his customary style, he was both insightful and humorous, and delivered a powerful message on the need for harmony and inclusion for taking India forward.

Aruna Roy, the veteran activist and leader of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, presided and gave away the citations.

The recognition ceremony was followed by the Everyone Is Someone Concert. The iconic band, Indian Ocean, played as they have in previous years, defining the occasion in ways only they can with their original and socially meaningful music and lyrics. ■



An engaged audience from different walks of life



Indraani Singh speaking on Literacy India's work



Puli Raju from Telengana spoke



Archana Godbole and Jayant Sarnaik receiving their citations



Dr Sudha Sinha on setting up a



Anupam Mishra delivering a hugely applauded keynote address



Aruna Roy addressing the gathering



Sumoni Jhodia, a tribal leader from Odisha, gave a stirring speech



Dr Sitanath De's citation being received by Prof. P.K. Dutta



of rural distress



Indian Ocean performed brilliantly



children's cancer facility

‘VANI drafting model code of conduct for NGOs’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

AJIT KRISHNA

THE voluntary sector’s complaints against the Union government have been growing — beginning with the Manmohan Singh-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and now the Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). It is felt that activists and NGOs are being unfairly hounded and regulations on taxation and foreign contributions are being used to settle scores in situations where the government is criticised and its policies are opposed.

As the differences grow, Mathew Cherian, CEO of Helpage India, has taken over the additional role of Honorary Chairperson of the Voluntary Action Network of India (VANI).

Cherian’s mission is to find common ground and restore the image of voluntary groups as a source of positive energy with a constructive role to play in the development process.

Cherian is well-placed to restore balance. A fair-minded man, who measures his words, Cherian has credibility both in government and the social sector. But he has his work cut out for him. As much as the criticism against the government is justified, it is also true that many a voluntary organisation has to learn to live up to higher standards of transparency and accountability.

VANI is a network of around 400 grassroots NGOs. Most of them work in the poorest states of India — Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bihar — and provide assistance in drinking water, sanitation, watershed management, education, infant and maternal mortality, which are critical areas of concern.

What are your priorities as the new Honorary Chairperson of VANI?

We are trying to see how we can correct the image of the voluntary sector. I have always maintained that we have contributed hugely to society, whether it be the Right to Information law, drinking water, leprosy eradication, joint forest management... these have been done by various NGOs and become official policies of the Government of India.

Yet, when it comes to giving us a level playing field with the corporate sector, we are always at the receiving end. The government always backs the corporate sector, thinking it can solve all the problems of this country. But here is a sector that has performed time and again with meagre resources and changed the policies of the government. And what they give us is the stick.

In a democratic society, civil society is absolutely necessary. We are one of the pillars of society. If



Mathew Cherian: ‘In a democratic society, civil society is absolutely necessary’

‘We are trying to see how we can correct the image of the voluntary sector. I have maintained that we have contributed hugely to society.’

there is no civil society, there is no democracy. Many people acknowledge that the voluntary sector does a lot of work but the media writes negative stories about us.

Why do you think the NGO sector has a bad image?

The NGO sector is a very vast sector. We cannot control everybody. There are people who have not stood up to the levels of accountability we would expect them to. There have been some agencies that have not performed well. They have created personal assets. So all this has given us a bad name. But usually the media likes bad stories. The good stories don’t get written. The bad stories overwhelm the good stories.

So what can be done to improve this image?

VANI will be drafting a model code of conduct that we will make all our members accept. We are saying there is no getting away from transparency and accountability. Membership in VANI will hinge on signing this code of conduct. Your accounts and details of your organisation will be posted on your website. So whenever the tax authorities and the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) department hounds us, we can say we follow this

model code of conduct.

Has the time come for the voluntary sector to accept regulation?

Though the sector has been talking about self-regulation, we already have regulation through taxation, the FCRA and the Societies Act, which is weak but exists. The other way to get into regulation is to get a new Societies Act where we can all register again. That can be like the new Companies Act.

You could then register all development NGOs under the new Societies Act.

No, there might be some NGOs in the field of art, culture, or heritage conservation like INTACH. But we can avoid the clubs, and other societies masquerading as NGOs. The word ‘development’ might be difficult to define. The tax laws define our work quite clearly — relief of the poor, education of vulnerable people, healthcare and environmental conservation. A recent addition is yoga.

What is the effect this scrutiny is having on the NGOs?

Many NGOs have intelligence officers visiting them.

One NGO, Give India, received a 30-page questionnaire from the FCRA office. Quite a few NGOs have received scrutiny notices. All this is creating a mood that the NGO sector is under watch. Of course, the big foreign NGOs like Greenpeace and Hivos can't receive foreign funds and that instruction has gone to the banks also. Those agencies are on the watch list. Besides, we get tax notices.

But the impression that has gained ground, as in the Mahan controversy involving Greenpeace, is that NGOs are harming India's economic interests. In the Mahan coalmine agitation, the company involved is Essar, a British company. The shareholding is in London. Vedanta Resources plc's shareholding is also in London. They are listed on the London Stock Exchange so they are not Indian companies.

You can always question the receipt of foreign money. But there are many NGOs fighting with local funds. In Odisha, the agitation against POSCO is being financed locally. NGOs are using local resources. If you try to promote companies at the cost of the people, somebody will agitate.

Will you be encouraging members of VANI to get rated?

VANI is a network so we cannot rate ourselves. We are promoting various mechanisms for transparency and accountability. Rating is just one of them. It could be accreditation or some other system.

Like what?

Being online, having a website, is one of them. The other is posting your accounts in the public domain. According to Indian and foreign law, your tax returns are a private document. But many US non-profits put their tax returns on their websites which is like saying, this is what I have submitted to the government, this is my status. So I feel you should be able to put your tax returns on your website. Showing what I get and what I pay is very transparent.

The problem appears to be one of perception. Would you agree?

Yes, but there is also a communication problem. We need to go out and tell the world the value we are adding. In my organisation (Helpage), we are treating one million elderly. But the rest of the world does not know. We need to communicate not just to our donors and well-wishers but to the unconvert-

ed. Many NGOs do not like to communicate and they don't even use social media. They see it as a waste of time. They don't even have a proper website. We are trying to get Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) to create simple websites for our members in the .ngo domain.

Do you think the NGO sector needs to create neutral space where they can function regardless of which government comes to power?

Yes, we do need neutral space and a level playing field. We did discuss a model law for the voluntary sector with Syeda Hameed (former member, Planning Commission) during the last government.

The UPA government wanted to move us to the

'We need to communicate not just to our donors and well-wishers but to the unconverted. Many NGOs do not like to communicate and they don't even use social media.'

Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA). They said we have passed a model law for companies and the MCA has all the experience in the world to create a new law for you guys. We refused. We said, create a separate department for us if you like. Finally, that law never saw the light of day but we have drafted it and given it to the government. It is lying with the Ministry of Legal Affairs.

What does the draft model law for the voluntary sector say?

The draft ensured that there is a mechanism of reporting to the government on a regular basis. Currently, the Societies Registration Act is very weak on that. Then, there is the name of the NGO.

Today, you can register another society with the same name as your NGO's. In a company you can't do that because there is a name procedure. We had introduced a similar procedure in our draft law because otherwise you can have 10 NGOs called Prayas.

We think one of the main areas NGOs fail in is governance. They appoint a set of governors who continue for life with no rotation. As a result, even the best guys become either autocratic or dysfunctional over time. We recommended three terms for three years with one-third retiring every three years. Nobody can go beyond nine years. The Companies Act has got other provisions like director identification, filing your PAN, etc. We have inserted those too.

Perhaps the successful entry of NGOs into politics has made political parties and governments wary. Should NGOs be in politics directly?

There is a level of congruence between civil society actions and political areas of action. This hasn't arisen today. It was there during the freedom movement. Mahatma Gandhi himself formed many societies during the struggle for independence. This tradition continued. When Indira Gandhi found many NGOs involved in political agitations against her Emergency, she clamped the FCRA. So that is the origin of this law. When you take up rights-based work then that borderline (between political and non-political work) is being crossed.

The FCRA clearly says: If organisations are involved in political activity — without defining what political activity is — then their FCRA can be cancelled. Anil Choudhury of Peace has gone to the Supreme Court over this. He says if he protests against the World Bank chief coming to India, that is not political action. But the Home Ministry says it is. The Supreme Court will take a decision.

That is the legal point of view. But we are always moving into the political space. When you build a well in the Dalit locality of a village and the upper castes protest, you are doing politics.

But joining party political work and forming a party will not be approved by VANI. We will not approve jumping into politics or standing for elections. Using charitable money for political purposes is not correct. Neither can you translate goodwill acquired because of the work of your NGO, into political capital. ■

SAMITA'S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR

WHAT IS IT THAT YOU LIKE ME WEARING THE MOST?

A SMILE!



WHY ODISHA'S FARMERS ARE TAKING THEIR LIVES

Biswajit Padhi
Bhubaneswar

LAXMAN Goud, a 35-year-old farmer in Thakurpalli village in Komna block of Nuapada district of Odisha, used to lead a very simple life. He was a devoted follower of Mahima Dharma, a subaltern religion practised by underprivileged castes in Odisha. One morning, he took his life in desperation. He couldn't repay ₹19,000 he had borrowed from a local moneylender at 36 per cent interest.

Goud had invested the money in growing paddy on his field of 1.77 acres and on another two acres he had taken on a sharecropping basis. Lack of rain turned his fields to dust. All that he was able to harvest was 13 kg of paddy.

His wife, Kunti, said that he had been very worried. His mother, Ila, was too grief-stricken to speak. His 13-year-old son, Khileswar's future is uncertain. He will probably drop out of school and go to work.

Odisha has been in the news recently for farmer suicides. There isn't an exact tally of how many farmers have died but the local media estimates it to be between 50 and 80. The BJP, the main opposition party in the state, alleges it is higher.

"As many as 93 farmers took their lives in the past three months," claims Jadumani Panigrahi, General Secretary of the BJP's Kisan Morcha.

Reimati Majhi, a 28-year-old woman from Dhamanapada village in Nuapada district, will go down in history. She is perhaps the first woman farmer to kill herself. Her husband had gone to Surat to work as a labourer but returned penniless. Reimati's crop on her three-acre paddy field shrivelled and died. A loan from a local moneylender, which she could not repay, was the last straw on her back.

Most suicides are being reported from western Odisha, which doesn't have much irrigation, but they are occurring in irrigated areas as well.

Odisha, despite being a mineral-rich state, continues to be an agrarian economy. Almost 70 per cent of the population depends on agriculture and allied activities. Yet the agriculture sector's contribution to the state's GDP is declining. It fell from 13.7 per cent in 2013-14 to 12.33 per cent in 2014-15.

A sign of things to come is Jharsuguda district with its many industries. It has recorded the highest per capita income in the state. And the services sector now contributes more than 50 per cent of the state's GDP.

"It is ironical that the state has been able to address unpredictable disasters like cyclones, but fails to



Jadumani Panigrahi



Most suicide cases are being reported from western Odisha which lacks sufficient irrigation

Reimati Majhi, a 28-year-old woman from Dhamanapada village in Nuapada district, will go down tragically in history. She is perhaps the first woman farmer to kill herself. Reimati's crop on her three-acre paddy field had dried up due to lack of rain.

address seasons of drought which are quite predictable and many times man-made," remarks Pradeep Mohanty, a local journalist.

Odisha has about 64.09 hectares of farmland and around 41.16 per cent of this land is under cultivation. Most of it (40.17 lakh hectares) is acidic. A smaller percentage of land suffers from flooding, salinity or water-logging.

The state has as many as 10 different agro-climatic zones with rainfall that varies from region to region. Western Odisha gets 1,200 to 1,400 mm of rain in 30 to 40 days whereas the coastal districts get heavy rain in 60 to 70 days.

Farmers in coastal areas struggle with waterlogging while western Odisha fights frequent drought. North Odisha battles floods and in the hilly south tribals continue to practise shifting cultivation.

"In such a diverse agro-climatic region, one policy or programme can't meet the needs of the people," says Pradip Dutta, Director of Radio Kisan, a community radio that popularises agriculture.

Yet, successive governments

have been unable to design strategies that would meet the diverse needs of farmers in different regions of the state. Even agricultural scientists have failed. A premier institute like the Central Rice Research Institute (CRRI) in Cuttack has erred in its research.

CRRI has invented more than 60 varieties of paddy. "Yet more than 80 per cent of its inventions are for irrigated areas in a state where 70 to 80 per cent of farmers depend on rain-fed agriculture," says Professor J.K. Ray, an eminent agricultural scientist who too has invented a paddy variety for irrigated areas.

Farming practices continue to be traditional. Low seed replacement, low fertiliser consumption and low level of mechanisation are some of the major reasons why farmers in Odisha earn so little and end up spending so much.

Around 83 per cent of farmers are small and marginal, with the average land holding being just 1.25 hectares. "The increasing cost of production and frequent labour rate revisions have been pushing farmers to the brink of pauperism," says Birendra Pradhan, a farmer in Nuapada district.

Rising consumerism puts pressure on farmers to spend on marriages and family functions. In the absence of good government schools and health-care, they send their children to private schools and



In Jatla village in Bargarh district an elderly farmer goes back to work after his son committed suicide



Destruction of crops due to drought is the obvious reason for farmer suicides. But the reality is more complex

use private hospitals, adding to their cost of living.

Farmers are also beginning to use high-yielding varieties of seeds, fertilisers and insecticides that are adding to input costs. There is no certainty that the money the farmer invests will fetch him lucrative returns. Meanwhile, commercial farming is yet to pick up.

These are the reasons why farmers even in irrigated areas where they are assured of returns on their crops, are committing suicide, says Lingaraj Pradhan, a member of the Aam Aadmi Party, who is from Bargarh district of western Odisha.

The state has an attractive agricultural policy but on paper, allege critics. "The problem is there is no convergence with other programmes to maximise benefits to farmers," says Panigrahi.

In western Odisha ponds on cultivable land are a necessity. Yet these were badly dug under MGNREGA. A scheme that subsidised sinking of borewells and provision of free electricity has come a cropper.

Farmers say they don't get regular power supply so they can't pump water from the borewell for their fields.

Farmers who were promised compensation for destruction of their crops caused by Cyclone Phailin two years ago are yet to receive money.

Despite an active credit policy, institutional credit to farmers is still a mirage. AV Swamy, a Rajya Sabha MP, has been advocating that all farmers should be able to get credit at just 2 per cent interest since agriculture provides the maximum employment.

Currently, sharecroppers are left out of institutional credit schemes. But it is sharecroppers who mostly get into debt with local moneylenders.

The Odisha government claims that credit flow for agriculture rose to ₹10,454 crore in 2012-13 from ₹1,316 crore in 2003-04. But it isn't vulnerable farmers who are accessing this money.

The share of irrigation for farmers such as ponds,

canals and lift irrigation schemes has been steadily dwindling. According to government estimates around 51 per cent of land (33.12 lakh hectares) is covered by irrigation during the *kharif* season and 25 per cent (16.19 lakh hectares) is provided irrigation during the *rabi* season.

In fact, irrigation cover could be less than official estimates, says Arun Mishra, a local political leader, because of improper management of canals and lift irrigation points.

"The present system of irrigation through major and minor projects and lift irrigation will never be able to cover all the cultivable land in the state," says Jagadish Pradhan of Sahabhagi Vikash Abhiyan, an NGO working with farmers for two decades.

Pradhan advocates open wells dug every five acres at a cost of ₹22,000 crore. He feels it is possi-

Odisha could have been an exporter of fish. Instead, it imports fish and poultry from Andhra. Nabrangpur district is one of the biggest producers of maize. But it doesn't have any processing unit.

ble to build such a network of ponds in five years with MGNREGA money.

Another serious issue is lack of crop diversification and promotion of cash crops. Rice is still Odisha's major crop, grown on 80 per cent of farmland followed by pulses at 10 per cent.

As a result, the state is perennially short of vegetables and fruits. Take potatoes. The state needs nine to 10 lakh metric tonnes of potatoes annually. But less than one per cent of cultivable land is devoted to growing potatoes. So potatoes are imported from West Bengal.

Districts in western Odisha like Bolangir, Kalahandi and Nuapada produce huge quantities of onions. But due to lack of storage facilities the onions sell at very low prices and end up benefitting middlemen who export them to other parts of the country. Horticulture too continues to lag behind.

With its huge coastline, Odisha could have been an exporter of fish. Instead, it imports fish as well as poultry from Andhra Pradesh.

The tribal-dominated Nabrangpur district is one of the biggest producers of maize. But it doesn't have any processing unit so gullible farmers get exploited by traders.

The government announced compensation of ₹2,720 per acre to drought-affected farmers. This is inadequate, say activists. "The input costs alone are ₹15,000 per acre," claims Amitabh Patra, an activist.

Ashok Sahu, former Director-General of Police and a BJP leader, has been recommending free seeds and crop insurance for farmers with the government picking up 50 per cent of the cost.

A crisis over the survival of farmers and shortage of food is staring India in the face. Unless agriculture is given a new lease of life, food prices will continue to rise and India will pay more and more for imported food. ■



A field in Dharaav village

CASH-FREE FARMING

Bharat Dogra & Baba Mayaram
Bhopal

IN Dharaav village in Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh (MP), tribal farmers practise a system of mixed cultivation that they call *utera*. Several cereals, millets and legumes are grown together in June. Ganpat, a 60-year-old farmer, says that they don't need to spend any money at all to practise *utera* farming.

These farmers save seeds from the previous year's crops. Farm animals fertilise the fields with manure while crop residues completely free of chemical poisons, provide nutritious food for bullocks, cows and other farm animals. Mixed farming of grains and legumes ensures that soil fertility is maintained. If one crop fails due to some reason, other crops enable farmers to survive despite some loss.

Yet the predominant attitude of agriculture officials towards tribal communities is to try to convince them to give up their 'backward' agricultural practices and adopt more 'modern' and 'high productivity' ones. Often, no attempt is made to try to understand the traditional agricultural systems and practices of tribal communities. It is taken for granted that tribal agriculture is backward and needs to be replaced by readymade 'modern' solutions available with officials.

This is not the reality. What we see in tribal villages is an agriculture system in harmony with nature and the nutritional needs of the people. Tribal agriculture is a risk-minimising system which can provide at least some food even in adverse weather conditions. The relevance of this eco-friendly, zero-fossil fuel farming system has increased further in times of cli-



Tribal agriculture is low-cost and risk minimising

mate change and erratic weather.

In Dindori district of MP, Baiga tribals practise *benvar* agriculture. Gothiya, a farmer of Kandabani village, explains that during early summer small bushes, branches and fallen leaves are set on fire. Mixed seeds are scattered into this thin layer of ash. After about three years the site of farming changes. After letting the land remain fallow, tribal farmers return to it after nine years.

About 16 crops are routinely grown in this mixed farming system. These, further, have about 56 varieties. Various crops support each other. The bigger plant growth of maize protects the *kulthi* crop from strong winds. Nitrogen, absorbed by cereals, is replenished by legume crops.

This *benvar* system does not require the land to be ploughed. This system is rooted in the belief that ploughing hurts Mother Earth. Forget tractors, even ploughing by bullocks is avoided. This, in turn, helps women farmers to be very self-reliant. Ploughing in

most farming systems is handled by men.

Naresh Vishwas, who has written a book on the *benvar* system, says, "This system helps baiga tribal farmers cope with many adverse situations. There were some disruptions but then traditional seeds could be collected and this system could resume in many villages."

Vishwambharnath Tripathi, another researcher, has catalogued 26 types of cereals, 28 roots and tubers, 40 vegetables, 45 fruits and 21 mushrooms used in various tribal villages practising biodiversity-rich agriculture. Tribals also collect many foods from forests on the basis of their knowledge about the plant and tree diversity of forests.

A study titled "Forests as Food Producing Habitats" conducted in Rayagada and Sundargarh districts of Odisha by Debal Deb and others recently recorded 121 different kinds of uncultivated foods being harvested by villagers, mainly tribals. Ninety-eight different kinds of uncultivated foods were used to prepare cooked foods. The study found that forest foods could be playing a vital role in terms of micro-nutrients. Particularly in times of stress, uncultivated foods form a critical source of nutrition. If the forest is well maintained there is year-long supply of such food. This food is completely free and hence accessible to the poorest.

Many problems among tribals arise not from any lack of traditional wisdom but due to exploitation and disturbances (including displacement) they have to face due to outside forces. For example, their entire system collapses when they are pushed out of sanctuaries and park areas, or to make way for dams and industries.

Debjeet Sarangi, a social activist who works with tribal farmers in Odisha, says: "We found that several tribal farmers were routinely growing 55 to 60 crops on two-acre farms, and the mixed farming system was rooted in sound agronomic and nutrition logic. These tribals had excellent knowledge about very diverse uncultivated food they could obtain from forests. We contacted senior researchers who told us that as long as these traditional systems were well-preserved, tribal communities

did not need outside help or employment works during bad drought years. Unfortunately, the spread of monoculture crops and plantations under the garb of 'development' as well as other destructive projects implemented thoughtlessly without understanding the value of tribal farming harmed the self-reliance of tribal communities. While tribals looked upon their land as their mother, outsiders saw only the minerals they could extract as quickly as possible."

Sarangi adds, "Experiences of our organisation, Living Farms, show that any food security system proposed by the government should take into consideration the ability of traditional farming tribal systems to provide a very diverse and balanced mix of nutrients in the form of several millets, legumes, cereals, fruits, vegetables and herbs. The food security proposed by the state should support this strength and self-reliance of traditional food systems instead of harming them." ■

Gandhi of natural farming

Bharat Mansata
Kolkata

BHASKAR Save was the acclaimed ‘Gandhi of Natural Farming’, who inspired and mentored three generations of organic farmers. Masanobu Fukuoka, the legendary Japanese natural farmer, visited his farm in 1997 and described it as “the best in the world, even better than my own farm!”

When he passed away at the age of 93 on 24 October, he left behind a 14-acre orchard farm, Kalpavruksha. It is located on the Coastal Highway near Dehri village, district Valsad, in coastal Gujarat. The nearest railway station is Umergam on the Mumbai-Ahmedabad route.

Kalpavruksha is a food-forest natural farm. It has trees, crops, weeds and rich soil, and is a net supplier of water, energy and fertility to the local ecosystem rather than a net consumer. It is an outstanding example of natural farming.

Over the years, Kalpavruksha has become a sacred university for many, as every Saturday (Visitors’ Day) brings numerous people. They include farmers from all over India, agricultural scientists, students, senior government officials, city folk, and occasional travellers from distant lands, who have read or heard of Save’s work.

If you asked this farmer where he learnt his method of natural farming, he would say humbly: “My university is my farm.”

About 10 acres of the farm are under a mixed natural orchard of mainly coconut and *chikoo* (sapota) with fewer numbers of other species. About two acres are under seasonal field crops cultivated organically in traditional rotation.

Another two acres are a nursery for raising coconut saplings that are in great demand. The farm yield is superior to any farm using chemicals, while costs are minimal and external inputs almost zero.

COOPERATION IS ALL

About 20 steps inside the gate of Save’s farm is a sign that says: ‘Cooperation is the fundamental Law of Nature’ — a simple and concise introduction to the philosophy and practice of natural farming. Farther inside the farm are numerous signs that attract attention with brief, thought-provoking *sutras* or aphorisms. These pithy sayings contain all the distilled wisdom on nature, farming, health, culture and spirituality that Save gathered over the years.

Save followed four principles of natural farming. “The first is that all living creatures have an equal right to live. So farming must be non-violent,” he would say. “The second is that everything in nature is useful and serves a purpose in the web of life. The third is that farming is a *dharma*, a sacred path of serving nature and fellow creatures. It must not degenerate into a money-oriented business. Fourth is the principle of perennial fertility regeneration. We humans have a right to only the fruits and seeds of the crops we grow. The balance, the biomass, the crop residue must go back to the soil.”

Kalpavruksha’s high yield out-performs any modern farm using chemicals. The number of coconuts



Bhaskar Save: India’s most famous organic farmer demonstrated that natural farming was futuristic farming

per tree is perhaps the highest in the country. A few of the palms yield over 400 coconuts each year, while the average is closer to 350. The crop of *chikoo*, planted nearly 50 years ago, provides about 300 kg of delicious fruit per tree each year.

Also growing in the orchard are numerous trees of bananas, papayas and areca nuts, and a few of dates, drumsticks, mangoes, jackfruit, toddy palms, custard apples, *jambul*, guavas, pomegranates, limes, *mahua*, tamarind and neem apart from bamboo and shrubs like *kadipatta* (curry leaves) and *tulsi*, and vines like pepper, betel leaf and passion fruit.

Nawabi Kolam, a tall, delicious and high-yielding native variety of rice, several kinds of pulses, winter wheat and some vegetables and tubers too are grown in seasonal rotation on about two acres. These provided enough for this self-sustained farmer’s immediate family and occasional guests. Most years, there was some surplus rice, which was gifted to relatives or friends, who appreciated its superior flavour and quality.

Rarely can one spot even a small patch of bare soil exposed to the direct impact of the sun, wind or rain. The deeply shaded areas under the *chikoo* trees have a spongy carpet of leaf litter covering the soil, while various weeds spring up wherever some sunlight penetrates.

The thick ground cover is an excellent moderator of the soil’s micro-climate, which is of utmost importance in agriculture. “On a hot summer day, the shade from the plants or the mulch (leaf litter) keeps the surface of the soil cool and slightly damp. During cold winter nights, the ground cover is like a blanket, conserving the warmth gained during the day. Humidity too is higher under the canopy of dense vegetation, and evaporation is greatly reduced. Consequently, irrigation needs are very low. The many little insect friends and micro-

organisms of the soil thrive under these conditions,” he would explain.

This ingenious farmer relied on earthworms, weeds and mulching for regenerating soil and keeping it rich with nutrients. He was a great friend of the insect world.

Save used to say: “A farmer who aids the natural regeneration of earthworms and soil-dwelling organisms on his farm is firmly back on the road to prosperity.”

EASE OF WORK

“When a tree sapling planted by a farmer is still young and tender, it needs some attention. But as it matures, it can look after itself, and then it looks after the farmer,” the gentle Save used to explain.

The physical work on a natural farm is much less than on a modern farm. But regular, mindful attention is a must. In the case of trees, this is especially important in the first few years. Gradually, as the trees grow up, the work of the farmer is reduced — until, ultimately, nothing needs to be done except harvesting. In the case of coconuts, Save had even dispensed with harvesting. He would wait for the coconuts to ripen and fall on their own, and then collect them.

For growing field crops like rice, wheat, pulses, vegetables and so on, some seasonal attention, year after year, is unavoidable. This is why Save would call his kind of farming, ‘do-nothing natural farming’. Even with field crops, farmers were advised to do very little. Leave it to the superior wisdom of nature, was the advice of India’s most eminent farmer.

Since 2014, a residential Natural Farming Learning Centre has been offering six-day introductory courses in Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati and English at Save’s farm. ■

Adapted from *The Vision of Natural Farming* by Bharat Mansata, Earthcare Books. Website: www.earthcarebooks.com
To join Bhaskar Save’s natural farming learning course, log on to: www.bhaskarsavenftc.in

WINTER CHOICES OF DELHI'S

Ajit Krishna
New Delhi

PANKAJ is a food vendor. He is physically challenged and has lived on New Delhi's streets for 10 years now, ever since he turned up from his village in Bihar. Each night he wraps up his stall for the day and goes to a *rain basera* or shelter home, where he sleeps in one of two rooms set aside for people with disabilities like him. As winter sets in he is getting his blanket ready. The government gives out blankets at shelter homes. Pankaj, however, prefers his own blanket because it is cleaner.

Life on the streets in New Delhi has its own problems and solutions. Winter is especially a difficult time. But shelter homes, funded by the government and managed by NGOs, provide welcome relief to street-dwellers. The arrangements are very basic, but systems do exist. For instance, able-bodied people can't enter the rooms meant for the handicapped. "We feel safe," says Pankaj. "There are fewer incidents of stealing in our rooms. We aren't harassed for money and threatened." The shelters provide filtered drinking water and there are bathrooms.

Various surveys put the number of homeless in New Delhi between 25,000 and 250,000. There is no agreement on a number, it seems. There are always deaths from exposure in winter — 341 last year. The shelters are much better managed these days than they used to be, thanks to the persistence of outfits like *Shahri Adhikar Manch* and *Ashray Adhikar Abhiyan*. They have made governments sensitive to the needs of homeless people. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government has been particularly forthcoming and flexible.

Indu Prakash Singh of the *Shahri Adhikar Manch* says the AAP government helped reverse an earlier situation in which a tender process had allowed security agencies to manage shelters. It is only NGOs who do so now, he says. "Managing shelters is a complex task that requires an understanding of the needs of the homeless. It can't be done by security agencies."

Yet the shelters are just 201 in number and can accommodate only 16,173 individuals — mostly men. There are just a handful of shelters for women and families. It is far from adequate. These are people who have street-level occupations and have small assets they need to secure.

Some homeless people find they are better off not using the shelters. They have shaped a life for themselves out in the open both during the day and night. It is easier this way to take care of their meagre assets.

Shankar and Mohammad Sharif are rickshaw-pullers. They agree that the shelters have facilities like drinking water and bathrooms and a place to sleep. But both men say they prefer to stay out in the open. It has been like this for them for years.

Their rickshaws are of utmost value to them. Going to a shelter would mean leaving their rickshaws unattended and running the risk of having them stolen or impounded by the police. It is a risk they would rather not take.

It is late into the evening when we speak to them.



Night shelter run by an NGO in the old quarters of the city



A safe place



Homeless people and poor patients sleep outside the All India Institute of Medical Sciences

Both men have been drinking and, as we speak, a *chillum* (clay pipe) of tobacco is being lit. Instead of going to a shelter, they sleep in their rickshaws well covered. "What if someone stole our rickshaws and money at a shelter? Here in the open we feel safer," they say.

It is much the same for Jantri. He has been here for the past 16 years having left his home in a village in Bihar. Jantri pulls a handcart to make a living. He sleeps on the handcart at night. "We start early in the morning and work till late at night. There is no point in going somewhere else to sleep where the beds are on first come first serve basis."

Sitting with Jantri is another handcart puller. He refuses to disclose his name but is ready to elaborate on what Jantri says. "If the government wants to

help us, it should just give us blankets. That would be enough. All of us handcart pullers work together and live together. We feel secure sleeping nearby to each other. We can't leave this place," he says.

Raju runs a small restaurant — a hole in the wall kind of place. He used to rent a room to live in and spend the night. But after a dip in his earnings he found the room unaffordable. He now sleeps on the pavement near his roadside restaurant. "I am a simple man. I know everyone who sleeps in this area works and earns a living like I do, whether he is a rickshaw-puller or a worker in a shop. But I don't know about people in shelters and never go to them. I sleep here only because it is safe. I invariably have my day's earnings with me and I don't want to risk it being stolen in a shelter," he says. ■

HOMELESS

PICTURES BY AJIT KRISHNA



for homeless women at night



A rickshaw-puller sleeps on his precious vehicle



Raju runs a small hole-in-the-wall restaurant and sleeps next to it



Anshu Gupta surveys the destruction caused by a fire on Diwali

Fire sets back Goonj

Civil Society News
New Delhi

CLOTHES, blankets and household items, which would have reached 20,000 needy families across the country, were destroyed in a Diwali night fire that engulfed Goonj's main storage centre in southwest New Delhi.

Goonj collects discards from the middle class and well-off in cities and supplies them to the less fortunate in remote areas. It was recently awarded the Magsaysay for its unique efforts in redistributing such surpluses. Goonj also has vast experience of working in calamity zones. It has campaigned for providing only "useful relief" to communities struck by natural disasters.

The NGO works in cycles the year round to collect and process items. The fire on Diwali night destroyed nine months of work, which began in February in preparation for the onset of winter.

"Among the materials destroyed were three truckloads that were ready to roll out after Diwali and would have reached 1,000 families," says Anshu Gupta, founder-director of Goonj.

These were just the items that had been prepared for shipment against lists of families. In addition there were vast quantities of other, unsorted items that were being prepared for distribution. The storage space is 3,000 sq. ft. and 18 to 20 feet high.

Everything was destroyed in the fire that was caused by misdirected crackers. The fire lasted for seven hours and the fire brigade could not bring it under control.

The months and weeks preceding Diwali are important for Goonj's collection drives because of the spring cleaning that invariably takes place in homes and offices. It is the time that donations peak and materials pour in. The fire took it all. In addition, furniture and props used by Goonj for its events and washing machines were destroyed.

Materials that would have gone to Bihar were held back because of the elections in the state. The code of conduct during elections does not allow government departments and officials to collaborate with Goonj when the election process is on.

The other states where the materials would have gone are Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Maharashtra.

This is not the first time that Goonj has had to contend with a disaster. "In 2011 our Mumbai operations were affected when drains got blocked and the city was flooded. Our storage centre was under five feet of water and everything was destroyed," says Gupta.

Goonj is still trying to assess the financial loss caused by the fire. It is a difficult calculation to make because the NGO deals in discards and recyclables. It is not a business in the ordinary sense of the term. Its own office equipment, however, can be valued.

Efforts in the past to insure Goonj's stocked materials have foundered on the question of valuation. "We have asked insurance companies to fix any value they choose. They in turn ask us to come up with a value. We have gone back and forth and not been able to take out a policy," says Gupta. ■

Talking to the patient's family

Mary-Rose Abraham
Bengaluru

WHEN a patient is in hospital in India, he is likely to be accompanied by a number of people — parents, siblings, children, may be even a neighbour. Yet, in most healthcare systems — in India and abroad — these people just wait around while the patient undergoes surgery or convalesces. But what if they could play a more active role as caregivers?

That is the mission of Noora Health, a non-profit which equips frontline hospital staff, usually nurses, to educate patients' relatives in everything from hand-washing and basic hygiene to checking for a pulse and dressing a wound. That empowers the family to care for the patient not just in the hospital but during convalescence at home, reducing repeat visits and dependence on doctors and significantly lowering the cost of healthcare.

"Families have been less formally involved in the loved one's care during the hospital stay because it's assumed that they will add a burden to the system," explains Edith Elliott, CEO and one of Noora's co-founders. "The interesting thing is, by engaging families and training them in groups, we are able to save the nurses and the healthcare system time and money."

Three years ago, Noora began as a project at Stanford University's 'Design for Extreme Affordability' class. Elliott, a 31-year-old international development graduate, teamed with an engineer and two doctors in the interdisciplinary class. They initially thought of tackling patient flow in hospitals. But, on the ground in India — a country which none of the four had visited before — they quickly learned through talking to doctors, nurses and even security guards that the real issue was the role of the patient's family.

As their work progressed, the four found themselves transitioning from students to social entrepreneurs. The team partnered with Dr. Devi Shetty and now offers its 'Care Companion' programme in 16 Narayana Hospitals.

Noora Health was named after the mother of one of its first patients, a child undergoing heart surgery in Bengaluru. The programme not only trains hospital staff but also offers instructional videos in Hindi and five regional languages, as well as brochures and infographics for families to take home. Underlying all of its work is one of its core values: empathy.

"We want to make people feel supported and loved and not simply brought in and out of the system," says Elliott. "Deep compassion is the forward-facing sentiment of the programme. It's easy to put yourself in the patient's shoes."

She speaks from experience. In their small town in Colorado, US, her mother was diagnosed with a brain tumour when Elliott was a teenager. She became her mother's primary caregiver and



The Noora Health team: Shahed Alam, Katy Ashe, Edith Elliott and Jessie Liu

Noora empowers the family to care for the patient not just in the hospital but during convalescence at home, reducing repeat visits and dependence on doctors.

helped her to re-learn nearly everything, including walking, eating and writing. That experience and the death from complications owing to HIV/AIDS of a close family friend spurred her interest in healthcare. She spent five years at two large non-profits and worked in sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Europe before the Stanford class altered her path.

Noora Health has found early success. It was chosen as one of a handful of social ventures for the prestigious Y-Combinator, a start-up accelerator

based in California. And this year, Elliott was elected to the prestigious Ashoka Fellowship, in recognition of her passion for transforming healthcare through a new solution which also has the capability to be replicated anywhere in the world.

In addition to Narayana Hospitals, Noora has also partnered with Sutter Health, a private hospital chain in California. This revenue-generating US tie-up helps to fund the India operations. The long-term vision is for every hospital in the world to engage family members in a formal programme like Noora Health, leading to a fundamental shift in healthcare systems.

"We hope to prove the value of the family caregiver," says Elliott. "In the long run, we would like to see this model become a part of the global health toolkit and the standard of care."

As Elliott and her colleagues at Noora work toward that goal, she says they must not only retain focus on patients and families but continue to "delight them".

"The users came up with the idea and helped us develop the programme," explains Elliott. "We might have put the puzzle pieces together, but the patients, hospitals and families provided those pieces." ■

Mary-Rose Abraham is Communications Consultant at Ashoka India



A patient looks at literature given by Noora Health

THE NEW WOMAN IN INDIAN CINEMA

Exciting fiction corrects gender imbalance

Saibal Chatterjee
New Delhi

GENDER sensitivity has never been Hindi cinema's strength. The mainstream Mumbai movie industry has always been notoriously male-dominated. It accords little meaningful space to women, be it before the camera or behind it.

But away from this undeniable reality, a small but steadily growing tribe of independent Mumbai directors is scripting a significant shift. They are turning the spotlight back on stories that look at the world from the point of view of women.

It is of course no coincidence that several of these directors are themselves women. But by no means are these norm-defying films being made only by female directors.

Films such as Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan*, which won two awards in the Un Certain Regard section of the 2015 Cannes Film Festival before being commercially released in Indian multiplexes, and Kanu Behl's *Titli*, which played in the same segment in Cannes in 2014 and was recently released in India, have real, believable female characters — not Bollywood-style avenging angels or singing and dancing divas — who hold their own in a man's world.

At least two recent major global cinema events — the 72nd Venice Film Festival and the 40th Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), both held in September — took note of this change and showcased an exciting slate of fiction films from India that could serve to correct the gender imbalance perpetuated by the dominant Bollywood narrative.

In Venice, FTII alumnus Ruchika Oberoi's debut film, *Island City*, which featured in the festival's Venice Days section, won the FEDORA Prize for the Best Young Director from a jury of European critics.

The film, which deals with the debilitating struggles of ordinary individuals seeking elusive happiness in Mumbai, is made up of three loosely linked short comedies.

The first, *Fun Committee*, features Vinay Pathak as a listless middle-aged man who is chosen by his office managers to participate in fun activities aimed at brightening up the mood of the employees.

In the second, *The Ghost in the Machine*, the domineering patriarch is on life support in a hospital and his family makes the most of his absence — television is banned in the house by him. They watch a popular soap opera every night.

The third, *Contact*, has Tannishtha Chatterjee, an



Meghna Gulzar, director of *Talvar*

A small, growing tribe of independent directors in Mumbai is turning the spotlight back on stories that look at the woman's point of view.



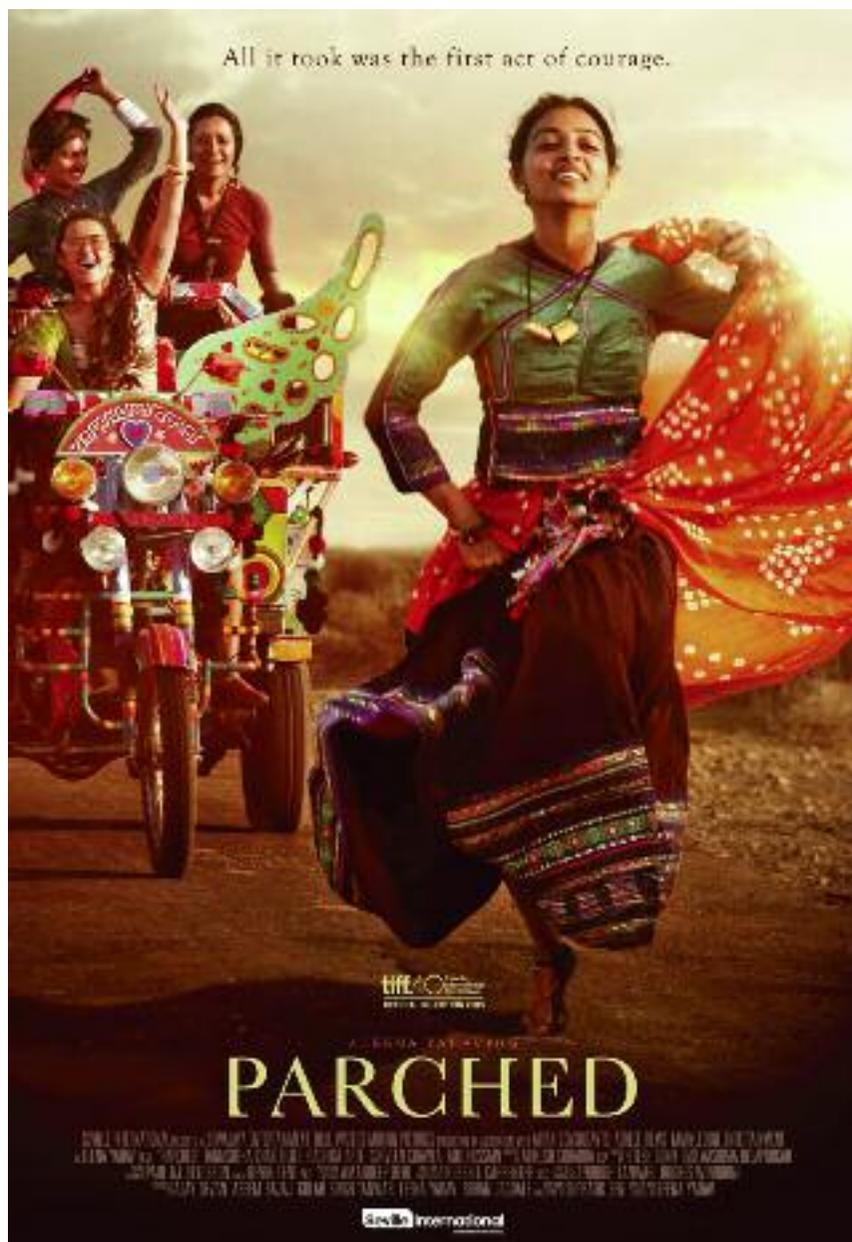
actress who seems to be the link between several of these films, in the role of a slumdweller whose dreary life gets a fillip when she begins to receive mysterious letters.

"*Island City* is an outstanding film that has the potential to travel across the world," says Chatterjee.

Less than 10 days after *Island City* was feted in Venice, Pan Nalin's *Angry Indian Goddesses* registered a singular triumph in Toronto. Pitched as India's first all-out 'female buddy' film, it was voted the second most popular film of the festival by the audience.

The film then went on to win the Audience Award at the Rome International Film Festival, besides being picked up for distribution across several markets around the world.

Angry Indian Goddesses was one of two strongly feminist Indian films in TIFF



this year, the other being Leena Yadav's provocative *Parched*. Both push the gender envelope much further than mainstream Indian cinema is usually known to do.

Markedly different from each other in texture and approach, the two titles have pretty much the same thematic trajectory – imagining a society where women call the shots against all odds and are none the worse for it.

In TIFF's official catalogue, the festival's artistic director, Cameron Bailey, wrote: "This year has seen a cultural shift that puts more women at the active centre of Indian films. At the vanguard of this trend stands *Parched*."

In his director's note, Nalin puts his intent in a broad perspective: "As a filmmaker who loves women and everything feminine, I have been witnessing an outcry from Indian women for gender equality, respect and dignity. I was compelled to use their fury as my fuel to fire up the film."

Anger and defiance underpin Leena Yadav's *Parched*, too. The film is set in a desert village of Rajasthan. In contrast, the drama in *Angry Indian Goddesses* unfolds in salubrious Goa.

But the two groups of women – one rural, the other city-bred – are inevitably up against identical challenges as they navigate a hostile world where the rules are set and enforced almost entirely by men.

In *Parched*, three ordinary village women — the widowed Rani (Tannishtha Chatterjee), the effervescent Lajjo (Radhika Apte) and dancing girl Bijli (Surveen Chawla) — form a rebellious sorority. They go all out to subvert the age-old traditions that condemn them to servility.



Leena Yadav, director of *Parched*

In *Parched* three ordinary village women form a rebellious sorority. They go all out to subvert age-old traditions.

Parched uses a dazzling colour palette, captured in all its intensity and radiance by Oscar-winning cinematographer Russell Carpenter (*Titanic*), to reflect the raw beauty of the setting. It goes well with the rousing, defiantly irreverent tale of long oppressed women seeking social and sexual liberation in what is the unlikeliest of circumstances by Hindi movie standards.

There is brutality, open and subterranean, all around in this universe. All the women in the story, including Rani's young daughter-in-law (played by former child actor Lehar Khan), are victims of domestic abuse.

When the trio decides to take matters into their own hands, all hell breaks loose, cuss words fly thick and fast, and the women fall back on every trick in the book, fair and foul, to further their fight for liberation.

The characters and their stories, says director Yadav, emerged from conversations and encounters that she and lead actress Chatterjee had before and during a two-week tour of Kutch, an area where two of the latter's earlier films, *Road Movie* and *Jal*, were shot. The actress had, during the shoot, interacted with many women who shared their innermost feelings with her.

"We decided to make the trip," says Yadav, "because we felt that ours was an urban perspective and that



we might, therefore, get it all wrong. But when we met and spoke to the women of Kutch, I was shocked to learn that I wasn't off the mark."

But Yadav is quick to point out that child marriage and domestic violence are by no means solely a rural phenomenon. "When I shared the script with friends, many said they personally knew victims of these social ills," she says.

She also adds: "City women tend to have inhibitions that village women do not. The latter might not talk about their suppressed sexual urges in public, but they are very outspoken when they open up." And that is exactly what *Parched* portrays.

It is an angry film, but it is uproariously funny too, in parts. It is disturbing, but its moments of tenderness are filled with warmth.

Chatterjee plays the role of a 30-something widow, Rani, who still nurtures thoughts of escaping the drudgery of her life. Her domestic world revolves around her troubled pubescent son, who she pushes into an early marriage in the

hope of curbing his waywardness.

Outside the home, Rani has a special bonding with Lajjo, the childless wife of an abusive man, and Bijli, a popular dancer in an itinerant troupe of entertainers that frequently pitches its tent outside the village.

Yadav decided to shift the setting of her story to Rajasthan (from Kutch) because of logistical reasons, but it wasn't smooth sailing at the new location either, especially to begin with. "The men of the village that we originally chose for the shoot refused to let us film there. They felt that our presence would plant wrong ideas in the heads of their women," reveals Yadav.

Yadav, who previously made *Shabd* (2005), starring Sanjay Dutt and Aishwarya Rai, and *Teen Patti* (2010), with Amitabh Bachchan and Ben Kingsley, had gone off the radar for several years in the wake of the films tanking at the box-office.

"*Shabd*," she says, "was marketed as a love story, while *Teen Patti* was pushed as a heist film. I felt frustrated. I thought I'd never be able to make a film." With *Parched*, Yadav is back into her own.

The director avers that *Parched* isn't directed against men. "I am not suggesting that the onus of bringing about change is on men alone. Women, too, need to change."

"*Parched* is meant to spark a dialogue, not initiate a blame game," she adds. While *Parched* is incendiary in parts, it is also playful in the way it takes potshots at misguided masculinity.

URBAN UPRISING

Nalin, too, asserts that his *Angry Indian Goddesses* "is not an exercise in male-bashing just as all conventional male buddy films aren't about female-bashing".

In the film, six female friends congregate in an old Goa home for an upcoming wedding. It is also about women striking back with a vengeance at a world bent upon painting them into a corner.

Nalin's film addresses multiple themes — gender assertion, violence against women, gay rights, forcible land acquisition, insensitive policing and legal system tardiness — but does so in a manner that blends a light touch with solemn purpose.

Nalin describes *Angry Indian Goddesses* as "my most commercial film to date" and hopes it will strike a chord with moviegoers in India.

The angry goddesses of the title have to contend with their own demons while battling to ward off threats that their social environment poses. The choices that they make — what they wear, how they conduct themselves, where they are headed — are all questioned, but these girls think nothing of throwing caution to the wind.

Like *Parched*, *Angry Indian Goddesses* is invigorated by a clutch of bold, energetic performances. And like *Parched*, it has Chatterjee in a pivotal on-screen role.

Nalin, who divides his time between Paris and Mumbai, says the idea for the film was born about six years ago. "Some women friends in the Mumbai film industry told me that my films have strong women characters and so I should be making more films about women."

There were, however, no takers initially for the concept. "We shopped around for funds for four years. Almost everybody suggested that the idea would be more viable if we were to add at least one strong male character to the story," says Nalin.

Then the commercial success of Sujoy Ghosh's *Kahaani* (2012) and Vikas Bahl's *Queen* (2014), both women-centric films made within the Bollywood mainstream, boosted interest in the genre.

So, despite failing in his attempts to find financial backing, Nalin, co-writer and casting director Dilip Shankar and co-producer Gaurav Dhingra decided to go ahead with the project.

Recent Mumbai cinema history is replete with successful male bonding films such as *Dil Chahta Hai*, *Rang De Basanti* and *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobaara*. But nobody in the industry has ever given the genre a shot with women taking centre-stage.

The *Angry Indian Goddesses* storyline, jaunty and full of surprises, allows the actresses — Chatterjee, Sarah Jane Dias, Anushka Manchanda, Sandhya Mridul, Rajshri Deshpande, Amrit Maghera and Pavleen Gujral — to improvise all the way through. "The cast underwent a month-long workshop before the shoot got underway," Nalin reveals.



A scene from *Parched*

Six female friends congregate in an old Goa home for an upcoming wedding. It is also about women striking back with a vengeance ...

INSIDE MALE TERRITORY

The TIFF lineup this year had another Indian film and this, too, was made by a woman — Meghna Gulzar's *Talvar*. The director's first film in eight years, it is a fictionalised reconstruction of the investigation into the Aarushi Talwar murder case. On its release on October 2, the film turned out to be a commercial success.

Scripted and co-produced by Vishal Bhardwaj, *Talvar* juxtaposes the past and the present and presents conflicting perceptions to piece together multiple scenarios that may have led to the 2008 double murder in a Noida neighbourhood.

Talvar is marked by a measured approach to the sensational theme and is aided by fine performances from the principal cast, led by Irrfan Khan and Konkona Sensharma.

The screenplay, structured like a straight police procedural, turns the spotlight on the workings of India's law enforcement and investigating agencies, outfits hobbled by callous ineptitude, internal contradictions and archaic methods of functioning.

"It was traumatic," Gulzar says of the experience of bringing a shocking true story to the screen. "Trying to maintain objectivity without compromising the truth was difficult." *Talvar* is an unusual film in so much as it is helmed by a woman director — whodunits are male territory.

Gulzar admits to facing a degree of scepticism at the outset. She was coming out of a hiatus and all eyes were on her to see how she would fare. "The naysayers suggested that I had chosen a sensational real story for my comeback film because it would get me instant publicity," she says. *Talvar* has achieved much more than just pre-release media play.

The challenge before a filmmaker like Gulzar is that she is not an independent director in the strictest sense of the term, but neither is her sensibility wedded to the predilections of the Bollywood dream factory. "No matter what I do as a filmmaker, I have to remain true to my moorings," she says. The balancing act isn't easy.



Pan Nalin



Kanu Behl



Island City is about the struggles of ordinary people to find happiness



Ruchika Oberoi, director of *Island City*

Titli is the story of a criminal gang of three male siblings who rob cars for a living. They are part of a dysfunctional family.



Angry Indian Goddesses is about female bonding



Neeraj Ghaywan

Mercifully, in the multiplexes of the country, audiences are increasingly warming to films that defy the conventional rules of the movie industry. Films like *Masaan* and *Titli* may not have been blockbusters — they were never intended to be — but they did not go unnoticed either.

The strong female characters in *Masaan* and *Titli* are not of the kind that audiences saw in *Kahaani* and *Queen*, both essentially commercial Hindi films with somewhat unconventional storylines.

They are neither like the vengeful Vidya Bagchi of *Kahaani* who returns to Kolkata from London in search of the killer of her husband, or the diffident Rani Mehra of *Queen*, who sings an old Hindi film

song and dances to its tune in the course of a solo honeymoon in Europe that helps her understand better what she wants from life.

MODERN MINDS

“Small town, small minds,” the female protagonist of *Masaan*, Devi Pathak (played by Richa Chadda), mutters to herself in one scene of the critically acclaimed film. The girl is wracked by a sense of guilt and loss after a clandestine sexual adventure in a seedy Varanasi hotel goes awry and ends in tragedy. Her quandary is worsened because the incident lands her ageing father, Vidyadhar Pathak (Sanjay Mishra), into the clutches of a blackmailing cop.

The minds of the men and women in *Masaan*, caught as they all are in the tussle between tradition and modernity, are anything but petty. Devi feels hopelessly cornered, but she remains defiant. She seeks escape from societal confines, but wants her freedom to come strictly on her own terms.

The *Masaan* gallery of characters has another equally spirited woman: Shaalu

Gupta (Shweta Tripathi), a poetry-loving college-going girl who catches the eye of the film’s male protagonist, final-year civil engineering student Deepak Kumar (Vicky Kaushal).

On learning that her boyfriend belongs to a lower caste, Shaalu makes light of the revelation. “*Bhaag ke jaana hoga na, toh bhaag bhi lenge* (if need be, we will elope),” she assures Deepak. She is clearly unlike standard Bollywood women trapped in a conservative construct in which the right to defy the established order is not unfettered.

Titli, which presents a stark and disturbing portrait of a rarely seen side of Delhi, is the story of a criminal gang of three male siblings who rob cars for a living. They are part of a dysfunctional family whose inter-personal connections are awry.

The eldest brother, Vikram, is short-tempered and foul-mouthed. The fact that there is no woman in the family shows in everything the boys do — the way they talk, the way they live and the way they deal with the world borders on a state of dehumanisation.

In one scene, Vikram claims that “we respect women.” But there is no evidence to suggest that he actually knows what respect really means. His mother is dead. His wife has walked out on him with their daughter.

The youngest of the siblings, Titli (Shashank Arora), wants to escape his criminal family, but Vikram will have none of it. The middle brother suggests that they look for a bride for Titli, hoping that marriage would calm him down, besides adding a lady to the gang and improving its strike rate.

The girl that they find for Titli, Neelu (debutante Shivani Raghuvanshi), turns out to be more than a match for the brothers despite her apparent vulnerability. She comes into the family with her own twisted dreams, which push Titli’s hopes of freedom in another direction.

Titli needs money for his proposed car parking business; Neelu is in love with a married builder and is waiting for the latter’s divorce to come through. The two strike a deal: Titli promises to help Neelu get the man she wants in return for money.

In this hopelessly benighted world, Neelu is the only figure who represents a streak of positivity. She retains her grace and composure under tremendous pressure and takes both the constant threat of violence and her own aspiration for a better life with equanimity.

The improving climate for cinema of this uncompromising kind is also indicated by the fact that Madhureeta Anand’s *Kajarya*, a hard-hitting film which addresses the theme of female foeticide, is set for release in early December.

Kajarya views the barbaric practice of killing girls in the womb through the eyes of two women — a young Delhi newspaper journalist (Riddhima Sud) chasing a scoop and a Haryana village woman (Meenu Hooda), forced to embody Goddess Kali in a counterfeit religious ceremony with hideous ramifications.

The film had its world premiere at the Dubai International Film Festival in 2013, where it was well-received and reviewed. It has taken *Kajarya* a while to find takers on the Indian circuit — but the fact that it has augurs well for Indian films that dare to buck the trend and give women their due. ■

‘Companies lack leadership’

Reporting in India is growing but what is the quality?

Civil Society News
New Delhi

COMPANIES that choose voluntary compliance and report thoroughly on their own sustainability build trust among stakeholders. They also strengthen their internal processes and stand a better chance of being globally competitive. How do Indian companies fare? Do they see reporting on themselves as an opportunity or a mere formality? Is sustainability seen across the range of engagements with society? Or is it limited to a handful of factory floor practices? Is it wrongly confused with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)?

To find out, *Civil Society* spoke to Dr. Bimal Arora, chairperson of the Centre for Responsible Business (CRB). Dr. Arora has been interacting with Indian and global companies on questions of sustainability for more two decades. He has been a keen observer of corporate behaviour. In November, CRB organised a conference in New Delhi on ‘India and Sustainability Standards’ to encourage Indian companies to learn and introspect.

What is the state of reporting by companies in India. It is, after all, five years since the voluntary reporting guidelines were framed.

I would say reporting in India is growing. I know GRI (the Global Reporting Initiative) has been around for a while in India. We have the Carbon Disclosure Project. We have the Water Disclosure Project. We now have the BRR or Business Responsibility Reporting. So, the whole momentum around reporting has been growing the past five years or so.

But when you say growing, what exactly do you mean? What is the quality of the reporting?

It is getting serious in the leadership companies. The bigger ones like the Tatas and Birlas have been engaging with the reporting process. The way it works is that the initial five years is the learning phase. During this time a company is only ticking boxes and is not using reporting as a tool for sus-



Bimal Arora, chairperson of the Centre for Responsible Business, at the conference on ‘India and Sustainability Standards’

‘It takes five years for responsible business to get internalised and institutionalised. It hasn’t changed a bit till date. Every organisation has its own reasons and dynamic, and its own politics of course.’

tainability. It goes on like this for five or six years before the realisation comes that there are more advantages to be got from reporting. So, in companies that have been doing it for 10 years you will see that the quality of reporting improves.

Why should it take so long for Indian companies, which are otherwise globally so well-integrated? Global companies also take that long. It is not just Indian companies.

But we have examples to learn from. We know how the rest of the world has gone. Why does it have to take us so long, especially when the problems of sustainability are rampant in India?

I can cite you studies from the US in the 70s, which said that it takes five years for responsible business to get internalised and institutionalised. It hasn’t changed a bit till date. Every organisation has its own reasons and dynamic, and its own politics of course. So, learning depends on the levers. At this

point of time reporting is for the levers we have and not sustainability.

So what you are saying is that at present for Indian companies reporting is more of an obligation. They don't realise that there are implications way beyond just ticking the boxes.

Yes.

What is lacking? Is it an adequate regulatory framework? Is it the absence of advocacy, evangelism, corporate leadership, education?

It is clearly a case of lack of leadership. I don't see a problem with the regulatory provisions. Globally there is a sustainability movement on. Globally there is broader awareness on issues and themes. It is just lack of leadership. I am not just talking about the top leadership, but leadership across the organisation because everyone can be a leader in his own right.

Has this got something to do with the kind of management education that is imparted? You know, there is some attempt at creating social awareness, but it is finance and so on that people go for. It is these guys who then run companies that impact the lives of millions.

That definitely is a factor. Not just in India but across the globe. Europe is better. North America is better as far as education is concerned. India is still...

Take, for instance, your conference on sustainability. I don't see educational institutions like the IIMs involved.

There is the University of Manchester doing a roundtable. I have been in touch with Oxford University. Michigan University has shown a keen interest and would like to be involved in our next conference...

But where is IIM Ahmedabad or ISB?

They have got lost in the CSR law. At this point of time everyone has got lost in the procedural aspect of the CSR law. They are more interested how this law will work or not work.

So there is no vision for sustainability?

No.

There is a growing sense that CSR has become the equivalent of the EIA. You need it and you go out and get it by any means. Is that correct?

In my own view this law is very interesting. When

leadership is lacking (in companies) you need compliance. You need the ticking of boxes.

But CSR is not sustainability.

The beautiful thing with the CSR law is that it has brought the subject to the board level.

Do most people handling CSR lack knowledge and specialisation?

It will take time for companies to internalise what the law is really about. You begin with compliance but when you have people handling things, they evolve. Companies have gone from rural development and population control to more sophisticated initiatives in meeting their social commitments. I was away from the country from 2002 to 2010 and when I returned I was pleasantly surprised that CII had the ITC Centre for Sustainable Development

'Government in my view is making it easier for businesses to do business. Political will is not an issue anymore. The challenge is administrative.... Companies need to seize this opportunity through better reporting and self-regulation.'

and their language was very different. It was interesting that an industry body had taken a leadership role. FICCI was not far behind. So the five-to-seven year period that I referred to with regard to companies also applies to a country.

But industry bodies aren't convincing. Coca-Cola, for instance, has played a key role in CII's water forums. Yet Coca-Cola has been chased away from locations by communities because its plans to draw on water sources were unsustainable.

The experience of beverage companies in India has led them to rethink globally about their policies on

water. It has been a process of learning, a journey. The leadership in big companies has realised that they can't do without dealing with civil society. These are the people who sit in meetings of the World Economic Forum — so you can't have your backyard dirty.

In India there is a growing mistrust of industry. Take the example of Volkswagen and emissions. All those ads about German engineering and quality. Who will believe what companies report about themselves?

You can't avoid that. There will always be companies who will fudge.

So there will be question marks over what Indian companies claim they do?

No, I don't agree. There will always be companies who find ways to do different kinds of things. But that doesn't mean that overall everyone is wrong.

What do you think government needs to do more to get companies to be sustainable?

Government in my view is making it easier for businesses to do business. Political will is not an issue anymore. The challenge is administrative. When I meet secretaries in the Government of India, and many of them are involved with the conference we are holding, I perceive a huge change in their attitude. It is very heartening. Companies need to seize this opportunity through better reporting and self-regulation.

When it comes to 'Make in India' what is the sustainability challenge before the country.

Make in India needs standards.

But companies will come here if they can pollute, exploit natural resources and so on. India lacks regulatory expertise. We have a dysfunctional environment ministry. Pollution control boards don't have qualified staff.

We don't live in a world in which the government is the only institutional actor doing everything. In India now the shaming and naming of companies has begun by Indian activists in a style not dissimilar from the West.

How ready are Indian companies for the UN's sustainable development goals?

We are stuck with the broader issues right now. The nitty-gritty is not known. ■

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Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

Schools for the tribal child

Subir Roy
Jamshedpur

THIS is a story of two schools. Both are in the same area, embedded in the same community. But there are key differences which offer an insight into how the process of mainstreaming poor tribal children happens in stages, with both the formal and non-formal support structures being equally important.

It is customary to visit a school during the day but we go to the informal school at Ghagiasahi, a tribal hamlet around a kilometre from the Sukinda chromite mines of Tata Steel in Odisha's Jajpur district, after dark. Once we get there we know why. There is a festive mood with tribal dancers and drummers performing with gusto.

In fact, the place properly comes alive routinely only in the afternoon when the children arrive and first tend to the vegetable garden and flowering plants. Then, with sundown, there is a prayer meeting followed by study and teaching, mostly in the form of help in coping with what has been taught at the government school earlier in the day.

Finally, there is dinner. The food is important as it is an incentive for the children to come. And they stay on until well into the evening because the area is not free from the typical power cuts that plague rural India and if they were to be nearer home there would in all probability be darkness and learning possible only by kerosene lamp.

Tata Steel employees' involvement with the village and its children goes back two decades to 1994 when two of its young employees, Sri Krishna Mohanty and Gokulananda Tarai, while passing through on their bicycles, saw something both uplifting and saddening. In the gathering gloom a group of young boys and girls was busy with studies in a cowshed around a kerosene lamp.

This prompted them to come regularly after work to teach the children. More children came for help with their studies. As the centre grew, other Tata Steel employees joined in and the shed expanded in 1998 into the Swami Chidananda Cultural Centre. It was dedicated to not just educating tribal children but also linking them to their roots.

The secular, cultural and religious come together in three ways at the centre. Republic Day is celebrated by holding the annual sports meet. Birsa Munda Jayanti is celebrated to remember the tribal leader, freedom fighter and folk hero, and Pandit Raghunath Murmu Jayanti is celebrated to remember the founder of the Aichiki script. And the annual religious event on the calendar is an "Ashta Prahar Nama Yagna" round the clock on the full moon day of the month of Kartik on the Indian calendar.

The welcome dance for the visitors over, everybody settles down to the main event of the evening — a programme of song and dance by the youngsters which reflects both the traditional and current influences on them. All are in tribal attire but the boys wear colourful sports shoes while the girls are barefoot.

Dance and response to rhythm is in their blood. The choreography, by someone who looks like their



Children performing at the Rangamati school

cultural leader, is a mixture of tribal and popular music video, and the music and songs are mostly Oriya folk and *bhajan*, again filtered through popular mediums.

Among those present is a star — Motilal Mohanta, 23, a local boy and a past student of this centre. He holds an engineering diploma, works with a contractor in a nearby chromite mine, and comes in the evenings to help out with the teaching.

'In the Rangamati school the involvement is more professional, in the Ghagiasahi school it is more emotional and involves personal time.'

So does Binod Mohanta, 22, who is now a final-year BA student who began at this centre. Bhim Hembram, 14, is a crossover. He is both a student and a teacher here, as the need arises.

I ask Suman Ho his age in Hindi and he replies in clearly articulated English, "I am 12 years," and goes on with little prompting, "I am sixth, in Kaliapani High School, will become engineer when I will grow up. I have two brothers, I am oldest son." His flow of English leaves me speechless.

The pride of the centre is Tripathy Murmu, who was among the first batch of students. He is now a lecturer in political science at SKCG Autonomous Government College, Paralakhemundi, after completing his postgraduate studies in philosophy from Odisha's leading liberal arts institution, Ravenshaw University in Cuttack.

Not far from Ghagiasahi, in another hamlet, Rangamati, is another school, also powered by Tata Steel employees in their personal capacity — the Sri Aurobindo Centre of Integral Education. A wing of the Sri Aurobindo Karmabhumi Trust, it owes its origins to the late Sisir Kumar Behera, a pharmacist working with Tata Steel at Sukinda. He started a meditation camp or study circle inside the Tata Steel campus in 1993 and in 1996 brought it to Rangamati, a poor tribal area which was then densely forested. He located it next to a horticultural rarity — two trees, a sal and a mahua, grown together.

The group started a school in 2001. To date there are no private schools there and the nearest government school is over two km away. The school now has 114 students, 73 boys and 41 girls, with nearly half being tribals. It is partly residential with 58 boarders. It is both like any other government recognised school of its kind, teaching in the state's Oriya medium, and also different in as much as, in keeping with the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, it tries to impart *purnanga* education covering the mental, physical and spiritual.

Pankaj Kumar Satija, general manager, operations, ferro alloys and minerals, Tata Steel, Sukinda, explains how for the employees involved, the service sort of "drags you in" and you keep looking for opportunities to mainstream the children. He then draws a significant distinction between the employees' involvement in the two schools. "In the Rangamati school the involvement is more professional, in the Ghagiasahi school it is more emotional and involves giving a lot of one's time."

The difference between a group aerobics show at Rangamati and the spontaneous song and dance numbers at Ghagiasahi bears this out. ■

INSIGHTS

OPINION | ANALYSIS | RESEARCH | IDEAS

Splitting up in Bengaluru



V. RAVICHANDAR

CITY LIFE

AGAINST the backdrop of the perceived failure of the objectives of trifurcating the Delhi Municipal Corporation, it is worthwhile checking out a similar exercise involving multiple municipal corporations that is underway in Bengaluru. In late 2014, the Karnataka Chief Minister announced a decision to split the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagar Palike (BBMP) and setting up of a three-member Expert Committee to advise the government on it. The Committee felt the prime need was to reimagine the city's governance and administration. The 'patient' was 'dis-

eased' and splitting it into multiple parts without fixing the underlying problems was unlikely to improve the quality of living in Bengaluru. The government concurred and the mandate of the Committee was changed to 'restructuring BBMP'.

From November 2014 to June 2015, the Committee worked on multiple fronts — study of global best practices in city-region management, similar exercises (including the Delhi trifurcation), stakeholder meetings (over 1,000), online suggestions and collation of Bengaluru data sets (including detailed spatial mapping) to help make the final recommendations. The Committee's report can be accessed at www.bbmprstructuring.org.

The chart sets out the suggested three-tier gover-

nance and administration structure for Bengaluru. In essence, the key elements of the Committee's suggestions were strengthening ward governance through greater clarity on ward composition (proportional representation with citizen involvement) and ward functioning (what can be done at the ward level should be done there); five municipal corporations at mid-tier (with two zones per corporation); an apex body called the Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) for integration across the corporations and multiple government parastatal agencies; a city Finance Commission to decide on fiscal transfers and an Ombudsman for addressing citizens' grievances.

While there was criticism of the solutions suggest-

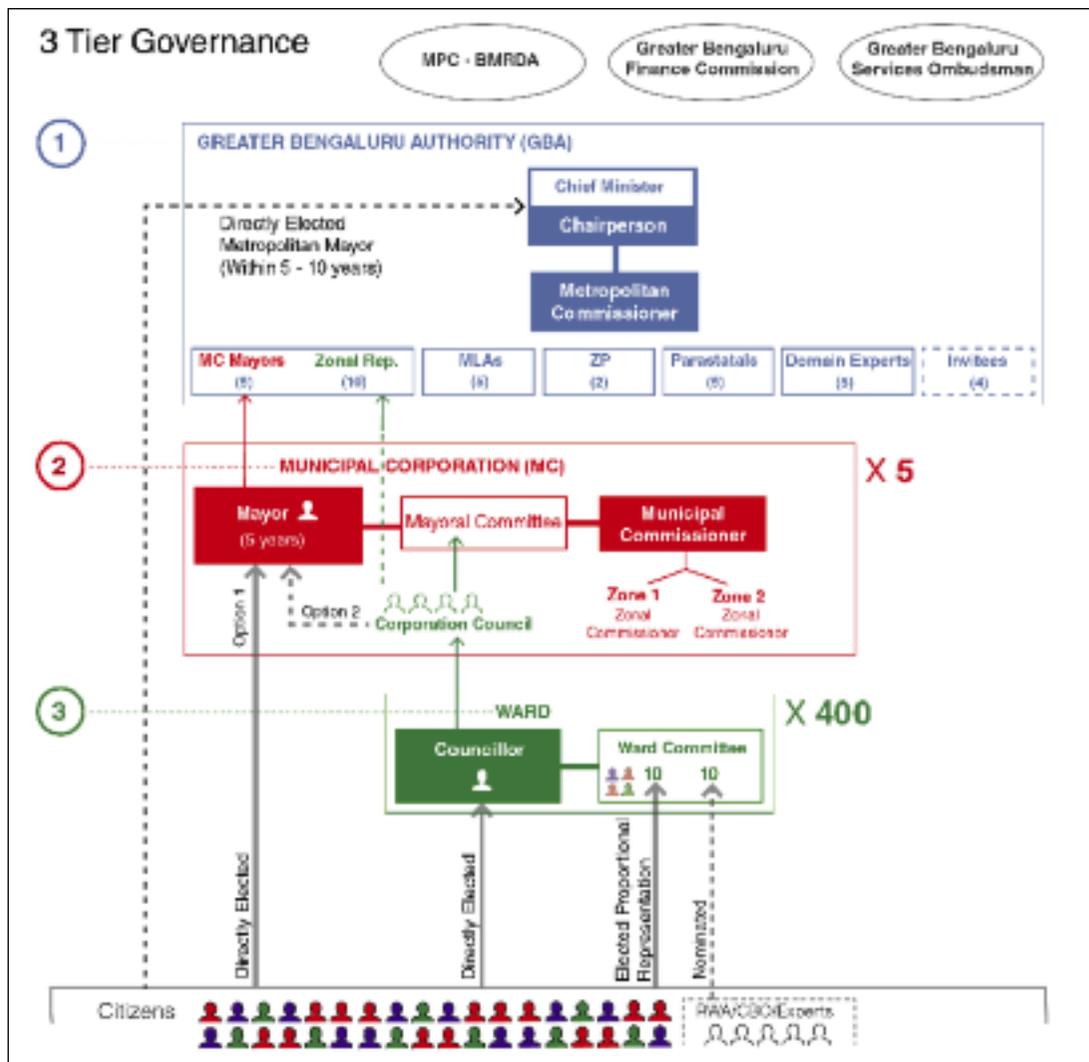
Continued on page 26

In our view, the Delhi trifurcation was rushed through without adequate thought on the overarching governance structure and ensuring basic financial sustainability for each corporation.

KASHIF MASOOD



There are plans to divide the Bengaluru Municipal Corporation



ed, most conceded that the Committee had identified the infirmities of the current system — weak governance and administration structure with huge state interference, titular one-year mayor, dysfunctional standing committees, negligible citizen participation, trust deficit between citizen and government due to leakages in civic contracts, speed money for permissions and overlooking of violations, lack of accountability and no outcome orientation due to multiple agencies operating in silos, low human capacity in government, financial mismanagement compounded by opaque reporting practices, disdain for planners and poor implementation leading to deteriorating quality of life in the city.

BIG DEBATE

The multiple corporations suggestion was both liked and disliked. The critics repeatedly pointed to the failed Delhi example and stressed the Bengaluru brand would be diluted by splitting the corporation.

In our view, the Delhi trifurcation was rushed through without adequate thought on the overarching governance structure and ensuring basic financial sustainability for each corporation. An apex body like the proposed GBA is essential to ensure inter-corporation coordination as well as to bring the independent civic government agencies such as those relating to water, transport, energy and so on under a common leadership. A city Finance Commission is necessary for an impartial examination of corporation finances and recommending apex-level and inter-corporation fiscal transfers. A detailed spatial mapping and study of ward characteristics is necessary before embarking on fixing the boundaries of the multiple corporations' jurisdiction.

Whether it is the Bus Rapid Transit system, trifurcation or alternative governance experiments, citizens elsewhere look hopefully to the capital city for future pointers — only to have their hopes dashed.

One of the arguments against splitting the BBMP was the fear of loss of the Bengaluru brand. This implicitly assumes brand Bengaluru is dependent on the alphabet soup, BBMP, remaining a single unit forever.

This is not the case. A city's brand is shaped by its people, ethos, culture, vibrancy and promise, among a host of other factors. BBMP can by no yardstick be considered the signpost of brand Bengaluru and it is extremely unlikely that the founder of Bengaluru visualised a future-day BBMP as the flagbearer of the city. The recommendation to divide it into multiple units is driven by a desire to make the city more manageable and more liveable. London has 33 boroughs but its brand is one of the best in the world.

A review of best practise in city-region management clearly shows that top mega-cities follow multi-municipal structures (think London, Paris, Sao Paulo, Tokyo) and that decentralisation and

devolution of powers is felt to be useful as cities grow. Finding optimal scale and size of governance is an iterative process and the number of corporations is based on balancing power, economy and accountability.

To those who still insist that a single corporation would do the job, this has been my reply. We have multiple skeletons in our single civic body. Can this skeleton be better 'hidden' in a 30,000-sq-foot mansion or a 1,000-sq-foot tenement? The smaller the set-up, the greater the chance of detection and something being done about it. Smaller units of governance and administration are certainly better to fix our woes, more so given the spiralling population growth and urban sprawl. Devolution and decentralisation are the way forward.

STATE & CITY

Another major criticism related to having the chief minister in charge of the GBA over the next five-10 years before handing over to a directly elected mayor. Many of us have cried ourselves hoarse over the years about the undue (stranglehold?) influence of the state over city matters.

Has it changed anything? If anything, it has got worse over the years as successive state governments have recognised the 'promising' characteristics of large, growing cities in the country. They have used multiple mechanisms to control the city through administrative measures, legislative powers, withholding grants, notification/de-notification and then some more. This is akin to back-seat driving, power without accountability. One would rather have them occupy the visible front seat, with clear bottomline accountability for their actions.

We also have a legacy problem. This state control has strengthened over time. For instance, we today have parastatals like the BWSSB (Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board), Bangalore Development Authority (BDA), Bangalore Metropolitan Transport Corporation (BMTCL), Bangalore Electric Supply Company (BESCOM) and so on which operate in silos, taking their instructions and cues from the state. Putting this genie back in the box is not a task for mere mortals, even directly elected metropolitan mayors. On the principle of 'You broke it, you fix it', the state (through the office of the CM) has a responsibility to set it right for a future-day city leadership to take over the reins. In our current system, no one else has a remote chance of getting our parastatals to fall in line. Hence the suggestion of handing over the reins to the CM for a limited period.

Delhi has been a boon and bane for other cities. Whether it is the bus rapid transport (BRT) system, the trifurcation or alternative governance experiments, citizens elsewhere look hopefully to the capital city for future pointers — only to have their hopes dashed. It ends up derailing and delaying similar exercises elsewhere.

As urbanisation increases, our cities badly need a complete overhaul of flawed structures and systems. We talk of smart cities but it is unlikely to work in our dysfunctional governance and administration arrangements. It is akin to placing a 2015 new age processor on a 1980s-era PC-XT motherboard. It will stall. One hopes that local state leadership exhibits the necessary political will and vision to truly empower our cities as engines of growth. ■

V. Ravichandrar is a member of the Expert Committee tasked with reimagining Bengaluru's governance and administration

The single-teacher plight



DILEEP RANJEKAR

BACK TO SCHOOL

HE is one of the best government teachers in that block, situated in the beautiful foothills of the Himalaya. His school is situated in a remote place (about 30 km of winding difficult road from the block headquarters) and after reaching a point, it took us a good 15 minutes of a difficult walk down the hill to get to the school. The climb down is dangerous even for a fit person. However, that is the only way the villagers, children and the teacher can reach the school and the village beyond it. You can imagine the plight of these people when it rains or snows.

The school has just 16 children in Classes 6, 7 and 8 and over 60 per cent of them are girls. The relationship between the lone teacher and the children has to be seen to be believed. And the same is true for the energy, understanding and keenness of the children. This teacher had singlehandedly succeeded in developing a desire among the children to learn and discuss a lot of things on their own.

Inside the school, a group of girls was practising dance all by themselves (one of the girls was playing the *dholak*) for the upcoming festival performance. The small midday meal room was neat and clean, and the woman cook was a sincere and methodical person.

The teacher has exemplary ownership of everything that happens in the school. One of the issues he is struggling with is how to manage the school when he is away from it for official reasons. He has temporarily addressed the issue by accepting the voluntary services of a 21-year-old girl from the same village, who is very keen to teach and help. Though one more teacher was approved for the school, the appointment has not been made for over two years.

We were wondering what would happen to the school if the girl gets selected for a job in the Home Guards or the police where she has applied.

This is not a unique scenario of this particular school. Everyone, from the Block Education Officer to the District Education Officer, is aware of this problem but cannot do anything. Across the country, close to 20 per cent of schools are single-teacher. In one of the districts where we actively work with the government, the single-teacher schools are 44 per cent.

When I was talking to a Block Education Officer about how he managed with so many single-teacher schools, he promptly said, "Forget the single-teacher schools, I have 127 schools in my block with no teachers." Though I am quite well acquainted with the reality, it still shocked me. In many states, new teachers have not been appointed for over five years — shrinking the teacher strength drastically.

The same situation prevails in many academic



AJIT KRISHNA

Everyone appreciates that the quality of our teacher education is poor but it has taken decades to even decide to upgrade the B.Ed. programme to two years.

institutions in the states. The approved number of Cluster Resource Coordinators and Block Resource Persons is not appointed. The District Institutes of Education Training (DIET) — an important institution to provide support for professional teacher development — are largely in disarray with several issues plaguing them. Approved funds are not disbursed until the end of the year. In some cases, they are not disbursed at all. Buildings are dilapidated due to lack of funds, on an average only 50 per cent of the approved strength of faculty members are appointed. That too an inappropriate mix of subject matter resource persons. The total facilities available in most DIETs are not at all conducive to quality professional development of the teachers in that district.

What is appalling is the attitude of some of the senior bureaucrats towards DIETs. When I raised the issue of the current status of DIETs in the country with a very senior (and committed) bureaucrat in Delhi, she asked, What is the issue? I cited non-availability of approved strengths of faculty members. She vehemently replied, "We should not appoint more people in the DIETs." Surprised, I asked why. Her reply was, "Because they don't work." I found it bizarre. I said, "In that case, we should abolish the institutions and provide alternatives." The discussion did not go anywhere.

Every committed Chief of a State Education Department laments the lack of quality people in all these institutions, but nobody shows the initiative of starting a process to create such quality people over a period of time.

Practically all politicians and senior bureaucrats know that the budget for the midday meal is inadequate to provide the nutrition prescribed in the

scheme. Most people know that in many places the allotted food grains don't reach the schools in entirety. But there is no move to raise the budgets or to ensure that every grain of ration supplied for midday meals reaches the children.

Everyone appreciates that the quality of our teacher education is poor but it has taken decades to even decide to upgrade the B.Ed. programme to two years from the existing 10 months.

The Centre's proportion of the budget in many important programmes such as the Integrated Child Development Scheme, the midday meal scheme, the Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan (such as for in-service professional teacher development) and so on have been reduced from a 75:25 ratio to 60:40. I shudder to think how these expenses will be met, especially by those states that have very little income or very little desire to achieve quality education.

We do have a large number of committed people in the education system. It is the apathy of our political and bureaucratic system towards some of the most 'critical to quality' issues that is proving to be the nemesis of quality education in government schools. Whenever one tries to discuss the issues related to implementation of committed actions even under the current policy and programmes, there is an unwillingness to address them.

Education policies and curricular frameworks can keep being revised but if we don't create basic enabling conditions on the ground to benefit the next generations, they will remain just on paper. We owe this to the more than 70 per cent of the population whose children are solely dependent on the performance of the government school system. ■

Dileep Ranjekar is CEO of the Azim Premji Foundation.

Norms go from pre to post



KANCHI KOHLI

IN the past year and a half, the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) has been tackling environment issues in three ways.

First, regulatory procedures have been modified to allow for speedy approval and execution of industrial and infrastructure projects. Exemptions from public hearings, limiting the appraisal processes, and highlighting the number of pending projects receiving green approvals were all part of the MoEFCC's achievements earlier this year.

Second is the ministry's focus on the 'development without destruction' narrative — the positive incentives to project authorities against causing pollution and creating space for heavy penalties in case of violations of the law and instances of pollution.

Third is bringing the conflict resolution mechanisms back within the executive, and far removed from the powers of a 'proactive' judiciary.

With this done, the onus of protecting the environment lies heavily on controlling an act of pollution once a project is set up and not necessarily on a precautionary approach of holding back the setting up of potentially damaging projects.

The T.S.R. Subramanian Committee report released in November last year amidst controversy had recommended heavy fines, penalties and imprisonment for non-compliance. It had also proposed the setting up of a first appellate authority within the regulatory system, prior to the intervention of special judicial mechanisms like the National Green Tribunal (NGT).

The Draft Environment Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2015, opened for public comment for 15 days in early October, was an attempt by the ministry to take forward the Subramanian Committee suggestions.

The Bill seeks to achieve three objectives: categorisation of damage, violations and acts of negligence into minor, non-substantial and substantial; providing for penal provisions and introducing the concept of monetary penalty; and creating an adjudication mechanism for identifying damages and levying penalties. This would be done primarily through amendments to the Environment Protection Act (EPA), 1986 and one corresponding change in the provisions of the NGT Act, 2010.

SORTING OUT DAMAGES

A key element of the changes proposed is the categorisation of damage to the environment. The amendments upfront recognise three kinds of violations and related damages: "minor violation", which is 'mere' failure to comply with the law, which led to a particular damage. Non-substantial damage is defined as the release of pollutants, hazardous substances or anything by which the environment is

affected or is likely to be adversely affected or damage due to non-compliance with an environmental obligation, whether accidentally or otherwise. This includes damage caused, likely to be caused or damage as a result of legal violation or negligence.

A major problem with this approach is that the Bill only sets the upper limit of damage but does not establish the minimum damage we are willing to bear. This is critical as minor violations are to be

subject to only "on the spot penalty" of ₹1,000-10,000 and ₹5,000 per day for continuing violation. Given the experience of monitoring non-compliance with environment laws in India, it is likely that several violations will be termed 'minor' and 'sorted out' with on-the-spot penalties.

The Bill also establishes a set of "factors" to be considered by the adjudication process to determine damage and therefore quantum of penalty. Though there is mention of public health among the factors, loss of livelihood is missing.

With livelihood not recognised as an element of substantial damage, the need to compensate for such a loss and to restore it would never arise. The most profound social impact of environmental damage is on the livelihoods of large communities such as pastoralists, farmers, fishermen and collectors of forest produce. For instance, in the Vapi industrial cluster in Gujarat, over two decades of indiscriminate dumping of effluents in the Kolak river has rendered the once thriving fishing economy unprofitable with the fish from the estuary regarded as poisonous.

ADJUDICATION AUTHORITIES

The amendments also propose an "adjudicating authority" within the administrative framework of regulating the environment. This can either be a new authority created by the central government, or one of the existing authorities created under Section 3 (3) or any other authority that is already in place to adjudicate and impose penalties for violations of the EPA. It is to inquire into the cases of substantial and non-substantial damage.

The efficacy of such a mechanism needs to be rooted in upfront investigation of the history of such authorities within the regulatory system for the environment. Prior to the setting up of the NGT in 2010, where cases of environmental damage are currently heard, there existed a National Environment Appellate Authority (NEAA). People could appeal to

the NEAA against the grant of environmental clearances. The NEAA, which was set up in 1997, functioned understaffed for all of its existence. In 13 years it dealt with a handful of cases; it began to see an upswing a couple of years before it closed shop with the advent of the NGT. The National Tribunal Act of 1995, which had clear adjudication functions as being proposed, was never implemented after being enacted. This too ceased to exist in 2010.



With livelihood not recognised as an element of substantial damage, the need to compensate for such a loss and to restore it would never arise.

Administrative adjudication, as the first avenue of appeal, would make sense only if the executive is able to draw the faith of the affected people. With one arm of the environment ministry curtailing public participation and organising "ease of business" conclaves, there is genuine doubt that the other arm will be able to disassociate itself from the objective of smooth functioning of industrial and infrastructure projects despite repeated violations.

FUNDS AND COMPLIANCE

According to the proposed amendments, there is no role for the complainant or appellant in determining if the penalties have been paid in full and if the order of the adjudicating authority is upheld and used for the stated purposes such as restoration of the environment and preventing further damage. Without these measures, these funds, proposed to be created from penalties, could remain unrealised and unutilised in a timely and effective manner.

The Bill also proposes that the funds collected through penalties will be "used for remediation and reclamation of polluted sites and improvement of environment", which is limited. The range of damage in environmental cases almost always includes loss of livelihood, health impacts for people and livestock, and other such difficulties faced by the project-affected. If these are not compensated for and remedied with the funds generated through penalties, this stated social responsibility would not be fulfilled.

The experience with earlier administrative appeal mechanisms, unhindered non-compliance and the emphasis on increasing investment in industrial and infrastructure projects has raised several questions around the proposed amendments. Precautions and not payments by polluters are needed to address the environment and social impacts, or else the fundamental right to life will be reduced to a tedious road to appeal. ■

*Kanchi Kohli is a researcher and writer.
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LIVING

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Dakshin Bajrange and the Budhan troupe before staging a play

Theatre to fight stigma

Tanushree Gangopadhyay
Ahmedabad

SHYAMALI begs the police to stop beating her husband, Budhan. He is innocent, she pleads. “Please leave him alone. He has not stolen anything.”

“Oh, the wife is also a thief,” sniggers the policeman.

Give him an electric shock, says the police officer, he will own up.

The policeman does as ordered and then shrieks, “He is now dead.”

The police officer coolly replies: “No, no, he committed suicide with his *gamcha*.”

“You have killed him,” shouts Shyamali. “Budhan did not possess a *gamcha*.”

Budhan stands up and addresses the audience. “Why would we steal? Look at my plight. My son is now an orphan and my wife a widow, all because we belong to a denotified tribe.”

The actors rhythmically recite:
“This is mourning for the dead
This is the bazaar of corpses
Cut the jungle

*Sell the land
Sell the river
Sell the country.”*

The audience, comprising fresh-faced students, listens in silence. The play, *Budhan Bolta Hai*, has touched them. It is being staged by the Budhan Theatre group at the exuberant Udaan festival of the Institute of Rural Management in Anand, Gujarat. But the mood here is sombre.

Who are denotified tribes, ask the curious students.

Atish Indrekar, who acted as Budhan, explains that denotified tribes (DNTs) are communities who were branded criminal tribes by the British under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. They were actually just nomadic communities going from village to village and providing services, including entertainment. To stop them from moving from place to place, the British branded them criminals.

In 1952, after India gained independence, the Criminal Tribes Act was denotified. But discrimination against them continues. Today, there are seven crore DNTs in India, explains Indrekar, who belongs to the Chhara community, a Sansi DNT.

“No auto-rickshaw will take you to Chharanagar,

a suburb in north Ahmedabad where we live. We are still treated as thieves. But we refuse to live with stigma. We are performers,” he says.

“There are innumerable cases of police torture against us, which we have portrayed in our plays. No one is born a thief.”

Budhan Theatre began in 1998 under the shadow of the gruesome murder of Budhan Sabar who belonged to the Kheria Sabar tribe in Purulia. He was picked up by the police on mere suspicion and tortured to death. The police wrote off his death as suicide, claiming he had hanged himself with his *gamcha*. Eyewitnesses contradicted the police version.

Sabar’s murder shocked human rights activists. It caused deep anguish to writer Mahasweta Devi. She approached the courts for justice.

Subsequently, Justice Ruma Pal of Calcutta High Court rejected the story put out by the police and ordered the state to pay compensation to Sabar’s wife as well as punish the policemen who murdered him.

The same year, Mahasweta Devi travelled to Vadodara to deliver the Verrier Elwin lecture. Along with Prof. Ganesh Devy, a noted linguist and

Continued on page 30



A scene from *Budhan Bolta Hai* staged at IRMA



Dakxin Bajrange directing his actors

founder of the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, and formed the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG).

Prof. Devy set up a community library in Chharanagar which soon became a hub for Chhara youth. They would gather there to speak their mind. Prof. Devy inspired them to take up theatre to protest against the discrimination they faced and to tell people who they really were.

The Chharas were familiar with theatre. In the 1980s, theatre director Prem Prakash had come to their colony, looking for actors to play the role of slaves in Badal Sircar's play, *Spartacus*. They recalled the rousing reception the play received when it was staged in Ahmedabad.

So they were receptive to Prof. Devy's idea and Budhan Theatre was born. It is a new kind of protest theatre combining activism, acting and angst with assertion of rights. The actors reached out to people on the street with impassioned stories of injustice.

Prof. Devy recalls Budhan Theatre's performance of *Bulldozer*, a play about the Ahmedabad Municipal

Corporation's (AMC) eviction of the Bahuroopias, a DNT community from their colony. The group acted even as they sat on hunger strike outside the office of the AMC. They eventually approached the court against the eviction and won the case.

The Chharas who are part of Budhan Theatre are mostly young, educated and socially conscious. Dakxin Bajrange was 22 when he became Budhan Theatre's first director. He wrote the group's signature play, *Budhan Bolta Hai*.

The play became hugely popular and was staged across India and abroad. Bajrange went on to study theatre at Leeds University on a Ford Foundation fellowship. He has made several award-winning films, documentaries and TV programmes and also penned his autobiography, *Kahani Meri Tumhari*, which has been translated into several Indian languages. Most scripts enacted by Budhan Theatre are by him.

Many of their plays are translations of the work of European writers. For instance, they translated *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist* by Nobel laureate Dario Fo. The play is about fake encounters. They also translated French writer Jean Genet's play, *The*



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Balcony, a story of exploitative kings prior to the French Revolution. They adapted Henri A. Schwarz's play, *Acting Like a Thief*.

Budhan Theatre's first Gujarati play, performed at the police academy in Gandhinagar, was *Paata*, written by Kanjibhai Patel. The group went on to enact plays like *Pinare Kaleki Maut*, *Encounter* and *Mazab Hamwe Nahin Sikhata Aapas Mein Bair Rakhna*, after the Gujarat riots of 2002.

Alok Gagdekar and Vivek Ghamande, both Chharas, graduated from the National School of Drama (NSD) and entered the world of films. Kalpana Gagdekar, another Chhara, recently presented her play, *Kasturba*, in the US. The play, a complex portrayal of Kasturba, Mahatma Gandhi's wife, has been well-received in India and abroad.

Gagdekar herself played the lead role of *Kasturba*. "I enjoyed that role," she says. "Like her, I am not very well-educated. I don't have any formal training in theatre."

Yet, despite international recognition, not many people even in Ahmedabad are aware of Budhan Theatre. The gentle criticism of their work is that they don't perform plays written by local writers although many of the latter's themes are close to Budhan Theatre. "They are certainly wonderful actors. But if they do not mingle with local theatre groups, they may get marginalised," fears theatre activist Hiren Gandhi, a well-wisher.

Prof. Devy feels that people are more interested in entertainment and not in the kind of tragic events that are portrayed by the Budhan group. But they have gone from strength to strength. After 15 years, Budhan Theatre takes pride in being India's first and only theatre group of DNTs.

"We plan to train many more Budhan Theatre groups," says Indrekar. "We want DNTs to emerge from the cloud of stigma that surrounds them and live with their heads held high, without fear." ■

'Time for a new forest service'

Civil Society News
New Delhi

VALMIK Thapar's recent book, *Saving Wild India*, is a blueprint for radically changing the way we govern our forests and wildlife. A conservationist and naturalist, Thapar has spent 40 years of his life trying to protect India's jungles and animals. He has served on 150 committees of the government at state and central level only to realise that they were mere 'paper tigers'. He has also been a member of the Central Empowered Committee (CEC), respected by environmental activists for its honest functioning. The CEC was set up by the Supreme Court to monitor and ensure compliance with its orders on forests and wildlife.

Thapar's frustration and irritation with the vast bureaucracy that administers forests and its myriad rules and laws is apparent. Instead of incremental change, he feels revolutionary changes are needed.

His book is full of such ideas. He recommends that the Ministry of Environment and Forests be split into two: one would be in charge of forests, wildlife and climate change and the other would deal with air and water pollution and the environmental fallouts of urbanisation. He also suggests that the All India Forest Service should be turned into a state forest service and employ local talent. A think-tank of non-government and government experts would assist state forest services.

Included in the book are several ideas on using CAMPA (Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Plantation Authority) funds, streamlining environmental laws and encouraging private nature reserves.

Thapar's suggestions aren't wild ideas. He has been implementing some of them. He is a member of Rajasthan's Board of Wildlife and his Ranthambore Foundation is working with the state government to implement the Van Dhan Yojana, a forest conservation programme, in Rajasthan.

Your book comes across as an angry book. Are you angry?

Yes, it is an angry book. I served India's forests and wildlife for 40 years. But good ideas and reform were blocked by a bureaucracy that was not only obstructive but also uninterested in the dynamics of change. It was therefore essential for me to put down an alternative plan of green governance. At least this could be a starting point for good governance for a younger generation of conservationists to pursue.

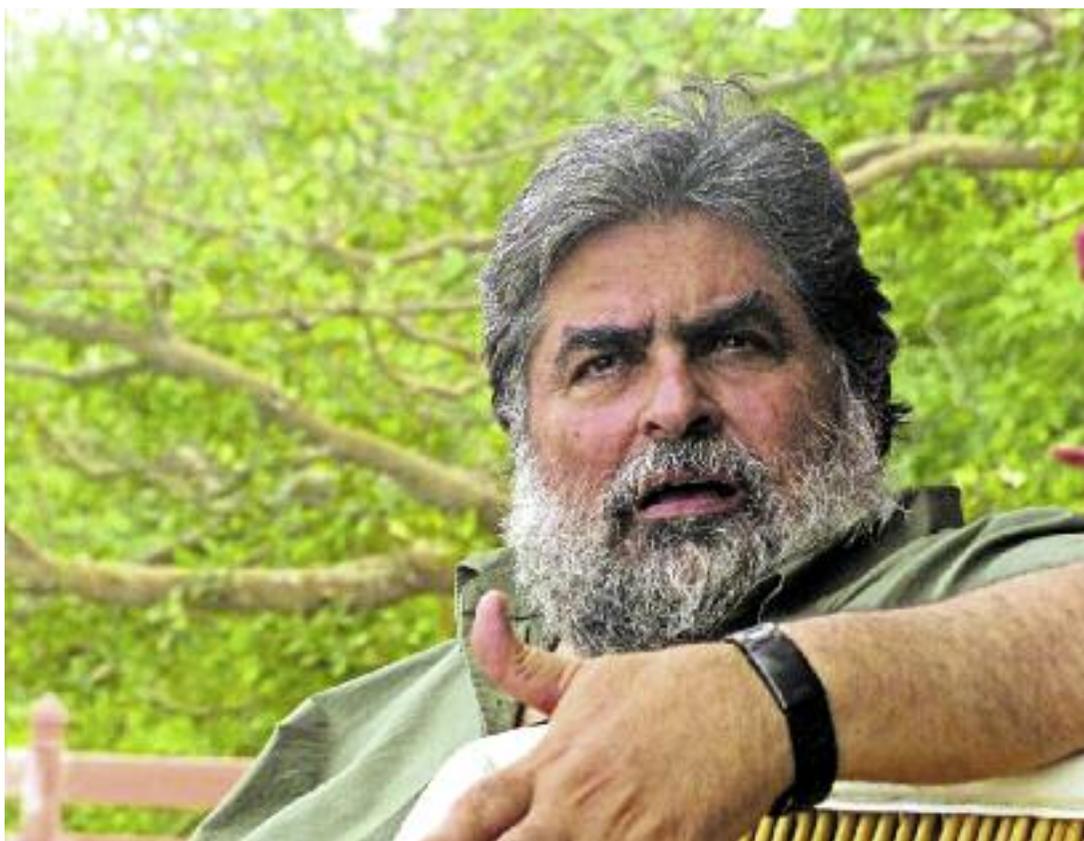
You have suggested a complete overhaul in the way we manage our forests and wildlife. What has been the reaction to your suggestions? Would you be open to wider public debate?

I am always open to a larger debate. That is the way we learn and evolve. But there are very few around both in the written and electronic media who consider this a priority issue. Very few realise what will

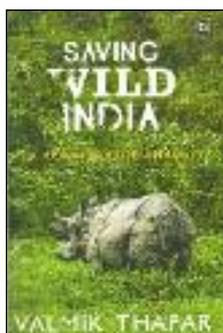
happen to India as forests vanish. The impact of the degradation of our forests due to poor governance will create the biggest obstacles not just to quality of life but to the all-round progress of India. But deaf ears meet this very vital issue.

Wildlife is under pressure, but from time to time we get indications that perhaps things are not so bad. The tiger count is stable, Gir has many lions,

department must engage in public-private partnerships (PPPs) in order to evolve in creative ways. Civil society must be a partner in this process. Never forget that the forest departments are only custodians for the people of India. Now new custodians must engage in constructive ways. It is the only way if we want to move forward. New definitions of forest will result but only when non-government experts are welcomed into the forest fold. Clarity on this issue



Valmik Thapar: 'Forests and wildlife are not a priority issue'



Valmik Thapar
Aleph ₹ 499

there is a profusion of blackbuck and so on. Should these be seen as successes and to whom should they be attributed?

Indian wildlife successes are like bouncing a yoyo...it keeps going up when good individuals manage areas and rapidly declines when good persons get replaced by poor ones. For 40 years I have watched this happen and seen the weakest of institutions in play. The successes you mention can be matched by enormous failures like the extinction of tigers in Sariska, Panna and Buxa

because of poor and negligent governance. Until there is induction of non-government experts into forest management and into decision-making little will change and we will keep bouncing up and down and go nowhere.

The idea of encouraging private forests is interesting. But do we have a clear definition of what is a forest?

India always had private forests and the whole world has them. The time has come to encourage community forests and private wilderness. The forest

will come when core policy changes.

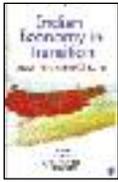
You have asked for a state-based forest service that would employ local talent to administer wildlife and forests. What role would you assign to local communities?

A prestigious state service is the need of the day. We do not need this colonial-thinking all-India service. It has no purpose. Local communities are vital in this process and some forest tracts must be given to them to manage. This factor is elaborated in my book but all stakeholders must have a role to play in the day-to-day governance of these areas.

Many forest officers agree with my ideas. Much of civil society thinks that such changes are essential but there are others who prefer the status quo and detest change so it will be a battle to bring in positive change in this vital sector. I pursue my ideas through the State Board of Wildlife in Rajasthan. I am working closely with the chief minister of the state. We have started some new models like the Van Dhan Yojana and others are taking shape. So what I have discussed in this book is possible practically. There is, therefore, hope in this sector that is getting totally demoralised and neglected as it refuses to change course. ■

SHELF HELP

A quick selection from the many books that turn up for review



Indian Economy in Transition

Edited by S. Janakarajan, L. Venkatachalam and R. Maria Saleth
Sage
₹995

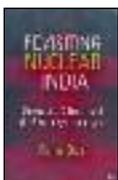
THIS volume has been published to honour C.T. Kurien, a Professor of Economics at the Madras Christian College and subsequently at the Madras Institute of Developmental Studies, who has contributed enormously to economic research and policy in the country.

The book is a collection of essays by leading economists and suggests ways and means of making India's economic growth more inclusive. The essays tackle critical issues such as food inflation, agriculture, labour markets, social infrastructure, climate change, governance and poverty. The choice of topics is eclectic but all the essays are worth reading because they dwell on subjects that dominate the development discourse today.

Abhirup Sarkar analyses why food inflation is high during a period of high economic growth in India. He says economic growth might have raised demand for foodgrain but agricultural production has not kept pace with population growth.

Venkatesh Athreya discusses agriculture in Tamil Nadu, using aggregate and village-level data. Although food production has risen in the state, there is agricultural distress due to reduction of farm subsidies. The area devoted to farming has shrunk. There is a rise in non-farm employment but Athreya questions whether this has resulted in the well-being of people. A. Narayanamoorthy calculates whether farming is profitable for six crops in India and concludes that farmers are suffering losses despite a rise in productivity, post the 1990s. Brinda Viswanathan and Padmini Desikachar write about labour market insecurity, especially for rural women. S. Chandrasekhar and M.H. Suryanarayana in their chapter on education highlight the importance of school life expectancy. How long a child stays in school depends on gender, poverty and how far the school is from the child's home.

S. Irudaya Rajan writes about ageing in India and Janakarajan brings out the impact of urbanisation on natural resources and people's livelihoods in the peri-urban areas of Chennai. Also included in this volume is a chapter on the effects of household pollution on women and children in rural areas. There is a chapter on water governance and another on the dire impact of social discrimination on development. ■



Revisiting Nuclear India Strategic Culture and (In) Security Imaginary

Runa Das
Sage
₹1,195

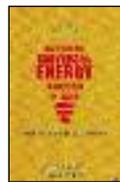
RUNA Das explores an interesting idea in her book: how does culture influence the way India thinks about its strategic and military options? How have India's diverse identities, and its political and cultur-

al struggles shaped its strategic thinking and nuclear policy choices?

The thinking so far has been that India's strategic culture has been passive because of the Hindu concept of time and the 'emotional' Hindu view of life. There is also a lack of rigour in India's strategic mindset, say analysts, because it has taken time for the nation to evolve and express its thoughts. Policy is cloaked in secrecy which prevents the influx of new ideas. "A combination of real politics and *dharma* has influenced India's strategic cultural mindset," writes Das.

Her book takes the reader on a historical journey from Vedic days to present times. Nehru's political idealism which shaped India's policy of non-alignment was gradually overturned by subsequent prime ministers. Das explores the shift to nuclear aggressiveness and the waning of non-alignment under Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, its crossing of the nuclear threshold under Atal Behari Vajpayee and its final shift to neoliberalism and a pro-US orientation.

Although Das has chosen a good subject, her analysis is not thought-provoking. Her book is completely unreadable. It is thick with academic jargon and written in a cumbersome style that is utterly boring and exasperating. Perhaps another researcher will take up this subject. ■



Achieving Universal Energy Access in India

P.C. Maithani
Deepak Gupta
Sage
₹900

AFTER decades of Independence, 45 per cent of India's rural population continues to live without electricity. Over 85 per cent of people in villages depend on biomass for cooking. In this book, P.C. Maithani and Deepak Gupta explain why villages need access to energy, the problems encountered in connecting villages to the grid, different policies and schemes that have been tried with limited success and possible solutions.

The authors spell out the dire effects of living in the dark in detail. They explain India's current electricity status and conclude that it will be extremely difficult to connect all of India to the grid using conventional energy. We will have to rely on renewable energy. Several villages in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Assam, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and the northeastern states don't have access to electricity.

The turning point is probably the Electricity Act of 2003 that freed generation of electricity, its transmission and distribution from the clutches of impoverished state entities and opened it to entrepreneurs. The authors examine efforts at generating renewable energy, including recent successful efforts by entrepreneurs. The book also has a chapter on access to cooking energy for rural women and another on subsidies and funding.

This is a timely and well-researched book and can be read by anyone interested in understanding rural electrification. ■

Smallest,



Trekking through Bako's dense forest

25 vegetation types in 15 ecosystems

Susheela Nair
Kuala Lumpur

TO get to Bako wildlife park, we took a pleasant drive from Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, to the nondescript village of Kampung Bako. The only way to reach the park headquarters is by boat so we started our wildlife sojourn by donning life jackets and hopping aboard a boat. En route along the picturesque Santubong river (the last part of the boat ride was through the South China Sea), we passed several scenic stretches of sandy bays. Steep cliffs and rocky headlands stood like sentinels, affording us a welcome.

All the beaches are lined with limestone and sandstone cliffs. Wave erosion at the base of the cliffs has carved many of the rocky headlands into brilliantly-shaped arches and stacks with coloured patterns formed by iron deposition. We saw some of these rock formations on entering the Teluk Assam Beach, which fronts the park.

Established in 1957, Bako has several claims to its credit. It is the oldest and smallest national park in Sarawak, in eastern Malaysia, on Borneo Island. Spanning an area of 27.27 square km at the mouth of the Bako and Kuching rivers, the visit to Bako

oldest national park

SUSHEELA NAIR



SUSHEELA NAIR



A Wagler's pit viper enjoying a siesta

encompasses a broad canvas — over 100 species of birds, a profusion of other wildlife, particularly monkeys, a panoramic rocky shoreline, bizarre rock formations, jungle streams and waterfalls, coastal cliffs, dramatic sweeps of beach and sea stacks, and scenery ranging from rolling hills to peaks.

The wide range of attractions and activities in a compact area has made Bako one of the most popular parks in Sarawak. One can explore the park through several trails, bridges and boardwalks. The well-maintained network of nature trails — ranging from easy forest strolls to full-day jungle treks — allows visitors to get the most out of this unique environment.

A distinctive feature of Bako is that, despite its small size, 25 distinct types of vegetation form seven complete eco-systems: beach vegetation, cliff vegetation, *kerangas* or heath forest, mangrove forest, mixed dipterocarp forest, *padang* or grassland vegetation and peat swamp forest. Bako's main draw is this incredible variety of plant species and vegetation types. At Bako one can see almost every type of vegetation found in Borneo.

SUSHEELA NAIR



Bako's famous resident, the Proboscis monkey

SUSHEELA NAIR



The Bornean bearded pig

rummaging for food around the park headquarters. With prominent bristles on either side of its snout, it looks different from other wild pigs.

Bako is also home to a number of snakes, most of which are harmless. They are well-camouflaged, and usually slither off into the undergrowth at the first sign of human arrival. We spent some time gazing in awe at a Wagler's pit viper enjoying a siesta after a heavy meal. Our guide informed us that it had been resting on the same tree for the past two days.

As we followed the trails, we spotted silvered langurs, ever-playful long-tailed macaques, wild boar, squirrels and monitor lizards. Birds of every shape, size and colour dot the landscape. Teluk Assam, in the area around the park headquarters, is one of the best places for birdwatching: over 150 species have been recorded in the park, including pied and black hornbills. Large numbers of migratory birds come to Bako between September and November. Rock pools and mangroves are ideal places to sight small animals such as mudskippers and crabs, especially sky-blue fiddler crabs and shell-dwelling hermit crabs.

Our guide informed us that the other delightful creatures to watch in Bako are the two species of otters — the oriental small-clawed otter and the hairy-nosed otter which spend most of their time in the water, feeding on fish, frogs and other small aquatic animals. The largest of Bako's many lizard

SUSHEELA NAIR

species is the common water monitor, olive green in colour and reaching a length of two metres. Young monitors are green with yellow spots and therefore easier to spot. We found them near the accommodation area, scavenging for scraps.

But the highlight of our trip was sighting the elusive proboscis monkey. We heard a strange grunting sound and the crash of leaves long before we actually sighted a proboscis monkey high up in the forest canopy. It was ripping leaves off the branches and stuffing them into its mouth. "These rare proboscis monkeys are found only in Borneo. The male is a

bizarre-looking creature, with a huge pendulous nose and a large pot-belly, weighing in excess of 20 kg. They are mostly arboreal (tree-dwelling), moving about the forest or mangroves in small groups and feeding on young leaves, shoots, sour fruits and seeds. The mangroves at Teluk Assam are also a good place for viewing proboscis monkeys," explained Cornellius, our ebullient guide. We left Bako Island with a fervent prayer to save the endangered proboscis monkeys when we heard of their dwindling population due to the massive clearance of forests for palm oil plantations. ■



The park has steep cliffs and rocky headlands

It is easy to explore these eco-systems via the jungle trails. The plant life includes mangroves, strangling figs, wild orchids, carnivorous pitcher plants and symbiotic ant plants. All the trails have a great variety of vegetation, from mighty 80-metre dipterocarps to dense mangrove forest.

One need not venture very far into the forest to see the different vegetation types, they are found close to the park headquarters at Teluk Assam. The area around the headquarters is an amazing site for seeing wildlife. Long-tailed macaques, silvered langurs or leaf-monkeys, common water monitors, plantain squirrels, wild boar and mouse deer are all found here. One of the macaques scampered into the canteen as we tucked into our food. Another one dug into a packet of biscuits and sipped from a can of Coke. In contrast to the unruly macaques, the silvered leaf-monkey or silvered langur is a docile and attractive creature. We found the resident Bornean bearded pig (said to be Bako's largest mammal),

FACT FILE

Getting there: Take a bus or taxi from Kuching town to Bako Kampung and hire a boat from there to Bako Island.

Accommodation: Designated camp sites, lodges and chalets are available.

Contact: info@sarawakforestry.com



Ratni Devi & Som Gautam

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A green bazaar

SHOPPERS were spoilt for choice at Dilli Haat's 10-day *mela* of organic products held in Delhi. Organised by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, the fair, called Women in India, was a busy jumble of stalls selling ethnic foods, pickles, preserves, spices, personal care products, household items, clothes and fabric.

There were companies like Amira, famous for a myriad varieties of basmati rice, sharing space with small farmers hawking freshly harvested foods and spices. Women entrepreneurs promoted bottles of fragrant oils and soaps. And a bunch of elderly women talked young shoppers into buying their kitchen remedies.

Ratni Devi and her husband, Som Krishna Gautam, were selling packets of rice, maize and wheat fresh off their farm in Himachal Pradesh. Gautam says they switched to organic farming three years ago after he learnt to be an organic farmer at the Bhai Kaka Krishi Kendra in Anand, Gujarat. They grow a variety of fruits, vegetables and cereals on their 20-bigha farm and they say they earn more now than earlier.

Sharmila Mishra and Vijay Prakash run Native Roots, a social enterprise, deep in the tribal region of Chhendipada in Odisha. They buy forest produce collected by tribals in six villages and turn it into products for daily use. There were bottles of aromatic neem seed oil smelling like it had just been taken off a neem tree. "Knocks off mosquitoes and keeps your home insect-free," said Sharmila.

They were also selling roasted *ragi* powder, rich in nutrients and East Indian Arrowroot, a "weaning food for babies and a specialty of Odisha", explained Prakash. There were nicely designed clay utensils that attracted buyers: frying pans, *tawas* and *karhais*.

Anupama Malhotra's stall was full of aromatic cosmetics for women and men. She branched out on her own after working for 10 years in the corporate sector to start Verte, a company that manufactures personal care products which brim with goodness.

There were handmade soaps, redolent of flowers and herbs, body scrubs of saffron, milk and orange, moisturisers and oils, plus shampoos to tame all kinds of hair, and more. "I see skin products as food for the skin. What is best for you, should also be best for Mother Earth," said Anupama.

All of Verte's products are paraffin-free, vegetarian and not tested on animals.

Vasundhara Singh, an undergraduate student of political science at Delhi University, is part of the Tejaswini Foundation which works with villages in Jhajjar and Rohtak districts of Haryana. "We are promoting the lost ethnic culture of Haryanvi women," she said. Vasundhara was selling medicinal plants, crafts and foods.

Sutra, run by Alka Bhutani, had a range of pure Ayurveda oils: sweet almond, cold pressed coconut, rose and sandalwood, and a lavender massage oil.

The organic movement in India has finally come of age. From fields, farms and factories it has found its way into bazaars, malls and homes. ■



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